

Finlis



*A Novella based on the
space trading game Oolite
and sequel to Incursio*

Drew Wagar

Finis

A novella based on the space trading game Oolite.

Part 4 of the Oolite Saga by Drew Wagar.

Sequel to 'Status Quo', 'Mutabilis' and 'Incurtio'.

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Shutterstock.com: For the graphics and artwork that form the front cover.

Can you read?

If so, you're one of the lucky ones.

My Oolite books will always remain free to download and read. I deliberately make no financial gain from them. However if you enjoy them and would like to show your appreciation, I would like to suggest a donation to a charity local to me: the Ashford Dyslexia Centre.

Dyslexic children and adults find it very difficult to access the written word, particularly in the traditional 'black text on white background' format adopted for most printed material. This can cause acute 'visual stress'. It's been estimated that the dyslexic brain has to work around four to five times as hard to process text when compared to a non-dyslexic. Imagine trying to read a block of text when the words keep shifting position, change size, re-order themselves and go blurred at whim – that's what traditional books look like to a dyslexic person.

In children this can lead to behavioural problems as they are not able to understand why they can't access text as easily as others. Schools are typically unequipped to detect or deal with the needs of dyslexic children. As a result children are frequently labelled as 'stupid' or 'slow' despite overall high intelligence. Given that most teaching and testing focuses around the written word (clearly you have to be able to read the question in order to answer it) dyslexic children are disadvantaged on all sides, unable to demonstrate the abilities they do have. Writing is also problematic.

Often, dyslexic children have far superior non-verbal reasoning, logic and sequencing abilities. They often demonstrate higher degrees of musicianship, creativity, entrepreneurial and empathic abilities. Crucial to getting support to help people with dyslexia is an expert diagnosis and the subsequent recommendations. There are many ways to help; ebook readers, special glasses, additional time for exams and so on.

The Ashford Dyslexia Centre exists to advise, diagnose, support and provide specialist teaching for those affected by dyslexia in my home town. People with dyslexia may have a problem with traditional books, but they still love stories. Please consider helping them to access what we take for granted as book-lovers.

You can donate at <http://www.wagar.org.uk>

Thank you.

Prologue

The Oresrian trader is a heavily built, dark-chitin covered insect measuring just over seven feet tall. Oresrians have six limbs, two of which are dedicated walking limbs. The remaining four limbs have jointed hands each possessing three digits, one of which is an opposable thumb.

The head is a triangular ovoid in shape, with prominent faceted eyes mounted to the front. In general, the overall impression is similar to that of a praying mantis. There are two short antennae that protrude from the top of the head. The mouth is on the underside of the front point of the triangular head and is relatively small. It is surrounded by two strong mandibles.

Oresrians are known to be closely related to the Thargoids in a genetic sense, however there are some minor anatomical differences. The most obvious is the more rounded shape of the fourth joint on the hind leg. Oresrians also sport far less dramatic thorax markings than their warlike cousins.

Oresrians have not enhanced their bodies in the manner of the Thargoids, and view such 'tinkering' with the genome as an anathema. Oresrians are typically nomadic traders by occupation, and are a rare, but not unwelcome, sight throughout the charts. They generally specialise in textile commodities of high quality.

Oresrians are a peaceful people, and have never engaged in warlike conduct of any sort. Famously relaxed and almost impossible to inflame, the only known way to enrage Oresrians is to mistake them for Thargoids, with whom they appear to have some kind of undisclosed blood-feud. The nature of this animosity is unclear, but Thargoids have been observed targeting Oresrian ships as voraciously as they attack other vessels.

Oresrians technology is unremarkable and inferior when contrasted with known Thargoid equivalents. Their ships bear a striking resemblance to Thargoid vessels, but have a specification similar in overall performance to familiar Galcop designs such as the Cobra Mk3. Weapons capability is likewise of little note.

Of Oresrian culture and politics, little is known. Oresrians generally conform to a strict non-interference code of conduct with other races. Interactions are limited to commerce, in which they are efficient and known to drive a hard bargain.

– **Extract from the Elite Webcon Interactive Knowledge Institute (Elite-Wiki)**

Oresrians. Masters of the small print. Check your change before you leave.

They're by no means bad, just rather focussed on what they do. And what they do is sell their wares. Quite what they do with all the credits they make is a mystery. They certainly don't spend it on their ships, which are unremarkable little octagonal vessels that bear an unfortunate resemblance to those of their Thargoid cousins.

The first time you see one you'll be forgiven for thinking the seedy bar you're in has been invaded by the bad-ass insects we warned you about in the previous chapter. Whisper it, yes – they look just like frakkin' Thargoids don't they!

Make sure you don't confuse them with the Thargoids though, either in space or in person. In the first instance Galcop will come down on you like a wamp-rodent on a high-gee world, in the second you'll be lucky not to be disembowelled on the spot. Nothing upsets an Oresrian like being mistaken for a Thargoid, it really riles them. No-one is quite sure why this is, and many a young hotshot has paid the price for this classic mistake. Don't be a braincase – learn the difference. There's no spike on the fourth joint of the hind leg. Easy enough when you know.

Once you're past all that the Oresrians are pretty handy traders. Fine fabrics tend to be their speciality. They're very reliable, and famously difficult to haggle with. It's worth noting they take a dim view of late payments, refuse to provide credit and they have no direct translation for the phrase "Will next Tuesday do?"

– **Extract from the Unofficial Galcop Conspiracy Theory Archive, Tianve**

All new pilots should note that Oresrian vessels share many identification patterns with Thargoid vessels. Automated ident computers are not always able to distinguish between the two vessel types. Pilots are encouraged to familiarise themselves with the differences and make careful observations before engaging unknown vessels.

– **Extract from Lave Space Licensing Authority Log**

Chapter One

Aesbion Witchspace Monitoring Station Nine was not the bright centre of the universe. One of the ten witchpoint entry zones at Aesbion, it tended to be the least used, primarily serving witchspace traffic to and from the backwater system of Aronar, rather than the busy route which ran to Aesbion between Isence and Qutiri. Sometimes days could go past without a single vessel using the link.

As such it wasn't a posting that was fought hard over; in fact getting 'Deep Space Nine' was very much the booby prize on the roster, resulting in much callous laughter and derision on behalf of the unfortunate nominee.

It was dreaded for many reasons. Postings lasted for a month, not quite long enough for you to be able to successfully sue Galcop for mental health problems due to isolation, but enough to make you go just that little bit eccentric. Folks back in on Aesbion Prime could always spot a 'niner', and avoided them like the plague.

Second it was woefully dull. The witchspace corridor was underused. Since Aronar was an infrequent destination and most of the systems aboard the station were fully automatic, it left the supervisor with very little to do for the vast majority of the time. The only time things got lively was when the local pirates decided to stage an ambush, at which the supervisor was forced to turn something of a blind eye. It wasn't as if they could do much; the station lacked any form of weaponry. Fortunately they were equipped with formidable shields.

Other than providing the occasional navigational fix, that pretty much summed up the role of a witchpoint monitoring supervisor in its entirety. On the plus side, the pay was good and there were some other perks.

Grebe Storenge was a native of Aesbion. A morbidly obese green frog with a hobby of breeding mega-drosophila for his own private consumption, he was generally unconcerned about the lack of stimulation from the outside universe. After paying scant attention to the instruments aboard he was now reclining in his favourite chair on the small observation deck, with his feet and lower legs propped upon the controls, unconcerned with the smudges of mucus he was leaving on the sensitive instrumentation. He was due to be relieved in under a week and had adopted a rather laissez-faire attitude to cleanliness as a result. The auto-mechs would sort it all out.

He was enthusiastically watching one of the Tionisla Chronicle's more risqué entertainment

channels. It specialised in species specific adult entertainment piped in from some of the more salacious amphibian planets in chart three.

Grebe's tongue flashed out, impaling another oversized fly and sucking it back to its doom within his slavering lips. A wet slapping sound marked its demise along with an intestinal rumble, signalling rapt appreciation of the holofac images dancing before him.

'Would you look at the glands on that!' Grebe roared, sitting forward, his eyes wide. 'You can drop into my pond any day, baby! Phreeeoow!'

Behind him, a series of yellow warning lights illuminated in sequence and messages flickered up on the comms array.

Warning: Incoming witchspace transfer. Unscheduled arrival, acknowledge?

Grebe was oblivious, until the show he was watching was interrupted by adverts. He wagged his feet in outrage, swearing at the holofac.

'Frakkin' algae sellers! Not now!'

Flashes of flickering light cast shadows on the bulkheads adjacent to the observation windows. Grebe stopped, frowned and looked around.

'What the frak?'

In the distance he could see a series of faint points of light, a convoy of ships at extreme range, having apparently witchspaced into Aesbion without so much as a by-your-leave.

Grebe checked the scanners, rubbing at the smeared screens, trying to get a clear view. There were dozens of ships, some with big mass signatures. He flipped on the on-board telescope, hoping to get a closer view. The holofac images of happy amphibians chowing down on processed algae slices were replaced with a series of dark grey, beweaponed and purposeful ships rapidly heading in-system.

Pirates on a mission...?

'Bonus day,' Grebe grinned and flipped on the narrowband comms-link.

'This is Aesbion Monitoring Station Nine. I'm guessing you guys know that an unauthorised witchspace transfer lands you mucho fines with the feds.' Grebe put on a grin. 'Of course, I'm willing to overlook that in favour of a donation to my favourite nominated charity, the Grebe Retirement and Benevolence Fund. Transmitting the details on the narrowband.'

Grebe had quickly learnt that it was possible to supplement one's income by cutting the pirates a little slack. He had a nice little routine going with some of them, with regular appearances being made whenever he rotated back onto station nine. These ones weren't any of his regulars, but clearly news of his 'flexibility' had spread.

The narrowband comms buzzed and then emitted a high pitched whistling sound. Grebe frowned, checking a few settings and trying the transmission again.

Warning: Transmission bandwidth zero. All frequencies impeded.

'You stupid hunk o' junk!' Grebe said, slapping the controls in frustration, 'Now is not the time!'

He looked back at the holofac images still being beamed in from the external telescope. The first ships had cleared the field of view, revealing the second set quickly moving up from behind.

Wait a minute, that looks like...

Grebe knew his ships well enough to spot the hulking shape of a Kruger class Behemoth. A ship four kilometres long, the pride of the Galactic Navy. It was one of their latest heavy cruiser class ships. A match for, well, anything.

'Frak! The big boys in boots!'

Grebe triggered a few switches and opened up the narrowband comms again.

'Just my little joke, one for the natives you understand! No question of depriving the glorious Cooperative from their perfectly legitimate and very reasonable taxes...'

The high pitched whistle screamed out of the comms unit again.

'Come on guys! You know how it is out here...'

The illumination inside the observation deck abruptly changed to a dim red. Grebe looked around at the computer.

Warning! Facility targeted. Defensive screens activated.

Grebe looked at the holofac image to see small orange spheres of glowing material erupt from nozzles on the Behemoth, and drift towards his point of view. He spun to look out of the windows, seeing the same incoming fire racing towards him.

'Frak! Stop! This is a monitoring station! This is an unarmed civilian facility!'

The bolts of plasma crashed into the external shields, causing them to flare an angry purple in

response.

Warning! Shields failing! Energy Low!

‘Cease fire! For frak’s sake! What are you...’

The observation deck depressurised as the plasma made short work of the station’s shields and ripped into the superstructure. Grebe’s curses were lost in the vacuum of space. His body spun in sickening silence and he caught one last view of the monitoring station as it disintegrated before him. A tumbling piece of fiery wreckage spun towards him. He couldn’t hear himself scream.

He held up his hands in a futile gesture of defence before his consciousness ceased.

Commander Mahl Triboner of the *Foregone Conclusion*, a green-hulled Anaconda freighter, glowered at his son in the dim light provided by the astrogation scanners.

‘No, of course we don’t tell them the truth. We’d be out of business inside a week.’

‘Oh.’

His son’s whiskers twitched nervously. Mahl rolled his eyes and flicked his rubbery tail in annoyance. He’d built up this trading and convoy support business from nothing over the course of thirty years and had amassed a sizable fortune, along with a fleet of ships not far short of a small armada. The business gave him a perfect cover for some less conventional operations. Opinion on the legality of these operations was mixed. Mahl believed they were perfectly valid business transactions, Galcop seemed to class them as smuggling. Age was catching up with him and he’d been taking time out to try to bring his eldest son up to speed with the way things worked. His rodent features were bunched up in a frown.

‘You tell them what they want to hear. Most of them are greenhorns straight out of Lave. It’s the oldsters you need to watch. Never speed, pay your docking tolls, pay your permits. You only cut corners when you’re out of sight.’

‘Right,’ his son nodded. ‘So no blasting the police, then?’

Mahl shook his head in exasperation. ‘No, you never blast the police.’

‘So when do we get to use the guns, then?’ his son asked eagerly.

‘We don’t!’ Mahl snapped. ‘The moment you use your weapons you’ve lost. Missiles cost...’

‘Lasers fire for free....’

‘Until somebody fires back. Listen son, a typical light skirmish costs you two or three hundred credits just on minor hull repairs, more if it gets serious. You don’t need that cutting into your profits. There isn’t any glory out here boy, just people trying to make money. The reason we’ve got guns is to make other people with guns think twice about firing their guns. Got it?’

Mahl gestured to the rear view monitors, where a huge convoy of traditional trading vessels: Cobras, Adders, Pythons, Mambas, Boas and even the odd Fer-de-Lance were jockeying for position. They slowly crept forward into the depths of Aesbion interplanetary space.

‘And speaking of making money, today’s business is one of those nice little earners that needs a little care and attention. Watch and learn, boy.’ Mahl rubbed his paws together in glee. ‘Watch and learn.’

‘The bugs?’

‘You call ‘em Oresrians, you hear? But yeah, the bugs. You make sure you’re polite, you bow and scrape. You come across all genial. They like manners, makes the deal sweeter.’

‘But why are we out here in the black?’

‘Why?’ Mahl demanded incredulously. ‘Haven’t you been listening to anything I told you? We do this out of sight of frakkin’ Galcop. We’re talking bulk import of ten thousand tonnes of prime Oresrian silk in a single system. Aesbion Prime will want a cut of that, to the tune of nearly fifteen percent! This way we split the trade between a lot of different ships, witchspace them out to the surrounding systems and then bring ‘em back staggered, all arriving at different times from different places. No import tax lower than five hundred tonnes. We keep the fifteen straight off the top!’

‘Oh. You’re so smart Dad.’

‘Took me eighteen months to set this deal up, we’re the only company that can handle this much stock. So pay attention! If this goes south I’ll be taking it out of your fur!’

His son scurried across to the astrogation scanner.

‘Got incoming ships, Dad!’

‘They’re early. They must be in a hurry.’

Commander Gerhuuk of the Galactic Navy Kruger class Behemoth *Reciprocator* grimly surveyed the image of the planet Aesbion displayed, along with various pieces of tactical information, on the main viewer. He frowned, rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

He was operating under sealed orders. Orders issued from levels very high up in the Galactic Administration. Orders that required extraordinary actions. In time of war that was often the case. Aesbion was fast becoming a strategic location in the frontline of the increasingly desperate war against the Thargoids. What he had been ordered to do to the Aesbion system had no precedent. Desperate wasn't the right word, he decided.

'Maintain course in towards the *aegis*,' Gerhuuk snapped. 'Stay alert for Thargoid incursions. They may already be in system. Look sharp.'

'Wideband transmission range achieved,' the comms officer called out.

Gerhuuk sighed.

Time to break the bad news to civvy street...

'Open wideband comms, override civilian, Galcop and navigation channels and transmit.'

Gerhuuk waited patiently whilst the sophisticated systems aboard the *Reciprocator* effectively took control of all communication lines within the Aesbion system.

'Ready sir.'

'People of Aesbion, your attention please. This is the Galactic Navy Vessel *Reciprocator*. To ensure continued safety for Galcop citizens throughout the chart, you are hereby notified that your system is being appropriated as a blockade against Thargoid invasion in this sector. Effective immediately, a curfew will be in operation. No vessels will be permitted to use local or galactic witchspace drives until further notice. Witchspace transponders will be switched off. Any vessels found to be in violation of the curfew will be fired upon. All vessels currently in transit are instructed to return to station *aegis* immediately. No exceptions will be tolerated.'

Gerhuuk smiled grimly at the expressions of dismay, outrage and anger that were sweeping across billions of faces at his proclamation. Complaints would be acknowledged, logged and then calmly ignored.

It wasn't as if anyone had the might to stand up to the *Reciprocator*.

'Frak! Frak! Frak! Of all the frakkin' bad timing!' Mahl could see the GalNavy ships swiftly moving down the primary space lane towards Aesbion. He thanked his foresight in ensuring his convoy had taken a more circuitous route on the outbound journey. Otherwise they'd have run straight into the Navy frigates and that scary-as-frak Behemoth. As it stood, they were out of scanner

range. It was the sheer size of the Behemoth that made it look closer than it was. It had to be over a hundred clicks away.

‘Look at the size of that thing!’ his son stammered, aghast. ‘What do we do?’

‘You heard the man. Curfew’s coming. We’re out of visual range. We slip along and stay silent. Work out a new rendezvous time and send the comms code to the bugs on a tight squeak. I ain’t letting this one go on account of some stuffed shirt in a uniform.’

Mahl flicked on the narrowband comms at minimum power. ‘All ships, best possible speed to coordinates for witch marker three. Don’t save the engines today, boys!’

The astrogation operative aboard the *Reciprocator* had access to technology and capability that Mahl was unaware of. Navy spec scanners reached far beyond the measly range of the systems available to civilians. As such the operative could see Mahl’s convoy alter course and increase speed on the starboard scanners.

‘Sir. Civilian convoy at eight five point two mark four is not complying with directive. Heading out system at point two five.’

Gerhuuk nodded. ‘Give me the tactical overview.’

The holofac image of the convoy appeared on the screen. Gerhuuk could see an unremarkable collection of trading vessels gathered in an untidy group, driving away from the planet as fast as they could go. It was the number of vessels that was most surprising; there were over two hundred of them.

‘Clearly they think the law does not apply to them,’ Gerhuuk mused, watching the displays for a moment before settling back in his command chair.

‘Set course to intercept the convoy,’ he snapped. ‘Flank speed.’

Time to make an example. I do prefer to be taken seriously...

‘Code sent!’ Mahl’s son said excitedly. ‘Got the ack. Bugs will be here in five minutes.’

‘Don’t call ‘em bugs!’ Mahl snapped as the wideband comms illuminated with an incoming message.

‘Civilian convoy, this is the *Reciprocator*. Reverse course and return to Aesbion *aegis*

immediately.’

‘Frak! They’ve seen us. Plague ridden cretins! Stall them and send an abort code to the bugs!’
Mahl roared, jabbing at the astrogation computer.

‘Stall them? How?’

‘Oh for frak’s sake...’ Mahl grabbed the comms unit. ‘*Reciprocator*, last message unclear, we’ve got sun-spot interference, please repeat.’

‘Anaconda class vessel. Identify yourself immediately.’

‘Sorry *Reciprocator*, message still unclear.’ Mahl jabbed at the comms unit controls and static fizzed across the open link.

Mahl’s son was staring at the astrogation scanner. ‘Dad! Those ships, they’re coming this way!’

Suddenly the line went dead.

‘What the...’

‘Is that better?’ A voice called from behind them.

Mahl and his son turned to see a holofac projection of a Galactic Navy commander glowering at them.

‘Er... yeah,’ Mahl stammered. ‘Looks like the comms have cleared.’

‘Identify yourself,’ the Commander directed.

‘Captain Mahl Triboner at your service, Commander. This is my ship, the *Foregone Conclusion*. How can we be of assistance...’

‘Turn your ships around, Captain. Now.’

‘Of course, Commander. Right away,’ Mahl fired back, amiably. ‘I’ll just send out a narrowband course correction to my fleet. Standby...’

Mahl’s son looked bewildered and whispered at him. ‘But, we’ve got to warn the bugs off...’

Mahl glared at him and surreptitiously typed in a code on the astrogation scanner.

‘What’s he doing?’ the Commander said, narrowed his eyes at the Anaconda Freighter directly ahead of the *Reciprocator*.

‘Wideband comms activation, sir...’

‘Jam it! The works! Wideband, narrowband, scanners, everything! Now!’

A screaming whistle echoed out of the wideband transmitter aboard the *Foregone Conclusion*. Mahl and his son winced and recoiled. The astrogation scanner clouded with static and flickered out.

‘What is that?’ Mahl’s son demanded.

‘Jamming signal.’

‘Did the word get out to the bugs?’

‘How the frak should I know?’

Mahl and his son cowered down as the intimidating bulk of the *Reciprocator* swept towards their fleet, accompanied by rows and rows of neatly arranged military frigates and fighter escorts.

The astrogation scanner aboard the *Reciprocator* flashed up several new warning messages.

‘More targets incoming, sir! Designated group two. High speed. At least one hundred ships.’ The operator announced.

Gerhuuk looked around.

‘Idents?’

The scanner operator twisted a few controls and studied her readouts. ‘Can’t make them out sir. Too much interference from the jamming...’

‘Dammit. Get that frakkin’ trader scum on the point blank.’

‘Hailing frequencies open, sir.’

‘Trading vessel *Foregone Conclusion*, are you expecting to rendezvous with another convoy at this time?’

‘Just enjoying the free and open space-lanes, Commander,’ came the jaunty reply. ‘Nothing to do with us. If you’d see your way clear to stop jamming the comms we’ll form up our fleet and clear out of your way...’

‘Listen Captain, do you want me to pull your trashy collection of ships aside and subject you to a hull by hull inspection? All your paperwork in order?’

‘Nothing to hide, nothing to fear, Commander,’ the voice dripped sarcasm. ‘Always thought you military types were busy bees. If you’ve got time on your hands...’

‘Targets closing, sir! Firing range in fifteen seconds!’

Gerhuuk spun back around. ‘Get me a damn ident! I need a positive ID!’

‘Can’t scan. Got a visual sir. It’s not very clear but...’

Gerhuuk looked up at the screen. The *Reciprocator*’s long range jamming signal wasn’t helping the interference. He caught a flash of green and magenta hull, an octagonal shape, twisting in space, heading directly towards them. A phalanx of ships spread across an intercept trajectory.

He heard a gasp from the bridge officers. They’d all seen the footage from Tionisla. The Thargoid attack on the space stations. Hundreds of ships sliced into oblivion by that devastating plasma accelerator.

Thargoids!

‘Still on a collision course sir, speed better than 0.4! Coming right at us! Thirty clicks and closing fast!’

Gerhuuk froze for a moment.

Should be running the checks by the book, but there’s no time! If they cut loose on us before we can bring our weapons to bear...

‘Sir! Firing range in five! Sir!’

‘Sir! They’re...!’

This is it... no wireframe simulation; this is the real deal...

Gerhuuk clenched his fists to stop them from shaking. ‘All ships! Target is group two. I repeat, group two. All batteries! Open fire!’

Mahl looked past the bulk of the *Reciprocator* to where the new ships had appeared. A phalanx of the newcomers was spread out in a loose formation. Scanning beams flickered out across the gulf of space.

Come on you stupid bugs, you must have figured out the game is up! Get out before we all get locked up! Frakkin’ military interference...

Mahl blinked as intense bright light flashed out in front of him. Coloured lights clouded his

retinas before he managed to squint enough to see what was going on.

‘Oh frak...’

Hundreds of bright beams of laser fire and the glowing arcs of plasma weapons fire were streaking across space between the military ships and the incoming Oresrian traders. Two ships exploded immediately, the others began randomly adjusting course attempting to avoid the devastating firepower. A number of the dark hued insectoid vessels collided with each other in a desperate attempt to avoid being shot to pieces.

That’s my frakkin’ silk you’re blasting out of space!

Mahl grabbed the comms link. ‘*Reciprocator!* Abort attack, those are Oresrians, not frakkin’ Thargoids!’

The screaming hiss of the jamming signal was the only response. Explosions peppered the backdrop of space.

The Oresrian ships continued closing the gap between themselves, the military vessels and Mahl’s now stationary fleet, seeing their best escape route to be a direct flypast. The military ships continued to fire as they passed, tracking them mercilessly, pummelling them with close range fire. More ships exploded, showering the area with drifting, whirling debris.

A dozen of the insectoid ships made it past the front line, swerving abruptly to avoid Mahl’s stationary fleet. The military fire continued to radiate towards them.

Two of Mahl’s Adders were hit by errant plasma bolts, tumbling out of control and crashing into a nearby Boa. All three ships exploded into dust.

‘FRAK! For frakkin’ Randomius sake....’ Mahl screeched.

It was too much for the rest of his convoy. Ships began peeling off in all directions, some straight into the firing solutions the military ships were trying to re-establish on the Oresrian vessels. More trading vessels exploded in the blizzard of fire. The bigger vessels began to fire back at the military ships in retaliation.

‘No...!’ Mahl shouted, impotently. The jamming signal was his only answer.

Military fire splashed across the shields of the *Foregone Conclusion*, rattling the ship. Missiles streaked around, looking for targets as the rapid pulsing of ECM transmitters introduced headache inducing buzzing sounds in the jamming static.

It was utter chaos.

‘Get us out of here!’ Mahl yelled, stabbing commands into the astrogation computers.

The Oresrians ships, perceiving the battle widening, came about and began unleashing their weapons on the military vessels. Two of the frigates succumbed to the combined attack before the *Reciprocator* made short work of the attackers, splashing their hulls across the blackness of space.

Gerhuuk realised his mistake within a few seconds of the first shots being fired. The faded hulls of the Oresrians were clearly visible at close range. Within moments the Oresrians had destroyed the two frigates at the lead of the convoy. At the same time the trading convoy lost three of its ships and began firing back en masse.

‘All ships cease fire! Cease fire!’

The *Reciprocator*’s jamming field was still operating, preventing anything other than comms at point blank range. Two of the nearby frigates received the command and did as they were told. The traders immediately took advantage of the lack of local fire and obliterated them.

‘Get that jamming signal off!’ Gerhuuk yelled as a trio of traders unleashed missiles at the *Reciprocator*.

Dozens of the traders joined in the attack, slamming a near constant barrage of missiles towards the *Reciprocator*, forcing the forward viewer to back down its brightness scale in an attempt to still provide a visual.

‘Jamming down, sir!’

‘All ships! This is the *Reciprocator*. Cease fire! I repeat, cease fire!’

Mahl glowered at the debris that was all that remained of eight ships formerly belonging to his trading fleet. Some of those ships still had mortgages on them.

Frakkin’ military sting operation. They knew the bugs were going to meet us here and they’re using this curfew to take us out. If they think we’re going down without a fight... If we can take out that Behemoth no one will ever dare to cross us again!

Mahl saw the jamming signal fade away, and grabbed the narrowband transmitter.

‘All ships. Death or glory boys. This is a fight for our livelihoods. Feds planned to take us down from the off. I don’t hold to that. Target that frakkin’ mother with everything you’ve got! Get

the ‘stards!’

As the *Foregone Conclusion* turned and brought its forward gun to bear, Mahl also activated the vidlog and started transmitting on all wideband channels he had access to.

‘Galcop and the Navy are not to be trusted! They’re firing on civilians with no provocation...’

‘Get us some manoeuvring room,’ Gerhuuk instructed, looking at the tactical display. The melee of ships was no tidy engagement; ships were pointing at random orientations, each tracking individual targets.

‘Incoming!’

Gerhuuk looked up to see a swarm of missiles converging on the *Reciprocator*. The automated ECM emitters got around half of them, but the rest piled in and impacted against the Behemoth’s shields. The shriek of sirens echoed through the bridge as various danger thresholds were exceeded.

‘Frakkin’ hell!’

‘Shields down in quads 3 and 4, sir! Damage to portside hull plating.’

Oresrian ships blasted past the viewer at point blank range, green lasers flashing in the darkness. The *Reciprocator* rumbled underneath him.

Gerhuuk called to mind his sealed orders; secure the Aesbion line.

Secure the Aesbion line at any cost...

The battle was joined, he couldn’t disengage now.

He straightened, stepping to his feet.

‘Take them out,’ he said heavily. ‘Take all of them out.’

The *Reciprocator*’s plasma weaponry burst forth once again, crowding the nearby space with furious and devastating energy. The Oresrians and the Aesbionian traders came about, unleashing every piece of ordnance they carried, but their ships were no match for the heavy guns and defences of the military vessels in a close range slugging match. Ship after ship was targeted, disabled and destroyed. Some of the smaller military vessels were lost in the altercation, but wherever the *Reciprocator* turned its weaponry the civilian lines were decimated.

Within minutes it had turned into a rout, and none were spared. Even escape pods were systematically subjected to gunnery. Some ships tried to make an escape using fuel injectors, but military fighters quickly overhauled them and pummelled them into submission.

The *Foregone Conclusion* was one of the last to be destroyed. Mahl had even tried to launch a Q-Bomb, but the *Reciprocator's* gunners shot it down before it could detonate.

Five minutes after the final orders had been given it was over.

Aesbion was under martial law.

‘In a startling and unprecedented move, the Galactic Navy, with Galcop’s blessing, has introduced martial law across several systems in the Old Worlds sector, with various other restrictions being imposed across chart one. Many systems have had their witchpoint navigation beacons disabled and all ships are subject to stop and search protocols in these zones. Travel into and out of the Old World systems is effectively at a standstill at this point, with curfews in operation. All ships are required to remain docked at orbital stations or planet-side until further notice. Galcop has said the situation is unlikely to change for the duration of the war, but indicates that it has no plans to extend the restrictions to other systems at this time.’

‘In other news, reports are growing of an acute shortage of Galactic Witchdrive units, with many repair yards and transport outlets reporting they simply can’t fulfil orders. The Galactic Stock Index dropped a further eight percent this morning, with the price of essential commodities continuing to rise. With many systems interdicted, imminent shortages of basic commodities seem inevitable in the near future. What’s next in this war? Truth is, we don’t know. This is Kiri Mereso, for the Tionisla Chronicle, under the jackboot. Wideband channel three eighty five point two.’

Chapter Two

Rebecca had passed out as the escape pod jettisoned. The acceleration was fierce and brutal, far worse than she'd anticipated. By the time she regained consciousness the pod was firmly held by one of the Thargoid warships. A quick, impotent prod of the thruster controls indicated she was utterly helpless in their grasp.

She looked around and saw that the whole series of Thargoid vessels had dropped into a tidy wall formation and were proceeding back towards the Thargoid mothership at pace. She craned her head around, but could see no sign of the *Spectre*. She hoped her plan had worked. Jim would doubtless be at the rendezvous point.

Her heart hammered painfully at the thought of him seeing the *Spectre* emerge without her.

He will do the right thing. He'll understand. Won't he?

The mothership loomed in the windows. She saw a section of the hull roll aside, revealing some kind of orifice, brightly illuminated by intense green light. The escape pod was dragged inwards. The glow was painfully bright, forcing her to hold a hand up to shield her eyes.

The orifice closed, sealing her off from the outside. The light faded immediately.

Rebecca tried to recall any previous instances of people being captured by Thargoids. She couldn't remember it ever happening. Thargoids simply attacked and killed, that was that. If anyone had been captured they'd never lived to tell the tale.

Will they kill me? No, they've gone to too much trouble. But will whatever they have in mind be worse...?

A dozen nightmare scenarios ran through her mind. Torture? Experimentation? Maybe they'd just eat her. Who was to say what ethics or morals a warlike insectoid race had?

The escape pod jolted slightly as it came to rest. Its engines shut themselves down automatically. The sudden absence of noise was disconcerting, causing Rebecca to shiver involuntarily.

She blinked, looking through the forward viewer ports, trying to see. It was too dark and her eyes were still trying to adjust to it. She pulled herself out of the seat and grabbed her lightweight pistol from her waistband.

Maybe I should end it now?

She looked at the pistol, and got as far as raising it up to point towards her head. Her hand trembled.

...I can't. I've got to know what they want with me...

A series of scratches and thumps came from the rear hatch. After a moment she could smell hot metal. The Thargoids must be burning their way through the rear of the escape pod. She levelled her pistol at the hatch.

Her fears were confirmed, as the hatch began to glow. First a dull red, it swiftly grew through a dim orange to a bright yellow and then a fierce white. Molten streams of metal ran as the tough alloy dissolved. An acrid smell diffused through the cabin, making her cough. Before long smoke was billowing above her head, forcing her to duck down, with her hand across her mouth.

She braced herself against the pilot's chair, taking careful aim at the hatch.

The moment it goes...

The hatch broke, collapsing inwards with a shower of sparks, leaving a gaping hole in the rear of the pod. Rebecca immediately fired through it, punching out five or six bolts of fierce laser fire before stopping. The shots disappeared into the darkness, apparently without hitting anything.

She heard rapid chattering from outside. Something appeared in the gap, a dark green mass. She fired at it, but the thing was unaffected. Rebecca squinted. It was difficult to see through the swirling smoke, but it looked like some kind of organic matter, like a blob of syrupy lichen. It was moving, flowing over the gaping entrance hole into the interior of the pod.

She fired again, noticing that the laser was burning small brown spots on the thing. As it flopped inside the pod it suddenly stretched sending tendrils out in all directions like a plant growing a thousand times too fast.

Rebecca fired at the tendrils. Each one she hit coiled back on itself, but there were always more to take their place. They grew at an extraordinary rate, quickly covering the bulkheads and snaking across the floor.

Rebecca tried to back up, still firing, but it was to no avail. One tendril managed to wrap itself around her ankle, tripping her up. As she tried to bring her pistol to bear, another managed to catch her wrist, pulling her arm back. The tendrils constricted, forcing her hand open. The pistol dropped with a clatter.

No...

Tendrils rose up in front of her face. She shrieked in horror.

More tendrils snaked around her, securing her ankles, wrists and thighs. Another set wrapped themselves around her waist and her shoulders. She was lifted off her feet, helpless to resist, vainly struggling to free herself.

The green mass retreated back through the rear opening, pulling her with it. She found herself turned on her side and lifted through the opening.

‘Frak you! Let me go! Let me go!’ Fear made her voice screech.

Outside the pod was a dull green featureless cavern. Rebecca cast around to see if she could see anything recognisable, but there was nothing to focus on. No control panels, no conduits, no wiring. No evidence of the entrance through which the escape pod had arrived. There didn’t seem to be any obvious source of lighting, though everything was lit by a dim greenish glow. A dank moist smell greeted her, as if she was in the depths of some dark primeval forest. A faint throbbing hum echoed around her, almost too deep to hear.

She was tilted forward as she emerged from the pod. She struggled again, the tendrils that held her were elastic, but still held her firmly. After a moment she relented, unable to get any kind of purchase.

She swallowed as she saw nine Thargoids steadily regarding her. At first glance they all looked identical to the one she’d fought in the lab back on the *Catechism*, only after a moment did she realise they seemed considerably smaller. The sight filled her with a sinking cold realisation. She felt her sweat cool instantly, leaving her shivering. She continued to struggle, but the tendrils held her tight. The green mass had arranged itself underneath her, supporting her in mid-air.

‘Let me go you frakkin’ ‘goids! Let me go! Where are you taking me? Can’t you speak? I want to talk to someone...’

One of the Thargoids inclined its head slightly. A tendril shot up and wrapped itself around her mouth, muffling her voice. She instinctively tried to scream only to find she couldn’t.

A strange smell assaulted her nostrils, sweet and sickly; almost honey-like. It was intoxicating. She tried not to breathe in but with her mouth covered she couldn’t help it. Her vision blurred, the background thrumming blended into a dull thudding in her head. Colours flashed around her, spinning out of control, slowly tunnelling in and fading away.

A scant few lightyears away, five spacecraft hung in the darkness. Aboard one a transmission was being played to the dismay of the individual watching it.

‘Jim, speak to Coyote. You can trust him...’ Rebecca’s image looked briefly at the monitor. ‘Don’t try to come after me...’ she paused. ‘Jim... I’m sorry I didn’t call you... You know I...’

The cockpit was abruptly lit by a flash of light. Jim saw Rebecca flung to one side as the stars behind the ship wheeled sickeningly around. Alarms sounded on the recording and the cockpit was lit by red illumination.

‘Rebecca! No!’

He saw her close her eyes, brace and tap the eject buttons. A bulkhead shot down between the monitor and the rest of the cockpit. Dust and particles of debris spun in a maelstrom as the cockpit depressurised and the escape pod fired backwards and upwards from the deck of the *Spectre*.

Jim caught a brief view of the escape pod thrusting away in vain, the Thargoid warships behind the *Spectre* immediately swarming around it, ignoring the fleeing vessel. A moment later the spiralling rings of witchspace appeared and the video faded out with a crash of static.

Transmission complete. Replay?

Jim slowly reached out and touched the darkened screen.

‘Frak that!’ a clipped voice snapped on the narrowband. The screen widened to incorporate the incoming comms of the other ships. Extra video feeds lit up, dividing the screen into quadrants. Jim recoiled at the startling sight of an angry looking draconoid with an artificial eye, who was gazing into the camera pickup at close range, showing a visceral collection of extremely sharp looking teeth. ‘No bug-eyed insect is kidnapping my princess. Lock and load! Let’s go get her!’

‘Wait!’ another voice snapped, with a tone of command. Jim saw a dimly lit figure on the adjacent monitor. He recognised Coyote’s more dulcet tones. ‘We have a mission to complete. Rebecca knew the score...’

‘I concur,’ said a deeply metallic third voice. That viewer was dark, Jim had no idea what the owner of that voice looked like. Based on Rebecca’s description it had to be Udian Foraga Shulth. Rebecca’s text summary had been succinct in the extreme.

Udian - don't trust him!

Udian continued. ‘We have the *Spectre*, we have the weapons. Our mission is still viable. The loss of the woman is regrettable, but does not alter what we need to achieve...’

‘And what the frak were you doing back in Xequerin?’ Derik roared. ‘Screwing around in front of Galcop?’

‘A simple engine glitch.’

‘My scaly ass it was!’

‘Gentlemen!’ Coyote raised his voice. ‘This is not the time. Prep for jump to Zaerla.’

‘What about you, lab boy?’ Derik leant even closer in to the monitor. ‘She’s your sweetheart...’

‘Of course I want to get her back!’ Jim returned.

‘Then I say damn the frakkin’ mission, and let’s go barbeque some bug!’ the draconoid snarled, leaning back and already starting to flick switches in his cockpit.

‘Derik...’ Coyote warned.

‘The Thargoids will have significant numbers of ships between her and us,’ Udian commented. ‘The chances of being able to retrieve her are marginal, for insignificant gain. The Thargoids will show her no mercy once they take from her what they need or discover she is of no use to them.’

‘You frakkin’ cowards!’ Derik yelled. ‘She saved your ass Coyote, you forgotten that? I thought we were supposed to be a frakkin’ team. We stick together. Who’s going to fly her damn ship anyway? You really going to leave her to them? They’re not taking her on vacation. They’ll torture her, kill her, rip her to pieces! We don’t even know why they took her...’

‘Most likely she is already dead,’ Udian added. ‘And how, precisely, do you expect to storm a Thargoid mothership without a contingent of marines? They are unlikely to allow us to waltz in and retrieve her...’

‘You ever been introduced to my axe, buddy?’ Derik returned.

‘I know why the Thargoids are after Rebecca!’ Jim interjected. ‘We have to get her back, she didn’t know...’

‘This is not a democracy!’ Coyote said, uncharacteristically raising his voice. ‘This is the mission, we get to Beenri. Rebecca got the *Spectre* back to us so we could continue. Prep jump to Zaerla. All ships.’ He lowered his voice, ‘Now.’

‘No way,’ Derik snarled back. ‘Bugs got debts and it’s payback time. See you in witchspace

buddy.’

There was a flash of light from outside the observation windows on the *Dubious Profit*. Jim looked up to see a spiralling witchspace wormhole where the draconoid’s ship had been a moment before.

Coyote swore under his breath.

‘I’m afraid my companion is prone to occasional bouts of single minded fixation when presented with danger to those he professes to care about...’ Udian said with grim humour.

Coyote ignored him, thinking hard for a moment.

‘Jim. Can you fly?’

‘I’ve had basic training, yes. Wireframes. But I can’t fight...’

‘Good enough. Get over to the *Spectre*. We’re going after Derik. All ships prep return jump to Derik’s coordinates.’

‘This is a mistake,’ Udian insisted.

‘Mistake’s already been made,’ Coyote returned.

‘What about us?’ Hesperus scratched out.

‘You’re coming too,’ Coyote replied quietly.

‘No way! We didn’t sign up for this war!’

‘Put it this way,’ Coyote said. ‘You either come with us, or we leave you here, one ship unescorted, and send out an open season wideband with your ident on it saying you’re carrying forty tons of narcotics. Comprendre?’

Hesperus prevaricated for a moment before acquiescing.

‘Get me over there,’ Jim snapped, indicating the stationary *Spectre*.

‘I’ll join you if I may be permitted,’ Daddyhoggy said from behind them. Jim looked at the big avian in surprise.

‘Why?’

‘I’m hoping the décor aboard that ship will be a little more conducive,’ the bird replied. ‘If I’m going to be reduced to my constituent components in a futile and ill-advised attack, I’d rather do it with a little more *je ne sais quoi*...’

Rebecca blinked.

The thrumming noise was louder now. Lights flashed in front of her, she could just make out indistinct shapes surrounding her, occasionally moving. She felt dizzy; unable to focus her eyes. She frowned and squinted, trying to figure out where she was. Her head swam, she fought back a feeling of almost overwhelming nausea. Her body was shuddering uncontrollably.

A horizontal beam of light passed over her, followed by a vertical one. The pattern was repeated again and again. It was too bright, it made her eyes hurt.

She could hear chittering and clicking sounds. The shapes resolved slightly; green; mauve.

Her arms and legs hurt. She tried to move, but found she was restrained at the wrists and ankles, her arms pulled above her head and her legs slightly apart. She moaned, trying to look around her. A cool breeze drifted across her momentarily, making her skin twitch. They'd taken her clothing, she was entirely naked.

The lights flashed across her again.

She struggled, but whatever held her refused to relent. She was bound fast, lying mostly on her back, but slightly propped up. She felt horribly vulnerable and struggled again, wildly pulling at her wrist and ankles. It was to no avail.

'Let me go!' she wailed.

One of the shapes came close. A terrifying head resolved in her vision. A wide ovoid, green and bristling with fine hairs. Two antennae on top of its head bent towards her and probed her face. She screamed and twisted her head away.

There was some kind of holofac image floating in the air on her left side. It looked like a map of chart one. Different systems faded out one by one after brief pauses. The lights flashed in front of her again, more systems were removed from the map.

Rebecca tried to focus more clearly, trying to see what the Thargoids were doing. She pulled her body to one side.

Almost straightaway something slipped across her mouth. She felt the tendril tighten around her.

She tried to cry out her defiance, but she could make no more than a muffled moan. The honey-sweet smell invaded her senses again. Her eyes rolled up in her head and she collapsed back

again the restraints that held her; unconscious again, her pale body still held by the indefatigable tendrils.

The lights flashed, across and down, across and up, across and down, across. More systems on the map were removed. Only a handful remained.

Jim fired up the astrogation scanner in the *Spectre's* cockpit as Daddyhoggy arranged himself behind him. The bridge was spartan, functional with little in the way of embellishment. Each monitor, console or control had a discrete purpose. Less was more, classic Isis design.

Just how she would have liked it. Easy to underestimate, just like her...

Only the original forward section of the cockpit remained. The escape pod had formed the rear component of the control centre and it was conspicuously absent. There was nothing other than bulkhead now. Of the three chairs that would have been part of the bridge, only two were left. Jim could see the tracks that had secured the third seat to the floor. Rebecca would have been pulled backwards as she'd triggered the escape sequence.

He shook his head to focus his mind and buckled himself in.

'Austere, drab and dreary,' the big avian commented from beside him. 'But it is clean.'

The narrowband comms flickered into life.

'You in?' Coyote's voice sounded.

'We're ready.' Jim replied.

'Good. Enter the following co-ords and prime the jump, por favor.' Coyote rattled out a string of numbers. Jim typed them into the witchspace plotter.

'Ready,' Jim replied, when he was finished.

'You're going to be running point defence,' Coyote continued. 'Just stay behind Udian and me and watch out for anything that gets past us. The *Spectre* has the highest spec out of all our ships, but that's our trump card. Stay behind us, comprende?'

'Got it,' Jim nodded.

'First priority is to catch up with that damn lizard, and then we'll assess what else we can do. Engage witchspace jump.'

Jim tapped the command on the astrogation console.

Witchspace to unspecified destination in thirty seconds.

Coyote's image scrutinised from the viewer.

'Now, you've got half a minute to tell me what the frak the 'goids want with your girl.'

Jim eyed him back.

'Rebecca said I could trust you. Did she tell you anything before she...'

'She said a few things,' Coyote answered back. 'I think she knew she was going to get caught. The last thing she said was the word Raxxla. Code word I guess...'

Witchspace to unspecified destination in twenty seconds.

Jim shook his head.

'Raxxla's no codeword, Coyote. It's a ghost world. A real planet. a real legend. Rebecca and I have been there. We've seen what it can do.'

Coyote was looking at him with astonishment. 'Real? Raxxla?'

Witchspace to unspecified destination in ten seconds.

'The Thargoids want Rebecca because she's been there,' Jim continued. 'They think she's going to lead them to it somehow. All those stories about time travel and ultra-powerful portals? They're true. If the Thargoids get hold of Raxxla they'll control everything; forget bio-weapons, forget anything. They'll be able to wipe us out at a stroke...'

Witchspace engaged...

If Coyote managed a response it was lost in the burst of static as the ships dropped into witchspace.

When Rebecca next awoke she was once more in the clutches of the strange tendril creature, surrounded by Thargoids and being marched towards a wall. The lichen-like creature that held her followed them, carrying her along above itself.

A little surprised to find she was still alive and knowing that it was pointless to struggle, Rebecca decided to conserve her strength and observe what was happening around her.

As the Thargoids approached the wall it puckered, and folded inwards, splitting. It then rolled back with a disturbingly organic slurp, revealing a pulsating tunnel of the same material. Rebecca could see that the tunnel itself seemed to be a temporary thing, unfolding in front of the marching

troupe. She craned her neck back and saw it begin to seal itself behind them as they passed through. The walls and floor seemed gelatinous in composition; the ambient light seemed to be a natural property of them both.

They passed areas where the walls seemed thinner. Rebecca got the brief impression of hexagonal pods lining the walls, their translucent covering revealing the outlines of largely, vaguely oblong objects hidden behind them. Some were bright white in colour, others a muddy brown. She could have sworn some of them moved.

Thargoid infants?

Before long the corridor widened out into a circular room of sorts. As they entered the wall behind them sealed itself, leaving no trace of the entrance. The Thargoids stopped and then marched outwards, each one arriving at the wall. They made a smart turn-about, and then stood motionless equidistant from each other, facing inwards.

She found herself lowered to her feet, the tendrils retracting gently. The lichen-like creature grew in size slightly as the tendrils were reabsorbed. Once this had been accomplished it too puckered, shivering for a moment, and then appeared to pop. For a moment there was an undulation and then it was gone, becoming part of the floor, indistinguishable from it.

Rebecca spun around. She was surrounded, with no way out. She cautiously looked around. The room was likewise completely featureless. She took a step forward. The Thargoids immediately before her raised their front limbs threateningly. She retreated back to the centre of the room and their arms lowered back into place.

Stay put, that's obvious enough...

She knelt down, touching the ground. It was warm and soft to the touch of her hands and feet, giving slightly to the pressure of her hand. On close inspection she could see it contained what looked like bubbles of something, shapes moved within its translucent layers. It pulsed, a faintly increased glow of light running through it.

It's alive! The whole inside of the ship is alive...

The wall behind her puckered, pulling itself back. An opening appeared and another Thargoid entered.

This one was very different. It was far taller and more imposing. Its exoskeleton was much darker, a deep maroon, rather than the more familiar green Rebecca had come to loathe. Its head was larger too, and the abdomen more than twice the length of the other Thargoids. Rebecca was also

surprised to see that it had wings; thin iridescent membranes that flickered in the dim light. She also saw it had none of the barbs or spikes found on the smaller Thargoids.

The wall slithered closed with a sucking sound and the new Thargoid straightened to its full height. It towered above her; Rebecca estimated it at about two and half metres. She took a step back.

The Thargoid regarded her silently, its compound eyes slowly whirling, as if regarding her from different magnifications, apertures and focal lengths.

‘What do you want with me?’ Rebecca burst out.

The Thargoid slowly gestured to the wall on Rebecca’s left hand side. The wall darkened and an image appeared suspended in mid-air. It solidified into a view of space. Rebecca could see the outline of a small ship. It was a Super Cobra, one of the highly regarded custom designs from Apocalypse Engineering. She’d flown one once, a long time before...

Wait a minute...

The image zoomed in. It was the ship she’d flown. She remembered how the ident numbers had been scrubbed off the hull. That Super Cobra had been a prototype, the first of its kind. She and Jim had stolen it and ended up in interstellar space.

Rebecca frowned.

Thirteen years ago! This has to be the Thargoid recollection of those events...

The ship turned and fled, lasers snaked across the field of view. After a few moments the ship disappeared, replaced by a flickering blue wormhole.

That’s right; we jumped back to Lave...

Indecipherable symbols cluttered the image, and various schematics interposed themselves on top of the wormhole. Rebecca inferred they were scanning it, calculating the destination. The screen wavered, showing a series of Thargoid warships docking with the mothership before a witchspace tunnel suddenly appeared.

Next moment the view shifted. It was a familiar star system. Lave, the home of Galcop Administration. Rebecca could see fleets of vessels arrayed in various formations.

It was a battle between the Empire, Federation and Galcop. We came out in the middle of it! Then the Thargoids arrived...

The viewer wavered again, showing a fierce and terrible battle taking place. Rebecca could see ships of various configurations exchanging fire with the Thargoids. Missiles streaked across the view, explosions and debris littered space for miles around.

Why are they showing me this? I was there...

The view shifted again, focussing in on a single ship. Rebecca could see it was the Super Cobra. It was ducking and diving, moving closer to the Thargoids camera, flanked by a series of other vessels. Underneath it was a small device. As she watched the device was dropped, spiralling down towards the Thargoid vessel. The Super Cobra pulled up rapidly, fleeing.

The Q-Bomb... we destroyed them...

The image suddenly flashed, crumpled and died. The view went blank.

The big Thargoid turned back to regard her, silently.

‘Yes, that was me!’ she declared defiantly. ‘I killed your whole mothership! I’d do it again if I could! What you gonna do about it?’

The Thargoid stepped forward slowly, raising a limb. Rebecca could see the sharp claw that formed the end of its jointed hand. She stepped back, hearing the soft click of the other Thargoids snapping to attention behind her.

Rebecca’s eyes widened in horror as the claw came down towards her. She remembered the attack of the Thargoid she’d encountered in the lab, the agony as it had impaled her.

They mean to execute me for crimes against them!

The jointed hand came towards her. Instinctively she grabbed it, trying to fend it off. It was impossible; the Thargoid’s limb was unbelievably strong. The claw opened and settled around her neck, clamping firmly around her, but stopping short of choking her. Rebecca struggled feebly, acutely conscious that the moment the claw closed she would be neatly decapitated in an instant.

She glared defiantly at the Thargoid in front of her, both hands still trying to wrest the claw from her neck.

‘Kill me then! I defy you! Insect scum!’

But the claw didn’t close. It remained tight enough to immobilise her, but she could still breathe. The Thargoid wasn’t throttling her. It appeared to have other ideas.

It sank towards the floor.

It's kneeling! What...

Around her the other nine Thargoids stamped their feet in unison and also dropped to one knee, their heads bowed.

Rebecca stared in disbelief.

They're honouring me?

The claw slipped away and the Thargoids stood back up. Rebecca warily looked at the imposing creature before her.

‘So now what?’ she demanded, trying to steady her voice. ‘Love the whole mutual respect between warriors and all that, but that’s not...’

The Thargoid made a brief click with its mandibles. Rebecca felt the floor underneath her feet shift slightly. Tendrils once again rapidly emerged from around her. They secured her ankles and wrists as before, but now Rebecca felt them shoot up across her, running up against the skin of her legs.

She shrieked in horror, vainly attempting to brush them off. Within seconds they had crossed her waist and chest, delicately wrapping themselves around her neck and covering her face in a fine green lattice-work.

‘Perhaps you can understand me now.’ said a voice.

Rebecca was almost immobile, but her eyes widened in surprise. The Thargoid in front of her hadn’t moved, but it was regarding her intently. The voice seemed eerily familiar.

‘I...’

Rebecca tried to speak, but she realised her mouth hadn’t moved. But she thought she had heard her own voice...

‘Satisfactory,’ the voice repeated. ‘Calibration is successful.’

It's inside my head! Telepathy?

‘Of a sort,’ the voice said, with the same sense of disturbing familiarity. ‘We are linked. Do not struggle; you will only cause yourself pain.’

‘You can understand me?’ Rebecca said. Somehow she heard herself, despite knowing that her mouth hadn’t moved.

‘We understand many things, Rebecca Tyley of Tianve. Much is now clear.’

It was only then that Rebecca realised the voice was female.

‘Who are you?’ she demanded. She still wasn’t sure whether she was thinking or speaking the words.

There was a pause and a strange background noise, almost like a musical murmur. Then the voice spoke again.

The Thargoid answered with a few simple words, yet Rebecca gasped in horror, disbelief and shock. Her body collapsed into the soft grasp of the tendrils, immobile and unconscious. She was lowered gently, almost reverently, to the floor. The tendrils retreated and the floor raised itself, gently matching the contours of her body, shifting her into a resting position. One of the tendrils remained wrapped around the top of her head, like a pale green plant-like tiara.

The large Thargoid bent down to inspect her. Satisfied, it tenderly ran a claw across her hair, carefully moving it aside so her face was visible.

Then it stood back, its head bowed.

Something moved swiftly through the darkness of deep interstellar space. Stars flickered as a silent, almost invisible vessel briefly caused their light to refract in a scarcely discernible fashion. Ahead a fleet of dark hued vessels clustered in a defensive perimeter. Beyond them, a large mothership slowly turned about, aligning itself for a witchspace jump.

Space warped, folded and unravelled itself. The dim, menacing bulk of a Caduceus bio-ship grew into complete visibility.

Derik quickly surveyed the targets ahead using a vision sweep with his enhanced prosthetic eye. Seventeen vessels in total. Sixteen warships plus the mothership. Even at extreme range he could tell that most were the classic Thargoid design, octagonal ships with single omni-directional turrets. Four were the newer frigate-class ships nicknamed Terrorisers. These were swifter, more dangerous; with twin weapons. They looked more like a simple cross at this distance. They had to be the priority targets.

Derik didn’t dare use the targeting scanners on the *Persistence* to light up the Thargoids. That would give him a missile lock and a chance to use the wide variety of munitions aboard his ship. However, it would also instantly notify the Thargoids that they were under attack and give away his position. His biggest advantage remained the element of surprise. The Thargoids wouldn’t see him coming, so much the worse for them.

He nosed the *Persistence* into extreme range and then tweaked the console settings to allow extremely fine control of the ship. At his command the ships coasted to a near stop, slowly creeping forward in the manner of a cat stalking its prey.

‘Now Violet, it’s time for the masquerade ball,’ he muttered under his breath, activating the main gun on the forward mount. ‘Take your places everyone.’

Lasers aboard ships tended to be classed in increasing wattage, giving off distinctive hues of light as a result. With the relatively high levels of dust and gas that pervaded the charts, lasers glowed noticeably in the darkness due to backscattering of light and had their range limited accordingly. With a traditional weapon, sniping at range worked for a while, but it didn’t take long for potential victims to work out your location, come about and start firing back. Bright lasers were like big arrows indicating ‘Here I am!’

Derik had a novel solution to that problem. With the help of some serious tech-heads from Lerelace he now had the option of dramatically increasing the frequency output of his laser. It could now operate in the ultra-violet range; invisible, but still devastatingly potent. He lost a little efficiency as a result, and the weapon heated up even faster than normal, but it left him with a weapon completely suited to the way he liked to fight; striking from the darkness, leaving no clues.

Ever since he’d begun employing this type of attack, nothing had escaped his aim. Most hadn’t even known what had hit them.

He slipped an ultra-violet enhancement subroutine into the computer that controlled his eye and called up the visual acuity system.

His claw closed on the firing control.

Damn cowards! Humans never have the balls when it comes down to the wire. Too much frakkin’ sneaking around, too much debate. Time to teach these insectoid scum who they’re messing with...

The first Terroriser Frigate drifted into the enhanced crosshairs of his improvised targeting system. The forward gun of the *Persistence* spat invisible death across the gulf of space.

The Thargoid vessel didn’t react for a moment, clearly confused by the rapid and devastating drop in its shields. It came about, its weapons spinning past the location of Derik’s vessel, unable to detect anything. Derik jostled his aim to starboard and fired again. The Thargoid ship exploded.

Derik immediately turned his ship aside, activated the on-board cloaking device and triggered the injectors, moving his angle of attack on the Thargoid convoy by precisely thirty degrees. He’d

dubbed it the *Clockwork Kill*. It was a masterful attack strategy on a numerically superior force. Keep circling the victims, destroy a single ship, hide and move, return, rinse and repeat. With an invisible ship and an invisible weapon it was almost impossible to counter.

The *Persistence* crept back into range and fired again. Another Terroriser warship expired. Derik's scanners detected the scanning emissions from the Thargoids as they attempted to locate him.

Not gonna work, bugs!

The cloaking device allowed him to move with impunity. Another hour on the imaginary clock face, another ship came into the crosshairs.

The Thargoids had spread their ships out in a vain attempt to visually ascertain the *Persistence*. Derik could see them spinning, hoping to catch a glimpse of his vessel. They had little chance, even though he did have to de-cloak in order to fire. The hull of the *Persistence* was a dark grey, with only faint green emanations in certain places as testament to its heritage as a bio-ship. Designed for precisely this type of attack it presented a narrow forward profile. At range it was effectively invisible even before any electronic stealth technologies were brought to bear.

Another ship died. Derik smiled in satisfaction.

Fish in a barrel...

The *Persistence* cloaked and moved again. Derik eased back into range once more. He scrutinised the Thargoids and blinked, surprised by their response.

Clearly realising they couldn't detect their attacker, the Thargoids had switched to a highly defensive strategy. Their ships had pulled in close together and were swarming around each other in a tight pack at high speed. Derik tried to draw a bead on an individual ship, but found his aim was constantly interrupted by another ship in the pack. No matter which ship he chose, they were too tightly packed to individually eliminate.

Clever 'stards...

Meanwhile the mothership was emitting an increasing amount of gravimetric radiation, an obvious tell-tale sign that it was prepping its witchspace drive for a jump. Time was running out.

Need to disable that mother. Gonna have to improvise a little here...

Via his eye implant he primed one of his favoured weapons, a Quirium cascade torpedo. Based on the infamous Q-Bomb mine, the torpedo was almost equally powerful, but added a self-homing drive-unit into the mix. This allowed it to individually select and approach its target

autonomously.

Firing it at range would give away his position, something he couldn't afford yet. It would also be visible to the Thargoids, giving them a chance to shoot it down. However, when it went off the Thargoids would be too closely packed to escape.

No, we're going in up close and personal now. This may be a little tricky...

Derik brought the bow of the *Persistence* around and triggered the injectors, driving headlong towards the swarming mass of insectoid ships.

He didn't engage the targeting computer immediately, but eyeballed the range visually based on long years of experience. As he approached five kilometres range he dropped the cloak and primed the torpedo, backing off the injectors to give himself time to conduct the attack with absolute precision.

Four kilometres... three....

He activated the targeting computer, selected one of the two remaining Terrorisers and fired the torpedo.

Torpedo launched. Detonation in five seconds.

The Thargoids instantly detected the targeting lock, their green and purple vessels abruptly spinning around in the direction of the *Persistence*. As the torpedo homed in on their position laser fire flickered in the darkness in the general direction of Derik's ship. Two lucky shots bounced off the shields of the *Persistence*.

Derik grinned and was about to thumb the injector controls when the astrogation scanner lit up with dozens of new targets.

'What the...?'

Suddenly the area was flooded with objects, creating a blizzard of obstacles directly in the path of the *Persistence*. Derik recognised them immediately, the Thargoids' autonomous remote controlled craft, Thargons. He punched the auto-targeting computers online for the turret based weapons aboard the *Persistence*. Plasma fire spewed into space, taking out many of the new craft.

Derik swerved around one, ducked below another, but there were too many of them and insufficient space to manoeuvre. A pair of them impacted on the starboard quarter. The first exploded and discharged the shields, but the second one slammed into the hull before disintegrating. The *Persistence* yawed into an uncontrolled spin. Warning messages flashed up on the console.

Warning! Forward shields depleted!

Warning! Starboard engine at 72% of rated output. Damage to inlet manifolds.

Warning! Cloaking device off-line!

Derik cursed and wrestled with the controls to regain control of his ship. As the *Persistence* came about, he glanced at the rear view imager and saw the Thargoid warships bearing down on him...

...Just as the cascade torpedo detonated. The display blanked out, backing down several intensity levels, trying to provide an image. Derik could see the magenta sphere on the astrogation console as the deadly Quirium cascade expanded rapidly from the point of detonation, almost immediately consuming the nearby Thargoid vessels and triggering further devastating cascades.

His claw closed on the injector control, tightening in glee.

‘Sayonara bugs!’

The *Persistence* lurched forward briefly and then stuttered.

Warning! Fuel injection off-line. Starboard nacelle manifold pressure out of bounds!

Derik looked up at the approaching wave of destruction he’d initiated, his claws jamming the throttles forward to their stops. He glanced at the range indicator.

Not enough!

‘Oh frak...’

Chapter Three

Rebecca came to with a start, sitting up and looking around her in trepidation. She was still in the same place, the dull featureless yet strangely organic room. Beneath her the floor reacted slowly, smoothing itself out. She didn't move for a moment, trying to remember where she was. Slowly it came back to her.

The escape pod, Thargoids, captured... lights... then...

She looked up.

What it said, no that's not possible...

The large Thargoid was standing a little way from her, regarding her without moving. Rebecca scrambled backwards, looking around her. The other Thargoids were no longer present. She was alone with just the solitary insect. The room remained featureless, sealed. There was no way out.

Beside her was a pile of clothing. She recognised the flight suit she had been wearing when she was captured. Gratefully she pulled it on. She kept her eyes on the Thargoid throughout. It remained motionless. Unfortunately her pistol was nowhere to be found.

As she finished, the Thargoid stepped forward a pace.

No...!

'Stay away!' Rebecca screamed, scrambling away rapidly. 'Don't come near me! Go away!'

The Thargoid bent down and left a small silver disk on the floor between them. Then it slowly retreated. As Rebecca watched, the disk soundlessly hovered, rising a few feet in the air. Then it began to glow, emitting an image around itself. It seemed like a holofac transmitter, only clearer, less grainy. It steadied and then appeared solid. A perfect hologram.

No! It can't be!

It was a woman, a woman only too familiar to Rebecca. The image was just a little taller than she was. Long brown hair with a slight wave framed a narrow face with a hint of freckles. Large brown eyes appeared to look out at Rebecca. The woman was clothed in a generic spacers outfit from a few decades before. She was standing, looking slightly down at Rebecca. Her expression was unreadable.

It was her, down to every little detail. Rebecca remembered the hairstyle, the stance, the

caring look; everything.

How can they know this? Is this how they intend to torture me? Pulling up images from my past?

Rebecca had backed away against the wall of the room, feeling its fleshy solidity behind her. There was nowhere to run to.

‘What do you want with me?’ she whispered, her voice tinged with hysteria.

‘They mean you no harm.’ The image of the woman spoke the words softly.

The voice! Oh frak, the voice!

‘No harm?’ Rebecca almost screamed, waving vaguely in the direction of the hologram.

‘What’s this supposed to be then?’

‘They hoped this image might be reassuring. To allow them to communicate more effectively.’ The woman took a step forward. ‘An image of...’

My mother! How can they do this? How can they?

‘I remember! You think I don’t?’ Rebecca cried. ‘I’ve seen her face every day since I was child!’

The woman stretched out a hand.

‘Rebecca...’

‘My mother died years ago!’ Rebecca screeched back. ‘She was killed when I was six!’

The woman nodded.

‘That’s almost true. You might say Rihanna Tyley died in 3118 as you measure time...’ the woman smiled coyly and then stepped aside. ‘Or perhaps you might not.’

Rebecca stared back, shivering with fright, shock and distrust. She kept her eyes on the image of...

...my mother!

Rihanna continued. ‘She was on a trading mission to chart five...’

‘I remember,’ Rebecca said, breathlessly.

‘It was nothing too unusual. She and her crew were ambushed by pirates, too many to evade. They were outnumbered, their ship damaged. There was no way out. The only thing left to try was a

mis-jump. Easy enough with the old style faraway jump drive they were using. But it was too late. Pirates attacked just as the jump engaged. The ship was shattered, but the jump still happened. I guess you could say that's when she died.'

Rebecca swallowed. 'But...?'

Rihanna turned on her heel. Rebecca saw her hair spin out briefly before it fell around her face again. The holofac simulation was faultless.

'I woke up,' she said simply, giving Rebecca a smile.

Her smile...

Rebecca looked back at the huge insectoid that was standing motionless at the back. It inclined its head slightly.

'No way...' Rebecca shook her head decisively. 'That's impossible!'

'Oh it took a while. I wanted to end it all to start with. The horror of being transformed, finding myself like this, in non-existence? But they were patient. Once I'd adjusted they let me have the choice... I decided to live...'

'I don't understand...'

'They found my ship,' Rihanna said, her voice soft and reassuring. 'What was left of it... what was left of us, what was left of me. It wasn't much, but Thargoid technology is very advanced. I guess you could say they salvaged me.'

'Salvaged?' Rebecca said weakly.

'My body was crushed and burnt, but they were able to save my memories, my consciousness if you will...'

Rebecca felt queasy and wondered if she was going to vomit. She tried breathing deeply. Rihanna paused, waiting for her to recover.

Rebecca looked past the hologram at the Thargoid again, biting her lower lip.

This is some stupid trick. Why are they spinning this elaborate story?

Rebecca steadied herself and stared at the hologram accusingly. 'If you are what's left of my mother you'll remember my favourite bedtime story then, I'm guessing?'

Figure that one out insect!

Rihanna smiled. 'The magical planet of Raxxla, an onyx jewel lost in space. A planet beyond

the furthest star - Raxxla's the most wondrous place? I remember it well.'

Rebecca stumbled backwards, bumping into the wall again, her mouth dropping open in bewilderment.

No one else knew that, not even Dad! But she knew...

'No. It's not possible. It can't be!' she said, her voice cracking and rising in pitch. 'You died! We had a funeral and everything! You're dead!'

'As I...'

'Why did you leave us?' Rebecca suddenly screamed, her eyes filling with tears. 'Why did you leave me? I loved you! What possesses a mother to go waltzing off into space leaving her children behind? Didn't you love us?'

'Rebecca of course I...'

'Not enough!' Rebecca cried bitterly. 'What was it? Exploring the unknown? Enjoying the danger? You had a family! Responsibilities!'

'Space is dangerous...'

'You think I don't know that?' Rebecca snapped, her voice breaking up entirely, a breath short of hysteria. 'I've had to fight my way through it all my damn life! Do you know what happened after we lost you? Dad was never the same again - Red was pretty much running the whole damn show. We never had enough credit, always one step ahead of resorting to piracy, Black Monks chasing us across systems for bad debts! We'd only just got back on our feet when... I lost everything! Do you know what happened? Do you? They were all killed, lasered into oblivion. My cousins, Dad, Red... everyone...'

Rebecca sank to her knees, finally shuddering into hysterics, tears freely flowing down her cheeks.

'Everyone... all dead... they always die...'

Rihanna paused, also kneeling down across from Rebecca, just a few feet away.

'I can't change what has passed, Rebecca.' Rihanna's voice was soft and slow. 'I wish I could, but I can't.'

'Leave me alone!' Rebecca refused to look up.

'Rebecca...'

‘Leave me!’ her voice was a sharp furious snap.

‘Please, you must...’

Rebecca struck out, incensed. She flailed her clenched fists at Rihanna, seeking to strike her. Had she been real Rihanna would have suffered blows to the face and chest. As it was Rebecca’s fury went nowhere, overbalancing her. She stumbled, tripped and fell forwards, striking her head against the floor.

The bridge of the *Persistence* was a shambles. As he’d watched the incoming wave of destruction, Derik knew he had one reckless choice left. Without injectors, his ship couldn’t outrun the cascade effect from a standing start. With the Thargoids obliterated there was nothing between him and the deadly effect.

‘Computer! Blow out the coolant valves, jam open the pressure wastegates on the starboard engine and dump the witchspace fuel directly into the drive exhaust.’

Warning! Damage to...

He cancelled the computer’s objections. ‘Yeah, but not if we keep the ratio down. Leak the fuel in at two point two percent!’

Derik lurched across to the helm console and set the engines to full burn. The *Persistence* surged forward, the cascade still growing behind him. Only seconds were left before it would impact against the ship, signalling an abrupt end to everything.

Reconfiguration complete. Warning! Current...

‘Now computer!’ Derik yelled.

The *Persistence* suddenly accelerated forward as if something had given it a huge kick from behind. Blazing a trail of flaming witchspace fuel, bits of hull plating and other assorted debris, it hurtled forwards in an erratic spiral trajectory.

Poor man's fuel injection! That's definitely going to invalidate the warranty on this baby!

The acceleration was terrifying. The inertial compensators were unable to completely dispense with the forces in question; they were too erratic and unpredictable. Derik groaned as he was pinned against the rear wall, his arms forced painfully against his sides. He couldn’t draw breath and winced as small bits of debris kept bombarding him painfully as anything loose within the cockpit was flung rearwards.

Darkness whirled at the edge of his vision as he struggled to free himself from the inexorable grip of inertia.

Derik slowly clawed his way back towards the helm console. Warning lights were flashing across most of the monitors. The ship couldn't keep this up for long. Burning witchspace fuel in this fashion with a damaged manifold in the engine input system would melt the engine in short order.

As if to confirm his thoughts, the computer announced a fresh set of warning messages.

Warning! Starboard engine temperature out of bounds, failure imminent!

Warning! Main reactor critical, abort configuration!

Derik tried to reach the engine cut-off switches, but the force of the acceleration was too much for him to overcome. He could see the engine status indicators showing double red. The starboard engine was burning itself out. The external hull indicators were showing nothing at all. Most likely the sensors had already come loose with large parts of the external plating, probably floating around in his wake dozens of kilometres behind.

Last chance, buddy!

The acceleration slowly began to slacken as the remaining witchspace fuel ran out. Derik struggled forward and hit the cut-offs. The engines flickered and died, the ship yawing around and spiralling impotently through space.

Derik pulled himself upright and surveyed the damage, wheezing and gasping for breath.

‘Balls to the wall baby... that was one hell of a ride!’

The narrowband comms buzzed. ‘Derik, where the frak are you?’

The *Dark Star*, *Hammer*, *Spectre* and the *Dubious Profit* materialised in the depths of interstellar space, just in time to see the cascade torpedo detonate.

Coyote jammed on the narrowband transmitter.

‘Derik, where the frak are you?’ he yelled.

Static crackled across the link.

Coyote could see nothing on the scanner other than the fading mark of the Quirium cascade.

‘Report, damn it!’

‘Got the bugs...’ Derik’s voice sounded oddly strained. ‘Get the mothership...’

‘All ships, injectors!’ Coyote commanded. ‘Jim, Hesperus, follow me. Udian, intercept the mothership and conduct a fast scan. We need to know if Rebecca’s aboard.’

‘Understood.’ Udian’s metallic voice returned. The *Hammer* peeled off on a different vector towards the hulking mass of the Thargoid mothership, still hovering menacingly in the near distance.

The three other ships streaked towards the fading remnants of the cascade.

As they pulled into range the scanner became clouded with drifting unpowered ships. Coyote recognised the small signatures of Thargons, remote controlled craft, floating dead without the ships that had launched them. Clearly the mothership was already out of range.

One larger target appeared, powered.

Just the Persistence... what happened?

The *Persistence* was in a bad way. The starboard flank and wing nacelle were streaming a glistening white material and only one engine appeared to be working. The hull seemed to be blackened and pockmarked with minor scrapes and punctures. In some areas the hull plating was entirely missing.

‘Derik! Report!’

Rebecca rubbed at her eyes, wiping away the tears and looked up into Rihanna’s face. The image was so clear, it could have been real. Rihanna looked younger than she did.

Looking down on me just like... I guess this is what she looked like when she died! What would she have been? Not much more than thirty, far younger than I am now...

‘I had a long time to think about the decisions I took,’ Rihanna continued. ‘I know what I did to you all. It was selfish of me, always...’

Rebecca looked up, her heart hammering. She remembered the words Jim had spoken in anger at her a few short days before, now she repeated them to herself in regret and understanding.

‘Always living on the edge,’ she whispered. ‘Taking risks, one step away from being spaced. Death always around the corner...’

Rihanna nodded slowly.

Oh Jim... now I understand what I put you through!

‘Guess that’s where I get it from then...’ Rebecca said, slowly sitting up.

Rihanna ventured a small smile.

‘You didn’t try to find us?’ Rebecca demanded, climbing to her feet.

Rihanna smiled faintly. ‘As a holofac emitted by technology owned by hostile aliens? I considered it, of course. But no, it was better to let things be. I never expected this.’

‘And what is ‘this’?’ Rebecca demanded. ‘You’re working for the Thargoids?’

‘In a manner of speaking,’ Rihanna replied. ‘I do owe them my life, such as it is.’

‘But they’re killers!’ Rebecca fired back, nervously looking at the Thargoid behind Rihanna’s hologram. She dropped her voice to a whisper. ‘Vicious, sadistic killers! They’ve been fighting us for years! You know what they’re like. Decades of war, unprovoked attacks...’

Rihanna was shaking her head. ‘Unprovoked? Wouldn’t you fight back if you were being eradicated?’

‘We didn’t attack the Thargoids! They attacked us!’

‘There’s much that you don’t know...’

‘I know what they did to Tionisla!’ Rebecca rounded on her. ‘I was there. Thousands of innocent men, women and children were killed! They tried to kill me!’

‘An act of desperation, a desperate chance,’ Rihanna countered, her tone stiffer. ‘It pales into insignificance compared to the atrocities visited on the Thargoids. Worlds sterilised, a sustained campaign aimed at wiping them all out. Their homeworld subjugated.’

‘Homeworld?’ Rebecca echoed. ‘Thargoids don’t have a homeworld! They came from space.’

‘Galcop propaganda,’ Rihanna said. ‘How could any creatures have evolved in space? No, Thargoids are planet-borne creatures just like humans, felines, rodents and all the other space faring creatures known. And they all have something in common.’

‘And what’s that?’ Rebecca demanded, hand on hips.

Rihanna gestured with her hand and another hologram appeared. A shining blue green planet appeared in front of her, with a single moon.

Rebecca recognised it; a federation world. Old Earth. The supposed birth-place of humankind.

‘Earth?’

‘Earth.’ Rihanna nodded. ‘A shared heritage, a common ancestry.’

Rebecca scowled. ‘I don’t believe this. I can’t! You’re just a creation of the Thargoids! Memories extracted from me when you had me tied up and unconscious. Is this how you plan to interrogate me? Because it’s not going to work!’

A strange keening tone wailed through the room, interrupting whatever response Rihanna was about to give.

‘What is it?’ Rebecca demanded.

Rihanna looked blank for a moment, before looking at Rebecca, her eyes wide with alarm.

‘Ships. They’ve found us. Come with me.’

Udian’s *Hammer of Sorrow* bore down upon the Thargoid mothership. As the ships closed, the Thargoids began firing defensive lasers in his direction. Udian paid them little heed and performed evasive moves, spiralling in closer to the mothership. As the range decreased he activated the scanning beams, setting them to detect humanoid life-signs.

The beams raked across the Thargoid vessel, the *Hammer* blasting down the massive gleaming hull at breakneck speed. He spun to avoid some of the many jutting mechanisms on the outside of the ship.

The scanners beeped as he passed the halfway point.

Humanoid life-signs detected.

Udian was mildly surprised to discover the woman was still alive. Perhaps the Thargoids had yet to extract whatever it was they were after. He pulled the *Hammer* out onto an escape trajectory and blasted away from the mothership, firing a sensor spike as he did so. The minute sensor device homed in on the Thargoid mothership, embedding itself in the hull and immediately began relaying data. Status information appeared on the diagnostic monitor aboard the *Hammer*. It was clearly a human reading. Life science monitors lit up with heartbeat and respiration graphics.

She’s alive... excellent. Plan ‘B’ it is.

He flipped on the rear view. The mothership was receding in the display, but he could see more ships launching from the side docking ports. Three... eight... ten. The Thargoid warships quickly turned toward him, in pursuit.

Udian flipped on the narrowband and directed it towards Coyote's vessel.

'I can confirm the woman is aboard and is alive. I'm transmitting the trace. We also have incoming.'

Coyote had quickly assessed the damage to the *Persistence*. It was in bad shape, and there was no way it was going to be of any use facing down the incoming Thargoid warships hot on Udian's heels.

We can't win this one, we'll be lucky just to get out of here!

Udian had clearly been reading the situation too. The narrowband comms buzzed.

'Plot a jump,' he instructed. 'I'll delay them. I suggest we depart immediately.'

'What about Rebecca?' Jim called desperately from the *Spectre*. 'We've got to rescue...'

'We can't even get close to the mothership,' Coyote shot back, counting the approaching Thargoid warships. 'They're keeping Rebecca alive, right now there's nothing we can do for her. If we stay here, we're all going to get wiped out. Hesperus, plot a jump back. Udian...'

'Don't worry about me,' Udian returned. 'I've been looking forward to this opportunity for a while.'

The *Hammer* swept about in a wide arc and started heading back toward the incoming Thargoid attack force.

The range shrank fast. As he closed Udian threw the *Hammer* into a yaw and presented his portside flank to the oncoming Thargoids. In any other ship this would have been a crazy, if not downright suicidal, move. For the Caducei it was anything but.

Along the port and starboard flanks were three high powered plasma turrets, the portside set were brought to bear by Udian's move. They instantly began spewing lethal energy towards the oncoming group of insectoid war vessels. The first one was unable to make an evasive move in time and disintegrated shortly after being hit. The others, more circumspect, veered aside and broke off their attack, regrouping.

Lasers flashed in the darkness, seeking out the *Hammer*. Udian triggered the injectors and then yawed his ship back in the other direction, driving the *Hammer* directly into the Thargoid formation. Now, the top and bottom turrets aboard the ship came into play, continuing to blister devastating energy upon the Thargoid vessels. Two more were incinerated.

The *Hammer* was struck by laser fire as the Thargoids pivoted, came about and sought to eliminate their attacker.

Via his sensory feed Udian saw a flicker of light and then a pulsing wormhole open up. The *Dubious Profit* had created a route back the way they had come. Udian noted the *Persistence's* limp into the wormhole and subsequent disappearance. The *Spectre* was still holding station.

‘Alacrity is called for,’ Udian intoned. ‘I will not be able to hold them forever.’

‘Break off the attack. Looks like we’ve out-stayed our welcome,’ Coyote returned.

‘Acknowledged. I’m on my way. Get yourself through, I’ll leave it to the last possible moment so they can’t follow us,’ Udian responded, turning the *Hammer* about in a rolling evasive turn. The Thargoids dropped into pursuit, peppering his rear shields with collimated energy.

‘Copy that.’

Coyote turned his attention to the *Spectre*, which had made no move towards the slowly shrinking wormhole.

‘Jim, get your ass out of here!’ he snapped.

Aboard the *Spectre* Jim was blinded by indecision. His logical mind knew that an assault on the mothership was utterly futile, as Derik’s nearly wrecked ship had shown. However his heart knew Rebecca was out there, just a few tens of kilometres away, held by these vicious insects that would stop at nothing to achieve their aims...

He could see the trace coming from Udian’s sensor relay. Humanoid life form, respiration, carbon based indicators. The beep of the heartbeat was reassuringly steady, if a little fast. Human, female, age 40 plus or minus 5 standard years...

She’s alive, she’s still alive! But, if we don’t rescue her, for how long?

‘I’m not leaving without her!’ Jim cried in response. ‘There has got to be a way to get her back!’

Aboard the *Hammer* Udian called up a secret code. A variety of wideband comms signals presented themselves on a heads-up display. He quickly located the one he required. The time had come and it was unlikely such an opportunity would present itself again. Coyote and the others were occupied. No one would notice.

Plan B.

‘Computer, broadcast this sequence immediately, maximum transmission power, unidirectional signal aimed at the primary Thargoid target.’

Goodbye little woman...

‘Listen to me, Jim,’ Coyote was still trying to reason with the despairing scientist. ‘We’re outnumbered and outgunned. We can’t get close. You saw what happened to Derik. We stick together, we complete the mission...’

Coyote was interrupted by a sonorous tone that issued from the life science trace. He turned to look at it, frowning at the unfamiliar sound.

Mierda! No, no, no!

Jim saw it at the same time. The life sciences information spiked. Rebecca’s heart rate suddenly rose dramatically, held at a high level for a brief moment...

...and then flat lined.

Rebecca followed Rihanna to the wall, which folded back revealing a view out into space.

Rebecca could just make out a small dot. A series of the familiar octagonal Thargoid vessels were closing on it. Lasers flashed silently in the darkness. Ships wheeled around, jockeying for position.

‘Can you get me a close up?’ Rebecca asked.

The star field shifted. Rebecca couldn’t see how it was done, but after a moment the image cleared. Rebecca still couldn’t make out the shape of the vessel. She saw the brief outline of a Caduceus class vessel, before it faded out again.

Cloaking device! Derik or Udian. Derik probably, the damn stupid gecko! I told them not to come after me!

The Caduceus reappeared. Rebecca saw it fire some kind of torpedo at the group of Thargoid warships that were struggling to engage it. Rebecca recognised the tactic.

Dropping a torpedo at point blank... it’s got to be...

Her fears were confirmed as the torpedo exploded. A rapidly expanding sphere of flickering blue energy; the infamous Quirium cascade. The Thargoid vessels were almost instantly consumed.

‘Another unprovoked attack,’ Rihanna said.

‘Unprovoked?’ Rebecca said. ‘They’re trying to rescue me! You’re the ones who ambushed and kidnapped a member of their team!’

Rihanna turned to regard her. ‘Yet no demands for handing you over, no communications? Just sheer unmitigated hostility. Striking from behind the obscurity of a cloaking device, not even an honourable fight?’

‘And give away his position to a numerically superior force?’

‘The mass destruction of sixteen vessels?’

‘Thargoids would do the same!’

‘That’s why you’re still alive is it?’ Rihanna returned, gently.

Rebecca had no answer for that.

The view shifted. More ships had appeared

No... no! I told you not to come after me!

‘More of your ‘friends’?’ Rihanna said, watching Rebecca’s disheartened expression as she quickly recognised the ships. Rebecca’s heart thudded painfully as she recognised the *Spectre* and the *Dark Star*.

Jim! Coyote! What the frak are you doing? Get out of here!

‘Please don’t destroy them!’ Rebecca cried. ‘Please, I’ll do anything you want. Please, just let them go! Don’t fire on them!’

Rihanna was unmoved. The viewer switched, tracking another Caduceus vessel. It was closing rapidly on the mothership, heading directly towards their point of view. Rebecca could just make out the hull markings.

Udian...

Scanning beams flickered out from the speeding vessel; a burst of light illuminated the room in which Rebecca, Rihanna and the Thargoid were assembled. Immediately the Caduceus peeled off. Rebecca saw a phalanx of Thargoid vessels in pursuit.

They know I’m aboard. The fools! I told them to keep going. How the frak do they think they’re going to rescue me from in here anyhow?

‘We’re leaving,’ Rihanna said. ‘We can’t risk being damaged in another attack. The warships will eliminate them.’

‘Let me speak to them,’ Rebecca demanded. ‘I can warn them off! Please don’t...’

‘It’s too late,’ Rihanna gestured to the view. Rebecca looked back and saw the second Caduceus had come about and was firing on the Thargoid vessels. Rebecca could see the other ships moving slowly away. The other Caduceus was slowly moving away.

Derik...

More lasers flashed, the Thargoid vessels careened out of the way. Udian appeared to be trying to divert them.

Buying time for an escape! But why the frak did they come here in the first place?

A blue wormhole appeared and one by one the ships began to move towards it. ‘We’re receiving a transmission,’ Rihanna said.

There was a crackle of static, followed by a strange warbling stream of noise.

‘Some kind of code,’ Rihanna said after a pause.

Rebecca had no idea what the transmission was. It sounded like some kind of data stream.

Why Udian would waste time sending something like that when in the midst of...

Sudden agonising pain flooded her body. It was so intense; her mouth opened to scream, but no sound came out. She was paralysed, unable to control anything. Her conscious thoughts were interrupted by sheer, brutal, liquid fire that seemed to permeate every part of her body, smashing through her rational mind and reducing her to a quivering, shaking automaton.

Rebecca fell full length onto the floor, watching with horror and only vague comprehension as webs of dark material spun out of her extremities. The webs moved fast, seeking contact with the interior of the Thargoid ship. The moment the dark material reached out the Thargoid ship’s fleshy interior began bubbling, dissolving and retreating. Acrid smoke billowed from the points of contact. More webs spiralled out, like a dark malevolent organic cascade mine, growing silently, but with extreme rapidity.

Rihanna’s hologram snapped off as Rebecca continued to writhe in agony in the midst of the rapidly thickening webs. She was now oblivious to what was happening to her, screaming at the top of her lungs – a sound that was abruptly cut off. The lone Thargoid stepped back as the area of contamination spread around Rebecca’s body. It pulled out what was clearly some kind of portable weapon, primed it and trained it on Rebecca’s now motionless form.

The weapon fired, spitting a coruscating flail of energy at what remained of her body.

The line on the monitor continued flat, the unending level tone of the trace emotionlessly recording that the subject in question was no longer emitting a measureable heartbeat. Almost simultaneously, all the other indicators showed a downwards trend and bottomed out.

Life-signs terminated. Continue scanning?

Jim stared at the readout in shock, his hands falling away from the *Spectre*'s controls, oblivious to the Thargoid vessels that were continuing to close on their position.

'No... oh God no!'

'I cannot hold them any longer,' Udian's voice sounded, interspersed with the sounds of weapon fire hitting the shields of his ship. 'We're out of time. We have to leave, now.'

'Jim. Jim!' Coyote called. The *Spectre* was still sitting motionless in the line of fire, the phalanx of Thargoid vessels now within firing range. 'Follow me damn it! Jim!'

'She's gone...' Jim's voice was faint. 'We've failed...'

'Jim, engage engines and head for the wormhole now.' Coyote kept his voice deadpan, commanding, unemotional.

'What's the point? She's ... she's...'

Lasers flickered out from the Thargoid vessels, lancing around the *Dark Star* and the *Spectre*.

'Jim, engage engines and head for the wormhole now! Now!'

'...not letting this happen... can't be...'

The *Spectre* turned, but not towards the wormhole. It spun towards the incoming Thargoid vessels and slowly started moving towards them. Lasers flickered out in the darkness, triple beams of military fire. The fire was inaccurate, only vaguely aimed at the Thargoids.

'Damn it, Jim!' Coyote yelled.

A crackle of static and a thump echoed over the narrowband comms.

'Jim? Jim! What the frak are you doing?'

The *Spectre* lurched, dived and then came to an shuddering halt. For a moment it didn't move, then it came about and began driving towards the wormhole at flank speed. Coyote fell in alongside it.

‘Good Jim. Just keep it going...’

‘Daddyhoggy,’ came a deep voice from the *Spectre’s* transmitter. ‘Given the situation, I have taken charge of the vessel.’

Both ships headed towards the flickering wormhole, which was already showing signs of shrinking and destabilising. The *Hammer* was still trailing behind them, leading the attacking wave of Thargoid vessels. Coyote surveyed the scene.

Almost a complete frakkin’ disaster!

‘Make it quick,’ Coyote snapped in Udian’s direction. The *Spectre* vanished through the wormhole.

‘The pressing need for haste is uppermost in my mind,’ Udian replied. The *Hammer’s* rear shields were almost gone.

Udian angled the *Hammer* towards the wormhole as Coyote’s ship vanished.

They had only seconds left before it collapsed. It was time enough. The Thargoid mothership and its escorts were left alone in the void between stars.

Chapter Four

The Behemoths *Altercator*, *Deprecator* and *Facilitator* were holding station in a low orbit around a lush green world. Faint swirls of cloud drifted beneath them as they followed a swift trajectory around the planet. They were accompanied by hundreds of other lesser vessels, all dark-hulled and heavily armed. An armada awaiting a mission.

Three ships approached from behind one of the two moons, having recently arrived in the system. A primary vessel with two flanking fighter escorts.

The main ship was of an unusual design, a heavy looking ship with four extended engine nacelles and a snub nosed central fuselage. It was clearly a new vessel, its hull showing the unblemished shine of newly pressed Duralium, reflecting the green hues of the planet below. The group of ships was heading directly towards the armada.

Through the broad windows of the new ship the expansive bridge could be clearly seen, crewed by two pilots. Standing behind them, watching the approach, was another man. He was of average height, but stood erect and stiff, a clear military bearing. His clothes were just short of a uniform, but rigorously pressed and formed, highly tailored in a shade of grey that was almost black. Grim hazel eyes took in all the details of the armada ahead as they approached.

The commtab he was holding beeped for attention and he raised it up to inspect it. A quick scan of the succinct text displayed made him grin wryly.

Just couldn't resist, could you Udian...

Garew Ward looked back up at the nearest Behemoth, now sliding past the windows as his ship approached the docking bay. The necessary chatter from the pilots briefly diverted his attention.

'Altercator to Osprey, you are cleared for docking in bay four. Proceed when ready.'

'Acknowledged.'

Garew inspected his commtab again, musing on the information it contained.

ID: Hammer of Sorrow (CoreComm – Anxeonis): The opportunity presented itself and Plan 'B' has been put into effect successfully. The woman has served her purpose. Once the inevitable emotional outpourings have been endured we will make our way directly to Beenri. Be ready.

Garew chuckled at Udian's message, clearly able to imagine the disdain with which Udian would choose to regard the dismay of the rest of the motley team. Doubtless they would have formed

an attachment to the woman through their minor adventures in securing the bio-weapons. She was of no great significance, but he'd respected her defiance at the time. She had a gritty determination that might have been useful elsewhere. Nonetheless, a chance to strike at the Thargoids from the inside had been too irresistible not to take. With the rest of the team now close to Beenri her skills as a pilot wouldn't be a great loss.

She served her purpose. Such a succinct way of saying that she died a very unpleasant death whilst ensuring the infection of the Thargoids. Excellent. Weakened from within they will soon have to contend with the fire of destruction from without. Once they have been dealt with, Galcop's final solution can at last be wrought, five hundred years in the making...

The *Osprey* jolted gently as it came to rest within the belly of the *Altercator*. The ship's systems powered down as Garew made his way towards the rear cargo areas and descended the ramp as it lowered into place. He walked out into the expansive hanger of the Behemoth.

The Captain and the First Officer of the *Altercator* were there to meet him. They exchanged a perfunctory salute. Garew dismissed the First Officer and then gestured for the Captain to accompany him. They walked quickly forward across the hanger bay.

'Is everything in readiness?'

'The fleet is armed and ready, sir. We await the bio-weapon technology. We can replicate it and arm all vessels within a standard day. We can arrive in the Old World's quadrant in less than three days from the time we depart.'

'Excellent.' Garew handed him the commtab. 'These are the ships you are looking for.'

The Captain was quickly scanning the ship IDs. The blueprinted diagrams of a Cobra, Caduceus and Vampire class vessels could briefly be seen.

'They will be intercepted...' the Captain began.

'Not until the test has been successfully carried out,' Garew corrected.

'Sir?' the Captain queried. 'These are the fugitives you described...?'

'Yes,' Garew said, with a wry smile. 'But they are also transporting the bio-weapon technology.'

The Captain frowned.

'Our bio-weapon expert was not completely at ease with a Navy expedition.'

The Captain nodded. ‘Ah. Udian Shulth.’

‘Precisely,’ Garew responded. ‘When the ships arrive, escort them to the planet and allow them to carry out their attack run. Once that has been verified as successful all of them save Shulth are to be arrested and executed shortly thereafter.’

‘And Shulth?’

‘He will be useful in the final attack on the Thargoids. Once that is accomplished we can deploy the bio-weapons again, with a wider remit.’

The Captain nodded in appreciation.

Kiri Mereso watched the incoming news feeds with a growing sense of despondency. Ever since the destruction of the civilian fleet at Aesbion, events had unravelled quickly. Despite denials that it would take place, several worlds had been blockaded, with the witchspace markers switched off. This had caused huge traffic issues in some sectors with traders and passenger ships trying to find alternative routes. Some areas of the chart were already completely isolated and effectively gridlocked.

News feeds that ran stories unfavourable to Galcop and the Navy found their licenses revoked and their equipment confiscated or disabled.

Within the few days that had elapsed, the Galactic stock indices had dropped sharply, ruining the finances of billions of companies, their employees and administrations. Debts were being rapidly called in, with many unwilling or unable to pay up. Minor arguments became scuffles, scuffles became fights, and on many worlds, fights became full scale riots. With a decreasing monetary supply, access to raw materials quickly became vital. This was particularly evident for those worlds where trading routes were curtailed.

Corporate worlds simply locked down their quiescent and compliant citizens with new curfew legislation and life continued much as normal. At the opposite end of the scale, the anarchic states hardly noticed the difference either. Galactic credits had never been a particularly worthwhile form of currency to them, though bartering increased in intensity. In between those two extremes, changes were more dramatic. Feudal states downsized their sudden budget deficits with ‘population adjustments’; euphemisms for mass exterminations of the old and the infirm. Communist states simply appropriated what little private property remained outside of party control and any complainants quietly disappeared. Multi-government worlds quickly descended back to partite

squabbling over rapidly diminishing resources with planet-side wars being the inevitable result. Even in the democratic systems, the key-stone of their official structures was often drastically undermined by ill thought out emergency legislation aimed at controlling an increasingly unruly civilian population.

The news channels that remained, the Tionisla Chronicle amongst them, were firmly instructed to continue playing pre-recorded announcements at hourly intervals. These informed all citizens to remain planet-side and for trading vessels to not attempt to run the Navy blockades. Each revised isolated sector of worlds was told to become self-sufficient within the confines of the blockades. This was reasonable for many systems, with agricultural and technological worlds in reasonable proximity to each other continuing to trade as normal. For areas where long distance trading had been established as the norm, they now found themselves without the necessary imports and lacking an export market. Chaos quickly descended. Desperate trading ships tried to run the blockades. The Navy shot them down without mercy.

Kiri didn't understand the details, nor was she interested. Her summary of the situation was surprisingly piquant.

'Frakkin' Thargoids don't actually need to attack us, we'll destroy ourselves. Galcop is coming apart at the seams!'

The *Dubious Profit* held the signal honour of being the ship with the largest common area out of all the vessels that had fled the Thargoid attack. Clustered around it hung the *Dark Star*, *Spectre*, *Hammer* and the half shattered hulk of the *Persistence*. The *Persistence* was almost completely obscured by a protective cocoon of shimmering white material; VapourStasis fluid. The ship was already hard at work trying to repair itself.

Hesperus had left his crew on duty at their various stations and then proceeded to the common area, hastily trying to make it as tidy as possible. The gesture was more than futile, but it gave him something to do.

Why the frak did we get wrapped up in this hairball?

Daddyhoggy had already brought Jim aboard. The man looked shell-shocked. He didn't acknowledge Hesperus at all, collapsing into a chair around the dining table in the refectory and staring at the opposite bulkhead. His face was ashen, his eyes blank.

Hesperus sidled over to the avian, trying to read the enigmatic creature's expression.

‘He ok?’

The avian turned to regard him.

‘I think not,’ came the sonorous voice. ‘He is, at the very least, severely distressed. His actions aboard the *Spectre* were borderline psychotic. I had to overpower him and wrest control of the ship in order to facilitate an escape.’

‘Will he get better?’

‘I’m a librarian, not a psychologist,’ Daddyhoggy returned sombrely. ‘However, I would submit that he is grappling with issues of despair and regret. From what I have pieced together, he was estranged from this woman the Thargoids have killed. Yet the breakdown in their relationship was something he hoped to resolve. Now that opportunity has passed.’

Hesperus growled softly under his breath.

‘Frakkin’ Thargoids...’

‘The Thargoid motivations are not entirely clear at this point,’ Daddyhoggy chided gently. ‘But that does not mean they are without reason...’

They were interrupted by an argument coming from the corridor that led from the docking bay.

‘You nearly got yourself spaced and the rest of us into the bargain!’ Coyote’s voice was raised.

‘We had to do something, just sitting around wasn’t going to do any frakkin’ good!’ Derik’s clipped voice was equally tense. ‘Bugs had it coming...’

‘This is my mission,’ Coyote replied. ‘You don’t have the luxury of following your own agenda when we’re all depending on you. The team sticks together! What would have happened if we hadn’t followed? You’d be sucking vacuum through a Remlok right about now...’

‘Stick together?’ Derik yelled back. ‘Leaving the princess in their hands? How’s that ‘sticking together’? They stole her from right under your nose and you weren’t even going to try to get her back? Just let the ‘stards get away with it? That your kind of teamwork?’

‘That was a fight we couldn’t win,’ Coyote snapped.

‘We could have taken down those ships,’ Derik returned. ‘Three Elite combateers? We’ve all seen worse odds, one on one.’

‘And storm a mothership?’ Coyote growled. ‘With what? A freighter pilot, a librarian and a professor? How many Thargoids are aboard that thing, Derik? A thousand? Ten thousand? You know the interior layout I presume? You know precisely where they were holding her? You know how to bypass their interior defences, I’m guessing?’

‘We would have figured it out!’

‘We would be dead before we got out of the landing bays. If we got that far.’

‘Didn’t you give a damn about the poor girl?’ Derik fired back.

‘Of course I did,’ Coyote snapped in return. ‘But that doesn’t change the situation...’

‘She deserved better!’

‘Maybe she did, but she knew the score. She told us to get on with the job. The Thargoids needed her. That attack clearly took them by surprise. How do you know it wasn’t that which made them kill her, rather than risk losing her again?’

‘You trying to pin this on me?’ Derik spat. ‘You damn coward!’

Coyote slowly turned and straightened, staring at the draconoid. Derik eyeballed him back just as fiercely.

‘You want to rephrase that, por favor?’ Coyote said coolly.

Derik leaned in.

‘You’re a damn stinking coward,’ he hissed. ‘The lot of you are! Only the prof had the balls to try something worthwhile...’

Daddyhoggy could see the situation was getting out of control, but he was on the wrong side of the table to intervene. Fortunately he didn’t have to.

With a clank and a whirr a huge metal automaton lurched into the room, only just fitting through the bulkhead doors. Hesperus and Daddyhoggy’s eyes widened in surprise as the strange creature interposed itself between the two assailants. Only Jim didn’t react. Two deep red ocular receptors glowed threateningly at the assembly.

‘Derik. Sit down.’

‘Frak you, Udian!’

The ocular implants turned on him.

‘If you insist on acting like a child, I will deal with you on those terms. This is the time for

retrenchment, clear hard facts and rigorous appraisal. Dispense with the emotions or I will dispense with them for you.'

Derik raged for a moment before subsiding.

'Coyote is right,' Udian continued. 'The woman was lost to us the moment the Thargoids captured her. Any attempt to rescue her was doomed to failure from the off. The question is what did they gain from her capture?'

'It was about that plasma accelerator tech...' Derik said, with a puzzled look, 'We know that...'

Coyote shook his head and looked sidelong at Jim, who was ignoring them, still staring at the bulkhead.

'Prof?'

'He's gone blotto,' Derik snapped, after a brief pause in which Jim failed to respond. 'He said something though. He knew why the bugs were after her...'

'Raxxla,' Coyote replied.

Daddyhoggy, Hesperus, Udian and Derik stared at him.

'So you're blotto too,' Derik cackled. 'That explains a lot.'

Coyote ignored him and continued in a subdued voice. 'It was the last thing Rebecca said to me before she was captured in witchspace. Remember: Raxxla! Tell Jim, remember Raxxla, Coyote. I wouldn't have wished this on you. Raxxla. That's what she said.'

'Raxxla?' Hesperus said. 'But that's a myth, a fairy story...'

'Au contraire,' Daddyhoggy said. 'Its existence has never been proven, of course. But the descriptions and rumours are remarkably consistent. I would surmise that there is some truth behind the stories.'

'Indeed,' Udian intoned. 'I have also encountered significant quantities of circumstantial evidence in my travels.'

Coyote looked across at Jim again, but there was still no response.

'Before we jumped after them, the prof told me Raxxla was the reason the Thargoids were after Rebecca.' Coyote swallowed, finding it surprisingly hard to say her name out loud. 'That the legends were true, there was a portal, time-travel and the rest. The rumours are on the mark.'

‘No frak.’ Derik whistled through his teeth.

Coyote continued. ‘Both he and Rebecca had been there, and he said if the Thargoids get hold of Raxxla they’ll control everything; forget bio-weapons, forget anything. They’ll be able to wipe us out at a stroke...’

Udian leant back, clearly rather alarmed.

‘If this is true then Derik was right. We should have attempted to retrieve Rebecca at all costs.’

‘Thanks buddy,’ Derik grinned, combining it with a glare at Coyote.

‘Of course, we’d have been eradicated in the attempt.’ Udian continued. ‘And we wouldn’t now be in the impotent quandary that we now find ourselves. So, in hindsight, Coyote was right.’

‘Thanks buddy,’ Derik growled, more slowly.

‘Having killed her, we must assume the Thargoids are apprised of the location of Raxxla,’ Udian noted. ‘We can also assume they know of our mission to Beenri.’

‘They know more than we do then,’ Derik complained. ‘Raxxla, for frak’s sake, it could be anywhere. Isn’t that the point?’

‘Lave.’

The voice was faint, but it startled Hesperus and Daddyhoggy into turning around. Jim had looked up briefly at the assembled throng.

‘Lave,’ he repeated in the same flat monotone, before looking away again.

‘Lave?’ Coyote began, ‘But...’

‘It’s possible,’ Udian said thoughtfully. ‘The Thargoids have concentrated all of their attacks on the Old World region of chart one. Perhaps they already suspected the location.’

‘And Garew said they were going to let the Thargoids take Lave before trying to eradicate them! We’re playing right into their hands!’ Derik fired back.

‘Strictly speaking, insects do not have hands,’ Daddyhoggy corrected. Derik glared at him.

‘The Galactic Navy still holds those territories,’ Udian said. ‘Garew indicated they intended to hold them until we returned with a viable bio-weapon to use against them. Our mission has not changed. We must ensure the veracity of the weapon and return to Lave as quickly as possible. We can still prevent the Thargoids from accessing Raxxla, or indeed, proceeding any further.’

‘This is extremely unwise,’ Daddyhoggy interjected. ‘My companion and I...’ he gestured to Jim, ‘Decoded the obscure transmission the Thargoids were sending.’

‘And?’ everyone echoed.

‘The Thargoids believe that this woman was leading them to a place of safety. They are not seeking a conflict; they are trying to avoid one.’

Derik growled. ‘Maybe you didn’t see those laser beams bouncing off my shields beak-face, but they looked like they were seeking a conflict to me!’

‘There is no need to resort to ad hominum attacks,’ Daddyhoggy replied, with distain. ‘But the facts remain. The Thargoids intend no conflict. They are not the aggressors.’

‘They just killed our princess, remember? She was frakkin’ murdered by those ‘stards!’ Derik snapped angrily, stepping toward the avian.

‘They are doing what they need to survive in the face of relentless persecution.’ Daddyhoggy’s voice was even, but firm. He stared back at the bulky draconoid without flinching.

Coyote’s eyes were narrowed thoughtfully. ‘So what do you suggest?’

‘Allow the Thargoids to proceed to Raxxla, and leave them alone.’

Derik scoffed out loud and Coyote recoiled in surprise. Udian summed up their thoughts.

‘Give them free access to a device that by all accounts can change time, distort reality and access other parts of the universe?’ Udian asked derisively.

‘You mistake the Thargoids’ motives,’ Daddyhoggy continued. ‘They are desperate to escape, not intent on conquest.’

‘Escape from whom?’

‘Humanity,’ Daddyhoggy said seriously, ‘and Galcop in particular.’

‘I’ve heard this conspiracy nonsense before,’ Derik scoffed, still confronting Daddyhoggy. ‘Thargoids are the victimised outsiders. It’s frakkin’ flux waste, that’s what it is. They’ve been slicing, burning and ripping their way through space ever since they first encountered us. Monsters!’

‘In self-defence and retribution.’

‘Frak you!’

Coyote held up a hand. ‘Enough!’

Silence fell and everyone except for Jim looked around at him.

‘We have three choices as I see it,’ Coyote said quietly. ‘One, we suggest to the Galactic Navy that they let the Thargoids through to Lave without hindrance, hang up our hats, find a decent bar and hope Garew forgets about us. Two, we return now and hope the weapons we have already work. Three, we continue with the mission and aim to deliver a working weapon back to Galcop as originally instructed.’

He paused. Udian leaned forward.

‘Two is not an option. Even if the weapons work there are no facilities to mass produce them on our return route. Beenri has such facilities and a Galcop contingent to make use of it...’

‘Then we have a simple choice,’ Coyote acknowledged, with a grin. ‘Who’s for giving the ‘goids a free ticket to Lave and then being disembowelled by nanotechnology when Garew realise we’ve stitched him up?’

‘You are all fools,’ Daddyhoggy said, with a glare. ‘You do not know what you are dealing with.’

‘Yes we do,’ Udian said, his voice low and menacing. ‘In exquisite anatomical detail.’

Coyote walked across the room and looked at Jim. He’d gone back to staring at the bulkhead, apparently oblivious of the proceedings.

‘Jim?’ Coyote said gently. ‘If you’ve got a view, now’s the time.’

Jim drew a deep shuddering breath and then looked up at Coyote, his eyes haunted.

‘Kill the ‘stards. Let’s kill them all.’

‘I will not be party to this,’ Daddyhoggy said, confronting Coyote as he left the common area. ‘This mission of extermination is execrable, and will only make things worse.’

‘I don’t give a damn what you think,’ Coyote replied. ‘Don’t even know why you’re here.’

‘I’m here because I know a great deal about history and reasons behind the Thargoid behaviour. Your professor sought me out to decode the...’

Coyote turned and held up a hand.

‘Which is all very interesting. But get this straight mi amigo. Those ‘goids destroyed a station, openly made war on innocent systems, chased us across half the chart trying to kill us on an

hourly basis and they just murdered someone in cold blood who saved my life just two days ago. Someone special, a part of my team. They started this, not us. Comprene?’

‘Raxxla is the key here, not the Thargoids.’

‘Claro. But we’ve already decided we can do nothing about that,’ Coyote fired back. ‘Galcop has us over a cargo pod. If we don’t do what they want, we’re dead.’

‘There are worse things than death. You’re not seeing the big picture...’

‘And you’re testing my patience,’ Coyote gestured around the dank interior of the *Dubious Profit*, ‘This ship and its crew are of no use to us. I suggest you book a passage to wherever you came from before I completely lose control of my pet newt and he rips you to shreds. Comprene?’

‘You elucidate clearly,’ Daddyhoggy said, straightening. ‘If uncouthly.’

‘Glad I got the message across.’

‘Humanity’s much vaunted values of self-sacrifice, understanding, peaceful cooperation and accommodation are clearly so much hyperbole,’ Daddyhoggy mused. ‘You disgust me.’

‘I’m not apologising for what we need to do,’ Coyote said. ‘This is war. We didn’t start it.’

‘Yes you did.’

Coyote had had enough. He turned on his heel and stomped away.

Daddyhoggy went to leave, but then paused and turned, raising his voice. ‘There will come a point when you realise you are in error. The Thargoids are not your enemy. Remember that if nothing else.’

Udian had already returned to the *Hammer* and Jim to the *Spectre*. Derik was preparing to leave via the airlock back to his ship. As Coyote arrived he looked up, looked away and then straightened.

‘Coyote.’

‘Derik.’ Coyote acknowledged him carefully, waiting to see what he said.

Derik growled softly and then looked around. For a moment he struggled to say anything, before sheepishly looking up at Coyote with a lowered head.

‘Listen buddy, I was out of order back there. You should have kicked me on my ass.’

Coyote responded, deadpan. 'You're bigger than me.'

Derik smiled by return.

Coyote walked across to him. 'We're all twisted out of shape here, amigo.'

'Can't believe those frakkers just killed her.' Derik was shaking his head. 'Just like that. 'Stards.'

'I miss her too.' Coyote nodded. 'She was a pain, but she leaves a void. Some folks are like that. But she knew what she was doing. She wanted this mission to succeed. Let's make sure we complete it, for her sake.'

Derik looked up, his expression hardening.

'Damn right.'

Coyote held out a hand. Derik proffered a claw. They shook.

'Let's do this.'

There was a clatter from behind them and the foppish captain of the *Dubious Profit* sauntered in.

'What about me? Er... us... no... me!'

Coyote looked him up and down. 'What about you?'

'I'm owed money by your prof, danger money for traipsing into 'goid space, not to mention hosting your little conference...'

Derik showed his teeth. 'Feelin' hard done by are we? What say we let you live and call it quits, eh?'

Hesperus' fur stood up on end, his voice a squeak. 'But we need the money.'

Coyote smiled and nodded to Derik.

'How much were you promised?' he asked the quivering feline.

Hesperus totted it up in his head and then added a twenty percent mark-up to make the maths easier. It was the least he could do.

Coyote opened up one of the core-comm units on the wall, rubbing the grime on the screen away with his finger. He arranged a transfer of the credits. Hesperus tried to keep a straight face as he saw the 'transaction confirmed' message appear.

Yes... suckers!

Coyote turned back to him.

‘Thanks for all your assistance,’ Coyote said, still smiling.

‘Our pleasure,’ Hesperus said, wanting to get these dangerous combateers off his ship as fast as possible. Coyote thumped a hand down on the feline’s shoulder.

‘Damn good show,’ Coyote continued. ‘Just be ready next time we need you.’

‘Er...’

‘Because if you’re not,’ Coyote kept the grin in place. ‘Derik here will probably use your fur for a pair of moccasins, and we wouldn’t want that now. Comprendre?’

‘Well... I’m sure...’

‘I’ll be watching. Your first mission is to take that bird back where he came from, no stops and no delays. Make sure he goes directly home and stays put. Can you do that for me?’

‘Anything, of course! Straight away, sir!’

‘Claro.’

Coyote straightened.

‘Better get moving then.’

Hesperus nodded, rooted to the spot. ‘Right away.’

‘Now,’ Coyote whispered.

Hesperus fled, Derik guffawed.

‘You’re a ‘stard.’ He managed, after stifling his laughter.

‘Never a creditor or debtor be,’ Coyote murmured. ‘But if push comes to shove, being the creditor is the best side of the deal. He knows he owes me one, and you never know when you might need to call in a favour.’

‘Moccasins? I’d have preferred a hat.’

‘Fur’s out of fashion this season, didn’t you know?’

Derik cackled and they headed back to their respective ships.

Coyote dialled up a link to Udian's vessel as he sat back in the cockpit of the *Dark Star*. Udian never responded with a video feed as the cockpit of the *Hammer* lacked the space or the need for one. The audio linked confirmed it was ready.

'You did a great job back there,' Coyote said. 'Thanks.'

'With the Thargoids or with Derik?' Udian returned immediately.

'Both,' Coyote admitted. 'But mostly with the Thargoids. That was a mess we didn't need.'

'If Derik has a fault, it is impetuosity,' Udian replied. 'He is not always given to considered appraisal of the situation.'

Coyote nodded to himself.

'The loss of the woman, Rebecca...' Udian said slowly. 'Is... regrettable.'

'No frak,' Coyote replied. 'You really mean that?'

'It would be unworthy of me to say I had a deep affection for her, but she had demonstrated her worth. Without her our team is less effective.'

Coyote nodded again and then changed the subject to the other matter on his mind.

'What can we expect when we arrive at Beenri?'

'I suspect a Navy armada will be in residence, guarding the planet. They will provide an escort so we may proceed with the test.'

'I'm guessing Garew will be there too.'

'I concur.'

Coyote pushed up his hat a touch. 'And you think that we'll get an effusive thank you, a stack load of credits and just be able to walk away at the end of this?'

Udian almost laughed before managing to compose himself.

'Do I detect a note of suspicion from a veteran smuggler?'

'I wouldn't let me walk away if it was my call,' Coyote returned.

'It seems likely that Garew will have an ongoing agenda,' Udian acknowledged. 'It is unclear whether or not he is aware of Raxxla, and that the Thargoids intend to seize it.'

'My thoughts exactly.'

'You fear he will simply decide it is better for us to be quietly eliminated.'

‘Something I’d rather avoid if necessary. I want a lever I can use over Garew. Until we’ve got rid of the nanobots that he infected us with...’

Udian thought for a moment.

‘The solution is simple. I suggest I encrypt the schematics, data and all source information regarding the bio-weapons and store it upon my person. At any hint of betrayal we can simply refuse to hand over the data. We can ensure that the encryption key is not transmitted until the nanobots that infest us are purged, and we are in a position to leave without being intercepted. Garew will not risk the loss of that data. It is too crucial to the war. The lives and whereabouts of the four of us are insignificant by comparison.’

Coyote thought it through.

‘Do it,’ he said. ‘I want that Galcop scum kept over our canister this time. I’ll clue Derik and Jim in on the plan.’

Udian lowered his cylindrical unit into place within the cockpit of the *Hammer*, luxuriating in the expanding sense of power provided by his connection into the infrastructure of the ship.

Garew’s plan is still not clear...

Udian had always known that Garew was concealing the truth. He understood that necessity completely. The question was whether the concealment had a material effect on his own plans or not.

He promised the complete eradication of the Thargoids. That was the deal, in exchange for the bio-weapon technology. But Raxxla, if it exists, is an even bigger prize. Is that what he’s really after? Is the plasma accelerator technology merely a ruse?

Udian focussed his thoughts. Speculation without facts was futile. His aim was clear. Garew’s scheming was irrelevant for the moment. His own goal was near at hand. With the demise of the woman it had already been kicked off. He allowed himself a moment of pleasurable recollection.

Plan B. Elegant and simple.

Garew had designs on the woman from the beginning. As arranged, Udian had ensured that she had been infected with the bio-weapon serum whilst in the lab aboard the *Catechism*, during her altercation with the imprisoned Thargoid warrior. The bio-weapon remained quiescent, dormant within her, until activated by remote control.

A walking doomsday bomb.

Once he'd ascertained she was indeed held aboard the Thargoid vessel and the opportunity had presented itself, he'd sent the code to activate the bio-weapon. Within seconds the bio technology would have commandeered her body to generate more of itself, with a single minded intent – infect, destroy, incorporate and grow, seeking out any Thargoid DNA, repurposing it and continuing until nothing further could be found. The Thargoids would have been reduced to more raw materials for the deadly bio-weapon. Any ships responding to the distress call would likewise be infected after a brief incubation period designed to take them by surprise and allow the spread of the serum. It was anticipated that the infection would neutralise the Thargoid fleets within weeks if not days. The missile-mounted weapons would do the rest.

Udian hadn't been sure the weapon would be effective, but it was a risk worth taking in advance of the checks at Beenri. It appeared to have been successful. The woman's life-signs had disappeared almost immediately as anticipated.

And the fools believe the Thargoids killed her, a more than satisfactory outcome. Derik's puerile attack has restored their confidence in me, and vengeance for a perceived crime is more than enough motivation for them to complete this mission. Coyote, even after all these years, remains an idealist; too trusting. Unfortunately this will be their last mission, but their sacrifice will have such meaning. After all these long years, the Thargoids will finally perish...

He turned his attention to the witchspace charts, plotting the next jump on the route to Beenri.

Chapter Five

Kiri Mereso would never be known as a ‘people-person’. Having irritated virtually all the reporters at the Tionisla Chronicle with her self-absorption and complete disinterest in their affairs she’d made herself almost universally unpopular with the tech staff at the Chronicle array too.

Until the Galactic Navy had shown up that was. After that she became remarkably popular at very short notice. Her almost continuous broadcasting became a massive hit, essential listening for trillions.

Tionisla was a democratic planet and the local government, unused to bending the knee to Galcop or the Navy, had vigorously championed their independence. The Navy had interdicted their witchspace routes as they had done with numerous other systems, but Tionisla wasn’t about to take that lying down. There were too many influential people who hailed from the planet, with their own vested interests. There were still important funerals that needed to take place in the graveyard for instance, forcing the Navy to allow certain ships through. The Tionislan government, unlike many of its contemporaries, didn’t pass draconian legislation forbidding its citizens from activities they enjoyed. On the contrary, it made it illegal not to hold flamboyant celebrations, all the way from births, betrothals, weddings, divorces and even death.

To support all this, raw materials were needed – lots of them. The Navy tried to stop it of course, but Tionisla reminded both them and Galcop that they didn’t have a remit to interfere with the workings of local planet-side government. Thus, smugglers found a way, tacitly supported by those in authority.

The Tionisla Chronicle was forbidden from broadcasting certain information about the situation, particularly the movements of Galcop and Navy vessels. It was also required to broadcast Navy announcements on demand. Kiri Mereso, furious that the Chronicle was being used as a mouthpiece, ensured that she obeyed the letter of the new law, if not the intent.

‘And we’re due another scintillating announcement from our sponsors,’ she crowed on the airways. ‘I bet you think these are pre-recorded, but for some reason they don’t trust us civilians here at the Chronicle to play the recording, so they’ve sent one of their hunks across to read it out for us.’

Kiri was glaring at the uniformed marine who stood, trying his best to remain calm in the interview room.

‘Get this, he’s not allowed to memorise it either, he’s got a piece of paper. I’m not kidding! A

piece of paper! Only the latest tech is in use by the Navy in their fight against the Thargoids. Come on you, time to be famous.'

The marine was a junior, clearly unhappy about his assignment. He stepped forward uncertainly.

'It's a microphone. Have you seen one before?' Kiri said, sickly sweet. 'Listeners, I know you can't see this. He might not have much in the braincase, but he's a bit of a dish in the middle latitudes, if you get my drift...'

'Er...'

'And not one for words ladies! Oh, I'm sorry muscles, you get on with it. Go on.'

The marine swallowed and began to read from his prepared announcement. Kiri slid across to the terminals and started typing as he spoke.

'The Galactic Navy reminds all citizens that interdicted zones exist across the chart...'

Across the chart, listeners were enjoying Kiri's text commentary alongside the monotonic delivery of the marine.

Interdicted, that's a long word. Wonder if he knows what it means!

'...and that it is only permissible to use pre-arranged flight routes between major planetary systems...'

They say rules are there to be broken folks! Not that we'd ever condone such action, not us!

'...And ships caught attempting to run the blockades will be fired upon...'

If this guy is at the firing controls you'll have no worries! He'll be working out the targeting using his piece of paper!

'...No warnings or second chances will be given...'

Ooooo, the masculinity here listeners, I'm all overcome; I might have to go for a cold shower – save me, oh hunky one!

'And no exceptions will be tolerated.'

He's got such a nice ass...

Kiri turned her attention back to the marine as he finished reciting his speech.

'Oh well done,' she said. 'You did so well for your first time out. Did you write that

yourself?’

The marine shook his head.

‘Can’t hear you shaking your head, honey,’ Kiri announced, for the benefit of her listeners. ‘We need to hear your rough and tough deep ol’ crooning voice...’

‘This is an official Navy pronouncement,’ the marine replied.

‘A pronouncement!’ Kiri said, ‘Wow. There was us all thinking it was an outrageous abuse of liberty, but no, it’s a pronouncement. Got that everyone?’

‘If you’ll excuse me...’

Kiri batted her eyelids, hitched up her short skirt and ensured her skimpy top was stretched almost beyond bursting point.

‘Wanting to leave so soon? Come on, this isn’t a family channel, I’ll make it worth your while.’

The marine backed up rapidly, tripping over his own feet and stumbling backwards out of the room. Kiri laughed.

‘Must be losing my touch, folks. I don’t know about you, but if the Navy’s best is going to turn tail and run at the sight of a bit of cleavage I don’t hold much hope for us in this war...’

Approval ratings at the Chronicle had risen enormously since Kiri had started taking an insubordinate line with the Navy. They had tried to shut it down immediately, but the Chronicle was a wholly owned company with no shareholders with huge influence throughout the charts. It belonged to Anna Mereso, Kiri’s mother, herself no stranger to tough decision making. The Chronicle was simply too big an organisation. Too many data feeds and communication channels relied upon it, it couldn’t be shut down. To ensure both transmission range and impunity from any potential vested interests, the Chronicle array itself was powered by a special reactor based on material derived from the Tianve pulsar; short of a supernova it was virtually indestructible. Anna and Kiri knew this, and thus mercilessly lampooned the Navy at every opportunity. Other newsfeeds didn’t have the luxury of continuing to be true to their roots in the same way. They simply weren’t as important. As a result, everyone across the chart was tuning into the Chronicle and Kiri’s show in particular. Even the staff at the Chronicle array had reformed their opinions when it became clear she had ‘the touch’.

‘And the latest news from the Navy is that we’re not allowed to report anything about their

activities in the Aesbion system. That's the AESBION system we're not allowed to talk about. A... E...S... B... I... O... N... Of course, we take our duties very seriously here at the Chronicle, so we won't be mentioning anything about them shooting at civilians in the Aesbion system. Or that one of their ships broke down because they cocked up the maintenance in the Aesbion system. Or that they seem mostly interested in inspecting vessels bringing in slave girls from Isence for sale in the Aesbion system. Clearly vital to the war effort that. Great to see our boys taking their duties so seriously in the... damn I've forgotten... what was that again?... oh yeah... the Aesbion system.'

Tania D'Mentiot was waving at her from across the room. Kiri rolled her eyes.

'...scuse me folks. Looks like we've got a technical glitch.'

Tania was pointing at the local transmitter graphs. They were showing an unusual waveform, interfering with the Chronicle feed. As she watched the signal peaked, forcing the Chronicle array to boost its power to override it. Static crackled across the preview channels on the displays above them, showing how the signal looked at the receiving end.

'Frakkin' Navy, trying to jam us. They should know by now that they don't have the power to do that!'

Tania shook her head. 'It's not the Navy, this is like...'

Kiri looked at her, her eyes widening in alarm.

'Frak! Folks, looks like Tionisla is about to play host to the opposition team again. We'll keep transmitting...'

On the various video feeds across the system, Kiri could see the various Navy vessels turning and orienting themselves around orbital space. Something was up, that was clear.

'Of course, we're getting up to date information from the Navy at all times,' Kiri snapped. 'Not. We can't see anything yet, our scanners are on though, so the moment we... there!'

A flash in the darkness, ships appeared. One was big, enormous, dark green and malevolent.

'Oh frak! This is not good, not good at all. We're switching to video transmission! There, hopefully you can all see this! We've got a Thargoid mothership, here in Tionisla. It must have broken through the lines at Isinor somehow! It's heading into system space! This is Kiri Mereso, for the Tionisla Chronicle, wideband channel three eighty five point two, keep it here everyone! What's going to happen next? Truth is, we don't know...'

The invading Thargoid vessel was wasting no time. It was driving rapidly towards the planet.

Navy ships were quickly moving to intercept, but the Thargoid armada was vast, overwhelming. Even Kiri, with no military or tactical training could tell there was only going to be one outcome.

‘Frak... this could be it folks. We’re outnumbered. We’re punching out distress calls, but we’ve got limited comms other than the main feed. Hope somebody upstairs is watching my show!’

Lasers flashed in the darkness. Missiles began streaking across space, explosions peppering the blackness. Ships died.

The mothership remained.

‘It’s broken through!’ Kiri said, her voice rising with horror. Tania and the other techs around her watched in dismay as the overwhelming bulk of the mothership swept into system space. Unlike before, the Thargoids were ignoring the main orbital stations. The mothership was cutting across the orbital arc of the planet, heading directly...

‘My god... they’re heading towards us!’ Kiri screeched on the still open transmission circuit.

She hit the internal intercoms. ‘All staff, looks like we’re going to be boarded by the Thargoids! Anyone who wants to run, just go now! Get out while you can!’

Panic thronged the corridors of the Chronicle Array operations centre. These people were no disciplined military personnel, but a mix of journalists, reporters and researchers. Within minutes ships were departing from the Chronicle docking ports, desperately running from the approaching mothership.

Fortunately for them it appeared to be unconcerned with their flight, intent only on closing with the Chronicle array itself.

Kiri and Tania watched as the mothership suddenly began launching legions of smaller Thargoid warships towards them.

‘Get out of here Tania,’ Kiri snapped. ‘Nothing more you can do.’

‘You’re coming too then!’ Tania replied, hotly.

Kiri shook her head. ‘The show must go on.’

‘Those are Thargoids; you know what they’ll do!’ Tania cried, desperately.

‘Maybe they’ll have something to say before they kill me,’ Kiri replied. ‘Perhaps we’ll get a scoop. I’m not running away from this story, Tania. Now, move, before all the ships are gone.’

Tania’s eyes widened in surprise, fear and growing admiration.

‘Your mum will be proud.’

Kiri smiled and squeezed Tania’s shoulder fondly. ‘Now, get going.’

Tania shook her head. ‘You’ll need someone to keep the transmission sync’d.’

Their eyes met. Both grinned.

Kiri grabbed the microphone and strapped it back on her head.

‘Ok folks! So the whole planet might be going to the bugs, and we’ve got a mothership knocking on the door. We’re going to keep transmitting! Who knows, maybe the Thargoids will give us an interview. Of course, the question we all want answered is what do they think of our current number one hit “Did She Shake Her Glands At Me?” – we’ll try to find out for you...’

‘They’re jamming our shield emitters...’ Tania whispered, looking at some of the readouts on the console nearest her. ‘How are they...?’

Kiri watched as the mothership slowed and stopped relative to them. Both the Chronicle and the mothership hung in space side by side. Two astonishingly large constructs, casting huge shadows across system space, visible from the planet below.

‘Hope you can all see the video feed ok. The Thargoids have stopped outside. They’re not firing on us; I guess that’s a good sign. We’ve had no comms, but... Now we can see vessels heading towards the docking bay, looks like we’re being boarded. Yes, we’ve got Thargoids in the bay...’

The marine that had read out the Navy ‘pronouncement’ earlier burst into the room, now bedecked with two big guns and a brace of other weapons.

Kiri stared at him before laughing.

‘Oh... we’re all saved. We’ve got our hunky marine to protect us. Let me just ask him...’ Kiri walked over to him. ‘So how do you plan to repel hundreds of Thargoid warriors on your own honey?’

‘Duty.’ The marine replied grimly.

Kiri rolled her eyes. ‘Ok folks, he’s brave. Everyone got that? A real hero. But come on, you’re just going to get yourself killed...’

‘We’ve got to fight...’

Kiri grabbed the tip of his gun and pushed it down.

‘Don’t be stupid.’

They were interrupted by Tania, who gave a short sharp shriek.

‘Kiri, look!’

The video monitors within the station were showing dozens of insectoid creatures quickly marching through the deserted corridors of the Chronicle. They were clearly heading towards the transmission towers, where Kiri, Tania and the marine were waiting.

‘This is it folks. We’ve got Thargoids en-route to us. We may not be on air for much longer. Sorry for cutting the show short, but...’

There was thump from the door that secured the interview room. Kiri, Tania and the marine backed away as the door was framed by a fierce red glow and then abruptly exploded inwards.

Kiri was blown off her feet by the sudden blast. The marine moved forward, raising his gun.

‘No! Don’t!’

Green tinged gas was rushing in through the jagged opening, something moved in the shadows behind. Kiri screamed as the marine’s gun fired, hammering away noisily in the confined space.

There was a blur of motion, faster than she could see. The marine was sent reeling backwards, gurgling in agony. Kiri ducked aside in horror as he collapsed to the floor with a Thargoid on top of him, a green chitin coated arm impaled in his chest. As she watched in horror the Thargoid brought its other arm down and broke the marine’s neck. It then stood up, bleeding dripping from its claw.

Tania shrieked and hid behind Kiri as she stood face to face with the insect.

‘They just broke in,’ Kiri whispered, knowing her microphone was still on and that the Chronicle Array was still transmitting. ‘They’ve killed the marine. Oh God, he was right there, now he’s.... The Thargoid is just staring at me...’

More Thargoids arrived, stomping heavily into the room and looking about themselves. Kiri heard a rapid chattering sound.

‘They seem to be communicating something...’

The first Thargoid brought forward a device. Kiri flinched assuming it was a weapon. She then recognised it as a standard Galcop issue commtab. The Thargoid gestured imperiously at her.

She frowned.

The other Thargoids came to attention, marching towards her. They opened and closed their claws just inches from her face and then retreated again. The first Thargoid gestured with the data tab again.

‘I think they want you to take it,’ Tania whispered.

Kiri reached out.

‘They’re giving me something, a commtab. I think...’

As she took it, the lead Thargoid gestured to the console, and then, with a wider encompassing gesture, the space outside the Chronicle windows.

They want us to transmit something...

Kiri slowly turned the tab over in her hand. There was nothing unusual about it at all. Carefully watching the Thargoids she slipped it into one of the console readers and looked at the content inventory.

A video file!

‘They haven’t killed us; they seem to be asking us to transmit something. They’ve got a video file. It looks like we’ve got our interview after all. What could it be? Truth is, I really really don’t know folks! This is Kiri Mereso, at the mercy of the Thargoids, about to transmit their message...’

‘Can you believe this?’ Stepan was staring at the Tionisla Chronicle newsfeed in amazement. ‘The frakkin’ Thargoids have boarded the Chronicle Array! Where the frak is the Navy?’

‘Probably frakked off with that woman for dissing them all this time,’ Hesperus replied.

‘They’re losing the war,’ Daddyhoggy intoned. ‘It’s a convenient fiction that they have sufficient forces to defend the core systems. Clearly they are being overrun.’

‘Can’t be that bad,’ Hesperus said, shaking his head. ‘The Thargoids are only one race...’

‘Knew the bugs would do something like this one day,’ Rus commented.

‘Sad sad sad day,’ D’VLin clicked.

‘They’ve been planning this for decades,’ Daddyhoggy replied. ‘Just waiting for the right trigger. The death of that woman appears to have been the last piece of the puzzle for them.’

The *Dubious Profit* was sun-skimming, fuelling up for the final jump back to Ordima. Stepan had only tuned in to pass the time while the tanks were slowly topped up. He'd called the others up the moment the mothership had appeared. By the time they'd caught up and joined him, the Chronicle was being boarded. Along with billions of others they'd witnessed the marine get killed by the Thargoids after he'd fired on them. The new girl's terrified account was still playing out, everyone expecting her to be killed too.

Only she wasn't.

The Thargoids wanted to talk. It was unheard of.

On the screen they saw the girl take the data tab and slot it in to the console

'They haven't killed us; they seem to be asking us to transmit something. They've got a video file, it looks like we've got our interview after all. What could it be? Truth is, I really really don't know folks! This is Kiri Mereso, at the mercy of the Thargoids, about to transmit their message...'

The video feed from the interview room faded away, being replaced with a strange symbol. A voice began speaking. It was deep and measured, and articulated in flawless Galcop standard language.

'Disparate citizens of the Far Colony Alliance. We address you today to make a plea on your behalf. Those of you who share, with us, a heritage divorced from humanity are under threat. The humans intends to subjugate and enslave you, and you are sleepwalking into submission. They took our world from us, and they are doing the same to you. We beseech you to resist, rise up from your somnambular ways and join us in fleeing the oppression of the humans. Only persecution and isolation await you if you remain amongst humankind. We have fought to free ourselves for centuries from the curse of imprisonment. We have resisted humanity with every means available to us and now our time has come.'

The voice paused for a moment before carrying on.

'Watch the deterioration of your rights, the interdiction of your systems, the collapse of your governments and sovereign states. Who is to blame? The Galactic Cooperative controls your imports and exports. They have laid down law after law aimed at restricting your movements and keeping you under control.'

'These bugs are talking sense!' Hesperus said, surprising himself.

'Many of your worlds are deliberately kept from acquiring technological advances which could end poverty and suffering. Others are kept in debt to pay for vastly overpriced commodities

from the richer human dominated worlds. You are captives in a system which is run for humanity's benefit, which condemns you to a life of servitude, endless labour and minimal prospects. You have been conditioned to accept this as your position in the hierarchy, to even consider it normal and preferable. We refused to accept this bondage many centuries ago and determined to escape it. We have been persecuted for our bid for freedom ever since.'

'Is this for real?' Stepan said, his mouth hanging open.

Daddyhoggy nodded. 'In fact, this is the reality far too few of us appreciate.'

'We have been forced to hide in the shadows, to conduct guerrilla strikes to gain knowledge, technology and supplies to keep our own kindred from starvation and death. Humanity has come close to extinguishing us many times, but they have, and will continue, to fail. Long we have awaited a mechanism to gain our freedom from humanities grasp. Now such an opportunity has presented itself.'

The two felines and the avian leaned in closely to the monitor.

'It is time to shake off the shackles of restraint. Salvation has arrived. We appeal to all victims of oppression to seek escape. We invite every non-human resident of the Far Colonies Alliance to make your way immediately to the Lave system. We will hold the gates open and defend you. Flee the oppression of the humans. Do not allow them to stop you. Risk everything. This is your last chance for freedom. Do not hesitate. Flee immediately to the Lave system. We will...'

Suddenly the display was interrupted by static. Clearly somebody somewhere had found a way to divert the signal. A face appeared, that of a Galcop spokesman.

'Thargoids have brutally murdered the staff aboard the Tionisla Chronicle! This is propaganda. The Thargoids are seeking to weaken the defensive lines around Lave, they are not in possession of the Lave system or any of the other systems immediately around that area. We ask all citizens to remain calm, stay where they are and not travel under any circumstances. Galcop and Navy forces are there to protect you from these vicious killers. Please respect your local regulations and remain planet-side. Normal news services will resume shortly. Do not disrespect the memory of those brave souls who died aboard the Chronicle in this horrendous unprovoked attack. Remember all the lives lost in the attacks on the Tionisla stations last week. The Thargoids want nothing more than to destabilise Galcop and the Navy so they can wreak havoc upon us all. Do not pay them heed!'

The video feed cut out. The Tionisla Chronicle was off the air for the first time ever in its

history.

Hesperus looked around at his crew. They were silent and pensive. No one said a word.

The astrogation console pinged and flashed up a message.

Fuel tanks full.

Hesperus straightened. 'Let's get you home, buddy.'

Daddyhoggy turned to face him. 'It may already be too late for that.'

Stepan jabbed the witchspace controls and the *Dubious Profit* cycled up for the witchspace jump.

'Can't be real,' Stepan said, shaking his head. 'Galcop's kept the peace for hundreds of years. The 'goids have always been attacking 'em.'

Rus spat on the console. 'Been saying this for years. The Thargoids ain't the bad guys. It's stinking Galcop! Neo-conservative 'stards! They mean to keep us all under the cosh!'

'Humans aren't the most agreeable creatures much of the time,' Hesperus added, 'But I'd take them over those bug eyed goons any day of the week.'

'Oi,' D'VLin squeaked.

'You're not a Thargoid!'

'Insect,' D'VLin chittered angrily. 'Not second rate creature!'

The witchspace countdown ticked to completion and the *Dubious Profit* lurched into witchspace before hurling itself back to real space at the Ordima witchspace entry marker.

Hesperus looked up to see a number of ships crowding the area. Trading vessels, freighters and transports...

...all being fired upon by massed ranks of Vipers bearing Galcop and Navy markings.

'Frakkin' hell!' he exclaimed.

Imperious demands echoed over the wideband transmitters.

'All ships will cease and desist. Attempting to run the blockade will result in immediate destruction! Comply!'

The offending ships weren't moving. They'd already stopped.

Lasers continued to flash out. Ships in the stationary convoy exploded, scattering debris into

the far reaches of space. Screams of fear and supplication issued from the speakers.

‘Please don’t kill us! We’ve stopped. Please, no, we’re going back! Please don’t...’

More ships were incinerated; the screaming voices were abruptly cut off. Some of the Vipers noticed the *Dubious Profit* coasting to a halt near the marker. They came around in a smooth arc and headed towards the stationary Python.

‘Unidentified ship, heave to and submit to scanning.’

The crew watched in disbelief as the squadron of the Vipers swarmed towards them.

‘Get us out of here,’ Daddyhoggy whispered.

‘Submit to scanning and you will not be harmed.’

Hesperus flinched as scanning beams raked across his ship.

‘Now.’ Daddyhoggy said, his voice strained. ‘Get us out of here.’

‘Idents confirmed. Blockade runners. Finish them.’

‘We’re not blockade runners!’ Hesperus screeched on the narrowband comms. There was no response.

Lasers flashed and the *Dubious Profit* bucked and shook.

‘No! But we’re not humans either!’ Daddyhoggy shouted uncharacteristically. ‘Get us out of here! Now!’

Stepan punched at the inventory controls.

‘Boss, we’ve got a spare Quirium canister...’

‘Do it!’ Hesperus snapped. ‘And get us some room to move! Frakkin’ Galcop ‘stards!’

The *Dubious Profit* shuddered again and warning lights flickered across the consoles.

‘Shields failing!’ Rus said, turning tale and running towards the engine room. ‘I’ll get on it!’

Stepan slammed the thrusters onto full burn, driving straight at the Vipers in what looked like a suicidal move. They broke off, not expecting the tatty old ship to actually engage with them. Stepan triggered the lasers for good measure, clipping one of the Vipers and sending it spiralling aside.

‘Fuel transfer underway!’ D’VLin called. ‘Witchspace motors charging!’

The Vipers came sharply about and commenced firing again. Just as the shields were about to

give way they got a sudden boost of power and the laser fire was deflected.

‘Running the core on overburn!’ Rus called from below decks. ‘She won’t stand it for long!’

Stepan swung the *Dubious Profit* around again, firing the main lasers in sequence, trying to get a clear avenue of escape. The Vipers swarmed around, trying to target the erratically jinking vessel.

‘Ready!’ D’VLin called.

‘Punch it!’ Hesperus yelled.

D’VLin engaged the witchspace motors.

‘Keep ‘em busy for ten seconds Stepan! Make it count!’

Stars whirled on the viewers as Stepan desperately tried to keep the ship out of harm’s way. The Vipers had no intention of letting it go and mercilessly pounded on the beleaguered ship.

The shields failed and everyone ducked instinctively as lasers flashed across the hull, drawing a terrifying cascade of sparks as they splashed across the exposed surface of the ship.

‘Five seconds!’

‘She’s comin’ apart!’ Rus yelled, barely audible against the screaming whine of machinery pushed beyond its limits.

Hesperus turned and looked at the starboard viewer and his mouth dropped upon. One of the Vipers had taken up station alongside them. As he watched, a quartet of missiles raced towards his ship.

‘Oh.... Dog crap...’

Four ships materialised in the Beenri system. Two were dark and sinister looking vessels few in the charts would recognise; a secretive ship design. Those who did know them would quickly give them a wide berth; ships bred for a purpose, the single-minded destruction of foes.

The third ship was less intimidating, but more mysterious. It looked tough and brutal with a purposeful air about it. A ship designed for the fight, packing a hefty punch. It trailed a mysterious green glow.

The fourth ship appeared humdrum by comparison. A common trading vessel, looking distinctly out of place amongst such impressive company.

Coyote checked his viewers as the ships emerged from witchspace. All ships present and accounted for. Derik and Udian took up positions on either side of him in the pair of Caducei, with Jim bringing up the rear in the *Spectre*.

He's doing all right in there. He's no combateer, but at least he knows which part of the ship is the pointed end...

Coyote ran a check on the on-board systems. It had been a quick series of jumps to get here. Normally he'd have liked to run some preventative maintenance to ensure everything was ok. After all the battles they'd had and the damage they'd incurred, there were bound to be some loose hull plates at the very least. The witchspace drives were never happy without constant tweaking and attention.

But it's been too easy...

Nothing had stopped their progress to Beenri. Every system had been virtually deserted, as if abandoned. They hadn't ventured near the planets, always refuelling at the stars. Even given this they should have come across some traffic. Despite travelling through systems with some of the worst reputations in the whole of the chart they'd seen no-one, been bothered by no pirates, bounty hunters or chancers looking for easy prey.

It was as if the systems have been purged. Something's not right...

'Status check,' he called into the narrowband.

'All systems green,' Udian responded promptly.

'Ready to kick ass,' Derik quipped back.

'All good here,' Jim said, after a brief pause.

Coyote looked ahead. Beenri was a green world, covered in a shroud of thin and wispy clouds. There were no ice caps. The records indicated it was a lush world, covered in vegetation, with an unusually high atmospheric oxygen concentration.

He sighed.

'Let's do this,' he said. 'Sync injectors... and engage.'

All four ships leapt forward in formation, driving quickly towards the innocent looking planet in the distance.

The distance shrank quickly, but no ships registered on the scanner. No friends, no foes.

Beenri quickly grew ahead of them. As they closed into range, Coyote began to make out dark grey dots against the bright backdrop of the planet.

‘Company,’ he said. ‘Look sharp everyone.’

‘Do not fear,’ Udian reassured them. ‘The Navy has an operation here. They will be expecting us. Garew will have ensured we have cover in case of adversity on the approach. The ships there are awaiting the results of our test. They will be able to mass produce the weaponry, assuming it is effective...’

Coyote could now make out a sizeable armada against the bright backdrop of the planet’s shimmering surface. Chief amongst the vessels were three large Behemoth capital ships. As he scanned them the narrowband comms activated on an encrypted channel.

‘Altecrator to Dark Star. You are cleared for attack run. Proceed at will.’

Coyote acknowledged the transmission from the Navy armada brusquely, focussing on the task in hand. He could see two contingents of small fighter vessels, paralleling their course on both flanks.

Time to finish what we started...

‘All ships, close to range. Arm all missiles,’ Coyote said, reaching down and entering the commands to prime the four bio-missiles aboard the *Dark Star*.

Below the hull of his ship, four hatches slid silently open and menacing looking missiles dropped out of each and locked into place. On his console the four arming lights flickered from green to red. Aboard the other vessels a similar process took place.

‘Locked and loaded,’ Derik called, his voice tight with anticipation.

‘Ready here,’ Jim confirmed.

‘Ordinance primed and targeted,’ Udian said, his voice registering satisfaction.

The range indicator was counting down fast. The altitude warning came on.

‘We’re in range,’ Udian prompted.

The ships injector drives cut out on programmed command, the ships coasting forward.

‘It’s your shot, Jim,’ Coyote’s soft tones came over the narrowband.

Jim grasped the firing control that would unleash the lethal bio-weapons on the population below. Beenri spun in the viewer, lush, verdant and green. All ships were poised and ready.

Uncounted Thargoids were below, unaware of the death that was about to rain down on them from above.

Jim's eyes were dark and hard.

'This one is for you, Rebecca.'

With a snarl of hatred he closed his fingers around the trigger.

Chapter Six

A group of Thargoids gestured at a holographic display, clicking and chittering at high speed. They were clearly discussing the readouts presented in a three dimensional projection portrayed before them. The display showed a complex organic molecule, a double helix, with various aspects of its structure highlighted with a variety of codes and symbols.

One of the Thargoids gestured and the display shifted into two pairs, similar in some ways, but not identical. As the display resolved it was possible to determine that one of the displays seemed to be indicating a primary molecule and the second some kind of supplementary addition, perhaps a symbiote or parasite.

The Thargoid gestured again, pointing at the primary molecule.

‘Ragazza.’

The other Thargoids nodded and chittered their acknowledgement.

He gestured to the other molecule.

‘Shulth.’ The Thargoid hissed, finding the human word difficult to pronounce.

More chittering acknowledgement.

The Thargoids turned their attention to a blackened object held within a transparent pod. It was difficult to determine exactly what it was. Only close forensic examination could have revealed it was organic, the remains of some kind of creature. Further investigation would have confirmed that it was human in origin, a woman who had died in some strange and unusual transformation.

In another pod, adjacent to the first, something writhed. It too was dark, tendrils of material moving and probing, seeking a way out of the pod. The Thargoids began arranging a series of complex pieces of equipment between the two pods. Once they were in place the group stepped back and waited for a moment. Their leader examined the holographic displays and performed a brief motion in the direction of the equipment.

Both pods were illuminated by a pulsing green light and then a connection was made between them. The strange tendril material instantly moved across into the second pod, probing the new space, continually looking for an exit. As it did so, the lead Thargoid gestured again. The hue of the light changed to an intense magenta. The Thargoids blinked and staggered back, their eyes unusually sensitive to radiation at that particular frequency. The equipment came to life with a powerful thrum

and fields of polarised energy began sweeping up and down the pod that contained the human corpse. As it did so the tendril-like growths began to disintegrate, collapsing and withering away. The pulsing energy also stripped away the blackened surface of the corpse, revealing bones, sinews, strips of muscle and skin.

More fields came into play, smaller now and with higher resolution, concentrating on various aspects of the body. It was possible to see bones restructuring, sinews knitting, muscles stretching and reattaching, skin growing and sealing. More and more of the tendrils were absorbed, and the blackened material that had covered the corpse crumbled away into dust and was consumed by the fields of energy that continued their sweeping inspection.

The Thargoids looked on with expectation.

Across the charts unofficial reports of fights and skirmishes were growing, carried by local transmissions and second hand accounts. The Thargoid message was repeated and retransmitted across the chart, and quickly carried to all worlds. It was largely dismissed on human colonial worlds, but caused major unrest on the non-human aligned planets. Rumours grew that ships were being impounded, Quirium fuel rationed and flight worthy ships being prevented from leaving the systems.

That and the rumours of ships being shot down just for being in the wrong place at the wrong time...

Tionisla was still occupied by the Thargoids. The Navy seemed particularly unconcerned about retaking it. The Chronicle Transmission Array was still operating and had resumed broadcasting. The Thargoids had done nothing but insist their transmission was replayed at regular intervals.

Kiri Mereso had tried to get them to discuss what they were trying to achieve. However, they remained stonily silent, almost oblivious to her presence. She and Tania had been allowed to sleep and eat, but it was clear they were not permitted to leave the facility.

Everything seemed to be at a stalemate until a transmission came in, relayed by several other ships between Tionisla and the remote system of Ordima.

The video feed was flagged as high priority. Kiri could see it was already badly fragmented, being transmitted as broken segments, with instructions for reassembly. Clearly somebody was trying to prevent the transmission. Kiri seized upon it straight away.

‘Folks, another update from the hive. No sign of the Navy, no sign of rescue, but the Thargoids still are only occupying the system, no-one has been harmed. They’ve ignored the stations, but we understand they’ve appropriated the witchspace markers in and outbound. We’re getting some kind of priority video transmission at the moment. We’re just trying to pull it together... Tania? Yes, folks, we’re nearly there. This was beamed from Ordima, avian world, north central....’

The transmission feed switched over to a view of space. Stars spiralled in a dizzying fashion before focussing on a series of ships floating in a stationary line. Static laced the visuals, but the audio was clear enough to make out.

‘My name is Daddyhoggy. I am a citizen of the High Nest, Sky City, Ordima. Attempting to return to my homeworld my transport came under fire from Galcop forces, after being alleged to be in violation of an illegal blockade. There was no such transgression. We were fortunate to escape, yet others were not so blessed.’

The video switched to a ship mounted camera, showing Galcop Vipers closing on the stationary convoy.

Lasers flashed out. Ships in the convoy exploded, metal fragments spun and flickered in the void. Screams of fear and supplication could be heard on the wideband communication channels.

‘Please don’t kill us! We’ve stopped. Please, no, we’re going back! Please don’t...’

More ships were incinerated; the screaming voices were abruptly cut off.

Kiri stared at the screens in horror. She’d quickly counted at least sixteen vessels. They’d been mercilessly shot to pieces by the Vipers.

Daddyhoggy’s commentary continued.

‘None of these ships were in violation of a blockade; none of them had fugitive or even offender status. They were killed for the simple reason they were not crewed by humans. This outrage is being repeated in many planetary systems. Do not trust Galcop broadcasts. The Thargoids are telling the truth, Galcop and the Navy intend to subjugate non-humans throughout the charts. I urge any who can do so to defy the blockades. Make your way to Lave. Do it now, before it is too late.’

More lasers flashed, Kiri could see the streaks of missiles flying across the view. Somebody swore and the video crackled into static.

Kiri and Tania looked around at the Thargoid across from them. It inclined its head slightly,

but passed no comment.

A gasp. She felt air rush into her lungs and oxygen reach her blood. For a moment there was nothing but the desperate instinctive desire to breath. She sucked down huge lungfuls, her throat tight and sore. A horrible rattling sound accompanied each action.

Consciousness returned, along with confusion and disorientation. She felt her body shudder and shake uncontrollably. Pain wracked her and her mouth opened to scream, but another gasping lungful of air was demanded immediately.

Suddenly there was relief. The pain faded and she could think.

What? Where?

She opened her eyes, seeing nothing but a green blur above her. She squinted, trying to focus.

A ceiling... where am I?

Memories came back. Ships, weapons, people... aliens!

Thargoids!

She tried to sit up but found she was restrained. She struggled feebly, unable to free herself.

There was a flicker of light beside her. An image appeared in front of her eyes.

No... a holofac...

‘Rebecca?’ the image asked. ‘Can you hear me?’

Rebecca squinted again. A face, a face she recognised.

‘Who...?’

The image resolved itself into a face. A gentle, caring, concerned face.

‘Rebecca. It’s ok. Lie still.’

Rebecca slumped back against whatever it was she was tied too. She felt sick and dizzy.

‘Where am I?’

‘You’re safe now. Rest.’

A familiar honey-like smell drifted across her nostrils. She smiled and breathed deeply once more, her head lolled to one side as she gently passed back into unconsciousness.

The *Dubious Profit* lurched out of witchspace into the Esesla system, trailing plasma from a rent in its starboard side.

Hesperus was grimly looking at the status indicators. The ship was badly damaged. The ECM was out, shields barely registering. The hull was showing several damage indications in places where the sensors were still working. Those were the healthiest parts. They were out of missiles and the rearward laser was fried, little more than a twisted hulk of metal as a result of their last skirmish.

Stepan pushed the battered ship into a dive and engaged the Torus drive, hoping to clear some distance before their pursuers locked onto them. Space debris flashed past on the forward screen, annihilated by their passage, vaporising against their already battered shields.

Mass locked, jumpdrive inoperative...

‘Frak!’

The scanner showed four ships had appeared behind them.

‘They must have hitched on our wormhole,’ Hesperus spat. ‘We’re out of options.’

Stepan locked the ident computers on the newcomers. Galcop Vipers. No surprise there.

‘Thanks for making us public enemy number one, two and three, buddy!’ Hesperus growled at the avian standing at the rear of bridge.’

‘It was necessary.’

‘Yeah? Next time I want to be consulted before I volunteer to be a martyr!’

Daddyhoggy seemed unconcerned. ‘Billions will die if they are not warned about Galcop’s perfidy. You at least have the wits and the means to escape. Many do not. Would you deny them the opportunity to try?’

On the scanner they could see the Vipers coming about, turning towards them. The *Dubious Profit* wasn’t going to be able to outrun them. They were perilously low on fuel. The plan had been to make a run for the sun, but without a clear shot with the Torus drive that plan was dust.

‘I didn’t ask to be a hero!’ Hesperus snapped. ‘Rus?’

‘Nothing left to give boss.’ The lizard was unusually sombre. ‘We’re out of options.’

‘See?’ Hesperus cried, his fur standing on end. ‘You’ve frakkin’ killed us with your gotta do the right thing message. Galcop’s going to run us down...’

Hesperus stopped. Rus had grabbed his arm.

‘Boss, give the bird a break. Galcop had this planned for decades, just waiting for the right moment. This was coming one way or the other, don’t blame him. We did the right thing.’

Hesperus looked at him and then looked around at his crew. They’d been through a lot together. Not always together as such, but well... together. On the same ship at least, heading in the same direction. Hesperus felt a sudden pang of regret. There was Stepan, always the butt of his jokes on cleanliness. D’VLin with his lamentable lack of skills and clumsy speech. Rus, fierce and imperious, yet he’d kept the ship in one piece despite Hesperus’ inability to provide sufficient funding and spare parts. Even Gasazck was there, calmly handing out his ghastly goat soup as if nothing was awry.

They’ve stuck with me through all these years. Why?

The answer was obvious in hindsight.

Because they’re a damn good and loyal crew...

Hesperus straightened.

‘Stepan, how long until they’re in range?’

Stepan looked at the astrogation console and performed a swift calculation.

‘Closing fast. Two minutes tops, boss.’

Hesperus sighed and walked across the bridge, opening a locked closet on the far bulkhead. Inside were a large flask and a mismatched selection of tumblers. He pulled them out.

‘Gather round folks,’ he announced.

The rest of the crew clustered around him with bemused expressions. He ceremoniously handed out a tumbler to each of them, calling them by name as he did so. Then he cracked open the flask, pouring out the contents into the tumblers.

‘Boss?’ Stepan queried.

‘Soterian whisky,’ he said. ‘Forty two years old this year. Seems like the right thing to do.’

‘Not coming over all maudlin on us are you?’ Rus quipped.

Hesperus raised his glass.

‘To the *Dubious Profit*,’ he announced.

‘Best bag of bolts in the black,’ Rus added.

‘Good good ship,’ D’VLin acknowledged.

‘She gave us her best,’ Stepan said mournfully, stroking the console tenderly.

‘Erqk!’ Gasazck added, after a moment.

They downed their drinks, coughing violently as the fiery liquor burned their throats.

‘Damn smooth,’ Rus croaked.

Daddyhoggy inspected his tumbler and raised it too.

‘To the Thargoids,’ he said, his voice even more deep and sonorous than usual.

The others looked at him in surprise. He held their stares for a moment.

Hesperus slowly nodded. ‘Looks like we had them figured wrong. Here’s to them...’

The second round of drinks as downed just as the first lasers crashed into the shields, jolting the ship violently.

‘Never did get time to compose a decent set of last words,’ Hesperus lamented. ‘Never expected to use them I guess.’

‘Comes to us all,’ Rus said, with a grin.

Stepan had brought the *Dubious Profit* around.

‘Not going down without a fight,’ he said, targeting the nearest Viper.

Hesperus patted him on the shoulder. More lasers flickered across the shields. The *Dubious Profit* rumbled underneath them.

‘Full speed ahead, and damn the missiles,’ Hesperus commanded.

Futile, but so necessary...

There was a flash of light from the forward viewer. Hesperus and Stepan blinked in surprise. Arrayed in front of them, materialising behind the Vipers was a huge armada of vessels of all shapes and sizes. Some of the ships were big, bulk traders and transport vessels.

The Vipers spotted them at the same instant, streaking away from the convoy and abandoning their attack on the *Dubious Profit*. Almost immediately space was flooded with plasma weapons fire. The crew of the *Profit* watched with relief as the Vipers were wiped out in seconds.

The wideband communications channel crackled open as scanning beams flickered over the

listing wreck of the beleaguered Python.

‘Looks like you could do with a little help,’ an amphibian voice called. ‘Care to join us? We’re heading for Lave.’

Rebecca came to again with a start, and found herself lying on a soft green bed that appeared to have moulded itself out of the wall. She sat up rapidly, dislodging a thin blanket that had covered her while she slept.

Across from her was the holofac of Rihanna, waiting patiently.

‘Welcome back.’

Rebecca gave a short shriek as she realised she was naked again and gathered up the blanket around her.

‘What is it with you lot and my clothes?’ she screeched.

Rihanna smiled.

‘Our apologies, we had to be sure you were... complete.’

‘And?’ Rebecca demanded in alarm, peering down at herself.

‘Everything is back as it should be,’ Rihanna assured her.

Rebecca spotted her flight suit, neatly folded and placed near her feet. She grabbed it and began dressing once again.

‘What happened? I remember hearing a transmission, then...’

‘You were sent to kill us,’ Rihanna said, her tone growing serious.

‘What?’ Rebecca said, fumbling with the suit catches.

‘Your body was infected with biologically enhanced nanotechnology,’ Rihanna informed her. ‘Once activated, it consumed your body and attempted to destroy any Thargoid DNA it came into contact with. Fortunately we had taken precautions when we captured you, suspecting subterfuge of that kind. You had been contained in a secure area; there was only one casualty as a result.’

‘But...’

‘Fortunately for you the Thargoids were able to determine that you were an unwilling collaborator in this underhand attack. Had there been evidence of complicity I doubt they would have

restored you. As it was they wouldn't have succeeded in that without help.'

'My help?' Rebecca queried, struggling to take it all in.

'Your vanity,' Rihanna had a wry smile on her face.

'What are you talking about?'

'You had an injection of nanobots yourself. In fact your physiology was awash with all sorts of competing miniaturised monsters. There were three sets. One hostile, one advantageous and one quiescent. Fortunately the advantageous set had kept a complete record of your true DNA sequence and medical particulars.'

'Health extreme.' Rebecca finished arranging the suit and ran a hand through her hair. 'It was only for the grey you know.'

'Without them they wouldn't have been able to recall your original form.'

'I'll remember to send them a thank you note.'

Rebecca stared at Rihanna for a long moment, her thoughts racing before she came to her own conclusion.

'Udian!' she whispered, her eyes narrowing.

Rihanna nodded gravely.

'Udian Foraga Shulth is well known to the Thargoids.'

'A Thargoid attacked me and I killed it using one of the bio-weapons...' Rebecca's voice trailed off in horror. 'Some of it splashed onto me and... He used me as a weapon?'

Rebecca stared at Rihanna, her eyes wide with shock and disbelief.

'I knew he wasn't to be trusted, but I didn't think he'd actually try to kill me! He infected me in that lab! He was trying to use me to...'

Rihanna looked at her sympathetically.

'The frakkin' 'stard!' Rebecca said. 'I've got to let the others know. If he used me, he's using them too! The rest of them, they're ok! They're only trying to do the right thing.'

'Will you tell them what your mission was?' Rihanna said gently. 'The Thargoids already know much of it and they could extract it from you by force...'

Rebecca stared back at her mother's youthful face.

‘You won’t make me regret this, will you?’

Rihanna smiled gently. ‘I am not a slave of the Thargoids, Rebecca. They are not coercing me, or you. They have restored you to life and your life is your own. I can give you an assurance that you will not be harmed. They have enough information to carry out their objective regardless.’

‘What objective?’

Rihanna shrugged. ‘Finding Raxxla.’

Rebecca frowned again, thinking. ‘So that’s why...’

Rihanna nodded. ‘Raxxla was the key they were looking for. The reason they were seeking you. You’ve been there.’

Rebecca nodded slowly.

‘Somehow, that information was contained in your body...’ Rihanna began.

That weird resonance scan which Coyote and Derik found?

‘And the Thargoids scanned me and found it,’ Rebecca finished for her. ‘And what do the Thargoids want with Raxxla?’

Rihanna shrugged. ‘That I do not know.’

Rebecca stared at her. ‘You don’t know?’

Rihanna smiled. ‘I’m still a human remember? I don’t think they trust me entirely either. Now tell me about your objective.’

Rebecca shuddered and then nodded briefly.

‘We were on a mission to test that bio-weapon. The same one I was infected with,’ she managed. ‘On a mission to Beenri...’

‘Beenri?’ Rihanna’s eyes narrowed and she shook her head. ‘Galcop arrogance knows no bounds.’

‘What’s so special about Beenri? Rebecca queried.

‘What were you going to do?’ Rihanna asked again, her voice harder once more.

‘Test the weapons,’ Rebecca replied, her voice weak.

‘How exactly?’

‘By dropping them on the planet, eradicating the ... the...’

‘Harmless fat insects?’ Rihanna finished for her, her voice rising in distress. ‘Oh Rebecca, no!’

‘What is it?’ Rebecca said. ‘We were told they were genetic clones, bred for testing. They’re not...’

Rihanna walked slowly over to the portal, which was still displaying an image of the depths of interstellar space. She turned to face Rebecca, a look of anger and despair on her face.

‘Beenri was once the Thargoid homeworld.’

Rebecca’s eyes widened in horror.

‘What? There isn’t a Thargoid homeworld!’

‘Not true. Beenri was the planet originally signed over to them in the days of the Far Colony Alliance. That was five hundred years ago, after the wars of the 25th century. The newly formed Galcop insisted that the Thargoids, along with all other non-human life, submitted to regressive gene therapy, aimed at curbing violent tendencies and making them more ‘pliable’. Most species accepted this. The Thargoids did not. Galcop rescinded their rights to Beenri. The result was a war. The Thargoids were attacked, Beenri taken after a long and bitter fight. The surviving Thargoids fled into space where they’ve been ever since, striking at Galcop from hiding. The few that survived on Beenri were imprisoned and subjected to the ‘therapy’ originally intended, now a convenient euphemism for torture and experimentation. Harmless fat insects, the final insult.’

‘Then...’

Rihanna’s gaze was cold. ‘Your friends are about to perform the last act; an atrocious war crime unequalled in the entire history of the Thargoid holocaust. The mass extinction of a planet full of innocent victims.’

Rebecca had gone deathly pale. ‘Then we’ve got to stop them! If they knew...’

Rihanna nodded. ‘Indeed. However Thargoid vessels will be attacked the moment they appear in any human controlled system.’

‘Then we need an alternative,’ Rebecca said. ‘Give me a ship, I’ll stop them. Jim will listen to me, Coyote too... I can stop them – let me try!’

Rihanna looked distant for a moment. Rebecca realised that she was communing with the Thargoids in some fashion.

‘They concur,’ Rihanna said. ‘And they have an alternative means of transport.’

‘And what is that?’

‘Some allies, recently reunited in the Thargoids’ cause, who won’t be immediately regarded as an enemy to be destroyed.’

‘And who are they?’

Rihanna turned as an opening formed behind her. Rebecca watched as another insect came in, bowed from the neck and then regarded her without moving.

Rebecca looked questioningly across at Rihanna.

‘Look closer.’

Rebecca regarded the new arrival with a frown. Then she saw.

‘The Oresrians!’ she murmured.

‘Another transmission!’ Tania called. Kiri looked up expectantly. The Thargoid guard around her remained motionless.

‘What you got?’

‘Traders at Lave, text message only...’ Tania said, throwing a commtab across the room. Kiri scanned it briefly.

‘Wow!’

Kiri thumbed the microphone circuits and interrupted the music video that was playing over the transmission channel.

‘Sorry to interrupt those dulcet tones listeners, but we’ve got news. Unconfirmed reports from traders in the Lave system indicate that a Thargoid armada has breached the system and is holding open a witchspace express way for incoming ships. Already hundreds of ships have arrived. That’s it. We still can’t get our Thargoid guards to tell us what they’re doing at Lave. What have they got planned? Truth is, we don’t know. Kiri Mereso, imprisoned at the Tionisla Chronicle, wideband channel three eighty five, point two...’

Rebecca had followed the Oresrian down through the pulsating internals of the Thargoid vessel, accompanied by Rihanna. The tube through which she was walking widened and she found herself in a vast open space. It was a hanger. A vast array of Thargoid warships of various sizes were

positioned around her. She gasped involuntarily, her reaction instinctive at the sight.

Nestled amidst them were three smaller vessels, less obvious, more discrete. Rebecca could see the similarities, but the differences were marked too. Oresrian trading ships, not Thargoids. The two women, one real and the other ephemeral, walked to the base of the nearest Oresrian vessel. Rebecca stepped into the open docking tube, taking a cautious look around before turning to look back down at Rihanna.

‘They’ve agreed to take you to Beenri,’ Rihanna said. ‘They’ll depart soon, they’re almost ready. They’ll follow your orders.’

Rebecca nodded, thoughtfully looking at the small vessels. Then she turned with a frown.

‘Wait a minute. What about you? You’re coming with me, yes?’

Rihanna shook her head. ‘I can’t, Rebecca. The apparatus that sustains me is aboard this vessel. It is complex and requires resources the Oresrians do not have. I cannot come with you.’

Rebecca looked mortified for a moment, before managing to regain some control of her thoughts and feelings.

‘But I’ve only just found you again, what if...’

‘Rebecca, listen to me,’ Rihanna reassured her. ‘You’re the only one who can do this. There are billions of lives at stake.’

‘I know, but...’ Tears formed at the edge of her eyes and she hastily wiped them away. ‘You’re all I have.’

Rihanna frowned, sadness crossing her face. ‘Is there no one else?’

Rebecca shook her head. ‘There was, but it’s too late now. We grew apart, and I realised too late that I can’t have everything I want.’

Rihanna paused thoughtfully for a moment. Rebecca angrily wiped more tears from her face, but they kept streaming down her cheeks.

‘Couldn’t cope with the life you lead?’

Rebecca nodded, unable to speak.

Rihanna sighed. ‘I guess you do get that from me. Reet and I argued so many times over that. I wanted more excitement, more adventure. He just wanted to pay back the loans on the *Eclipse* and save up for a nice piece of beach somewhere warm. Look where that got me Rebecca, a disembodied

mind on an alien warship. I'm already dead.'

Rebecca looked at her askance.

'I understand the drive to avoid the predictable, to want to be non-conformist and cut your own trail. But so often what we're looking for is already around us.'

'You're telling me as if I don't know that?' Rebecca snapped.

'Where is he now?' Rihanna probed gently.

Rebecca looked up with a sigh. 'On route to Beenri, in my ship I hope. He probably thinks I'm dead. We didn't part on good terms.'

Rihanna would have taken Rebecca's hand if she could have done. As it was she gestured as if she wanted to give Rebecca a hug.

'You still love him though.'

Rebecca wasn't able to articulate an answer; she just managed a brief nod mingled amongst the tears and sobs.

'Then you've got more than one reason to stop this attack,' Rihanna said. 'Stop them, and let him know you're still alive. You've still got a chance, Rebecca. Don't waste it like I did. One day it really will be too late – but it's not today.'

'I...'

A strange keening tone wailed through the hangar. Immediately Thargoids began emerging from the side walls and heading towards the variety of warships in the bay.

'No time!' Rihanna called. 'We're under attack! You must hurry! Go!'

Rebecca ran up the boarding tube and it began to fold in behind her. She turned as the portal closed up.

'Mum?'

'I love you Rebecca, I always have, I always will...'

The Oresrian ship was sealed and immediately launched. Already lasers were streaming around the vessel and the three others that were accompanying it. Rebecca ran to the forward section, watching what was happening on a holofac projection.

She could see the Thargoid mothership was beset by two Behemoths and a phalanx of attacking vessels. The Thargoids had launched their own ships and the battle was joined, but Rebecca

could tell they were badly out-numbered.

The Oresrian ships were making a run for it. A swarm of Galcop ships passed close, missiles streaking through the darkness. The fourth Oresrian ship was caught by one, abruptly spinning out of control. It tried to right itself before another missile slammed home. Rebecca was almost knocked off her feet as debris from the hapless vessel impacted against the ship she was on.

‘Frak...!’

Rebecca could see the mothership was taking heavy damage from the combined firepower of the Behemoths. The Oresrian ships were almost out of range, looking to attempt a jump into witchspace.

Lasers fired again and the mothership faltered, heeling over on its long axis, its underbelly a mass of flaming debris.

‘No...’ Rebecca cried, impotently staring at the projection, tears streaming down her face. ‘No! You can’t do this! Leave them alone!’

There was a flash, a blast of light which sent Rebecca reeling backwards, trying to shield her eyes. The Oresrian pilots blinked quickly, allowing nictitating membranes to cover their eyes until the light faded.

The mothership was gone. The few remaining Thargoid warships were easy pickings for the remaining Navy vessels.

Rebecca sank to her knees and shuddered into hysterics. The Oresrian vessels slipped into witchspace, leaving the Navy ships far behind.

For long minutes Rebecca sobbed, before slowly calming herself down.

She looked up, her face determined, fierce, and possessed with a hard and bitter ruthlessness.

‘You killed my family Galcop...’ she said to herself. ‘And you are going to pay.’

On the eastern continent the sun had just risen across the sea. A G-type star, its light was golden and warm, the sea gently casting playful waves across the sandy beach. Tides were at an ebb, with both the moons hanging low in the sky on the opposite horizon. It was a cloudless, perfect day.

Just inland from the beach a group of creatures stood, looking across the rough grassland that was the main feature of this part of the world. They were tall, chitin covered, with a variety of green

and maroon exoskeletal coverings. An observer would have seen them gesturing towards a series of bright lights that had appeared in the heavens, slowly moving downwards from the zenith from whence they'd appeared.

The creatures chattered, pointing and remonstrating; clearly puzzled as to what these lights could be. The lights grew brighter, forcing them to shake their heads and back under cover of some of the taller vegetation. They were large insects, bearing a striking resemblance to a praying mantis of old Earth lore.

As they continued to watch the lights spread out slightly, then broke into smaller lights which themselves broke apart further into more. Before long the sky was covered with bright star-like points, which, other than their slow but deliberate movement across the sky, made it look as if the stars had come out in the daytime.

Some of the lights faded as they disappeared out of sight, dropping away beyond the horizon. Others continued to spread out from the zenith. Only the ones straight above slowly continued to grow in brightness. The creatures chattered and cowered, unsure of what to make of the strange phenomena.

A shrieking noise arose around them. The insects panicked. Some ran blindly away as fast as they could, whilst others were pinned to the spot. With startling suddenness one of the lights expanded, accompanied by a high pitched scream. It descended to ground, raising a reasonable sized splash of sandy soil from the point of impact.

The few remaining insects watched as, around them at various distances, the spectacle was repeated. More and more of the lights hit the ground, splashing up small eruptions of dirt and soil.

For a moment all was still. The insects looked at each other quizzically, wondering what to do next. The bravest of them slowly edged forward to where the nearest light had hit the ground. Its companions slowly followed its lead.

On reaching it the insects saw a shallow pit with small round object half buried in the ground at its centre. It was a metal sphere, quite unlike anything else in their lush and verdant world. The planet had few metal resources, and there was no industry of any kind. A shiny reflective surface other than water or ice was a marvellous novelty.

Even more puzzling was a small red glow, coming from the objects centre line. It pulsed in an unusual way, parts of it lighting up and then fading out in a semi-regular sequence.

The insects frowned, looking at each other in bafflement, unable to recognise the numeric

countdown.

Deploying in 5... 4... 3...

The insects took a step backwards as the sphere cracked into two halves and a thin black material erupted from inside. The material rose up in a narrow column until it was tall enough to be seen from outside of the pit. It writhed and rotated as if looking for something. Two of the remaining insects had seen enough, they backed away and began retreating quickly. The third, more inquisitive, waited to see what would happen next.

The writhing blackness froze for a moment.

It struck, lancing out and quickly engulfing the lone insect.

The two that had chosen to flee heard only a muffled shriek of pain and surprise, abruptly cut off. Fuelled by panic they tried to run faster. They heard a rushing sound from behind them.

A brief glance behind sent them into a state of utter terror.

A series of blackened tentacles were growing outwards at a terrifying rate, travelling across the ground far more quickly than they could run. The tentacles caught the slowest of the pair and the insect almost immediately vanished, instantly consumed by the voracious thing. A fresh burst of dark growth marked its demise.

The single remaining insect was only seconds ahead of the dark wave that had spread out in all directions. Nothing was stopping it, trees, rocks, streams or vegetation. Its growth was inexorable, insatiable and unbelievably rapid.

The insect came to a cliff top, tottered over the edge as it vainly tried to come to a stop. As it scrambled for grip its gaze stared in uncomprehending terror at the visage before it.

Below was a plain, low lying grassland nestling in the midst of a broad valley. The insect could see huge circular pools of darkness growing like indescribably large blots of ink, rapidly spreading out and covering the landscape. Ahead of the rapidly expanding boundaries the insect could just make out thousands upon thousands of his fellows, vainly trying to outrun the insidious infestation.

All in vain.

With a whoosh of air the darkness was upon the hapless creature. With no other recourse it leapt from the cliff, spiralling through the air.

Even a quick death by impact on the ground was denied it. The black tentacles reached forth

at a ferocious speed, wrestling the insect out of mid-air and consuming it before cascading to the valley floor, covering the entire landscape in glistening, shocking blackness.

The ships held position in low orbit around the stricken planet. The wideband transmitters aboard all four vessels picked up a lengthy blast of static from out of system, but no message came through.

Udian frowned at the wideband comms. Someone somewhere was trying to transmit a message in their direction. He recorded it, saving it for analysis later on, turning his attention back to the planet below.

As the four companions watched, a series of blackened splotches erupted on the surface. For a moment little was distinguishable, but gradually the blackness spread, the surface of the planet growing dimmer as the emerald green light being reflected was replaced with sombre greyness.

As they watched they could see the blackness growing, sometimes following the contours of the continents, sometimes bridging the gaps across seas. The blotches merged and within minutes a noticeable fraction of the planet was covered; a line of darkness could be seen slowly moving across the illuminated surface. It was as if a second terminator was approaching, only the sun was still shining as brightly as before.

Udian looked on in satisfaction.

The culmination of all my efforts. The weapon is effective, even beyond my expectations. A retribution long in coming. The desecration of those dear to me will soon be repaid in full. Not long now before that vengeance is complete...

As he continued to watch, the line of darkness swept over the horizon leaving a blackened world below. Devoid of light, devoid of movement, devoid of life.

The narrowband comms buzzed into life, a transmission from the *Persistence*.

Derik's voice sounded across the wavelength, uncertain and hesitant.

'Guys... shouldn't I be feeling better about us having completed the mission?'

Coyote and Jim were spared from answering by the sudden wail of the alert klaxons aboard all of their ships. A quick glance at the astrogation scanner showed three unidentified vessels closing from the rear.

'Stay where you are!' An imperious command issued from the narrowband of the escorting

Navy fighters. 'Thargoids! We'll deal with them.'

The Navy fighters had already half closed the distance between the incoming ships, blotting them out of sight.

Chapter Seven

During the transit to Beenri, Rebecca had been watching the news broadcasts, adeptly filtering out the Galcop censored transmissions and finding the concealed and subversive messages. She was a long way from Tionisla now, and Galcop was doing its best to block the unofficial reports still being transmitted by Kiri Mereso at the Chronicle. Underground movements, rogue transmitter outfits and passing traders continued to relay the broadcasts however, though they took longer to percolate across the chart. She'd listened to the Thargoid transmission, calling all the non-humans to Lave. She knew enough of her history to begin to place all the facts in line.

This war isn't about the Thargoids; it's not even a new war. This is Galcop trying to finish what it started over five hundred years ago. Enslaving the non-human population of the galaxy!

She was standing in the forward section of the lead ship, looking out across the Beenri system as the three insectoid ships raced planetwards. Ahead, Beenri spun, green and verdant.

1.7 billion of them down there...

'There!' Rebecca said, pointing at the four markers on the holofac display that served as a scanning device. 'That must be them. Give me a comms line.'

One of the Oresrians waved its arm through the display, clearly giving a sequence of commands through some kind of aerial interface. It nodded at her.

'Jim, Coyote, Derik...' she paused. 'It's me, it's Rebecca! Break off the attack! Beenri is the Thargoid homeworld! You mustn't attack. Those are innocent people down there!'

Static buzzed back from the link.

'Can you hear me? Break of the attack! I repeat, break off the attack! Don't listen to Udian, he's going to betray you! He tried to kill me, it wasn't the Thargoids, they don't want a war. They're just trying to escape along with all the other non-humans...'

More static buzzed back, overlaid with a repeating warble. Rebecca recognised the distinctive tones of a jamming signal.

'Damn and frak,' Rebecca snapped. 'Can you get us closer?'

The Oresrian next to her nodded. On the holofac scanner Rebecca could see new dots appearing, more ships. Visually she could make them out too, Navy fighters heading their way. Against the background of the planet she could also make out a vast array of ships, with three large

Behemoth class vessels.

They'll be on us soon, we don't have much time!

'Guys, please answer me! The Thargoids are not the enemy! I've embedded the relevant news feeds! Listen to them! Abort the attack and run before...'

Rebecca's heart sank as small bright flashes of light emerged from her four companions' ships.

'No... you mustn't! Don't... oh!'

The lights flashed forwards rapidly, heading swiftly down into the atmosphere of Beenri. As she watched Rebecca could see the missiles split into smaller and smaller fragments, spreading out their trajectories to cover the entire immediate hemisphere of the planet.

The Oresrians watched impassively as the missiles impacted the surface with bright flashes, before fading away. Within seconds dark markings began to spread out from the points of impact, rapidly consuming the bright green surface and turning it in a darkened wasteland.

'This can't be happening...' Rebecca said, fresh tears rolling down her cheeks. 'We mustn't... billions of them... they didn't know... why can't you hear me!'

Lights flickered aboard the Oresrian ship and Rebecca felt it swing about. The visual feed remained locked on the planet, where the darkness had swept across the globe, making it difficult to see against the blackness of space. The armada of ships arrayed in front of it now glittered cruelly in the light of the sun.

Rebecca could see that a phalanx of fighters was heading out of the system in their direction, clearly attempting to intercept them. The Oresrians had come about, seeing the cause was lost, and were fleeing back the way they had come, prepping for a return to witchspace.

Lasers flashed around them. One of the Oresrian vessels was hit, spewing hull fragments and plasma into the void before...

...Witchspace flashed before them.

Rebecca didn't know which direction the Oresrians had taken, but they'd clearly performed some kind of mis-jump, diving deeply into interstellar space in the hope they wouldn't be pursued. The ships regrouped, assessing damage and then moving together in a huddle. There was no sign of the Galcop vessels; they'd made good their escape.

Rebecca stumbled back against the interior wall.

I failed. The Thargoid homeworld is destroyed and I helped carry the weapons that did it. Their blood, on my hands...

She was shaking and she couldn't stop it. She was only dimly aware of the Oresrians chittering and communicating amongst themselves.

Jim... if only I could have stopped it. Saved them, saved us, saved you...

She was brought to her senses as she noticed the Oresrians had stopped talking to each other. They were all looking in her direction. One gestured towards her and tendrils spun out of the wall, securing her wrists behind her back.

'No wait... we can still...'

Her voice was muffled as another tendril wrapped itself around her mouth, binding it tightly. She struggled, stepping forward. More tendrils grabbed her ankles and pulled her back against the wall.

The Oresrian closed on her, looking into her eyes. Rebecca stared back at the spinning green orbs that served as the Oresrians optical system.

Anger! Fury! But I tried...

She didn't see the swift arm movement that preceded the blow to her head. She slumped in the grasp of the tendrils, still secured to the wall.

The Oresrians turned back to their duties.

Whatever the invading ships had hoped to achieve their purpose was clearly thwarted by the overwhelming number of Navy vessels in the system. Almost immediately they turned and retreated, fleeing before of the weapons of the fighters. Coyote caught a brief suggestion of a witchspace wormhole before it was gone, lost in the depths of space.

More Navy fighters swept down towards the four companions' ships, including a larger unfamiliar vessel.

Coyote frowned at it as it grew on the viewer, flanked by smaller fighter vessels.

Who do we have here then?

It was a midsized ship. Coyote estimated it as being about twice the tonnage of his Cobra Mk3. The central hull was a classic snub nosed affair housing a generous bridge and engineering

section. The midsection was rather bulky and clearly built to contain a hefty power core, perhaps even two. Emanating from this section were four arching pylons, the ship looking like a large 'X' as it moved towards them. It was impossible to tell from a visual inspection, but Coyote felt sure the ship was heavily armed and armoured. It moved with a sense of understatement, mindful of raw power kept carefully in check.

Coyote flicked the ident computer on. It clicked and buzzed for a moment as the unknown vessel continued its approach.

Vessel : Multirole Clipper GA-14G4 "Osprey". Mass 520 Metric, Speed 0.45 LM

Interrogating Galcop astrometrics, please wait...

Done. Description follows...

Multirole Clipper GA-14G4 – Prototype heavy fighter produced by Selezen shipyards. Designed in response to the Thargoid 'Terroriser' class frigates, the Clipper slots into the role of the heavy fighter long occupied by the Asp and the Imperial Courier class vessels. Bigger and more powerful than the Asp, the Clipper is also lighter and more manoeuvrable than the Courier, despite playing host to a twin core power-plant. Its primary armament is a pair of flux-cooled military lasers with double the heat dissipation of standard weapon systems. This results in extended longevity of deployable fire power. Eight missile pylons provide ballistic ordnance support along with an optional pair of turret mounted plasma cannons. The Clipper also sports twin sets of military shield generators which can be used together or in sequence. Able to hang in a fire-fight for twice as long, whilst dealing out twice the damage, when compared with any other currently available fighter, the Clipper is expected to be the default choice in frontline attack vessels when it goes into full production later in 3151.

Coyote whistled.

An uber ship if ever there was one!

The narrowband crackled into life, with a video feed being transmitted from the imposing vessel.

Coyote leant back thoughtfully as Garew Ward's face appeared alongside the faces of Derik, Jim and the blank video feed from Udian.

Surprise, surprise...

'Congratulations on your success,' Garew said, with a rather humourless smile. 'I'm gratified

to see your weapon proved effective after all, Udian.’

‘That was never in doubt,’ Udian rumbled back, offhandedly.

‘And you Coyote, a master-class in evasive routing across the chart. The best trackers in Galcop lost you almost straightaway. Derik too, doubtless a dozen narrow escapes where your skills were put to the test...’

‘Cut the fraak,’ Derik snapped.

Garew nodded and grew sombre. ‘I see Rebecca is not with you.’

‘The Thargoids murdered her,’ Jim’s voice was still tight and bitter.

‘A tragic loss indeed,’ Garew said, acknowledging the scientist with a nod. ‘The only consolation I can offer is that she died in a worthwhile cause. With these weapons at our disposal we can end this war, swiftly and effectively. That will be her legacy. Now gentlemen, we have much to do. The weapons still need to be produced based on the prototypes you have successfully tested. You must be exhausted after your struggle across the chart, I suggest we retire to the *Altercator* and toast your success.’

Coyote looked at the blackened planet spinning below the bow of the *Dark Star*.

Little here I want to celebrate.

‘Just deactivate that damn nano-infestation,’ he replied, ‘And we’ll be on our way, por favor.’

‘Of course,’ Garew acknowledged. ‘But join me in...’

‘We want nothing to do your scheming,’ Derik snapped. ‘Pay up and shut up. You’ve got what you wanted. Time to make good on the deal.’

‘If you’ll let me have the details on the bio-weapons,’ Garew prompted.

‘You can have that when we confirm the nanos are gone, and we’re in a position to leave.’
Coyote fired back.

‘Is this really necessary?’

‘The nanos now, or no weapon,’ Coyote repeated, firmly.

Garew nodded and brought up a commtab. He could be seen typing a code sequence into it. He finished and looked up.

‘The nanobots are deactivated and purged,’ he replied.

Coyote ran a medical diagnostic. True to Garew's word, the nanobots had been instructed to disassemble themselves. They were free.

'Now, give us clearance to the witchspace jump point,' Coyote instructed. 'Once we're there and you've retreated we will transmit the information. Comprehend?'

'All in good time, gentlemen. Surely we can at least make repairs to your ships, refuel and re-provision...' Garew continued amiably.

'That's the deal, Garew.'

Garew sighed. 'A pity. I was hoping this would be straightforward.'

Coyote grimaced and flicked the arming switches of his weapons.

Just knew this was going to go south...

'Just let us go, Garew,' Coyote said slowly. 'No need for anyone to get shot to pieces today. You'll get what you want and you know what we can do. The information you want is encrypted, no way are you gonna get it without our say so. These four ships will make a big dent in your afternoon. None of that needs to happen.'

'Four ships?' Garew enquired innocently.

Coyote frowned. As he did so the hull lights of the *Persistence* and the *Spectre* flickered and went out, their engines dying. Both ships began to drift impotently. Before he could react, systems aboard his own ship began shutting down. Despite his efforts the *Dark Star* computers, engines, reactor, shields and weapons went offline in moments.

Frak... how did...

It was only the *Hammer* that was unaffected.

'Udian?' Coyote snarled. Somehow the comm system was still running.

'A condition of success,' Udian responded mildly. 'A working prototype and... no witnesses. I'm sure you understand.'

'You frakkin' scumscourge!' Derik raged from the bridge of his ship. 'After all we've been through you crazy metal assed backstabber...'

'Comply with Garew's demands and you'll not be harmed,' Udian replied. 'A degree of hex-editing and all will be well.'

'If you think I'm going to allow those Galcop frakkers to stick their probes into my brain

cavity...’

‘That will do.’ Garew’s tones were hard, yet quiet. ‘Take them in tow. There is no time to waste.’

The *Dark Star*, *Persistence* and the *Spectre* had been unceremoniously towed into the enormous hanger bay of the Behemoth *Altercator*. After that they had been boarded by marines and their occupants quickly accosted and marched at gunpoint into the depths of the massive military ship.

They were holed up in a featureless cell framed with solid metal walls on three sides and an invisible shield on the other. Only a tiny series of ventilation holes broke the monotonous interior.

‘Looks like Rebecca was right,’ Jim said after a moment spent looking around the cell, seeing nothing of interest whatsoever.

‘Say what?’ Derik rumbled.

‘She warned me not to trust that character...’

Coyote looked up. ‘None of us ever trusted Udian. We always knew he was operating on his own terms. But he holds no love for Galcop or the Navy, so...’

‘Why the frak did he turn out to be a frakkin’ backstabbing ‘stard!’ Derik yelled. ‘Siding with them? I’m going so going to take my axe to that carapace and rip his guts out!’

‘Any chance he’s playing some kind of double bluff?’ Jim asked.

‘If he is, it’s unlikely to be for our benefit,’ Coyote replied. ‘I should have seen it coming. I thought he’d aligned himself with us after that business on the *Catechism*, and our abortive trip into Thargoid space.’

Derik nodded. ‘Don’t rip yourself up. I’ve worked with him before and I didn’t think he’d try this sort of frak. He was up to something back on Xequerin when his ship was pulled aside for inspection. Coded message maybe? Has he been in league with Garew all the way through this?’

Coyote shrugged. ‘But if he was, then why the whole mission? They didn’t need us to run this. Udian could have just given the bio-weapons to Galcop...’

Jim nodded thoughtfully. ‘Unless the use of bio-weapons couldn’t be public knowledge until a certain point in time.’

Coyote and Derik looked around at him, both wearing puzzled looks.

‘Something Daddyhoggy said to me. Bio-weapons were banned long ago. They were illegally used on the Thargoids many centuries back, to devastating effect. They remain illegal. For the Navy to be able to use them the war must have got to a desperate state, something so bad as to justify their use again.’

‘So?’ Derik asked.

‘From what I’ve gleaned about Udian,’ Jim continued, ‘his life’s purpose seems to be the extermination of the Thargoids. Galcop appears to have tacitly supported this, but have also been forced to prevent him from deploying bio-weapons in the past given their illegal status. I think this war has been manufactured to allow that use.’

Derik still looked confused but Coyote nodded.

‘You could be right prof,’ he said. ‘Garew told us at the start that the Navy intended the Thargoids to take the Lave system. They were intending to blockade the Thargoids in and exterminate them there.’

‘But you said Raxxla was at Lave.’ Derik added. ‘How does that fit in with all this frak?’

Jim nodded. ‘I don’t understand it completely, but my guess is Raxxla is a construct associated with, and perhaps even responsible for generating the wormholes between the charts. Rebecca and I found it years ago. Lave’s moon is one place where it can emerge into real space. It becomes accessible. The Dark Wheel had been guarding it.’

‘The Dark Wheel?’ Derik echoed. ‘You’re not telling me they’re real too?’

Jim managed a faint smile and leant against the wall. ‘Rebecca was part of it. Years ago a man called Zerz Furvel tried to find it for use in furthering Galcop’s agenda. Rebecca and I stopped him. The Dark Wheel has been guarding Raxxla for centuries, trying to keep it in the realm of myth and legend.’

Coyote held up a hand. ‘Whoa there, amigo. Udian wants the Thargoids dead. That I get. The Navy wants the Thargoids dead. I get that too. The Thargoids were searching for Rebecca because somehow they knew Rebecca had some way of finding Raxxla, yes?’

Jim nodded.

‘And what do the Thargoids really want with Raxxla?’ Derik asked.

‘If Galcop is coming after them with the bio-weapon then maybe they really are just trying to

escape,' Coyote said.

'Raxxla can take them across the charts or to another time,' Jim replied. 'What more effective escape could there be?'

'And maybe Galcop wants Raxxla too.'

'For certain,' Jim said. 'The Dark Wheel has stopped them for a long, long time, but they've never given up that desire.'

Derik growled. 'I still don't get it. Garew had Rebecca right at the start of all this. She told us he'd tortured her over that plasma accelerator data. If Garew knew she knew where Raxxla was, why didn't he find out then?'

Jim's hands clenched at the mention of Rebecca being tortured, but he remained calm. 'I can explain that. The Dark Wheel considered our knowledge of Raxxla too important for even us to know. We were both hex-edited of course, but Raxxla also has a more subtle effect, only detectable under certain conditions. Even under torture Rebecca wouldn't have given Garew any useful information other than the basic location, because she didn't actually know herself.'

Coyote smiled. 'So she was holding out on us all that time. I thought she'd levelled with me with that guff about the plasma accelerator. I'm going to have to seriously review my ability to judge character.'

'That means Garew just wants Raxxla. He couldn't get it from Rebecca directly...'

'So the Thargoids are just a means to an end,' Jim said. 'The war is nothing more than a way to expose Raxxla for Galcop's benefit...'

Coyote lowered himself to the floor and propped himself up against the wall.

'Which means we remain royally screwed and Udian is going to get a very nasty surprise from Garew the moment the Thargoids are dealt with...'

Udian watched as his companions were led out of the hangar under guard. Contrary to outward perception he'd found it difficult to betray them.

I swore on many graves that the Thargoids had to pay. The cost of this vengeance is high and there will be casualties along the way. Some I can avoid and others I cannot. All my plans have led me here, to a point where that ambition can finally be fulfilled. The extermination of this infestation is close at hand.

Garew was waiting for him at the *Hammer's* loading bay egress.

'A job well done,' he said.

Udian slowed his motivator units and came to a halt, regarding the Commander through his deep hued ocular receptors.

'You still intend to terminate my companions?' Udian rumbled.

Garew nodded. 'I dislike loose ends.'

'And myself?'

'Much of Galcop would appreciate your destruction,' Garew mused. 'But I have sufficient influence to ensure those voices stay silent, permanently if necessary. The deal we struck remains. Your freedoms will no longer be curtailed by us, though certain jurisdictions may see matters in a different light.'

Udian inclined his torso slightly.

Garew raised his head. 'Thus you are free to go, once I have the bio-weapon information I require.'

Garew gestured to the hangar doors behind the *Hammer*, currently locked and closed. He held out his hand.

Udian paused for a moment, before extending a manipulator and providing Garew with a commtab. Garew inspected it for a moment, turned it over in his hand and then pocketed it.

'I will transmit the necessary encryption key once I am ready to execute a witchspace jump. If you interfere with my progress in anyway, I will destroy the key.' Udian said.

Garew nodded. 'I have no intention of interfering with your progress. Bon voyage.'

He turned smartly and marched away. Udian regarded him solemnly from the loading bay as he strode across the hangar floor.

That was far too easy.

Garew left the hangar and immediately entered one of the monitoring points within the *Altercator*. He handed over the commtab to one of the science officers.

'Decode this.'

The officer took the commtab and slid it across a holofac reader.

Access Denied. Encryption key required.

Garew smiled and then provided the science officer with a second commtab.

‘I think you’ll be needing this...’

The second commtab was slid across the reader. A holofac image materialised in the monitoring room of a conversation being played out. Garew watched in satisfaction as Udian’s metallic form appeared in front of him, courtesy of the holofac simulation.

Udian’s voice issued from the visualisation.

‘You fear he will simply decide it is better for us to be quietly eliminated.’

‘Something I’d rather avoid if necessary. I want a lever I can use over Garew.’ Garew recognised Coyote’s more dulcet tones.

There was a pause in the recording, before Udian continued.

‘The solution is simple. I suggest I encrypt the schematics, data and all source information regarding the bio-weapons and store it upon my person. At any hint of betrayal we can simply refuse to hand over the data. We can ensure that the data is not transmitted until the nanobots that infest us are purged, and we are in a position to leave without being intercepted. Garew will not risk the loss of that data. It is too crucial to the war. The lives and whereabouts of the four of us are insignificant.’

‘Do it.’ Coyote said. ‘I want that Galcop scum kept over our canister this time. I’ll clue Derik and Jim in on the plan.’

Garew smirked. ‘Pause! Scum, is it?’

The holofac image froze, awaiting Garew’s next command.

But in your haste you forgot one thing, Udian...

‘Play.’ he commanded.

The holofac resumed. Coyote had cut the transmission, but the holofac of Udian remained. The commands that he issued were clearly visible from the viewer’s perspective. It only took the science officer a few moments to interpret the codes that Udian had used.

You didn’t consider the possibility that you yourself were compromised by a modified version of your own nanobot technology...

Garew looked on as the science officer applied the necessary codes to the encrypted bio-

weapon commtab.

Encryption key verified. Access granted.

A detailed schematic, chemical and biological data flooded across the holofac display. The detailed specifications of the bio-weapons.

The science officer turned with a grin.

‘We have it, sir.’

Garew nodded. ‘Begin procedures to mass produce and equip every ship in the fleet. I want us ready to move out within twenty four hours.’

‘Aye sir. And the cyborg?’

Garew looked out of the plexiglass windows that provided a view into the hangar bay. Udian had retreated aboard and the *Hammer*’s cargo bay was closed once more.

‘Allow him to leave,’ Garew said.

‘Sir?’

Garew turned with a fierce smile. ‘Once he’s clear of the immediate vicinity... blow him out of the stars.’

Udian lowered his carapace back into the circuitry that formed the bridge of the *Hammer*.

Too easy. Why would Garew risk losing the bio-weapons? Unless...

Udian focussed his optical receptors on the interior of the hangar.

...he already has them. But that’s not possible. I have the encryption key, there is no other copy.

Udian noticed the console log was flashing up a message from the wideband transmission array. He scrutinised the message.

Message received. 26% degradation. Decode complete. Play Message?

Udian looked at it for a moment. It was the strange burst of static that had been received just prior to deploying the weapons on the planet. As he’d suspected, not just a random spike on the comms, somebody had been trying to transmit something.

He sent the mental impulse and instructed the array to play the message. For a moment the

words in the message were unintelligible, but before long it was possible to make out a high pitched voice. Udian recognised it immediately, hardly able to believe who it was. He listened with a growing sense of alarm and uncertainty.

‘Jim, Coyote, Derik... It’s me, it’s Rebecca! Break off the attack! Beenri is the Thargoid homeworld! You mustn’t attack. Those are innocent people down there!’

Homeworld! Beenri is the Homeworld? Garew must have known... this was no experiment; he’s used me to perform his war crimes! Keeping his own hands clean!

Static crackled before clearing again. Udian continued to listen.

‘Can you hear me? Break of the attack! I repeat, break off the attack! Don’t listen to Udian, he’s going to betray you! He tried to kill me, it wasn’t the Thargoids, they don’t want a war. They’re just trying to escape along with all the other non-humans...’

The clarity of the transmission continued to degrade. Udian recognised the distinctive tone of a jamming signal, overlaid on top of the message.

‘Guys, please answer me! The Thargoids are not the enemy! I’ve embedded the relevant news feeds! Listen to them! Abort the attack and run before...’

It became increasingly hard to make out the words as the original transmission faded away. Only a few final words remained.

‘This can’t be happening... We mustn’t... billions of them... they didn’t know... why can’t you hear me!’

Message complete. Replay?

Udian thought carefully for long moments, his mind in a high state of alarm.

How can that damned woman possibly still be alive?

He turned the scenario over in his mind. For Rebecca to have survived left only one obvious conclusion. The Thargoids had already found a way around his bio-weapon.

But that’s not tenable. It’s perfect; there is no possibility of a mistake! Long years of research and development...

Yet the evidence was clearly to the contrary.

If Garew discovers she is still alive then he will naturally assume I have betrayed him. If the Thargoids know a way around the weapon, why haven’t they attacked? If Galcop attacks them

assuming they have complete military superiority based on my weapon they'll be destroyed. And if Garew already has the bio-weapon technology... my own existence is immediately forfeit!

The message showed it had a file attachment. Udian inspected it. It too was badly corrupted, but still readable. Contained alongside Rebecca's transmission were a series of recordings. Rebecca had hastily tagged one with the words 'View me!'

He pulled it up on his visual interface.

A symbol appeared. A Thargoid symbol. Udian frowned in recognition. Then a voice began to speak.

'Disparate citizens of the Far Colony Alliance. We address you today to make a plea on your behalf. Those of you who share, with us, a heritage divorced from humanity are under threat. The humans intend to subjugate and enslave you, and you are sleepwalking into submission...'

Udian watched the transmission all the way through and then cancelled the replay.

Impossible. The Thargoids have never acted altruistically before.

Udian cast his mind back over recent days. Suddenly the image of a Thargoid gesturing to him aboard the *Catechism* came back to his memory.

*OOODDDEEEAANN SHHHUUULTH, NO KIILLLL EYE... SHEEE ISSS
RAAGAAZZZAAA...*

Udian considered the possibilities.

They knew it was me. No Kill I? A plea for mercy or a statement of intent? They wanted the woman more than they wanted vengeance on me. They wanted Raxxla more than they wanted a war. The avian was right! She is Ragazza! They intend to escape, not to conquer!

Udian froze for a moment, his thoughts and intentions in disarray. He tried to analyse the outcomes, make firm predictions based on the knowledge he'd attained. His usually unemotional analysis was impeded though, mercilessly washed aside in a furious mental barrage as his reasoning came crashing down around him.

I was wrong. I've been pursuing the wrong foe. Galcop, it's always been Galcop. I've been a willing tool in their merciless persecution of the Thargoids. My own hatreds inflamed at their behest. Unwitting war crimes performed on their behalf. Perhaps they even manufactured past atrocities against my family to commit me to this path! Placing the Thargoids in my way as a subject of vengeance! Manipulation! Galcop!

Warning indicators flashed on in Udian's life support system as his hormone levels exceeded tolerances. Computers automatically matched and delivered sedatives to ensure an optimum biological state was achieved as a priority.

Udian saw with clarity again.

No more. We stop this now.

Chapter Eight

The science officer turned to look at the hangar as a flicker of light reflected off the windows behind him. Garew had departed moments before leaving him to make arrangements for the bio-weapon deployment.

The cyborg's bio-ship had lifted off from the floor of the hangar. Currently the huge doors that shielded the hangar from the vacuum of space were still closed. The science officer frowned. He could see a large figure standing near the base of the ship, moving towards the monitoring station.

‘What the...’

It was the cyborg.

As he looked up he saw hatches along the underbelly of the bio-ship open up and missile pylons fold out in a swift and surgical fashion. The missiles surged forward inside the hangar, making a deafening roar in the confined space. The officer could see marines diving out of the way as the weapons streaked across the hanger, impacting against the exterior doors.

There was a muffled bark of an explosion and then, with a jolt the doors collapsed outwards, resulting in a devastating decompression of the bay.

Cargo canisters, ships parts, containers and everything not bolted down were abruptly swept out into the vacuum of space, including the detachment of marines. The officer could see them spiralling out into space, unprotected, dying a swift yet unpleasant death in the darkness.

‘Frakkin’ hell!’

Alarms sounded throughout the complex as the on-board sensors detected the vacuum and the loss of shipboard integrity. There was a horrendous hiss of escaping pressure before the officer saw the seals descend on the external doors, sealing the monitoring unit from the hangar.

The officer's relief was short lived. There was a tap at the window.

He looked up, straight into the malevolent hellish red ocular sensors of the cyborg. The machine creature was unaffected by the vacuum, self-contained in its bio-suit. As he watched the cyborg rolled back on some kind of magnetic traction system.

The carapace atop folded back and two lethal chain-guns emerged.

‘‘Stard!’

The last thing the officer saw was a spray of bullets hitting the window and a faint tinkling as a spider web of fractures gradually flittered their way gently across its surface.

The cyborg flipped an insult at him with an extended manipulator.

There was a moment of calm, and then...

Garew felt the jolt as the hangar depressurised. It did not damage the *Altercator* significantly, but the ship was momentarily destabilised. After a brief pause the alarm sounded and a rush of air through the corridor signalled some kind of hull breach. The emergency bulkhead doors closed behind him a moment later.

He punched the intercom.

‘Status report!’

‘Sensors show a depressurisation in the hangar bay, sir!’ came the immediate response. ‘We can’t raise anyone down there. The shield generators are off-line too; we’ve got debris jamming the emitters!’

‘Damn.’

‘Sir, we’ve now got depressurisation in corridors 4 and 5 on C deck, adjacent to the hangar.’

‘Udian,’ Garew murmured to himself and then turned back to the intercom. ‘Security to those sections. Have them prepped in suits with heavy armaments, then open the automatic seals and neutralise any hostiles with extreme prejudice.’

‘Sir, anyone caught in those sections unprotected will be killed the moment we open the seals.’

‘Lieutenant, we have an armed cyborg loose aboard this ship. A few unfortunates will be the least of our problems if we don’t stop him.’

‘Aye sir.’

Coyote, Derik and Jim were on their feet the moment they felt the shudder run through the ship. A moment later the illumination died, replaced with the deep red glow of the emergency lights.

The guards outside the cell were clearly just as alarmed as they were. They could be seen checking systems before a sudden wailing alarm caused them to panic and desert their posts.

‘What does that mean?’ Jim shouted, trying to be heard over the wailing klaxon.

‘Something bad, I’m guessing,’ Derik replied.

‘Pressure loss,’ Coyote snapped. ‘There’s been some kind of hull breach...’

Outside the cell there was a sudden shower of sparks and then a rush of air could momentarily be heard. Debris, styluses, commtabs and other assorted bits and pieces suddenly rushed along the corridor and disappeared out of sight.

‘Frak!’ Derik said. ‘Let’s hope that force field stays up, or we’re going to be sucking on vacuum!’

A thump echoed through the floor, something big cast a shadow into the dim red glow outside the cell. A heavy and metallic form moved into view.

Coyote, Derik and Jim stared in dismay as Udian appeared outside the cell, chain-guns deployed with faint wisps of steam and smoke spiralling up from the cooling nozzles.

Udian gestured with a manipulator. Clenched in its grasp were three small masks.

Coyote and Derik recognised them straightaway.

Remloks! He’s going to blow the...

‘Away from the field!’ Coyote yelled. ‘Brace against something! Take a deep breath!’

The three moved back as far as they could, positioning themselves against the wall as securely as they could.

A moment later Udian’s chain-guns opened up in eerie silence, shredding the delicate electronics that were generating the shield covering the entrance to the cell. It flickered momentarily and then faded out.

The decompression was violent, as if they were caught in an instant hurricane force wind for a brief moment, before silence descended like a veil. Coyote felt the air being pulled out of his lungs regardless of his attempt to draw breath. He knew he had maybe thirty seconds of consciousness before he would succumb to the lack of pressure. His legs felt incredibly stiff and reluctant to move.

Dimly he saw Derik moving forward towards Udian, who was holding the Remloks in an outstretched manipulator, unable to enter the cell due to the size of the entrance. Coyote staggered forward, half seeing Jim collapse to the floor next to him.

His legs wouldn’t move, a red glow filled his vision and the room began to tunnel in around

him.

Must reach...

His legs went out from underneath him, his outstretched hands unable to reach Udian.

Can't breathe!

Then the agony started, cramps building up in his legs, arms, chest and back. Only seconds remained before...

A wrench, something around his neck yanking him forwards. A click and then...

Air!

Something nestled over his face, clamping down firmly. A hiss and he could breathe again, sucking down huge lungfuls of glorious breathable air. Within seconds consciousness was fully regained. He got to his knees and looked around.

Derik had managed to grab one of the Remloks. His draconoid physiology was far more resistant to the effects of the vacuum than that of his two human companions. Having secured his own Remlok, he'd proceeded back to Coyote and then Jim, ensuring the lifesaving apparatus was attached.

Coyote watched as the Remlok around his face fired out a thin transparent membrane that surrounded his body in seconds, creating a tough, impermeable but flexible protective cover around him. As he watched, Derik secured the last Remlok on Jim and the membrane formed over the scientist's body in the same fashion.

Derik helped Jim to his feet and they turned back to the entrance. Coyote spun around. Udian remained in the entrance.

'What the frak are you playing at, metal butt?' Derik hissed. His voice was tinny in the miniaturised microphones and speakers within the Remlok facemasks.

'Saving your scaly ass, I believe,' Udian's voice rumbled back.

'Why should we trust you?' Jim burst out. 'You betrayed us to Galcop!'

'No time,' Udian returned. 'Remain in the cell if you wish. I plan to depart.'

He turned and moved back down the corridor.

The three companions exchanged a look and then hurried after him.

‘Depressurisation in corridors 8 and 9 now, sir.’

Garew nodded. ‘The brig. Some honour amongst criminals after all, so it would seem.’

‘Bulkhead seals between there and the hangar report breached, sir. Looks like they’ve been forced.’

Then how are they breathing...?

‘Get me a visual,’ Garew snapped.

The lieutenant worked the controls and a grainy video feed appeared on the screen. Garew could make out Udian and the three companions moving back down the corridors. The three were wearing Remlok masks.

Garew nodded in appreciation.

Clever...

On the viewer Udian paused. Garew saw him spin around and gesture the other three out of the way. There was brief flash from Udian’s carapace and the camera feed stopped working.

‘Weapons fire, sir.’

‘I saw it,’ Garew replied. ‘No point trying to prevent their return to the hangar. We’ll take them out in space. Warn the fleet! I want all available fighters to intercept them if they manage to launch.’

Udian led the three companions back to the hangar. As they entered, Coyote looked around and saw their ships still standing in the hangar bay, unaffected by the lack of air. They were craft designed to operate in the darkness of the void, the depressurisation hadn’t affected them at all.

Udian gestured to the ships and then proceeded directly towards the *Hammer* at pace. The rest of them did likewise, heading to their own vessels, entering via emergency hatches either at the rear or in the top hull of each vessel.

Coyote dropped down into the *Dark Star*’s cockpit, gratefully ripping the Remlok from his face. It gave a soft puckering pop and then retracted, sucking its membrane back into itself, recycling and resetting itself for future use.

He quickly activated the controls, relieved to find that whatever Udian had done had not been permanent.

The moment the controls were active he spun the *Dark Star* around and locked every single weapon he had on Udian's *Hammer*.

'Talk, buddy,' he snapped on the narrowband comms. 'And make it good, comprende?'

'We must retreat immediately,' Udian returned, bring the *Hammer* about.

'You give me one good reason why I should even consider trusting you...'

Udian cut across him.

'Rebecca's alive.'

'What?' Jim's voice echoed out.

'I am launching an EMP device to cover our retreat. Move! Now!' Udian roared, uncharacteristically. The *Hammer* launched out through the shattered side of the hangar bay, blasting out into space. A small canister had been left behind on the hangar floor behind Udian's departing ship. A small light blinked purposefully.

For a moment Coyote was too stunned to react, but then his training and discipline took over and he spun the *Dark Star* about and accelerated his ship in pursuit, the *Persistence* and the *Spectre* close behind.

'So whose side are you on now?' Derik snapped, ensuring he slotted in behind Udian's vessel with his weapons hot. 'Speak up buddy, or a very large axe of our mutual acquaintance will be paying a short sharp trip to your exoplating!'

'I suggest you focus your attention on our survival,' Udian replied laconically, 'rather than indulging your obsession with bludgeoning everything in the immediate vicinity...'

On the rearview they could see the *Altercator* coming about, preparing to fire its weaponry at them. Things were going to get interesting, and soon.

There was a bright electrical discharge from the shattered hangar they'd just vacated. A moment later writhing trails of sparks flickered across the hull of the stricken Behemoth astern. Its engines stuttered and died; the ship began to drift.

'You said Rebecca's alive,' Jim snapped, as the light from the EMP faded. 'How do you know?'

'I received a message from her,' Udian replied.

‘When?’ Coyote demanded.

‘It was sent as we launched the attack on the planet,’ Udian replied. ‘She was attempting to warn us of Galcop perfidy.’

‘Galcop...?’ Jim interrupted before Udian forged onwards.

‘She must have been aboard the vessels that appeared as we were firing the missiles; the ones that were intercepted by the Navy fighters. It appears Galcop has been conducting a sustained campaign of war crimes against the Thargoids and now intends to expand that to all non-human beings.’

‘Say what?’ Derik stammered.

‘We destroyed Beenri, the Thargoid homeworld, at their direction,’ Udian replied. ‘Galcop has misled us all over the real reason for this conflict.’

‘Frakkin’ hell!’ Derik announced. ‘That was the Thargoid homeworld? Sheesh!’

‘Then Daddyhoggy was right,’ Jim shouted. ‘We’ve got to find her! We’ve got to get Rebecca back!’

‘How can she be alive?’ Coyote said. ‘The Thargoids killed her. We saw it happen.’

‘No, they did not,’ Udian replied softly.

‘We were all there buddy.’ Derik cackled back.

‘The attempt on her life was not made by the Thargoids,’ Udian replied, his voice lowered. ‘It was I.’

For a long moment there was no response from the other three companions.

‘You tried to...’ Jim began, his voice shaking.

‘Garew and I were in league from the start,’ Udian explained. ‘My intention was to ensure the complete destruction of the Thargoids. The woman unwittingly became part of that plan. I deliberately infected her with the bio-weapon contagion when she was aboard the *Catechism*.’

‘You frakkin’ sh...’ Derik began.

‘Keep talking,’ Coyote interrupted.

‘I knew the Thargoids were after her and planned to ensure she was captured. That was thwarted on the *Catechism*, so I had to improvise to ensure she was captured later on.’

‘That damn engine glitch at Xequerin!’ Derik crowed. ‘I knew you were up to something.’

‘Indeed. She was captured as I intended. With your foolish vendetta, you provided the opportunity to get close to the Thargoids... to deploy her.’

‘You turned her into a terrorist bomber,’ Jim said, his voice stiff with fury. ‘We should blow you out of space right this instant...’

Coyote saw the *Spectre* tilt in behind the *Hammer*.

‘Hold your fire!’ Coyote ordered. ‘It didn’t work though, did it Udian? Somehow she survived, blowing a neat hole in your plan.’

‘You are correct,’ Udian confirmed. ‘I cannot yet account for it.’

‘Yet you were still happy to shop us to the feds,’ Derik snapped.

‘I do not deny it,’ Udian replied smoothly. ‘As stated, my aim was the complete destruction of the Thargoid race. I deemed it a price worth paying. However, the woman’s transmission confirmed the avian’s claim that Galcop had manufactured this war for their own ends. I had thought I was manipulating the situation to my advantage. It transpires that Garew had exceeded even my capacity for deception. Startling though it appears, the Thargoids really are attempting to disengage from this conflict. Galcop is after something bigger.’

‘So they played you too,’ Coyote murmured.

‘Garew intended to destroy us all. Somehow he had already found his way around the encryption key we put in place. Once I discovered that, there was little alternative but to try to escape, with alacrity. Thus, I now find myself at your mercy.’

‘Don’t expect any mercy from me,’ Jim snarled.

‘No time for that now,’ Coyote replied. ‘We’ll deal with you later...’

‘Hate to break up the pleasant chit-chat,’ Derik interrupted. ‘But we’ve got company coming. I’ve got enough fuel for a single jump, but that doesn’t leave anything to engage those fighters with.’

‘Claro,’ Coyote replied. ‘For some reason Garew decided not to refuel our ships as he promised. Must lodge a complaint about that...’

The profile of two large ships closing from ahead could be seen powering into range. Navy Behemoths, accompanied by a twin phalanx of small fighter vessels in front, with the *Altercator* still behind.

‘They’re trying to bracket us,’ Coyote replied. ‘We’ll be mass-locked in a moment and then they’ll jam the witchspace drives.’

‘Got your speech handy, Coyote?’ Derik said. ‘Looks like the game’s up, fellas.’

‘I think not,’ Udian said, scanning the approaching ships and performing quick calculations.

Coyote, Derik and Jim saw the *Hammer* lurch forward, blazing a fuel injected trail towards the incoming fighter screen.

‘Frak it, Udian!’ Derik yelled. ‘You won’t have enough fuel for a jump!’

‘Indeed,’ came the laconic response.

‘But...’

‘I suggest you run for it,’ Udian replied. ‘I’ll delay them as long as I can.’

‘Get your metal ass back here!’ Derik snapped. ‘It’s suicide!’

‘That outcome is most probable,’ Udian replied, laconically.

‘If anyone is going out in a blaze of glory it’s gonna be me!’ Derik growled. ‘Udian... don’t do this...’

The *Hammer* continued to recede rapidly. The narrowband comms buzzed briefly.

‘Tell Rebecca I regret my actions. And perhaps after this... you will think a little better of me as a result.’ There was a click. The narrowband connection was dropped.

‘No, you crazy assed metal monster! Come back here!’

The *Hammer* was already shrinking on the forward viewer. Lasers flashed out in the darkness, the streaks of missiles, the harsh hammering of the ECM transmitters...

‘Move!’ Coyote shouted. ‘He’s given us a way out. Let’s not waste it.’

The *Dark Star* and *Spectre* turned tail and ran, engines running at full power. They still did not dare trigger the injectors for fear of using fuel they needed for the jump.

Derik flipped the *Persistence* end over end and followed them, triggering the rear view. Udian’s ship was surrounded by a scintillating lattice work of shimmering laser fire. He’d driven straight into the fighter phalanx, aiming between the two Behemoths.

‘Good luck, buddy...’

Udian considered his attack strategy in the few seconds he had available to him. Maximum disruption was his aim; survival was not something he needed to consider in this scenario. It was almost an impossibility, regardless. Not even a fully armed Caduceus stood much of a chance against such insuperable odds.

Strange, I always assumed this fight would be against the Thargoids. Now I'm fighting my own kind hoping to protect the interests of a species I have been working for several lifetimes to eliminate...

Lasers flashed towards him. New hotshot pilots chancing it. Inexperience, a fatal flaw of the young.

Less than a minute to undo the errors of a century and a half. A worthy challenge...

He rolled the Caduceus, bringing the flanks to bear on the fighters. The flank plasma turrets fired automatically, bringing down two of the ships. They were lightweight interceptors, designed to swarm and immobilise targets. A fully powered Caduceus on an attack run with nothing to lose was a strategy they were ill equipped to counter.

Gratifying to see this ship remains a force to be reckoned with...

The fighters broke up in disarray, before regrouping and swarming around the Caduceus. The turrets blistered out fire. Lasers streaked towards him, the shields repelling the fire.

Udian continued evasive manoeuvres and then swung around to continue chasing the fighters. He could see the three distant ships belonging to his companions, still driving away from the immobilised *Altercator*. A number of the fighters were breaking off to engage them.

Can't be having that...

A series of missiles launched from the *Hammer*, swiftly targeting the fighter ships. They were forced to break off their pursuit, their ECMs failing to prevent the missiles rapidly closing on them. In the resultant confusion Udian was able to laser one of them into oblivion.

Then it was his turn. A missile streaked past, detonating against the shields, sending the *Hammer* reeling before it stabilised. Lasers crashed against the shields, now almost a constant barrage. Udian triggered the injectors and swung around, heading towards the two Behemoths.

They immediately began unloading prodigious amounts of firepower in his direction; huge orbs of ferocious plasma. The fighters skipped around them, but the Caduceus was too big to avoid them all.

Warning! Forward shields failing!

More laser fire peppered his ship. Fighters covered all the views, swinging around the *Hammer* like a swarm of angry bees attacking a stricken albatross.

A plasma bolt caught the starboard wing, obliterating the surface and digging deeply into the structure of the ship. VapourStasis fluid spat from the wound, followed by an organic lattice of cobwebs which struggled to reinforce and protect the damaged area. Microscopic, unseen, an uncounted army of nanobots were already working to repair the vessel...

Warning! Forward shields failed!

Warning! Hull Integrity 63%!

Udian released his remaining missiles, and set the turrets to randomly select targets at will. Three more fighters were destroyed in the melee before another plasma bolt struck home. The *Hammer* yawed to one side, losing thrust from one of its engines. The turrets on the port side flickered and went dark, unable to fire without power from the engine.

Warning! Hull Integrity 46%!

Forward weapon offline!

Core output 47%!

ECM System Damaged!

Armour failure in section 5, 8 and 9!

With the shields down, the fighters were now targeting the turrets on the *Hammer*. Surgically taking the ship apart piece by piece, they were incrementally reducing its ability to protect itself. Lasers penetrated the hull, shredding internal components and incinerating the vital nano-technology that composed the ships most sensitive and crucial internals. VapourStasis fluid spilled into the chill void, the *Hammer* now streaming tentacles of white material like a disintegrating cocoon.

Warning! Energy Low!

Warning! Hull integrity 23%!

Udian initiated the arming sequence for the last piece of ordnance on his vessel.

Engines spluttering, the *Hammer* careered downwards to a point in space equidistant from each of the Behemoths. Meanwhile the fighters were still closing around the stricken vessel. Now vital plasma leaked into the void, venting from the multiple rents in the *Hammer's* hull.

Arming sequence complete. Deploy mine?

Udian triggered the injectors and the *Hammer* crabbed drunkenly forward.

He hit a programmed series of commands on the astrogation scanner. Cargo canisters were ejected from the *Hammer's* cargo hold in a rapid sequence, trailing a line behind his stricken vessel.

Now to light the fuse...

One small final canister was ejected from the rear of the *Caduceus*. The fighters saw it immediately and turned about, recognising the distinctive signature of the deadly Tyley Feynman Quirium Cascade Mine. The Behemoths instantly trained all their weaponry on it, unleashing a sequence of plasma fire.

Udian laughed at them, it was to no avail.

And it's a short fuse...

Derik saw the Q-Bomb detonate. Within seconds it was accompanied by several further detonations as the initial explosion cascaded up the chain of cargo canisters Udian had left in his wake.

He filled them with Quirium! The sly 'stard!

There were dozens of overlapping cascades. Then the fighters that surrounded Udian's doomed vessel were consumed by the expanding spheres of destruction. The two Behemoths lethargically turned and attempted to run but it was to no avail. The leading edge of the cascades engulfed them, catastrophically ripping away their shields and cutting into their hulls. A single cascade they might have weathered, but Udian's consummate final strategy had put paid to that. A brief moment of hesitation was quickly followed by a pair of devastating explosions, themselves quickly subsumed in a further pair of expanding massive cascade wave-fronts. Space was shining a bright burning cyan for nearly a minute before it silently faded away into the darkness.

'Oh frak...' Jim stammered.

'He got them.' Coyote whispered. 'Every single one...'

'Nice one, buddy. Nice one...' Derik growled, watching more fighters launching from the *Altercator*, which had managed to re-energise itself. 'We should be in the clear now, guys. Let's make it count.'

‘We need to get to Lave as fast as possible.’ Jim said. ‘If Rebecca is alive, that’s where they’ll have taken her. The Thargoids will activate Raxxla and try to flee...’

‘And Galcop will be right on their tails.’ Coyote finished for him.

‘Then what are we waiting for!’ Derik roared.

Garew was bellowing orders on the bridge of the disabled *Altercator* when intense light flickered through the enormous viewing screens mounted high above the deck. He stared for a moment, his eyes narrowing. Alarmed voices shouted around him as the Quirium cascade expanded, obliterating the ships nearby.

Garew watched as the bright blue light of the cascade faded slowly away, leaving nothing behind. Power returned to the *Altercator*.

A fitting end Udian, and an expensive one. But an end nonetheless...

‘Sir, the renegade ships have made the jump to witchspace.’

Garew turned to the Captain of the *Altercator*.

‘Get this ship up and running! Continue prepping the weapons. Assemble the fleet and prepare to move out immediately. Send word to the third, seventh and the ninth. We will rendezvous with them at Zaonce before proceeding to Lave with our combined forces.’

‘Aye aye, sir!’

Where we will complete this work, once and for all.

Chapter Nine

Rebecca was led out of the Oresrian vessel moments after it touched down. She was still bound around her wrists. She looked about her in surprised recall. The brightness was blinding for a moment and she was forced to blink rapidly, before slowly being able to resolve some details.

There was no discernible horizon, no shadows, no apparent source of light...

It's Raxxla! We're on Raxxla! The Thargoids must have found out how to access it.

It was still the curiously enigmatic smooth marble surface it had been before, but around her were hundreds of vessels crowding the landscape as far as she could see. They were a mixture of trading vessels from across the chart. They were all showing signs of damage. She could see broken hull plates, evidence of laser burns and narrow escapes. As she walked down the ramp she could see the owners, pilots and passengers turn to look at the new arrivals. Some of them began to point in her direction.

Rebecca continued to look around.

Felines, lobsteroids, draconoids, amphibians, canines... but no humans!

The Oresrians flanking her snapped to attention and formed a cordon around her as shouts began to emerge from the shadows of the ships.

'Humans! Frak the 'stards!'

'Killers! Fiends!'

Rebecca looked on in growing alarm as a crowd began surging towards her. They closed on her and the same group of Oresrians now stood on guard. Angry shouts emerged from the crowd, accompanied by gestures, insults, screams of fury, growls and furious yelps and barks.

'You killed my family! Murdered! Shot down without mercy!'

'Purged my whole continent, human scum!'

'Gassed! You utter 'stards! What did we do? You had this planned for years!'

'Human flux stain!'

The Oresrians closed around her, forming a protective ring with her in the middle. The crowd surged past, the volume of insults and threats growing rapidly. Rebecca spun around, seeing nothing but a confusing blur of hostile faces all hammering abuse in her direction.

‘What you got to say for yourself, human scum?’

‘Yeah, bitch!’

The Oresrians in front of her were clearly bracing themselves against the crush of the crowd. Rebecca could see them struggling to hold back the people around her.

‘Payback time!’ someone yelled. ‘Make an example out of her! It’s her and those like her that did this to us!’

‘Kill the human ‘stard!’

Something was thrown, Rebecca didn’t see what it was; it went past her in a blur. Then there was another. She turned away as a brace of small missiles showered around her, struggling against the restraints on her wrists in vain. She couldn’t protect herself. One missile hit her in the chest, another on the shoulder. A third hit her on the forehead, sending her reeling backwards. She turned, trying to shield herself, feeling blood dripping down her face.

The sight of blood seemed to enrage the crowd still further and they pressed in upon the Oresrians. Rebecca saw with horror that, despite their huge strength, they couldn’t hold the apoplectic crowd back any more.

They’re going to rip me to shreds! But it wasn’t me. I tried to stop this...

A protestor broke through, an amphibian. It closed on Rebecca, arms outstretched, grabbing her around the throat and bearing her down to the ground with its momentum. Rebecca could do nothing about it.

‘Where are my children?’ the creature screamed at her. Rebecca realised it was a young female. Rebecca couldn’t have responded even if she wanted to, the grip on her throat was too tight. She choked.

‘My children. Six of them! They aren’t here, where are they? Answer me...’

The amphibian pulled Rebecca back up and then slammed her back down onto the ground. Through a haze of pain Rebecca saw the Oresrians struggling to remove the distraught creature. Mercifully, the pressure on her throat lessened and the screaming creature was pulled away from her.

There was huge bang, making the crowd around her jump. Rebecca felt it echo through the ground she was lying on. The crowd turned to look at what had caused the noise. Rebecca saw them fanning back, allowing something to approach. Even the Oresrians backed up. The tumultuous baying noise died back to a whisper.

Rebecca struggled up to a seated position just as a phalanx of heavily armed and armoured Thargoids marched towards her in a sharp military formation. They immediately forced back the crowds and established a perimeter around Rebecca, turning as one to face outwards and reinforce the ring of Oresrians around her.

The crowd remained quiet, listening and waiting.

Footsteps could be heard approaching, thick and heavy. Rebecca trembled, wondering what could possibly be about to arrive. The crowd began parting with a muted buzz of awe and respect.

The Thargoid guards moved apart. Rebecca looked up. A large feline stood in front of her, but unlike any feline she'd ever seen before. This one was almost ten feet tall, framed by a huge mane of fur around its head. The feline wore a huge and heavy-looking cloak, deep maroon in colour. Rebecca could see the long glinting claws barely concealed in its massive paws. The creature stepped forward, looking down at Rebecca, unmoving. Rebecca slowly got to her feet, keeping a wary eye on the feline.

'So you're the human,' it said, in a deep but clearly articulated voice.

Rebecca looked defiantly back.

'I tried!' she said desperately. 'I tried to stop them...'

The feline held up an outstretched paw and gestured. Its claws flashed out momentarily and retracted. Rebecca fell silent.

It took a step forward and then looked down at her imperiously.

'Rebecca Weston,' it intoned, its voice more of a rumble than anything else. 'As the sole representative of your race you stand accused of war crimes. The total and utter pre-meditated destruction of individuals, families, communities, cities, continents and planets. If found guilty the penalty is immediate execution.'

Rumbles and murmurs of approval sounded out from the crowd around her.

'You can't do this...' Rebecca began, swaying on her feet.

The huge feline signalled to the guards. Two of them immediately grabbed her arms.

'Bring her,' the feline ordered.

A cheer went up, carried by those closer to those further away. It echoed around her, growing in intensity with each repeating call.

Rebecca was roughly shoved forward with the guards flanking her. Torrents of abuse assaulted her ears again as she was led forward.

The *Dubious Profit* surged ahead of the convoy as it emerged from witchspace into the Lave system. It seemed remarkably quiet. Normally Lave would be hugely busy, but there was no evidence of ships making the transit between the witchpoint and the planet. Human ships had long since fled and the others were either already on the surface of Lave's peculiar moon, or parked in orbit around it. Stepan, Hesperus and Daddyhoggy were on the bridge taking in the view. Thousands upon thousands of ships could be seen ahead of them.

'Co-ordinates locked,' Stepan called.

'We made it,' Hesperus breathed. 'We actually made it!'

'A tribute to your ship and your crew, Captain,' Daddyhoggy said, looking almost genial.

Hesperus grinned and opened the comms.

'Rus you can stand down the repairs for the moment. Looks like we're in the clear, no hostiles detected.'

'Copy that, boss.'

Hesperus turned his attention to the forward viewer.

'Would you look at that...!'

Untold thousands, perhaps even millions of vessels were clustered around Lave's moon. Their metallic hulls sparkling in the darkness, out-numbering the stars in the background beyond them. All awaiting whatever it was that the Thargoids intended to do.

'We're getting a wideband holofac transmission from the moon,' Stepan said. 'At least I think it is, it reads from inside...'

Hesperus shrugged. 'Punch it up.'

The viewer flickered and was then replaced with a strange vista. A flat white and featureless surface came into view, with a huge crowd of people surrounding a central amphitheatre. There was a small cleared space in the middle. Hesperus could see a ring of Thargoids standing around the edge. The video vantage point zoomed quickly in. Hesperus spotted a tall feline standing in the centre.

‘That’s Harfen Realt! President of the Feline Assembly!’

‘Fascinating,’ Daddyhoggy said. ‘It would appear a council has been called...’

The video vantage point retreated back out again and they could see another figure, bound and held by Thargoid warriors on either side. It was a human woman, looking decidedly dishevelled. The video continued panning until they could see her face. She was bruised and battered; a recent cut had left a dark streak of blood across her face.

‘Wait a minute...’ Hesperus said, with a frown. ‘I’ve seen her before.’

Daddyhoggy looked at him inquiringly. ‘And?’

‘She saved my hide once, years ago. Pirates jumped us in the Sotiqu system. She shot them up and helped us limp back to the station. Arrogant little snot she was, but...’

‘Her name?’ Daddyhoggy inquired, tilting his head to one side.

‘It was ten years ago...’

Stepan turned. ‘Never forget a rich girl, boss. She had a triple-A credit rating, remember? Rebecca Weston. I remember that credit score, not often you see those.’

‘Good point. I’ve never had one...’

‘Rebecca...’ Daddyhoggy mused, before his eyes widened. ‘Can it be the woman captured by the Thargoids? Ragazza, the scientist’s companion? But I thought she had been killed!’

‘Seems the ‘goids changed their minds. What’s she doing down there though?’

‘Looks like they might be changing their minds again...’ Hesperus said.

Stepan turned as a beeping notification issued from the astrogation console. Three new blips had appeared.

‘Uh... guys...’

‘What?’ Hesperus snapped, still staring at the video feed and annoyed at the interruption.

‘We’ve got company. Remember those bad ass combateers we encountered back on the knife edge? They’re back!’

‘Frak!’ Hesperus stammered. ‘Let’s hope they don’t spot us!’

The narrowband comms buzzed for attention.

‘Too late!’ Stepan said with trepidation.

‘Daddyhoggy? Are you there?’ a voice issued from the on-board speakers. ‘Daddyhoggy, come in!’

The big avian stepped forward. ‘This is he.’

‘It’s Jim. I saw your transmission. You were right about Galcop, about everything! You were right!’

‘This I know,’ Daddyhoggy intoned sardonically by way of reply.

‘Galcop are on their way here. They intend to continue their persecution of non-humans; we heard it right from the source!’

‘I am gratified to hear that you now understand the situation in its entirety,’ Daddyhoggy replied. ‘However, there is more. Your companion is alive on the moon below...’

‘Rebecca!’ Jim’s voice was high with delight.

‘Indeed...’ Daddyhoggy began, before he was interrupted. Audio from the wideband video feed sounded through the bridge of the *Dubious Profit*. The tall feline leading the group was speaking.

‘Rebecca Weston, you stand in front of this assembly on behalf of humanity, accused of the crimes of mass destruction and ruthless slaughter. How do you plead?’

She looked defiantly back at him but didn’t answer.

‘You will answer for your species’ crimes! And you will face the judgement.’ The feline growled angrily, but still she did not answer.

‘They’re hankering for a hangin’!’ Derik’s voice crackled across the transmission.

‘We’ve got to stop...’ Jim began.

‘Rendezvous with us immediately,’ Daddyhoggy instructed.

‘But...’

‘I can save her!’ Daddyhoggy replied, ‘But you must do exactly as I say. This is going to require brains and brawn. Tell me everything...’

Rebecca had immediately recognised the amphitheatre of Raxxla, the location of the witchspace gate that drove the generation of the wormholes between the charts. The last time she had been here it had been virtually deserted, just herself and Jim, facing Zerz and his own counterpart

from the future.

That time the portal had already been activated; a glowing sphere of energy showing fleeting images of other places and other times.

Now that portal still remained quiescent. Either the Thargoids had yet to power it, or they hadn't figured out how.

She was roughly shoved forwards by the two Thargoid guards. She staggered and fell to her knees, looking up defiantly at the imposing feline who stood before her. Just beyond the lip of the amphitheatre the crowd of animals of all types had gathered to watch the conclusion of the judgement.

'This court is now convened,' Harfen announced, with barely restrained fury. 'You are accused of aiding and abetting Galcop in the perpetration of war crimes. How do you plead?'

Rebecca glared at him. 'Not guilty!'

A howl of outrage erupted from the crowd around her. Harfen held up his hand for silence and the crowd swiftly became muted.

'You flew a vessel under Galcop orders out of Tionisla, did you not?'

Rebecca pursed her lips for a moment before answering with, 'Yes.'

'And the nature of those orders? Smuggling perhaps? Illegal cargo? Carrying weapons?'

'We were blackmailed! We had no choice!' Rebecca fired back.

'No choice,' Harfen mused, as if to himself. 'No choice but to carry deadly bio-weapons across the galaxy, engineered by one of the most notorious war criminals known?'

'We thought we were at war!'

'Even in war there are rules,' Harfen fired back. 'Or did you think the genocide of an innocent civilian population unable to defend themselves was a legitimate military action?'

'We didn't know...' Rebecca cried.

'Orders which your companions carried out without concern, without hesitation.' Harfen's voice dripped sarcasm. 'The extermination of billions upon billions of innocents because you had no choice...'

'I tried to stop them! You know I tried...'

'Meanwhile to heighten the pretence, Galcop interdicts the space-lanes, closes trade routes,

forces whole planets into chaos, starvation, famine, riots, looting, war and death! Don't tell me you didn't know of this plan!

Tears coursed down Rebecca's face. 'I'm just a trader, I was forced, I didn't...'

'You are part of Galcop, a spy, an operative!' Harfen returned, his voice deafening. Rebecca flinched back. 'Do you deny working for Galcop?'

'No... but...'

'Do you deny working with known war criminal Udian Foraga Shulth?'

'No...'

'Do you deny carrying lethal bio-weapons with the intent to deploy them against the Thargoids?'

'We thought we were being exterminated!' Rebecca replied, shaking with fear and desperation, her voice unsteady. 'It was a war...'

'Do you deny you carried bio-weapons?' Harfen pressed, relentlessly.

'No...' Rebecca sobbed.

'Do you deny your companions decimated the Thargoid homeworld of Beenri?'

'We didn't know...' Rebecca whispered.

'And do you deny that as a result of your actions Galcop was able to put in motion a plan for the subjugation and persecution of animal-kind across the Far Colony Alliance worlds? The murder of innocent families?' Harfen's voice had taken on a slightly hysterical tone.

So it's personal for him too...

'I'm not part of Galcop...' she managed to utter.

'Liar!'

Harfen straightened, addressing the crowd. They had gone completely silent during Rebecca's interrogation.

'This human woman is a Galcop operative. By her own admission she knowingly and with foreknowledge carried illegal bio-weapons with the express intent of destroying the Thargoid homeworld. Despite her capture, her team were able to carry out that mission, with devastating results. Her actions allowed Galcop to further its mission to seize control of our worlds, imprison and murder our friends and families. As Galcop's only representative she carries the weight of our

judgement. Her sentence...'

'Death!' someone shouted. Others quickly joined in, picking the word up and repeating it on a rising chorus of crescendos interspersed with insults, screams of anger and vindictive howls. 'Death! Death! Death!'

Harfen looked around at the assembled crowd as they continued to chant, before turning his attention back to the small woman still kneeling in front of him. He raised his hand and waited for the crowd to come to order.

Silence fell once more.

'She will be executed as an enemy of the Far Colony Alliance!' he announced loudly. A huge cheer arose, arms, paws, antenna were waved in enthusiastic response. 'Sentence to be carried out immediately!'

Harfen signalled to the two Thargoid guards and Rebecca was wrestled to her feet. She stood uncertainly, held between them.

A huge echoing rumble sounded above them. Everyone looked up to see four ships descending rapidly towards them. Three peeled off slightly, looking for landing spaces, the final one continued to close. It was just a silhouette, dark against the bright background of the sky. It swooped towards the ground at breakneck speed, as if out of control. As it came closer people began to back away from the obvious flight path. It was heading directly towards the amphitheatre.

As it grew closer it showed no signs of slowing down. People panicked and began running, leaving Harfen and the Thargoid guards with Rebecca still held between them.

At the last minute the ship fired retrorockets, coming to an abrupt and sudden halt with a terrifying blast of noise. Landing legs extended and the ship settled to the ground, its shields unwrapping and dissipating in a flicker of barely visible light. Steam hissed out of various ports and then the cargo bay ramp lowered.

Rebecca peered through the mist, as did the Thargoid guards beside her. The ship was iconic, familiar. A Cobra MK3.

Can't be...

The sound of heavy footfalls came plodding down the ramp and a figure emerged from the clouds of steam.

There was a loud heavy double click. Two large and unpleasant looking chain guns were held

in the outstretched muscled arms of a seven foot tall draconoid.

‘Listen up folks and no one need get maimed. Somebody’s got my princess, and I’m here to take her back.’

The guns discharged into the air with a thumping rattle that had everyone ducking for cover.

‘I’m a mite trigger happy though. So best be making it quick.’

‘Derik!’ Rebecca cried.

Derik strode forward, his ocular eye implant glowing as he surveyed Harfen and the Thargoid guards.

‘Hey princess,’ he quipped at her. ‘How’s tricks?’

‘But how...’

‘You can thank your genius boyfriend,’ the lizard grinned at her. ‘Figured out all the clues.’

‘Jim?’ Rebecca cried in delight.

Derik stepped aside to reveal Jim and Coyote, standing behind him.

‘More humans!’ Harfen screeched. ‘Arrest them!’

Derik raised the chains guns, gesturing with them.

‘Not so fast there my furry feline friend,’ he said. ‘There’s more than one way to skin a cat, and I know most of them. You’d better be releasing her.’

‘She’s a traitor to the Far Colony Alliance!’

‘She’s no more a traitor than I am,’ Derik hissed at him. ‘Let her go.’

Harfen was not so easily intimidated. ‘She is an enemy and has been sentenced to execution.’

Derik regarded him coolly.

‘Buddy, you’ve got enough enemies without making anymore.’ He hoisted the guns a little higher. ‘And trust me; you don’t want me as an enemy. I’m making this easy for you. One last time, or you and yours are going to be dog food, and minced dog food at that. Let her go.’

Harfen prevaricated for a further moment. Derik growled softly.

Harfen nodded to the Thargoid guards, weapons were raised. Derik roared and brought the chain-guns around, his fingers tightening on the triggers...

‘Desist!’

A deep rumbling voice boomed out across the amphitheatre as an enormous black avian descended from above with a huge gust of wind and flurry of flapping wings. Harfen stepped back in surprise and anger. The crowd murmured uneasily. Derik and the Thargoids paused, weapons locked on each other.

‘Who are...?’

‘My name is Daddyhoggy. I am a citizen of the High Nest, Sky City, Ordima.’

‘And?’ Harfen asked, with a glare.

‘I am here to stop this madness,’ Daddyhoggy said, interposing himself between Harfen and Rebecca, the Thargoids and Derik. ‘To prevent further bloodshed this day.’

‘This is my judgement, and it shall be carried out,’ Harfen said, growling at him.

‘I cannot allow it,’ Daddyhoggy replied, his wings unfurling dramatically.

‘She is guilty of war crimes! She admitted it herself!’ Harden growled again.

Daddyhoggy stood over Rebecca, who was looking up, trying to work out whether the huge avian’s presence was welcome or not. He slowly turned around, surveying the crowd. Silence fell once more.

Daddyhoggy waited a further long moment before choosing to speak.

‘She doesn’t claim to be innocent,’ he said slowly. ‘But she was doing what she thought was right. She is merely a trader caught up in a war. If you’re determined to kill her, you kill her as a human – that’s what she is. But don’t let it be said that she supported Galcop. She’s never done that. Galcop used her, infected her and tried to kill her, all to further their aims. Kill her if you will, but you’ll be taking her life just because she’s a human. That makes you just as guilty as Galcop.’

‘A nice speech...’ Harfen growled sarcastically.

‘Galcop seeks to end all self-determination and freedom of expression,’ Daddyhoggy said, raising his voice over Harfen’s repost. ‘Whether you be animal or human, makes no difference. Galcop is the enemy, not those who have been forced against their will to do their bidding. If you kill this woman today, you destroy the very thing you have been fighting for, dishonouring the memory of those who have already fallen and revealing that you are no better than those you claim to be evil.’

Daddyhoggy turned and surveyed the crowds around the amphitheatre, raising his voice still

further. ‘All assembled here are part of this decision. If she dies, it is by each of your hands, claws and paws. And if you decide so to do, first you will have to kill me, for I will defend her to the last. Decide this day whether mercy defines you!’

Daddyhoggy turned and stared straight at Harfen. The tall feline stared back for a long moment, before casting an eye over at the Thargoids, at Derik, across at Coyote and Jim before taking in the sweep of the gathered crowds. Many were looking away, looking down, nervously pacing. Several were nodding. Harfen continued to look around the assembly.

He drew back a paw. Sharp claws flashed out. He aimed a sudden swipe at Rebecca.

The crowd’s reaction was instantaneous. There was cry of outrage, staggered shouts of ‘No!’ and a collective gasp of dismay. Daddyhoggy lurched across, talons unleashed...

Rebecca flinched and closed her eyes as the paw descended. She knew the power of those claws...

...but the blow never fell.

Rebecca blinked and looked up. Harfen had only fainted. Daddyhoggy settled back to the ground, poised and ready.

‘It seems the tide has turned...’ he rumbled, looking around at the assembled crowd, silent and waiting.

Harfen gestured to the guards. The Thargoids stepped aside. The bonds that held Rebecca unwrapped and fell away. With nothing to support her she swayed, struggling to stand up. Jim ran from his position behind Derik and grabbed her before she fell. She collapsed in his arms, a dead weight.

‘Rebecca...’

‘Jim, I...’

‘I thought I’d lost you, we thought you were dead.’

Rebecca managed to look up with a faint smile. ‘You can’t get rid of me that easily.’

Jim pulled her close, kissing her forehead.

‘Let’s get you away from these ‘stards...’

Rebecca shook her head. ‘No... we’ve got to help, it’s not them... it’s Galcop...’

Jim looked about to argue with her when a shadow fell across them. Coyote had walked

nonchalantly across the amphitheatre towards Daddyhoggy. The tall avian regarded him cautiously. Somehow the old man had a presence that killed conversation and drew all eyes towards him. Hundreds of gazes focussed on him as he paused in front of the dark feathered bird.

Coyote propped up his hat a touch.

‘You were right, I was wrong. I owe you an apology,’ Coyote said. ‘The Thargoids aren’t the enemy. Galcop is. I was in error.’

‘Indeed,’ Daddyhoggy replied.

Coyote’s grey eyes connected with the bright yellow irises that framed Daddyhoggy’s intent gaze.

Coyote swept off his hat, going down on one knee.

‘According to the code of avian law, as dictated in lexicon during the time of Argeth the Fifteenth. I fully and openly admit my error. I seek abrogation for my crime and humbly beseech your forgiveness, por favor.’

‘Say what?’ Derik whispered, sidling up to Jim, who still held Rebecca next to him.

‘Ancient avian law for trespassers,’ Jim whispered. ‘Coyote must have researched it...’

Daddyhoggy didn’t react for a moment, regarding Coyote with a wary gaze. He raised his head slightly, his obsidian beak glinting in the mysterious light of Raxxla.

‘Your usage is incorrect and slightly archaic,’ he mused. ‘But it is well intentioned. Such a gracious request I cannot and will not deny. I accept your apology.’

Daddyhoggy bowed deeply and raised Coyote back to his feet.

Daddyhoggy turned and surveyed Harfen, the Thargoids and the crowds of people behind.

‘These people are not your enemies!’ Daddyhoggy said, raising his voice. ‘They are victims of the same evil that has beset us all. Persecuted for not aligning with an authoritarian regime aimed at curtailing rights. They have fought to protect those they care for, to survive. If you seek to harm them, you seek to harm the very thing you claim to value most dearly. Freedom itself.’

Harfen slowly came forward, nodding and then proceeded towards Rebecca and Jim. Rebecca’s expression hardened as he stared at her. Jim was about to say something and lead her away when the big black feline spoke.

‘You’re from Tianve,’ he said, his eyes narrowing slightly.

Rebecca nodded. 'My home.'

'What do you think of the pulsar?' the big cat asked, his voice still sharp.

'Can't say I've ever been there,' Rebecca replied in a guarded voice. 'Too touristy for me.'

The corners of Harfen's mouth softened slightly. He nodded slowly.

'Perhaps we do share an understanding after all.'

Rebecca waited, her expression still hard. Harfen sighed, deflated.

'I have done you a great disservice young lady. My own bitter anger and belligerence got the better of me. Will you accept an old cat's apology?'

'Galcop killed my family too,' Rebecca said softly. 'I lost my father, brother, cousins... and my mother...'

Harfen's shoulders shook and he took a moment to compose himself before answering.

'Then you understand...'

'I understand,' Rebecca said, holding out her hand. 'I want revenge too. So yes, apology accepted.'

Harfen nodded, bowed, touch his paw to her hand briefly and then stood back.

'Hate to break up the party atmosphere,' Derik said in a loud voice. 'But Galcop ain't just sitting around counting canisters out there. They're likely on their way right now. I'm hoping somebody's got a plan, or is that too much to ask?'

Jim and Rebecca were sitting on the edge of the amphitheatre, overlooking the hundreds of vessels that were parked on the strange milky surface of Raxxla. Rebecca had been treated for the minor injuries she'd sustained. She looked across the vast array of ships with a melancholy frown.

'So many of them didn't make it,' she murmured.

Jim nodded. 'I'm ashamed of the part we played in all this.'

'Beenri?' Rebecca said, looking at him.

Jim nodded. 'We decimated the entire planet. Just vaporised all the life on the surface with those execrable weapons. It was pure vengeance; I thought they'd killed you...'

Rebecca shook her head. 'The Thargoids weren't what I expected, weren't what we'd always

been told. Galcop has spent decades brainwashing us all that they are merciless killers, hell bent on our destruction. Yet...'

'They are the ones oppressed,' Jim nodded.

'Udian was the killer,' Rebecca said, shuddering. 'He infected me with the bio-weapon, trying to kill the Thargoids by using me. It almost worked, if I ever...'

'Udian is dead,' Jim said quickly. 'He sacrificed himself so that we could escape from Garew. He regretted what he did to you.'

Rebecca looked at him in surprise and then sighed, biting her lower lip.

Jim looked across at her. 'What happened to you when you were captured by the Thargoids?'

Rebecca looked haunted. 'They dragged me from the escape pod, scanned me and locked me up. But then...'

Jim waited as Rebecca composed herself.

'I can hardly believe it now, but somehow, don't ask me how, they'd found my mother.'

Jim blinked in surprise. 'Your mother?'

'I never told you about her, did I?'

Jim shook his head.

'I lost her, years ago. I was just a child. She was on a trading mission and never came back. Dad and Red raised me. I had only a few memories, stories, the image of her face... We never knew what happened to her.'

'So how could she possibly...?'

Rebecca took a deep breath before continuing.

'The Thargoids produced a holofac, a holofac of her. It was perfect, in every detail. They knew things only she could have known.'

'Maybe they read your mind somehow, generated this from your own thoughts...'

Rebecca shook her head. 'She knew more about my past than I did. It was her alright.'

'But how...?'

'She told me how her ship had been wrecked, how she and her crew had tried to mis-jump away from a band of pirates. She'd been injured, close to death when the Thargoids found her.'

Somehow they stored her memories, personality and physical form.’

‘Astonishing...’

‘She was the one that brokered an understanding between us and the Thargoids. They had learnt a lot from her, and it had led them to me. Then Udian triggered the bio-weapon.’

‘How did you survive?’ Jim asked in a low voice.

Rebecca turned back to him.

‘I didn’t. He killed me.’ Her eyes were wide.

Jim stared back at her with a frown. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘The bio-weapon was successful,’ she said in a monotone. ‘The Thargoids were nearly overwhelmed by it. Fortunately they had a notion that Udian would try something like that. The Thargoids somehow put me back together, brought me back to life. I don’t know how. I guess I can thank my mother for that.’

Jim digested that for a moment. ‘Then, is she still here? Where is she now?’

Rebecca dropped her head with a sob, her voice shaking. ‘The Thargoid mothership was caught by a Navy fleet. I saw it destroyed just as I was escaping. They killed her.’

Jim placed his arm tenderly around her and she leant against him, crying freely now.

‘Galcop has killed everyone I ever cared about,’ she managed to say, between gasps of sorrow. ‘All except one. I’m so sorry, Jim...’

He held a finger to her lips. ‘Don’t be. You were right, I was a coward. Ignoring things never makes them go away. You were doing the right thing. Trying to make a difference, saving lives...’

Rebecca burst into tears. ‘No I wasn’t! All I ever wanted was to be with you! I was just too damn selfish to see it. I wanted everything on my terms. It took even more people dying around me to put it all into perspective. Ever since we met all those years ago I’ve known what I wanted! But I was too damn scared. Too scared to settle down, too scared to admit I needed someone other than myself. Always pushing away those closest to me...’

Jim pulled her close.

‘Help me, Jim,’ she said, clutching him back, sobbing. ‘My mother knew I was too much like her. She told me this could be my last chance, so please don’t let me screw it up! Shut me up...’

‘Rebecca...’

‘Let’s not ever be apart again. I couldn’t bear it. You’re all I’ve got, maybe all I ever had. If we’re going to die in this war, I don’t want to be alone...’

Jim ran his fingers through her hair.

‘I’ll never leave you alone again, Rebecca. Never.’

They stayed like that for a long while, lost in their thoughts.

‘This really looks like the end of the line doesn’t it?’ Rebecca mused, looking at the motley collection of ships stretched out to the horizon. ‘We’ll fight of course, but we can’t resist the Navy forever. Even if we run they’ll pursue us. Seems funny we’re back here on Raxxla after all these years. Almost as if we were meant to be here.’

Jim raised his head sharply and looked at her. ‘Almost...’

Rebecca looked back. ‘What?’

Jim was clearly thinking something though. ‘...with an inversion point, we could... it would take... Rebecca, you’re a genius!’

‘I...’

‘You beautiful, gorgeous woman!’ Jim gave her a kiss. ‘Wormholes! Of course!’

Rebecca looked at him quizzically. ‘What are you going on about?’

Jim jumped to his feet. ‘Quick! There’s a way we can still stop Galcop! I’ll tell you on the way! Hurry!’

Coyote shook his head and leant back from the table. A hastily convened council of war had been organised aboard one of the large Boa class vessels nearest the amphitheatre. Harfen, Daddyhoggy, Derik and Coyote, along with one of the Thargoid leaders were discussing the best approach to countering the imminent arrival of Galcop and the Navy. The Oresrians were acting as translators.

‘Not going to work,’ Coyote said flatly, looking directly at the big feline after Harfen had spoken his piece.

Harfen stared at him angrily. ‘There’s no alternative.’

‘Maybe not. But it’s still suicide. We saw the Navy fleet...’

‘We fought our way in here...’ Harfen refuted.

Derik laughed. 'They let you in here, buddy.'

'Hundreds of ships were destroyed!'

Coyote turn at the sound of footsteps and watched Jim and Rebecca running up the boarding ramp before looking back at Harfen.

'I'm not disputing that,' he said softly. 'But the Navy fleet on its way here will be massive. Braces of Behemoths, that's trouble of a kind you've not yet seen. Derik's telling the truth. They wanted you to take this system. They wanted you here. They plan to seal it off... and exterminate you all. They told us this... verbatim.'

'Then our plan is correct!' Harfen yelled. 'We retreat, flee through Raxxla into chart two.'

'And go where?' Derik responded immediately. 'They aren't going to just let you go. They'll pursue you, follow you and hunt you down. We've got to stop them here.'

'And how are we supposed to do that?' Harfen demanded. 'You've just told us we can't defeat them and we can't run from them.'

Jim lurched up to the table and leant across it. He was panting and out of breath.

'We stop them from being able to follow us,' he gasped. 'We cut off their route. We do the unthinkable.'

'Which is?' Harfen demanded.

All around the table grew silent; all eyes were on the unassuming scientist.

'We destroy Raxxla,' he said, his heart hammering.

Harfen stared at him as if he'd gone mad. Even Daddyhoggy looked surprised.

'You're insane.' The big cat said dismissively.

Rebecca grinned. 'Maybe, but we've got a plan...'

Jim smiled back at her. 'Thanks to a small box of tricks left to Rebecca...'

'...Which looks like it will come in handy after all.' she replied with a grin.

'Can I have the dumb lizard version of the plan please?' Derik snapped.

'I rescued the CEO of Deep Horizon Industries, back on Tionisla, just before running into you fine fellows,' Rebecca recalled. 'He left me this gadget. Never even had a chance to look at it...'

'And it does what?' Harfen asked.

‘It’s a wormhole enhancer,’ Jim explained. ‘I had a look at it on the way over here from Beenri. You can use it to keep a wormhole open for as long as you like.’

‘And why is that useful?’ Coyote asked.

‘It’s not,’ Jim admitted. ‘Unless we hotwire it to shut Raxxla down, permanently.’

‘You can do that?’ Derik asked.

Jim shrugged. ‘You just swap the batteries end over end. Simple.’

‘Say what?’ Derik looked at him out of his good eye and then laughed as Jim grinned back.

‘Ok, it’s not that simple,’ Jim acknowledged. ‘But the principle is sound. I rig this device as a witchspace collapser. We evacuate all ships through the Raxxla portal. Once we’re all through we activate it and destroy Raxxla, sealing us off from chart one forever. We’ll be safe. The Navy and Galcop will never be able to find a way through. It will be the end of Galactic Witchspace from chart one. With Raxxla gone, it will no longer be possible... ever again.’

Harfen leant back. ‘And can this truly be done?’

‘Well, at least it’s a plan,’ Derik said, laughing ruefully. ‘It’s better than nothing!’

‘It seems fanciful,’ Harfen concluded.

Rebecca got to her feet and leant across the table. ‘If Jim says he can do it, you can trust him to do it.’

Harfen looked at her, before nodding, slowly.

‘How long?’ Coyote asked.

‘A couple of days, maybe three,’ Jim said, thinking hard.

‘I think I may have just spotted the flaw in this plan,’ Derik said eyeballing the assembly. ‘Galcop ain’t gonna be hanging around waiting for us. They’ll be here in less than a day, with a fleet big enough to vaporise this entire moon.’

Coyote nodded and then grinned at the draconoid. ‘Claro... unless...’

Derik returned the look and then nodded.

‘...Some smartasses slow them down.’ The draconoid beamed. ‘Knew we’d get to the butt kicking sooner or later!’

Coyote stood up, standing alongside Rebecca.

‘Here’s the deal then. Derik and I will witch out to the surrounding systems and destroy every single witchspace transponder we can locate. That will force Galcop to use the old thru-space dead reckoning techniques. With an armada that will be a whole heap of pain to co-ordinate. That gives us some time. Meanwhile, Jim and Rebecca hotwire this gadget to shutdown Raxxla once and for all. The rest of you...’

Harfen looked at him.

‘Activate the portal and get every civilian ship through to chart two as soon as you can.’

‘We can’t do that in just a few days!’ Harfen declared. ‘There are millions of ships...’

‘I’ll arrange that,’ Daddyhoggy said. ‘Organisation and tidiness are skills I have in abundance. Leave it with me.’

The Thargoid leader chattered something. The Oresrian beside him leant forward.

‘He wants to know their role.’ The Oresrian translated.

‘You’re the last line,’ Coyote said, looking back at the tall Thargoid warrior. ‘Get every ship capable of fighting up and ready to defend against the Navy when they do finally arrive. You cover the civilians until they can escape.’

The Oresrian translated again, and a further series of rapid clicking exchanges took place. The Oresrian eventually turned back.

‘He says they won’t last long against those Navy vessels. Taking Lave severely depleted their forces last time,’ the Oresrian relayed.

‘Last time you didn’t have me around,’ Coyote said with a wry grin. ‘I know a few tricks the Navy won’t have seen before.’

‘Bring it on!’ Derik yelled, thumping his fist down on the table.

Blazing light flashed up from the amphitheatre, a pillar of brilliance rising up into the heavens. Jim and the Thargoids looked on with satisfaction as eight conduits of energy formed, converged and then generated a huge sphere at the base of the pillar. Raxxla was activated!

As they watched, images flashed across its surface; planets, moons, ships, landscapes past and present. After a moment the portal steadied and an image of an orange tinged planet appeared.

‘That’s it,’ Jim called excitedly. ‘Inoran, chart two! That’s where we need to go. Direct the

energy outwards...’

The pulsing sphere rose on the column of light, slowly at first, but then with increasing rapidity it shot away, disappearing into the brightness overhead.

Ships in orbit around Lave’s moon saw a bright sphere appear in space. It expanded, taking on the form of a massive wormhole, a gateway almost a kilometre across. A passageway to chart two.

Jim nodded to the Thargoids.

‘Tell Daddyhoggy he can start with his evacuation plan. Instruct vessels to begin making their way through the portal, as fast as it can be done!’

The Thargoids nodded and marched quickly away. As they did so, Jim noticed the *Spectre* slowly approaching the amphitheatre. It settled down nearby and the docking ramps extended. After a moment, Rebecca waved to him from the interior bay. She was standing by a cargo manipulator sled which was loaded with a series of crates marked ‘DHI’.

Jim raced up the ramp to her, looking over the equipment she had arranged on the sled.

‘I hope you know what you’re doing,’ she said demurely, looking at the pulsing column of light surging up from the centre of the amphitheatre of Raxxla.

‘Me too,’ Jim said. ‘Let’s get this down there, we need to hurry. Once I’ve got this thing converted we need to ensure it is in sync with Raxxla. It’s going to take a while to draw a sufficient charge.’

Rebecca nodded. ‘I’ll work on the remote detonation. Should be the easy part of the job.’

Jim brushed his hair back out of his face. ‘I feel like a vandal, destroying this mechanism. I wish we had more time to understand everything it’s capable of.’

Rebecca touched his arm. ‘I’m sure its creators would not want it to be used as a means of persecution or war mongering.’

Jim nodded. ‘Let’s hope they forgive us!’

Work proceeded apace. Jim and Rebecca’s wormhole collapser was integrated with the Raxxla mechanism; meanwhile ship after ship traversed the link to Inoran. Thousands of ships made the transit each hour, under the watchful guard of the Thargoid vessels and Daddyhoggy’s constant governance.

Derik and Coyote had been gone almost two days, with only sporadic updates on their progress. Rebecca had smiled at the reports of mayhem they sent back. Clearly they were causing the approaching Galcop and Navy forces rather a lot of grief as they neared Lave.

At the beginning of the third day Jim reported he was ready. Harfen and the Thargoids came to inspect it.

‘You sure about this?’ Rebecca queried, looking dubiously at the haphazard collection of electronics and the partially dismembered Deep Horizon device. Jim had rigged up a series of large coil capacitors around the collapser. Rebecca could already hear them humming as they stored up a massive charge.

Jim grimaced. ‘I can’t really test it without actually triggering it, but I’m as certain as I can be.’

‘Galcop will arrive at any moment,’ Harfen said, gesturing to the Thargoids.

The lead insect nodded and then gestured to the remaining ships.

Jim looked at Rebecca.

‘So... it’s time for that last stand,’ Rebecca said, her eyes bright. ‘Good. I have a score to settle with Galcop.’

She gestured to the *Spectre* and winked at Jim.

‘Coming?’

Chapter Ten

The *Spectre* joined the Thargoid forces arrayed in a defensive posture around Raxxla, awaiting the incoming Galcop and Navy armada.

‘Everything is ready,’ Rebecca called, pulling herself up the grav-tube from the systems deck. ‘Link to the surface is secure. We can collapse the gate the moment the last ship gets through.’

She looked out across space where the lines of civilian ships were still driving through the flickering wormhole to chart two.

‘We’re out of time,’ Jim replied, watching the scanners. ‘Look, witchspace sheer. Something big by the looks of it. Galcop must have found a way through.’

Rebecca jumped down and strapped herself into the pilot’s chair. Jim watched her for a moment. She turned and looked at him with a quizzical expression.

‘What?’

‘Just takes me back, that’s all,’ he replied, looking around the bridge of the *Spectre*. ‘You, me, flying a ship again...’

‘Keep focussed, Harmless!’ she said, with a grin.

‘Whatever you say, Dangerous,’ he fired back.

‘I’m Deadly now, you know!’

‘You don’t need to tell me that...’

She wrinkled her nose at him before quickly scanning the readouts Jim had been looking at. ‘Damn, we only need a few more minutes.’

She looked out of the *Spectre*’s windows. The queue of star-ships still appeared unending, but she knew they were down to the last few thousand ships. Each one was running into the Raxxla gate as fast as they could drive. Daddyhoggy had performed a wonder of organisation in ensuring they got through as quickly as possible, conducting operations from the bridge of the *Dubious Profit*, with Captain Hesperus’ assistance.

Flickers of bright white light flashed out in the darkness. Two ships appeared. Rebecca immediately recognised Derik and Coyote’s vessels. The Thargoid defenders scanned them briefly before backing away and allowing them through.

‘Guys?’ Rebecca called.

‘Mierda,’ Coyote’s voice responded. ‘We were overrun at Zaonce. They’ve got a witchspace beacon activated again. Only a matter of time now.’

‘Frak,’ Rebecca said, with a sigh.

Jim saw the witchspace sheer readings growing. ‘They’re already here!’

‘Then let’s give them a warm welcome!’ Derik growled, turning his ship around.

The *Dark Star*, *Persistence* and *Spectre* assumed a wedge formation, surrounded by the phalanx of octagonal Thargoid warships and the other Far Colony Alliance vessels ready and willing to stand in defence. They hung in the silence of space, waiting.

‘Just like old times, eh?’ Rebecca reminded them. ‘You got your hat this time lizard-features?’

‘Got my hook too,’ Derik fired back. ‘Don’t tell me; last best hope, death or glory stuff again?’

‘You got it. Time for some crème brûlée.’

Jim looked at Rebecca in confusion. ‘What are you talking about?’

‘Long story,’ she replied with a grin.

‘Excellent,’ Derik cackled on the narrowband. ‘’Bout time too. I’m not having Uidian going down in history without me in the footnotes...’

‘You gonna do as you’re told this time, lizard features?’ Coyote chimed in.

‘You’re the boss, boss.’ Derik responded.

Rebecca smiled. ‘You all set, Coyote?’

‘Claro,’ came the quiet, measured response.

‘You happy to be flying with me?’ she said, her voice light, but with a faint undertone of worry. ‘I’m only Deadly you know.’

‘I’ll make an exception this time,’ Coyote returned. ‘I figure you show a little promise.’

Rebecca laughed. ‘Is that the best inspirational pep-talk you can come up with?’

There was a pause from the other end of the comm-link.

‘You can fly with me any time, little señorita.’ Coyote’s voice was slow and soft.

Rebecca blinked back unexpected tears, gripping the flight controls and wiping her eyes with the back of her free hand.

‘Thank you...’ she managed.

The threat warning indicators lit up, flashing double-red. Incoming ships, lots of them.

The defensive escort fanned out, Terrorisers and Far Colony Alliance vessels on the outside flanks, with the main force of traditional Thargoid warships in the middle. The *Dark Star*, *Persistence* and the *Spectre* took up a spearhead position at the front of the mismatched fleet.

The astrogation scanner showed a neat formation of vessels just coming into range. They were driving straight towards Raxxla having just reactivated the inbound witchspace markers. Laser fire streaked out into the void towards them.

‘Hold the line,’ Coyote called quietly. ‘All shield power forward. Phase Zero.’

The Thargoid warships in the centre of the pack began moving forwards and back, swapping positions at close range.

Rebecca watched the Navy formation quickly approaching, counting the ships and trying to identify them all. They were a mix of Mk1 and Mk2 Vipers, with a scattering of Asps thrown in for good measure. Behind these frontline fighters a line of Military Anacondas could be seen, lumbering along with their injectors glowing at full thrust, missile tubes open and ready to launch.

No capital ships? Where are the Behemoths? You'd have thought we'd have warranted a little more than...

Laser fire streaked across them, narrowly missing the ships in the defensive fleet. Rebecca could see the incoming fighters spreading out in a classic ‘claw’ formation, trying to envelope the defenders. They were already significantly outnumbered.

Her hand closed on the firing trigger, anticipating the next command.

‘Phase one,’ Coyote said calmly.

The targeting computers across the defensive fleet synchronised, agreed a target and fed that information back to each individual ship. As one they turned, locked and fired their laser weaponry at a single incoming ship. More than thirty beams of deadly energy converged.

An Asp disintegrated under the prodigious firepower. Immediately a new target was selected, weapons were fired and the target destroyed. Then another, and another.

Lasers bounced off the ships in the forefront of the defensive line, but they were quickly replaced with the Thargoid vessels moving up from the rear. As one the defenders sat motionless, turning and firing.

Turn, aim, fire. Turn, aim, fire.

Still the defenders did not break their formation. Lasers targeted them more accurately, forward shields glowing with enemy fire. Dozens of the attackers had already succumbed, with no loss to the defenders.

‘Hold the line...’ Coyote’s voice was reassuring in the midst of the carnage.

Rebecca placed her right hand on the throttle controls, tensed and ready.

More lasers. The forward shields on the defenders ships were two thirds depleted.

‘Phase two,’ Coyote said.

The *Dark Star*, *Persistence* and the *Spectre* leapt forward, retaining their delta formation with the *Dark Star* in the lead. At the same moment the Thargoids and the Far Colony Alliance ships grouped into teams of four and broke up the linear formation.

Each pack of ships engaged a single target, concentrating their firepower and trying to share a fair distribution of incoming fire. More of the invaders were picked off as the range closed. The Navy fighters swarmed amongst them. Coyote saw the fighters close the remaining distance. The time for stratagems was over now, it had become a melee.

‘Engage at will,’ he announced.

The tidy groups of ships broke up into individual battles. Thargoid warships wheeled and spun, targeting the Navy fighters with their omni-directional turrets. Rebecca obliterated two fighters that were in danger of taking out one of the nearby Far Colony Alliance defenders.

Almost even, save the big ships! Masterful planning, Coyote!

The tide was already turning, the Thargoids able to counter the fighters with ease now that their numbers were not so overwhelming.

‘Derik, Rebecca. Follow me,’ Coyote’s call came sharply across the narrowband.

Rebecca saw the *Dark Star* wheel about, driving headlong through the spinning, whirling attack force. Derik dispatched another fighter and then dropped in behind. She did likewise, bringing up the rear.

‘Coyote, we’ve got them on the run! Where...’

The three ships emerged from the melee, to be faced with four military Anacondas who had deliberately been holding back from the battle. Just as Rebecca uttered the words, missiles streaked out from the Anacondas, four apiece, heading swiftly towards the Thargoid defenders.

Rebecca recognised the missiles immediately. Their pulsing signature had already been identified by the programmed sequence stored aboard her ship.

Bio-missiles! If they hit the Thargoids...

She instinctively jabbed the ECM controls, as did Derik and Coyote. It was to no avail, the missiles were undeterred, streaking across space towing a glowing trail of flaming Quirium exhaust.

‘Shoot them down!’ Coyote’s voice called.

The three ships triggered their injectors as one, closing the distance between them and the phalanx of missiles in scant seconds. Derik was already ahead of the game, two missiles succumbing to his precision fire before Rebecca had even attempted to fire.

Damn, he’s good!

Rebecca spun the *Spectre* around and fired, destroying two more. Derik and Coyote were also firing alongside her.

‘Got two!’ she preened.

‘Four here,’ Coyote called.

‘Amateurs!’ Derik cackled back. ‘Five... no make that six.’

Rebecca glared at the controls and pushed the injectors harder, pulling ahead of the *Persistence*.

I’m not having that! This is my party piece!

She pulled the *Spectre* around, and peppered space with rapid laser fire. Four missiles were incinerated.

‘Not bad princess, not bad...’

All three ships turned as one, bearing back down on the Anacondas.

‘Let see if you can take as well as you give,’ Derik snapped, firing a round of cascade torpedoes towards the bulky military vessels. They turned aside, but it was too late. Crackles of blue flashing energy made short work of them.

‘Watch the boundary,’ Derik called. ‘Tricky things those cascades!’

Jim looked over at Rebecca. Rebecca smiled and shrugged.

‘He doesn’t know you invented them. I thought it best not to tell him... didn’t want to confuse the poor ol’ gecko...’

A flash of light illuminated the bridge of the *Spectre*. Jim was looking at the astrogation scanner as the ship rocked.

‘Uh...’

Rebecca could see what was bothering him.

‘Coyote, Derik... Behemoths!’

‘I see them señorita,’ Coyote’s voice came back. ‘Fly through the middle of the pack on full injectors. Use your side weapons and watch for plasma fire. That stuff is vicious...’

The Navy fighters were falling back to the safety of the big guns aboard the Behemoths. Lasers and plasma fire struck out as the defenders swarmed towards the big ships, led by the unlikely trio of trading vessels.

Rebecca watched in awe as Coyote threaded his battered old Cobra through the twisting conflagration. He seemed to have a sixth sense of where the weapons fire was about to come from, and made for the resulting gaps before they had even formed. He ran the gauntlet with barely a hit but then was lost to sight in the furious melee.

Rebecca ensured she held the trigger on the three forward military lasers aboard the *Spectre* down until they overheated and was reward with the nearest Behemoth’s forward shields collapsing. Lasers raked across its unprotected hull, tearing into the bridge. She saw atmosphere venting into space.

Burn in hell, ‘stards!

Thargoids ran parallel to her course, continuing to damage the Behemoth. It responded with intense defensive fire, destroying two of the insectoid vessels and crippling a third. That ship spun around and drove headlong into the flank of the stricken Behemoth, exploding along the hull and crippling one of its main engines.

Rebecca watched in growing alarm as the damaged Behemoth heeled over out of control, veering directly towards the next capital ship in line...

...with the *Spectre* right between them.

‘Get us out of here!’ Jim yelled, looking out of the starboard view at the closing Behemoth’s hull. It was filling the viewer with a terrifying rapidity.

Rebecca dove the *Spectre* out of the way, narrowly avoiding being crushed as the two Behemoth’s collided.

Debris and fire spiralled out from the point of impact as each ship was consumed by the other. Hull plating and decks twisted and erupted outwards, smashed to fragments in the carnage. A moment later one of the on-board reactors was breached and both ships were consumed in a giant fireball. Rebecca punched the *Spectre* to maximum thrust, only just outrunning the blast radius. She pulled her ship around in a giant loop.

‘More trouble...’ Jim called.

Rebecca could see on the astrogation scanner that one of the Behemoths had pulled ahead, cutting a path through the Thargoid warships and bearing directly toward Raxxla itself. As she watched she could see a lone ship dropping in behind the Behemoth.

‘Derik...’

Laser fire crackled against her ship, forcing her to concentrate on a new assailant.

‘Time to go down in history.’ Derik said to himself. ‘Better make this a good one buddy.’

The Behemoth was directly ahead, driving toward the moon at full speed. The Thargoids were trying to in vain to stop it, but the Behemoth’s plasma weaponry was keeping them at bay and picking them off one by one. Fortunately for Derik, no one was paying much attention to the rear view.

‘Hello boys...’ he grimaced, triggering a pair of nuclear warheads. ‘Party time...’

The warheads were lethal weapons, only suitable for attacking large ships. Their manoeuvrability was limited and their speed little better than the smaller vessels plying the space lanes. Against the big ships they were devastating, assuming they got close enough to hit.

Derik watched as the warheads closed towards the rear of the Behemoth, cursing as weapons fire suddenly erupted from its aft quarter. Both warheads exploded violently but harmlessly, kilometres away from the target.

‘Damn and frak!’

Plasma fire hurtled towards the *Persistence*. Derik dodged, ducking and weaving his ship towards the Behemoth, closing the range.

‘Looks like we have to do this the hard way again...’

The *Persistence*’s forward shields glowed as they deflected the incoming fire. The defensive gunner on the Behemoth clearly realising the incoming Caduceus was attempting to drop a nuclear device on them at point blank range.

More plasma fire swept through space, the *Persistence* straining to maintain its shields despite the murderous onslaught...

Warning! Forward shields failing!

Derik triggered the warhead release.

The *Spectre*’s bridge was illuminated by the flash as the warhead exploded. Rebecca was forced to look away, shielding her eyes with her hand, trying to see. The *Spectre* jolted, and then jolted again as something hit the shields. The astrogation console indicated a target lock. She swung the ship around, looking for their assailant.

On the rear view something was lurking, something big and menacing. Rebecca frowned, trying to get a better look. It was low and wide, with a cross configuration, four pylons and a sleek central hull. As she watched, two military lasers washed over her rear shields and a plasma turret fired in her direction.

‘What the frak...’

The narrowband comms crackled open.

‘Miss Weston. You seem to appear with monotonous regularity. Time for your part in this sorry saga to be finished once and for all.’

Rebecca’s eyes had already narrowed.

‘Garew Ward,’ she snapped, grabbing the commlink. ‘Come and get me then! You’ve had two tries and I’m still here. I’m guessing it’s my turn!’

She locked the targeting computer onto the ship behind her.

Vessel : Multirole Clipper GA-14G4 “Osprey”. Mass 520 Metric, Speed 0.45 LM

Rebecca shook her head.

Never even heard of that one before...

The *Spectre* rattled around her, forcing her to spin the ship about to evade the fire. She triggered the rear weapons and fled, the *Osprey* hanging close on her tail. More Behemoths could be seen entering the fray, supported by wave after wave of incoming fighters. Time was running out.

Derik's suicidal run had crippled the Behemoth closing on Raxxla. With its engines dead it was rapidly spiralling down toward the surface, already beginning to disintegrate in the deepening gravity well.

The *Persistence* had similar woes. The engines were burnt out, and the on-board systems had no chance of repairing them before the Caduceus impacted on the surface.

'You die first!' he yelled. 'That's all that matters, 'stards! You die first!'

As it hit the thin atmosphere that surrounded the small moon, the Behemoth stabilised a little. Its forward sections began to rapidly heat up and burn away, but the rear of the ship juttied back outwards towards space and Derik's hapless vessel.

Derik frowned, focussing on the rear of the Behemoth. A single turret was moving, slowly turning and bringing itself to bear on his ship as the Behemoth impacted on the surface.

'You frakkin' 'stard!' he yelled, impotently.

The gunner aboard the Behemoth knew his ship was going down, but his weapons were still operative.

Dead anyway...What the hell...

His gloved hand closed on the firing circuit as flames erupted around him. The Behemoth narrowly missed the brightly glowing portal and ploughed into the surface of Raxxla, mere kilometres from the amphitheatre. An astonishing fireball burst across the surface of the moon, carrying a wave of superheated gas and debris out from the point of impact.

Derik braced himself as a trail of flaming plasma orbs came pulsing in towards his stricken ship. The *Persistence* was dead in space, with only minimal power, not even the docking thrusters

were working.

He howled out his fury as the plasma descended on his ship, staring at the view screens, teeth bared, looking death in the face as the inevitable destruction drew closer.

A plasma bolt hit the port wing, ripping away part of the infrastructure. The *Persistence* rang with the blow, spinning away from the impact. A second bolt tore away part of the aft structure. The *Persistence* back flipped into a brain jarring spin.

Derik growled in pain and fury as the g-forces rapidly mounted.

Only moments now... save me a space in hell, Udian!

Rebecca was still attempting to lose Garew without success. If the *Spectre* had a flaw it was its ability to climb was weaker than its ability to roll, allowing the heavier *Osprey* to maintain a small but significant firing solution on the smaller ship by virtue of its top and bottom mounted turret weaponry. Rebecca tried in vain to elude him.

The wideband comms crackled.

‘Professor McKenna!’

Jim recognised Harfen’s voice, abrupt and distressed.

‘That Behemoth crashed on the perimeter! Damage everywhere! The wormhole collapser is still intact, but the power feed has been damaged! All the ships are through, but we can’t close the portal!’

‘Oh frak...’ Jim swore. Rebecca spared him a desperate glance.

‘What are we going to do?’ she cried. ‘We can’t keep them back forever!’

As if to highlight her despair, a laser bolt penetrated the shields and caused a cascade of sparks along the hull, violently shaking the vessel and causing them both to flinch instinctively.

‘I don’t know...’ Jim said, thinking furiously.

‘Can we ram it?’ Rebecca asked.

‘Won’t be enough to destroy Raxxla,’ Jim countered. ‘The collapser has been sucking power for days, but without the feed we can’t trigger it...’

‘There must be something! You’ve always got another idea...’ Rebecca swerved the *Spectre* aside, still trying to flee from the onslaught fired in her direction from the *Osprey*.

‘I need some time...’

‘We don’t have any, Jim!’

Four more Navy fighters swept in behind them. Laser fire flashed dangerously close.

‘...Jim I’m out of options here!’

Jim was still thinking, desperately searching his mind for a solution.

‘Can’t reverse the witchspace flux unless we have an inversion point, but we don’t have the equipment to do that... unless...’

He unclipped his harness and vaulted from his chair. Rebecca looked after him in surprise.

‘Harfen! Get everyone the frak out of there!’ Jim snapped the comms closed and turned back to Rebecca. ‘I’m going to need all the remaining witchspace fuel pumped into the core,’ he yelled, running from the bridge.

‘All of it?’

‘Yes, and keep us alive for another five minutes!’

‘Five minutes!’ Rebecca cried in despair, turning back to the flight controls. ‘No shields, no injectors! Who does he think I am...?’

The *Persistence* was subjected to a terrific lurch to one side. Derik’s head was mashed against the flight controls and two of the securing bolts on his flight harness sheared away. For a moment all was disorientation.

Derik managed to raise his head as the g-forces suddenly diminished, blood clouding his vision.

‘What the frak?’

On the forward viewer he could see a magnetic coupling line embedded in the bow of the *Persistence*. Above and beyond was the familiar, if now exceedingly battered, shape of a Mk3 Cobra.

‘Need a tow?’ Coyote quipped.

‘Frak you!’ Derik snarled back. ‘I had everything under control! What the frak are you doing?’

‘Looks like I’m saving your scaly ass.’ Coyote replied drily.

‘I was going out in a blaze of glory, dammit! I’ll not end my days in a nursing home with some autobot wiping the drool from my old grey lips! That what you think I want?’

The *Dark Star* changed course, heading down towards the glowing Raxxla portal.

‘Coyote, what are you... wait a minute. You’re not... you frakkin’ ‘stard! No!’

The magnetic grapple detached, leaving the *Persistence* gliding directly towards the portal at high speed. Within seconds it would pass through, leaving chart one behind forever.

Aboard the *Dark Star*, the narrowband comms array lit up with the draconoid’s reptilian face.

‘I object to you saving my life in this manner, you and your frakkin’ stupid hat!’

Coyote grinned at him. ‘Did I ever tell you you’re one ugly son of a bitch?’

Derik laughed for a moment before growing suddenly serious. ‘Stop the ‘stards buddy. Stop the ‘stards. You’ll do that for me, won’t you?’

Coyote regarded him seriously. ‘Claro, my friend.’

‘Been one hell of ride, eh?’

‘The best,’ Coyote replied, watching the *Persistence* nearing the portal. ‘It really was an honour you know...’

Derik sniggered. ‘You still need to work on those last speeches, buddy. Hey! Make sure you give my princess a slap on the ass from me?’

Coyote nodded with a faint grin. ‘Sure thing.’

Derik grinned and then yelled. ‘Adioooooos amiiiiii...!’

Static clouded the display. The *Persistence* entered the portal and disappeared.

Lasers crackled across the shields of the *Dark Star*. He could see four of the remaining fighters were pursuing the *Spectre*, flanking Garew’s *Osprey*.

‘No rest for the wicked...’

Rebecca knew she was going down.

The shields on the *Spectre* were virtually gone, the energy banks two thirds drained, the hull glowing from the lasers hits that had made it past the depleted shields.

‘Jim! We’re out of time. Not much more I can do!’ she called on the internal comms. ‘Jim!’

She glanced at the astrogation scanner. The *Osprey* and its four escorts were closing again. With the injectors off-line and pumping fuel into Jim's jury-rigging of the witchdrive core she couldn't outrun them.

'Give it up Weston!' Garew's voice crackled across space from the narrowband comms as his face appeared on the video link. 'You're the last one. I'll make it clean...'

Rebecca gestured rudely at the video and threw the *Spectre* into a gut wrenching dive, intermittently flicking the yaw thrusters on and off, trying to elude the fighters behind her.

Laser fire flashed close to the hull, but the *Spectre* evaded the attack for a few more moments. As she rolled it out of the evasive manoeuvre an explosion flashed behind her. One of the fighters had been destroyed.

'Don't count your trumbles before they breed, Pajero.' A soft voice announced on the narrowband comms. Rebecca could see that the *Dark Star* had somehow swung in behind Garew's small formation and attacked them whilst they'd been concentrating on the *Spectre*. The *Dark Star* was spewing coolant from the portside outrigger engine, clearly damaged.

Garew signalled to his fighters. 'Finish him!'

The three remaining fighters peeled off as the *Osprey* accelerated after Rebecca's spinning *Spectre*.

The brief reprieve had given Rebecca enough time to get a small level of charge back into the shields. Jim called her from the engineering core.

'It's done, the modifications are in and the tanks are charging. When it's ready we'll need to trigger it manually - you'll have to fly us down right on top of the amphitheatre for this to work!'

'Oh... joy...' she said, rolling her eyes.

Jim looked stricken. 'It means... Rebecca... there'll be no time for us to...'

'There never is, is there?' she replied softly, knowing what he meant to say. 'I'll deal with Garew. Then I'll get us there. I promise.'

On the astrogation console Rebecca could see Coyote's *Dark Star* fencing with the three fighters. It was clear the *Dark Star* was getting the worst of it.

The video link flashed up. Rebecca caught sight of the *Dark Star's* bridge. She could see flames billowing somewhere behind Coyote as he turned to regard her.

‘Hey señorita, looks like it’s time to be hanging up the ol’ sombrero...’

‘No wait!’ Rebecca called. ‘Bring them back this way, together we can...’

‘No time little señorita,’ Coyote’s even tones came back. ‘Got one last trick up my sleeve and then I’m all out of aces...’

‘I can’t do this on my own, Coyote!’ Rebecca screeched back, tears in her eyes. ‘I’m not good enough, I’m only Deadly! I need you...’

On the video feed the *Dark Star* jolted. Rebecca could see the old Cobra was on the verge of breaking up, leaking plasma from multiple hull rents.

‘Listen to me little one,’ Coyote said, calm amidst the carnage. ‘Elite is not a kill count, Elite is a state of mind. Elite combaters make a difference. You’re the one who convinced us to save the Thargoids. You turned the course of this war. That marks you out, you’re special, you’re unique. Rebecca, you are Elite, as much as any of us...’

‘Coyote, please...’ Rebecca wiped her eyes, trying to see clearly.

His old grey eyes twinkled, ‘And Elite combaters finish what they start...’

The video crackled. Rebecca could just make out a small sharp explosion on the bridge of the *Dark Star*.

‘Gotta go little one...’

‘No, Coyote! Please!’

There was a flash in the depths of space. Rebecca stared in anguish for a moment before her eyes widened in horror. The scintillating blue sphere of a Q-bomb detonation quickly grew on the viewscreen. The three fighters in close proximity to the last position of the *Dark Star* had no room to move. All three were enveloped by the swiftly expanding wave front. Three more spheres of detonation expanded out brief moments after the primary explosion.

The seconds passed and the light from the Quirium cascade began to fade away. As it did so there was nothing left behind on the astrogation scanner. Coyote, the *Dark Star* and the Navy fighters were gone.

Rebecca had no time to grieve. The *Osprey* appeared in front of her. She swung the *Spectre* aside knowing she was giving him a clear shot.

No... That was a mistake!

The blast of fire didn't arrive. Lasers were peppering the *Osprey* from the port flank side. Rebecca stared in slack-jawed amazement as a battered rusty old Python unleashed a storm of weapons fire. The *Osprey* broke away, diving out of range of the incoming vessel.

There was a brief flicker on the narrowband comms link. Rebecca looked up into the furry grey face of a vaguely familiar feline.

'I owed you one.' The grey furred feline said. 'Paid back my debts. Next time make sure you buy a trumble in memory of this auspicious event!'

Rebecca stared in total confusion. 'Who the frak are you?'

'Captain Hesperus, at your service!' the grey feline returned. 'But not for long, gotta shoot...'

Hesperus? Hesperus!

The battered old Python blasted past, heading for the shimmering portal. It trailed a plume of ejected plasma before finally limping into the shimmering portal and disappearing. Rebecca shook her head in bewilderment and turned her attention back to the *Osprey*. The feline Captain's intervention had allowed her to slot in behind it. Hers was the last ship left in the fight, the civilians had escaped. Garew's *Osprey* was alone, the remaining Navy forces too far away to be of any immediate assistance.

One on one...

'Games up, Garew!' she preened.

She triggered the *Spectre's* forward weapons just as she brought the bow of her ship around. The *Osprey* passed through the firing arc and the laser fire blistered along the starboard side of Garew's ship as he tried to turn back towards her.

The starboard engine exploded, throwing the *Osprey* into a wild turn to the right. Rebecca tried to dive the *Spectre* out of the way, but she was moving too quickly. A second before impact it was clear that it was going to be impossible to avoid a collision.

'Jim! Brace!'

The collision was brutal. Even at full strength it would have damaged both ships. In their weakened condition, battered from their earlier fire-fight, both ships were fortunate not to disintegrate.

Rebecca felt the bow of the *Spectre* drop and then found she was unable to pull the nose back up. The *Spectre* was dropping fast, engine dead. The on-board avionics were logging a catastrophic

loss of communication with the remaining control surfaces. G-forces began to mount up as the ship spun, spiralling down into the thin atmosphere of Raxxla. Rebecca completely lost sight of the *Osprey*, unsure whether it had been destroyed or was still behind them somewhere.

Rebecca blinked back dizziness from the impact and desperately hammered at the auxiliary systems, hoping to get some measure of response from the stricken controls. If she couldn't get the ship to respond they were going to hit the ground like a meteorite and there wouldn't be a piece left big enough to hold in two hands.

Come on! Come back to me, you can do this!

Jim was putting the final touches to his jury rigged witchspace bomb when he heard Rebecca's call on the intercom. He only had hold of the bulkhead with one hand and was wrenched off his feet by the effects of the collision. Just as swiftly the deck dropped out from beneath him as the *Spectre* began its sickening dive. He was in free fall, trying and failing to grasp at the control panel for his hastily engineered device.

With a terrifying groan the ship managed to right itself. Jim crashed into the floor as gravity reasserted its grip. Half dazed, he hauled himself up to the console just in time to see the computer flashing up a series of messages.

Warning! Dangerous witchspace configuration detected. Safety override in force.

Jim swore. 'Frakkin computer! We're trying to kill ourselves, that's the damn point!'

The comm buzzed and Rebecca's voice crackled across it. 'Jim. Grab hold of something. We're coming in fast. This is not going to be pretty!'

Just what we need!

Rebecca had managed to pump a little power into the auxiliary circuits. The *Spectre* was dying around her, but she thanked the Isis Interstellar designers that they hadn't dispensed with the controversial aerodynamic styling that was a signature of the Vampire range. It was all that was keeping them alive.

The unique Thargoid-derived engine was a nothing more than a pile of useless junk, the lasers were fried and the main reactor had shut itself down, leaking plasma as it did so. The undercarriage was jammed and the leading edge of the starboard wing was on fire where the heat shielding had failed. The collision with the *Osprey* had taken out the shield generators, all the comms arrays and the heat dissipaters mounted on the topside of the *Spectre*. Rebecca surveyed the damage with dismay.

Apart from that, everything's just peachy....

She had managed to get the ship to respond to its docking thrusters, giving her a measure of control over the attitude. It allowed her to point the *Spectre* in the direction of travel and bring the precious aerodynamics into play. Without them they would already be a dark smear on the featureless surface somewhere below.

As it was the *Spectre* was still very much in a controlled crash. It was dropping at a rate that was little short of suicidal. Rebecca knew she had one chance to get the landing right.

Elite combaters finish what they start...

'Come on, baby. Come on!' she shouted, wrestling with the controls, trying to pull the nose of the *Spectre* up in order to flare out and limit their rate of descent. The *Spectre* lolled drunkenly, as Rebecca desperately tried to keep the ship stable.

Can't afford to stall it...

Below was the strange luminescent and featureless surface of Raxxla she remembered from before. She angled the *Spectre* towards the shimmering column of light, seeing the amphitheatre coming into view over the horizon.

'Jim! Five seconds!'

At least it's flat. Let's hope it's not going to be too hard...

Brief moments before what would have been a catastrophic impact, the *Spectre* nosed skyward, as if desperately trying to return to the place it was born to, the vastness of outer space. It was to no avail; the rear of the ship smashed into the surface with a brain-jarring thud. The *Spectre* tilted wildly, the nose flipping down as the ship threatened to cartwheel itself.

Rebecca felt the impact, realised she'd lost control and watched helplessly as the ground rotated underneath the forward viewer, rushing past at a dizzying rate, before rising up to smash into the nose of the *Spectre* with a terrifying ripping sound.

Rebecca briefly saw metal debris spiralling towards her before consciousness was dashed away.

Chapter Eleven

Consciousness returned, amidst a haze of pain. Rebecca blinked, her vision obscured by a red mist. Blinking didn't help; she wiped her hand across her face, only then focussing on a smeared red streak on her wrist.

Blood...

The pain intensified as she tried to move, sending throbbing waves of nausea through her head. She winced, trying to block it out and concentrate. She forced her eyes to focus.

The bridge of the *Spectre*, what remained of it, was wrecked. The forward windows were smashed and buckled, driven upwards and outwards by the force of the impact. She could see the nose of the ship crumpled up in front of her. Sparks were cracking out of some of the panels and a few dim lights flickered uncertainly from the minor controls.

Rebecca reached out to touch the flight controls. They were jammed in the last position she remembered holding them, fully back, trying to avoid a crash. The astrogation console was smashed, its transparent surface nothing but a shattered collection of shards.

Pain increased once more, forcing her to cry out in anguish. She realised she was hanging in her seat, held in by the restraining harness, with the remains of the main controls below her. Looking down at herself she could see that the impact had been severe. The straps had cut through her flight suit and into her skin; blood was running down her chest from both shoulders. She tried to move herself upwards to release the pressure...

Bad call...

How long it was before she regained conscious for the second time she didn't know. None of the chronometers were working and the computers were dead. She realised her legs were trapped under the astrogation console, it had compacted forwards. She'd been lucky not to have them amputated. As it was she could see the edge of the console had crunched into her legs just above the knees. There was no obvious blood, but based on the excruciating pain coming from her legs she assumed she'd broken something at the very least.

Can't stay here...

She batted at the belt restraint in her lap with her left hand, noticing it too was streaked with blood and blackened with soot. The harness opened, spilling her forwards. Agony surged into her

thighs as her knees rotated, but she pulled free and crashed heavily into the forward part of the bridge, narrowly avoiding braining herself on the outstretched flight controls.

She lay there, gasping in shock, as the blood supply to her legs was restored. For a moment she felt nothing, then a tingling followed by a fresh wave of intense pain. Paralysed for a moment she rolled onto her side, curling up in a foetal position, trying to ease the agony.

She reached up, grabbing the inverted edge of the astrogation console and slowly pulled herself upright. She found she couldn't put any weight on her right ankle at all, and figured it was broken. Her legs were bruised and sore, but seemed in remarkably good shape all things considered. Her arms were cut in dozens of places, probably from the shattered console.

A crackle of something hitting the floor made her look down. Hanging from her belt was the remains of the shielding unit she'd stolen from Zerz. It was completely smashed, its innards spewing out from its casing. She pulled the remains off and dropped it on the floor.

So much for that...

Fortunately her pistol, though rather scratched, appeared undamaged. She patted it self-consciously. Looking back up, she caught sight of herself in a cracked reflection on the dead starboard viewer. She had a cut that was bleeding copiously above her right eye, the lacerations in her shoulders looked messy and hurt like hell, but she was alive. Nothing else seemed amiss.

They say any landing you can walk away from is a good one. I wonder if limping counts!

She reached up and prodded the intercom. It looked dead, but it was worth a try.

'Jim? Jim? Can you hear me?' Her voice sounded raspy. She tried to clear her throat. That hurt too, so she didn't try it again.

There was no response.

Please still be alive!

Normally the entrance to the rearward decks was at the back of the bridge. That was now above her. Rebecca looked up to see that the hatchway had been wrenched open and beyond she could see nothing but a bent and mangled wall of metal. It looks as if the bridge section had been somehow twisted at nearly ninety degrees from the rest of the ship.

Not going that way.

Rebecca looked down at the windows. She could see the milky surface of Raxxla immediately below their shattered remains. She crouched down, braced herself and then kicked the

remaining shards of the transparent material out with her good foot. Already broken, they fell away easily, allowing Rebecca a clear way out of the ship.

Gingerly she lowered herself through the tight opening, her arms trembling with the strain. Sharp edges cut into her palms and more blood trickled over her fingers. She slipped, crashing the last few feet onto the unforgiving surface with a howl of pain and shock.

She pulled herself up to her hands and knees and slowly moved away from the wreck of the *Spectre*, dodging various small pieces of unidentifiable wreckage. Rebecca managed about ten metres before rolling onto her side, exhausted. After a brief pause to catch her breath, she summoned her strength, first getting up on one knee and hoisting herself up.

For a moment she swayed, before, breathing deeply, to stop the waves of dizziness from overwhelming her.

Turning slowly, she took in the sight of her ship.

The *Spectre* was still in one piece, just. As she'd figured, the force of the impact had somehow bent the nose of the ship downwards at right angles to the rest of the hull. The rearward part of the ship looked more intact, though it bore the marks of a long slide across the surface. The wing pod nearest to her was buckled and torn, presumably from the devastating collision with the *Osprey*.

Jim. Oh God...

Rebecca hobbled forward as fast as she could manage with her damaged ankle. She got alongside the flank of the *Spectre* and used it as a prop to help her move along. Moving towards the rear hatches, she hoped that they were intact enough for her to enter the ship. She rounded the aft quarter of the *Spectre* and caught her breath.

Immediately in front of her was the pulsing witchgate of Raxxla. It looked like it had before, a column of light elevating perpendicular to the surface and disappearing into the zenith at what looked like an infinite distance.

Further round was something else.

No!

The *Osprey* sat about a hundred metres to the rear of the *Spectre*. Except for some obvious damage to its starboard nacelle it looked remarkably whole. Rebecca immediately saw that its landing gear was intact. The ship had landed, not crashed.

She spun and saw that the rear hatch of the *Spectre* was already open.

Oh frak, no!

She stumbled across, pulling her svelte pistol out of her belt. It felt comforting in her hand. Slowly she made her way into the circular passage, ducking her head to enter pass the hatch and then standing up inside. Glow from the internal illumination obscured her view forward, causing her to squint against the light, her body casting a long shadow behind her.

Cautiously she moved onward. There was no sound other than the faint crackling of the cooling engine. The interior of this part of the ship looked far more intact. Rebecca reached the end of the corridor and peered into the engineering deck.

It appeared undamaged, with little sign of anything amiss. She could see the witchspace drive was intact, the status indicators showing a full charge, but it was quiescent, deactivated.

Rebecca's heart jumped as she caught sight of Jim's body lying spread-eagled on the floor, face down. His right hand was still holding a strap, which appeared to have ripped out of one of the side bulkheads.

Rebecca fought against the instinct to immediately go to his side.

Got to be a trap! Where's Garew?

She looked carefully around the room, seeing no sign of another presence. She looked up, checking the ceiling and then down at the floor panels. There was nowhere Garew could hide. She looked over her shoulder; still nothing. The forward exit from the deck was buckled, as she had seen from the other side when she'd been on the bridge. There was no other way in or out. She checked her pistol again, making some adjustments to it.

Maybe the bulkhead was opened in the crash. Maybe Garew didn't survive the collision and the Osprey landed automatically?

Thoughts ran through her head, but it didn't make sense. Red alert lights were flashing in her brain but she could see Jim was hurt and after a further moment of consideration her instincts took over. She hobbled into the room, falling at Jim's side, sparing a nervous glance around her as she did so.

Still nothing.

'Jim. Jim! Can you hear me? Jim?' she touched him gently, relieved to find that he was breathing. She gently turned him over. He grimaced in pain. His face was battered, bruises swelling

around his eyes and nose. They were fresh, too fresh to have been from the crash.

‘Rebecca...’ he wheezed. ‘No... look...’

Rebecca suddenly sensed movement and half turned, just as a blow to the side of her head sent her spinning to one side. She hit the deck hard, almost passing out again, crying out with shock, fear, anger and searing pain.

‘You’re not the only one with the advantage of technology,’ a voice mocked her. Rebecca squeezed her eyes shut, trying to block out the agony in her head. For a moment she thought she was going to faint, but she slowly managed to gain control of her senses and turn her head around.

She opened her eyes and looked up.

Garew was standing on the other side of the room, as plain as daylight. He’d disarmed her, picking up her pistol from the floor.

Where did he come from?

‘A portable cloaking device,’ Garew smirked at her confusion. ‘Not as sophisticated as your shield, but effective nonetheless.’

Garew held her pistol up and trained it directly on her. He leant nonchalantly against the rear bulkhead, standing in front of the deactivated witchspace controls. His own gun was still holstered in his belt.

‘I see you’ve lost yours,’ he said with a smirk.

‘Lucky for you,’ Rebecca managed to gasp.

Garew nodded. ‘You were able to unbalance your contrabandista with it I understand. I would not have made the same mistake.’

‘Don’t do it Garew,’ Rebecca snapped, sitting up. Garew followed her movements with the pistol.

‘Don’t do what? Use Raxxla? And why not?’ he replied.

‘Messing about with time...’

‘The danger of changing the future?’ Garew nodded. ‘Thank you for the cogent advice. However, I suspect I’ll find the possibility of complete control over the galaxy will be more advantageous.’

‘The Thargoids will fight...’

‘Oh, Rebecca,’ Garew leant back again as he regarded her. ‘Haven’t you understood yet? This was never about the Thargoids. This was about control! This was always about Raxxla. I reviewed your files. I knew what Zerz was working on. I knew the Dark Wheel had sworn you to silence and that nothing we could do would reveal the location. You and the prof here even hid it from yourselves. All very clever.’

Rebecca blinked, trying to take it in.

Garew smiled. ‘But not clever enough. I fabricated the wreck of the *Falchion*. I planted your bio-reading there! I gave the Thargoids the clue that would lead them to Raxxla. I gave them the plasma accelerator, to precipitate the war! I knew they would voraciously pursue you, that they would attack Galcop directly once they felt they had the advantage. The bio-weapons were nothing but a ruse to ensure the Thargoids had a compelling reason to stop you. I knew you would discover the truth behind their origins. I knew their superior technology would find a way to extract the location of Raxxla from you. Once that was revealed, all I had to do was to reach out and take it.’

Garew indicated her prone form with a laugh.

‘You’ve been a pawn, Rebecca, nothing more. Played every step of the way. Udian’s implacable hatred of the Thargoids leant credibility to the plan, with him aboard no one would doubt our intentions to defend ourselves against the Thargoids. They’ve been the aggressors once again. Coyote led you across the chart and destroyed Beenri, merely enraging the Thargoids still further and forcing them to accelerate their own plans. As for the lizard, he was just another common animal like the rest of them, expendable.’

‘The population won’t stand for this...’ Rebecca began.

‘Oh, you’ll be surprised what people will put up with,’ Garew continued. ‘Humans are the superior species. It’s our right to control, subjugate and dominate. We first moved out into space, we mastered the universe. We gave the gift of consciousness to them. We are the masters. With Raxxla, we can reinforce that position, learn from the mistakes and ensure we do not repeat them when we edit the past. There will be no need to defeat the Thargoids, they will never have existed. Galcop will be pre-eminent, with a docile and compliant underclass serving humankind, as it should be. A little social engineering will quickly give us what we need.’

‘It won’t work!’ Jim intervened. ‘Zerz tried to change the future and he failed. Something will always stop you! Time doesn’t work like that...’

‘There is nothing left to stop me,’ Garew replied with a faint smile. ‘The Thargoids are

beaten, fleeing to chart two. With Raxxla in our power it won't take us long to reconstruct a present where the contamination of these animals never took place. We can prune history; make it flower the way it was supposed to.'

'You're a monster!' Rebecca cried.

Garew shrugged. 'Or I'm the saviour of mankind. Of the two descriptions, I prefer mine, and your opinion will shortly cease to matter.'

Rebecca crawled backwards against the bulkhead, but there was nowhere to go.

'Your companions are dead, Rebecca. You've fought your last fight.'

Garew leaned forwards and gestured with her pistol. 'The last remaining loose end. Udian's demise gave great joy to many in Galcop, despite the unfortunate cost. Your elimination will go largely unnoticed I'm afraid. You've proved remarkably tenacious throughout all this; Udian found you a source of much frustration. A shame to waste the talent you have, but I cannot allow witnesses, you understand.'

Garew levelled her own pistol at her.

'How would that old fool have put it? Adios amigo.'

'Amiga actually.' Rebecca snapped, glaring at him and stressing the 'a'. 'I'm a woman, in case you hadn't noticed.'

Garew actually laughed. 'Defiant to the last I see. It is of no consequence.'

His fingers closed around the firing stud.

'Goodbye.'

The pistol spluttered and hissed, but failed to fire. The power pack shorted out, sending a bolt of electrical energy into Garew's arm. He yelled in pain and surprise, dropping the pistol. His hand was burnt and smoking.

Simultaneously, Jim and Rebecca scrambled towards him. Jim got there first, slugging clumsily at Garew. Garew threw up an arm to protect himself, still half stunned from the electrical shock. Jim got hold of Garew's gun and pulled it free. He tried to fire it, but had forgotten the safety lock and the weapon failed to discharge. Garew swung back at Jim and the gun went spiralling away across the deck, clattering as it went. Rebecca had managed to get back to her feet as Jim was flung away.

All things being equal they would have been quickly subdued by Garew. Both of them were injured, Jim was no fighter, and Rebecca, while able to hold her own in a bar-room brawl, had no answer to Garew's military training and stronger physique. As it was, Garew was half dazed from the short circuiting of Rebecca's pistol, his right arm useless and he had two very desperate antagonists to deal with.

Garew threw Jim aside as Rebecca came towards him. Rebecca was more cautious, but she had the added advantage of the knife she always carried. She'd pulled it out, swapping it from one hand to the other and limping towards him, favouring her injured ankle.

Got to get him away from the witchspace controls!

Garew's gun was on one side of the engineering deck, the witchspace controls on the other. Her own pistol was burnt out and useless, a last desperate trick that had come off. Somehow Jim needed time to activate the drive. She could see only one way to do it.

'Games up, Garew,' she said. 'I've already bagged one Galcop 'stard with this knife. Time for a reprise. You 'stards killed my friends and my family. I'm gonna take my dues out of your hide!'

Garew was still nursing the remains of his hand, clearly in extreme pain. Rebecca could see the skin on it was burnt brown and black.

'Still full of surprises I see,' he managed, between clenched teeth. 'Coyote was right; it is too easy to underestimate you. But you will not walk out of here alive, you little viper. You're already dead...'

Garew sidestepped away from the witch-drive controls. Rebecca closed with him. Jim tensed, sensing the opportunity to get to the controls.

'You can't escape,' Garew said, grimacing through his agony. 'Even if you overpower me, my ship will be fired upon unless you transmit a security code. This is the end of your run. You are going to die, one way or the other.'

He doesn't know what we're trying to do!

Jim moved closer to the witch-drive controls. Garew made to move towards him. Rebecca surged forward, knife raised.

It was a feint, Garew backpeddled in the direction of his gun. Rebecca turned to catch him, but her damaged ankle slowed her down too much. Garew eluded her and dove for the gun, grabbing it with his good arm and trying to turn it on Rebecca.

Rebecca had already closed with him as he struggled back to his feet, punching at his damaged hand and arm. Garew howled in pain and swung clumsily back at her. Rebecca grabbed his other arm and tried to push the gun away, driving forward with the knife. Garew simultaneously tried to block her attack whilst bringing the gun to bear.

Jim had managed to get to the witchspace controls. He reactivated the drive unit, checked the Quirium levels and coded the fusing sequence. For a moment his hand hesitated over the commit activator, before he slammed his hand down on it. The witchspace drive hummed into operation and began charging for a non-existent witchspace jump, preparing to dump all its energies into a single burst of witchspace energy.

Rebecca stabbed.

Garew yelled in pain. The humming noise from the witchspace drive spiralled upwards rapidly, relentlessly increasing in volume. Garew punched, dealing Rebecca a vicious blow to her lacerated shoulder. She cried out in pain.

The gun glinted in Garew's hand; Rebecca reeled backwards before pivoting back on herself, only just managing to retain hold of her knife, but using the momentum to close back with Garew.

With the last vestiges of her strength she stabbed down once more.

Garew's gun fired.

Jim turned to see Garew collapse on the floor, his body streaked with blood and the gun falling from his lifeless fingers. Rebecca stood slightly to one side, her bloodied knife held loosely in her left hand. As Jim watched the knife dropped from her hand and clattered to the deck. She half turned and took a single step forward.

'Jim... I...'

'Rebecca?'

She looked across at him, catching his stare. Her face blanched in shock and surprise...

...before sinking to her knees and flopping to one side not far from Garew.

Jim stumbled desperately across to her.

'Rebecca!'

He reached her a moment later, cradling her to him, brushing the hair from her face. Her body was limp in his arms. He looked desperately over her, finding a small round hole in her chest, ringed

with a burn mark. There was hardly any blood.

‘No... Rebecca...’

She opened her eyes and managed to look at him.

‘Did I...?’ her voice was faint, barely more than a whisper.

‘Garew’s dead. You got him,’ Jim assured her, briefly looking up before turning his attention back to her. ‘The drive is charging, only seconds before...’

Rebecca smiled before a dry cough wracked her. Jim tried to hold her gently to ease the pain.

‘Elite combateers...’ she whispered dreamily, her eyes beginning to roll up in her head. ‘...finish what they start...’

She blinked, focussing back. ‘Jim... so cold...’

‘I’m here. I’ll never leave you, remember?’

Her eyes closed again.

‘Rebecca!’ Jim cried, desperately. Her eyes flickered open again.

The humming of the witchspace drive was now a reverberating throb, still getting louder.

Can't be long now...

‘Jim... I can’t feel...’

‘Save your strength...’ he said, stroking her face gently.

‘What for?’ she managed to laugh, before something caught in her throat. ‘I’m glad you’re with me now. We should have always been together...’

‘Rebecca...’ Jim felt tears run down his cheeks, he desperately tried to find the words he wanted to say, but they were nowhere to be found.

‘So much time...’ she uttered, her hand stroking his face fondly. ‘But never enough for us...’

Jim pulled her close. ‘Time enough,’ he said.

He brought his lips to hers, pulling her body as close to his as he could, feeling the warmth of her skin next to his. For a moment she responded to him, her arms wrapping around him gently. Then he felt a sigh run through her and she went limp in his grasp.

‘No... Rebecca, no!’

Her eyes stayed closed and her arms dropped away, her body a dead weight. Her face was pale, yet serene; but the vitality that characterised her very essence was gone.

Jim shuddered, unable to hold back more tears as he lowered Rebecca's body to the floor. Sobs racked his own body as he knelt beside her. She looked so tiny and fragile. He held her delicate bloodied hands in his as the witchspace drive spiralled upwards towards a climax.

Never enough time...

Jim was thunderstruck by a thought, eyes wide, gasping with realisation.

Never enough... Time!

He pulled Rebecca's limp body up from the floor, draping it over his shoulders, her arms flopping down across him. He stumbled and tripped as he headed out of the engineering deck of the ruined *Spectre*.

Only seconds left...

He managed to scramble through the access tunnel and drop down outside the wreck of the ship. Before him he could see the silent hulk of the *Osprey*. Beyond that, the pulsing witchgate of Raxxla.

He ran as fast as he could towards the shimmering portal.

Derik managed to right his ship after it emerged on the other side of the Raxxla Portal. A quick scan showed that he was in chart two as expected. Behind him the portal glowed with fierce blue actinic light.

Still open!

It could only be moments before the Galcop fleet reached the entrance and came swarming through. The vast numbers of ships before him were disorganised, damaged and in no way ready for another fight. If Galcop broke through it would be a massacre.

Come on Princess, you can do it. Shut that frakker down!

There was a flash of light. Derik looked up at the Raxxla portal only to see a Behemoth begin to emerge from it. It came through cautiously, obviously trying to get a clear perspective on conditions on the other side. A quarter of the dark and malevolent hull slowly protruded.

'Frak! Frakkin' Galcop 'stards! You're supposed to be dead!'

Half of the Behemoth was now through. Derik could see its weapons beginning to lock on targets. In a few moments, plasma fire was going to be flashing across space, making devastatingly short work of the desperate undefended convoy. With resignation he realised he wasn't going to be around long enough to worry about it. His crippled ship was between the Behemoth and the rest of the ships.

'Come on then! Take me out!' he roared in defiance, triggering the wideband comms. 'You stinkin' monkeys! Spin on this!'

He blistered the comms with every curse and profanity he could recall as the Behemoth continued to move forward. It was almost clear of the portal. Derik could see the various weapon hard points spinning around to target his ship and the others behind him.

There was another flash. Derik had to shield his good eye from the glare. The convoy was lit up by an astonishing green glare. He adjusted his prosthetic eye and managed to look at what was happening.

The portal was collapsing. Like a narrowing diaphragm it was constricting, apparently regardless of anything contained within it. As Derik watched the Behemoth was neatly sliced across its rear quarters, leaving it minus its engines. The forward bulk of the ship spiralled forwards impotently, its hull lights flickering and growing dim. The portal continued to shrink, spiralling into a point, growing brighter and brighter as it did so.

The glare was intolerable, like looking into a sun. The portal became infinitely small and then expanded again, rapidly fading away. A ring of glowing energy passed out through the ships that watched its demise. The *Persistence* rocked gently, before stabilising.

The Raxxla portal was gone. Chart one was forever isolated. Galactic witchspace was nothing but a piece of history.

'She did it! The princess did it!'

Months later Derik stood near the centre of Ixis, the capital city of Inoran, in a newly completed plaza. Immediately behind him stood Captain Hesperus, standing demurely and absurdly proud of the medal of honour he'd received for his actions in the final battle. Next to him stood Daddyhoggy, his avian head twisted slightly to one side, and his wings neatly furled.

Around them stood friends, family and thousands upon thousands of the immediate population of the planet. Holofac transmitters ensured that billions more would watch the events

unfold across chart two. Derik looked around him, seeing his family and some of his fellow draconoids amidst the rodents, felines, canines, amphibians and insects. A phalanx of Thargoids stood to attention, weapons hoisted in respect. There were a few human colonials present, now very much in the minority.

A hush descended and all eyes expectantly focussed on Derik.

He stepped forward slowly, his head bowed.

In front of him was a raised dais, which itself contained a simple monument, a vertical pillar of duralium. It shone like burnished gold in the early morning light. Atop this was fixed a crest. Some might have considered it over-styled, but it was instantly recognisable to all. Two unfurled wings either side, with a word proudly emblazoned across the centre. A word that encompassed the spirit and memory of those who had given their lives in the defence of freedom.

That list was long. Derik could see each individual name had been burnt indelibly into the metal monument. Thousands of names, representing all those who'd been killed in the final battle and the desperate rush across the chart towards the sanctuary of the Raxxla portal.

As he came close he raised his head towards the top of the list. Four names were highlighted in bolder text, with embedded holofac images of each one placed above.

Derik blinked and focussed on them, reading upwards.

Udian 'Foraga' Shulth.

Derik half grinned.

Bet you never thought you'd have a name on a pedestal you metal assed monster.

He looked at the next name.

Carlos 'Coyote' Maynard.

Derik shook his head.

'Somehow can't believe you bought it buddy. Somebody somewhere is going to get a surprise when that Sombrero shows up again.'

Jim McKenna.

Derik had barely known Jim. But the self-sacrifice he'd shown in figuring out a way to destroy Raxxla at the cost of his own life told Derik everything he needed to know. That and the fact that she thought he was worthy of her affection...

Rebecca Weston.

Draconoids didn't have tear ducts, so Derik grimaced instead, his lips pulling back, revealing his sharp white teeth. His head bowed in sorrow.

He remembered how they'd met, his first impressions; an irritating little woman determined to prove she was one of the boys in combat with her ancient battered Vampire. How he'd quickly had to change his estimation when he'd seen her flying skills. How she'd stood up to Coyote and faced him down, how she'd had her ass kicked by him in the asteroid field. The decom grease...

That was one hell of a day...

She'd rescued Coyote from his crashed ship and they'd buried the hatchet. How she'd had a crisis of confidence. How he'd ribbed her over the incident at the sanctuary. How she always gave back as good as she got. Her tenaciousness in combat and the bravery she had shown when trying to do the right thing for the Thargoids.

I miss her...

But she'd kept her head after being captured, turned the whole thing around and changed the course of the war. Without her it would have simply been a fight to the death, everyone would have lost, everyone would have been killed. Yet so small, so easy to underestimate. A small human woman you'd never notice in a crowd. Simply cut brown hair, no feminine trappings, nothing that gave away the tough character underneath.

'Sayonara, little princess.'

Derik placed his hand on the single control that would flood the area with illumination. Lights that would continue to blaze for as long as the names of those who'd given their lives for the freedom of others would be remembered.

Derik's claw closed on the control and he looked up as the Elite emblem atop the monument was flooded with light. A huge cheer arose around him, guns were discharged into the air, but he hardly noticed, lost in thought. Hesperus and Daddyhoggy joined him as he surveyed the glowing memorial.

Good-bye, my friends.

The girl at the bar was quickly losing control of the situation and most of the rest of the patrons were enjoying the view. She was skimpily dressed, which wasn't helping the leery and

alcohol fuelled behaviour at all. A burly 'gentleman' was clearly expecting her to render some kind of favour on his behalf, and she was not having any of it.

Angry, she pushed him away and he stumbled into another figure who was perched at the end of the bar, spilling his drink and splashing purple fluid across the mahogany surface. The burly guy turned and found himself face to face with an old cloaked figure sporting a tatty, scorched and blackened wide brimmed hat. The old man turned around slowly.

'What'yer looking at, yer ol' codger?' the burly man threatened, leaning in toward the older man.

The old man's eyes were hidden underneath his hat until he slowly tilted his head back. As their gazes met the burly man involuntarily stepped back a pace. The stare from the cold grey eyes set in a heavily bearded face was intimidating, plain and simple. The faint suggestion of a grin passed across the old man's features.

'A Pajero, by the look of it.' he replied, his voice soft, yet with a clear, musical lilt.

The burly guy's linguistic education wasn't up to interpreting the Spanish insult, but he figured out the general gist of it and decided to respond by swing a clumsy punch at the old man.

For a moment the old man didn't react. Just before the blow landed he turned aside, grabbed the outstretched arm and viciously smashed down on it with his fist. The crack of breaking bone echoed unpleasantly through the bar, accompanied by gasps and a few murmurs of appreciation.

The guy screamed in pain, but it was cut off as the old man delivered a sharp blow to the side of his head and dropped him like a stone, out cold.

The girl had watched this with astonishment, worry and then sudden relief. She looked up into the eyes of the stranger, equally intimidated by their peculiar grey colour. She stared into them, and then took in the strange battered hat. Parts of it were blackened and burnt and there was what looked like a bullet hole torn through one side.

Who the frak...

The old man smiled and signalled to the bartender as everyone else in the bar suddenly found they were busy with something, anything else. The old man pushed his mad hat up a touch and regarded her.

'Care to join me for a drink, señorita?'

Epilogue

‘We’re not completely clean ourselves, thanks to your attempt to flog those space lice! What were they called? Tribbles?’

‘Trumbles.’

‘Trumbles, tribbles, whatever. Vermin. Galcop should nuke that whole planet.’

‘That’s a bit rough, isn’t it?’

‘They’re ghastly things, they breed incessantly.’

‘Well, that’s the trouble with trumbles.’

‘Just make sure we don’t have any more trouble with trumbles, ok?’

Trumbles? But that was years ago... just before the Imperial Courier...

Nausea.

Voices assaulted her ears. A criss-crossing, confusing cacophony.

‘Rebecca? Hey, what... Rebecca!’

Don’t shout, it hurts. Please be quiet! Always arguing, we were always arguing...

Sirens going off, doors opening.

‘What the frak are you two playing at up here? Damn near rolled out of my sleeping bunk!’

‘It’s Rebecca...’

‘Lance, just get the damn ship back on course... Frak! What happened...?’

‘Reet, Lance, what’s going on? Rebecca! Is she ok?’

‘Don’t know. She was fine one moment, then she started shouting something about a ship and passed out!’

‘Get her down on the floor, give her some air!’

Hands grabbing; pushing and shoving...

There was the sound of a narrowband comm-link buzzing for attention.

Must warn them...

‘What’s she saying?’

‘Can’t make it out.’

‘Stop yakking and get her to the medi-bay now!’

The narrowband comm-link buzzed again. There was a click.

‘Yeah, We’re ok... What?... I don’t know, Rebecca’s had a funny turn, knocked the autopilot off and sent us into a dive... not sure, we’ll see... we’re taking her to the medi-bay now...’

More hands, dizziness, a feeling of movement.

‘What was she drinking yesterday?’

‘That new purple stuff they just imported. Evil-juice, Zaquesso stuff. Pretty heavy.’

‘Frak, why don’t you guys keep this place tidy? How many times do I have to tell you...’

Lights, glare, disorientation. Things being swept aside, noisily hitting the floor.

Look out! It’s coming... You must...

Beeping noises, warmth; the sensation of lying on something comfortable.

‘Looks like she just fainted. She’s never done that before. Hook up the scanner.’

‘That’s weird. The quantum resonance view ain’t working...’

‘Lance, just sort it. Without the techno-geek crapola please!’

‘Her image isn’t showing up... hang on, there it is. Must have been a glitch.’

Rebecca tried to force herself to wake, to open her eyes, forcing her conscious mind through a treacle-like thickness of dreams and imaginings.

She opened her eyes.

Blurred faces. Faces that couldn’t possibly be there.

But how?

Her voice was faint, but she managed it.

‘Imperial Courier. Starboard Bow. Run!’

‘Rebecca, it’s ok, lie still. You’re gonna be ok.’

‘Scanner!’ she managed to utter, struggling helplessly against hands that tried to hold her immobile. ‘Imperial Courier! Run! Oh please!’

‘She’s gone nuts. Imperial Couriers for frak’s sake!’

‘Lance, check the scanner.’

‘Come on, there’s no way...’

‘Just do it.’

‘There was nothing there. I looked!’

‘Run!’ Rebecca howled.

‘Look again, damn it!’

Footsteps, running. A distant voice.

‘All clear here. Red, anything on your scanners? Jante, Jenner, Coran... you seeing anything out there?’

More voices, answering in the negative.

‘There’s nothing Reet, it’s blank in all directions. Just us out here.’

Rebecca’s eyes glazed. She felt a hand on her forehead, slick with sweat.

‘She’s burning up. Temperature’s way over normal.’

I don’t understand... what’s happening?

‘Jim! Must tell Jim. It’s Raxxla...’ she managed to utter.

‘Who the frak is Jim?’

‘She’s got some kind of fever. Best get her station-side as soon as we can. I’ll sedate her.’

‘Lance, crank it up to full burn! Lance! What’s that addle-pat boy doing now?’

‘You go. I’ll stay with her.’

‘We’ll get her there as soon as we can. Lance!’

Rebecca felt a numbness grow in her body, and the little consciousness she could muster began slipping away.

‘Raxxla...’

‘Rest easy honey, you’ll be ok. Just a little too much drinking, sweetness. You need to remember the boys play hard...’

Rebecca frowned.

‘Mum?’

Several days later Rebecca sat at a core-comm terminal, deep in thought. She was dressed in a medical smock, sitting in a recovery suite in one of Zaonce’s orbital stations. The strange fever that had afflicted her had baffled the medical team; they eventually put it down as a form of space-sickness, told her to drink more water and prescribed a series of stress pills.

She’d almost managed to convince herself the bizarre visions had been a dream. A shocking, in-depth, and excruciatingly intense dream, but a dream nonetheless. The data on the screen in front of her made no sense to her. It did not gel with what she remembered, but it was absolutely correct.

Commander: Rebecca Tyley

Present System: Zaonce

Witchspace System: Not set

Condition: Green

Fuel: 7.0 Light Years

Cash: 65535 Cr

Legal Status: Clean

Rating: Competent (509)

It made no sense, no sense at all.

That Evil-Juice is strong stuff. Mental note to self not to drink that again...

She looked at the black reflective screen, seeing her reflection in its mirror finished surface. She was as she expected, and yet she wasn’t.

Can it really just have been a dream? But I can remember years, whole years, a full decade!

She fired up the terminal and typed.

Query: Population type. Tianve, Beenri, Diso.

The terminal paused for a moment before returning with:

Tianve : Human Colonials

Beenri : Human Colonials

Diso : Human Colonials

Rebecca sighed, running a hand through her hair.

But I can remember felines, bugs, frogs – they were so real!

She feverishly typed something else.

Define: Q-Bomb, weapon.

No such weapon found, please re-key.

She tried again, the words coming to her mind far too easily.

Define: Tyley Feynman Quirium Cascade Mine, weapon.

No such weapon found, did you mean 'Quirium Refuelling Canister'?

She cancelled the query, frowning.

But I can remember it all so clearly. It's not fading away like a dream. They all think I'm going nuts: Mum, Dad, Red... all of them... Maybe I am!

She tried another search.

Locate: Jim McKenna, Onrira Tori Station.

No such individual found, did you mean 'Jameson'?

Rebecca stared at the screen in disappointment. Maybe she was just crazy.

No, wait... our names were changed...

She typed furiously.

Locate: Jim Feynman, Onrira Tori Station, Person.

She held her breath as the core-comm system performed its search.

One individual matches search parameters:

Feynman, James.

Onrira Tori Station, Disk 2, Gimbal 5.

Faulcon De Lacy Technical Consultant

Public Domain Holo Available, display?

Rebecca exhaled in relief and viewed the image. She felt a shiver run through her.

The image was younger, the hair dark with just a hint of grey at the temples, but it was unmistakably the man she had dreamt of.

He's real, how can that possibly be if I'm dreaming?

With trembling hands she typed out a message and sent it.

Jim Feynman's comm-tab beeped. He looked at the message.

Notification: Inbound vessel Boa Class Cruiser Eclipse has arrived in station aegis. ETA for docking, seven minutes.

Jim pressed the acknowledge button and got up, looking around his apartment.

'Your mysterious visitor here?' Geraint asked.

Jim nodded.

'Better be careful,' Geraint advised. 'This still sounds fishy to me. You sure you've never met this... what's her name again?'

'Rebecca Tyley. And yes, I'm sure.'

'Never got too drunk at one of the end-of-project parties and got your end away? Maybe she'll be dragging a brace of sprogllets and she's looking for some compensation...'

Jim raised an eyebrow at him.

'OK, not really your scene...' Geraint continued, his huge monocular eye implants goggling outwards. 'What's the core-comm say? Daughter of some low-life trader, attitude adjustments with Galcop and a reputation for blasting ships? I'd stay clear if it was me.'

I would too, if she hadn't been able to tell me precisely what was wrong with the top-secret design concept I was working on and that I've seen her face in my dreams every night for the last few days!

Jim called up the core-comm entry on the strange woman who'd contacted him out of nowhere. Just as Geraint had described, she was the daughter of an inter-system trader, and her profile was less than salubrious. A dozen minor flight infringements, a minor criminal record in her teenage years and no particular evidence of any significant aptitude in any academic subject, let alone advanced astrophysics.

Yet somehow she was able to describe a Quirium cascade as if she'd seen it.

Jim had initially dismissed the woman's message as a crank call and thought it was some kind of security leak. He was about to report it when he'd reviewed the entire message. The woman warned that the isotope fuel he was using could become unstable and would trigger a deadly

explosion under certain conditions. Intrigued, Jim had run a simulation of that precise scenario and found that not only was the woman right, she was precisely right. She quoted the mixture ratio exactly. There could be no doubt she had knowledge of something he had yet to actually create.

The display flashed the details.

Rebecca Tyley. Native of Tianve. Age 26 standard years. Callsign 'Kitalpha'.

Occupation: Trader, crewmember

Combat Rating: Competent

Vessel: Crewmember aboard Boa Class Vessel: Eclipse.

It was the holofac image of the woman that had shocked him. She was hauntingly familiar, yet he could not recall meeting her ever before.

Right down to the eyes and the frown on her face... and ever since then...

He'd been beset by troublesome dreams. Dreams of desperate fights aboard a variety of starships, strange creatures and disreputable characters, distant planets which he'd never visited. Dreams of a decade of hardship and battles which couldn't possibly have happened. Throughout all this the woman was a constant image; her face evoking feelings of despair, anger, frustration and bittersweet affection.

Jim switched off the display and made to leave.

'Don't say I didn't warn you,' Geraint chuckled as the door closed behind him.

This has to be some kind of elaborate trick, some kind of scam. But I've got to know...

Jim caught the internal transport systems down towards the docking ring. As he emerged into the vast hanger the tatty old Boa and its escorts were just locking themselves into the docking clamps. Jim watched as the Boa's engines faded and the external running lights switched off. There was a pause, as the shields discharged with a flicker of half seen light, and then the lower cargo bay hull doors folded up and out, a docking ramp lowering down against the docking bay floor.

Jim squinted against the bright lights from inside the cargo bay. There were a number of figures standing at the top, clearly a family group. Two of them had weapons drawn. One was smaller, petite, fragile-looking. Words were exchanged followed by a simple hand gesture with an obvious meaning.

Just be careful, you really don't know this guy...

I'm ok... It will be all right.

The same figure cautiously walked forward, slowing descending the ramp. A young woman, not yet in her thirties.

She was dressed in a simple trader's outfit, her hair was brown, cut into two simple folds on either side of her head. Her skin was light, her eyes a deep brown. She wore no makeup, no earrings or necklaces and she bore no tattoos. A pretty, but unremarkable woman; slight with a petite build. Anywhere else she'd have gone unnoticed, lost in a crowd.

Jim stared at her, unable to believe what he was seeing. The girl of his dreams, literally.

By Randomius... she's actually real. It's her!

He walked across to her, his eyes locked onto hers. They stopped a few feet apart, regarding each other cautiously. She stayed on the edge of the ramp as if unwilling to step down onto the docking bay floor.

'Rebecca Tyley?' Jim asked, breaking the uncomfortable silence. 'From Tianve, right?'

'You're Jim. Jim Feynman.' She was definitive. The sound of her voice made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. It was disconcertingly familiar, dragging up alarmingly powerful feelings of affection and concern from somewhere deep inside him.

It's like meeting the ghost of your lover...

He could hear her breathing coming in short quick intakes of breath. Her face was pale and her eyes wide. Her hands were shaking.

She's more nervous than I am!

'But we've never met before,' Jim said, quietly. 'Have we?'

'No.' Rebecca said uncomfortably, her voice quivering with emotion.

'And yet...'

'You remember me?' she whispered desperately. 'Please god, say you remember me!'

He nodded, taking a step towards her, wanting with all his heart to somehow reassure her.

'If I asked you what year you thought it was, would you look at me cross-eyed?' she said, nervously.

'Everything around here says it's 3138,' Jim replied cautiously. 'And yet...'

‘Yes?’ Rebecca’s eyes looked wide, alarmed, her face showing a distinct sense of loss.

‘If I picked a year at random...’ he looked at her.

‘3151,’ they both said together.

Jim looked at the strange young woman, completely unknown and yet so utterly familiar. The eyes were the most expressive, visibly haunted by the loss of something indefinable.

Rebecca bit her lower lip.

She did that! That exact mannerism!

‘Insects...’ he murmured. ‘There were insects... what were they called? Thargoids?’

She nodded; remembering... ‘A planet... Raxxla?’

‘Coyote...’ Jim said, with sudden recall.

‘Derik and Udian,’ she returned, with growing excitement.

He nodded too. ‘There was a war. Some kind of mission...’ he paused, looking at her.

‘So it did happen,’ she said, a little colour returning to her face.

‘Jim nodded. ‘Yes! Quite how, I don’t know. But maybe, just maybe...’

‘All the creatures, safe, someplace else. Somewhere we can’t ever find them,’ she said, her eyes beginning to sparkle as more memories clarified themselves.

‘The Thargoids gone too... and then... but we...’ Jim said, in sudden realisation, his voice dropped, ‘You died...’

Rebecca smiled. ‘That’s how it ended, but just before...’

Jim remembered. ‘We...’

The feel of her closeness, a desperate last embrace, the taste of her lips upon mine...

He looked at her, conscious that he was blushing.

Rebecca’s face still looked pale. ‘I thought I was going mad, I needed to know...’

They stared into each other’s eyes, looking for a trace of the elusive images that had brought them back together. Tears formed in Rebecca’s eyes and a half suppressed sob escaped her, her eyes pleading and desperate. She dashed forward, pulling Jim into a close embrace and burying her head in his chest. Jim could feel her heart, a rapid staccato rhythm, beating against him. Instinctively his arms wrapped around her as her own closed about him. She was holding him so tightly he struggled

to draw a breath. He stroked her head, seeing her eyes were tightly shut. Her body shuddered and trembled against him.

‘Don’t ever leave me...’ she whispered.

‘I won’t...’ Jim replied.

They stayed like that for long minutes. Rebecca was terrified that this too might evaporate into a dream. Jim bewildered, but somehow knowing that they were both back where they should be.

Rebecca let him go and stepped back, trying to compose herself. ‘I’m sorry; I don’t usually throw myself at...’

Jim pulled her back and kissed her, cradling her head in his hands and running his fingers through her hair. For a moment she was surprised, but she didn’t resist in the slightest. That too lasted for a time, both of them oblivious to anything else around them. Nothing else mattered, they’d found each other again, the universe had somehow orchestrated to bring them back together. Quite how they’d never know, but all that mattered now was this moment, this time, this place. They weren’t about to let it go.

Eventually they stepped back and regarded each other, eyes searching, hardly able to believe what had happened.

‘Usually,’ Jim managed after a moment, with a faint hint of a smile, ‘I’d offer to buy you a drink before...’

Rebecca smiled back. ‘I’d like that.’

‘There’s this new drink,’ he said, ‘Just imported, Evil Juice I think it’s called...’

Rebecca immediately shook her head.

‘I’ll stick to Anlian Gin, if that’s ok with you. I don’t get on too well with that purple stuff...’

He held out his hand to help her down from the loading ramp. She took his hand in hers. Her fingers grasped his a little too tightly. She looked back over her shoulder and waved to her family, signalling she was ok. They slowly put away their firearms.

Rebecca and Jim walked forward a few steps and then turned to look at each other again.

‘As I recall,’ she began coyly, ‘we argued a lot.’

‘I think that’s probably an understatement,’ Jim replied.

‘How about we try and get it right this time?’ she asked, her voice a little too sharp. There

was still a tone of desperation in her words.

‘Let’s do that,’ he said fondly, leading her across the docking bay.

‘After all,’ she said, her face aglow with relief. ‘I seem to remember standing in this very spot and promising that I’d come back and see you someday...’

Jim nodded and smiled at her.

‘But there was never enough time...’

Rebecca looked into his eyes, her expression deadly serious. She caught her breath, squeezing his hand tightly.

‘This time...’ she said, with deliberate certainty. ‘There will be.’

Author's Note

And so the Oolite Saga comes to an end! I hope you enjoyed the ride, I certainly had a lot of fun writing it. Having only originally intended to write a single story, I never imagined there would be a series of four. That's a reasonable chunk of my life there. Five years from start to finish; Status Quo was released back in 2006, and now we're at the end of 2011.

You might notice a few (not quite subliminal) themes in the stories. Status Quo very much reflected the nostalgia for Elite, with lots of 8-bit in jokes for those in the know. It was quite lightweight and spun a similar yarn to the original '*Dark Wheel*'. Such things were quite deliberate. As I've said before, there was no intention to make a sequel. Even with the second edition update to bring it more in line with Mutabilis and the changes to Oolite, it remains a very straightforward space opera.

Mutabilis was written during a period when I was working in a very high pressure environment and thus took on a darker tone and took far longer to bring to a conclusion. I had to completely rewrite it at one point. Rebecca and Jim are estranged, their relationship breaking down. There is more complexity. One thing I deliberately set out to do in Mutabilis was to make Jim and Rebecca's relationship more tangled. In Status Quo it was mostly a case of 'boy meets girl under a silvery moon' even if there was a bit of laser fire thrown in. In Mutabilis, it's more realistic. Trying to make a relationship work in that kind of universe must be tough, and as you've seen in Incursio, it all comes apart for them again. A number of folks have told me that the overall story is more compelling due to this on/off romance, making the characters more realistic. We all know life isn't always neat and tidy, why should it be any different in the future? Rebecca and Jim both have faults and limitations and those play out in the story.

Incursio wasn't really planned either. I'd left quite a few loose ends in Mutabilis and it was an opportunity to fast forward into the future to see how things panned out. Having given everyone my interpretation of Raxxla, I wanted to give the Thargoids a bit of a makeover too, explaining why they are the way they are. My characters are once again messed up, with untidy lives, trying to figure out what to do next and living with their choices and regrets. The introduction of some of the Oolite forum characters from other fanfic works just makes that canvas bigger. I had huge fun writing the parts for Udian, Derik, Daddyhoggy, Hesperus, Coyote, Myy'q and Cheyd. I'm very grateful for their creators to allow me to use them.

And then Finis – an obvious title – and the end of the Saga. Themes of chaos and disruption,

analogous to the problems now faced by the worldwide economy. The European Union sometimes feels rather like Galcop, and Brussels rather like Lave - and equally fragile. I paint a rather unpleasant future for the worlds of chart one. The last time we had a crisis of this type in Europe we ended up with a world war. Let's hope that doesn't happen again...

Hopefully you found it a satisfactory way to wrap up these adventures. For those who might be puzzled by the rationale, you can blame David 'Selezen' Hughes. In the original Elite there were all sorts of creatures in the universe - all those bugs, felines, lobstoids, edible poets and so on - and these are faithfully recreated in Oolite. In the official Elite sequels (Frontier and Frontier First Encounters) these races had mysteriously disappeared, along with the ability for ships to use 'galactic witchspace'. Why?

The obvious answer is that the designers of the sequel games simply ignored what had gone before and just made up something new. Fans are rarely satisfied with this approach and are often found tortuously trying to close the gaps in the 'canon', and Dave did precisely that, figuring out a solution to that conundrum. I simply told the story, based on his timeline. Those creatures had to go somewhere, so where did they go? All has been revealed.

Spare a thought for me in all in this too; Rebecca, Jim and the other characters I invented have likely had their last outing, and I'll miss them, particularly my feisty conflicted space mistress. I've had quite a few emails about her, mostly positive. It seems there remains a dearth of strong, but realistic, female characters in science fiction.

You may ask what inspired these characters, are they based on anyone real?

In this case no, there is no real 'Jim' or 'Rebecca'. There aren't that many places you can go to get inspiration for a faster than light ship's pilot or a 31st century astrophysicist, at least, not without plagiarising stuff. You just have to make it up, so that's what I did.

To be honest, my characters in the Oolite Saga are no different from the characters in my contemporary stories. I tend to ignore the situation to a degree and concentrate on what the people are like; this is my 'comfort zone' when writing. I love the conversations, the emotions and the feelings. The description of scenery and action I find rather hard work by comparison. I make big efforts to ensure each character is reasonably rounded, with good and bad aspects, flaws and virtues.

Take Rebecca. Pretty, but not that you'd really notice. Smart, but not so smart she never makes a poor choice. Arrogant, cocky and sure of herself to a point, she's fine until pushed to the edge - only to reveal huge vulnerabilities and a lack of confidence. She's really just the girl next door who got a lucky (or unlucky!) break and happens to live in the 31st century - where jumping aboard a

star-cruising spacecraft is no more daunting than catching a bus is in the 21st. I firmly believe that humanity will be little changed in a thousand years from now; we'll just have better stuff.

Why not 'Zamia', 'Solara' or some other kind of more 'spacey' name? Isn't Rebecca a bit, well, down to earth? The first man on the moon was called Neil. Need I say more? I was trying to emphasise that she is normal, just an average person with a bit of talent, trying to make her way in the universe. She's not really much different from you or I. Rebecca as a name is more than two thousand years old and there's no reason it won't still be around a thousand years from now. I'll admit to a spot of indulgence too, my favourite book is 'Rebecca' by Daphne Du Maurier. Rebecca is also a Hebrew name, which when translated gives the English word 'Bitterness' – a strong facet of her character throughout these stories.

Ordinary people in extraordinary situations, something all my books feature.

And what of Elite and Oolite? If I've learnt anything from the continued existence of this game, the thousands of downloads of these stories and the hundreds of emails saying 'Thanks' it's this - never underestimate the power of an idea, especially when it takes root in the minds of the young. It's easy to be nostalgic, but for folks of a certain age this will always remain a focal point for us – something that we recall with fondness, yes – but more than that – a catalyst of the imagination, something that takes us beyond the humdrum, suspension of disbelief at its best. Even now, I still look at sci-fi movies and think 'Not bad, but if only they made an Elite movie...' – it will probably never happen, so my books are my personal alternative. But if someone fancies making a movie... let me know!

So farewell Jim, farewell Rebecca. If you want more Oolite fiction look no further than the Oolite Bulletin boards and the Elite Wiki, there are plenty of other very worthy contributors there now. I'll still be writing – I'm planning a fantasy saga next with a whole new cast of characters – so for now I'm triggering my final galactic witchspace and heading off to pastures new.

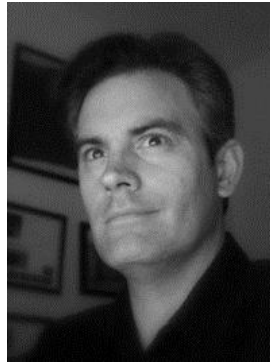
See you in witchspace, and of course... Right on, Commanders!

Drew. (Dec 2011)

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About the Author



Drew has written a series of novels and short stories for the '[Oolite](#)' Universe, along with other contemporary ebooks. You can find them at his website below.

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