

Incurσιο

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a black dress, is holding a futuristic, black, vertical assault rifle. She is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. The background is a dark, futuristic interior with purple and blue lighting, featuring curved architectural elements and a view of a starry space through a window. The overall mood is sci-fi and action-oriented.

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

Drew Wagner

Incursio

A novella based on the space trading game Oolite.

Part 3 of the Oolite Saga by Drew Wagar.

Sequel to 'Status Quo' and 'Mutabilis'.

More Ebooks available at

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Dedicated to Robert Paul Holdstock (2 August 1948 – 29 November 2009)

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Contents

License	3
Contents	4
Thanks To:.....	5
Can you read?.....	7
Prologue	8
Chapter One	10
Chapter Two	19
Chapter Three.....	47
Chapter Four	75
Chapter Five	104
Chapter Six.....	131
Chapter Seven	159
Chapter Eight	185
Chapter Nine	213
Author's Note.....	248
About the Author.....	250

Thanks To:

To my wife and family: who put up with all the irritating idiosyncrasies that go with being a writer, allow me time to pursue this hobby and still manage to forgive me time and again.

The late, great Robert Holdstock: Robert wrote the Novella that came with the original 'Elite' game. This story, 'The Dark Wheel', provided the background to the Elite universe upon which my tales are based. Robert also wrote the original Elite manual, further fleshing out the environment in which the game took place. Sadly, Robert passed away on the 29th of November 2009 due to complications following an E. Coli infection a couple of weeks earlier.

To Daddyhoggy: Who just 'gets' what this writing lark is all about. Also for the freedom to create a character based on his name in this story. Hope you enjoy 'Daddyhoggy', Daddyhoggy!

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To Wyvern: For the character of "Derik Roh'i", a fearsome reptilian bounty hunter. Derik also features in 'Rise of the Kirin' – available on the Elite Wiki.

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based on the forum personalities, her amusing assassination stories and obsessive hatred of rock-hermits.

To the developers of Oolite, the OXP builders and the general forum contributors. None of this would be here without your creativity. Without doubt the most effective collaboration project I've ever been involved with.

The 20,000+ readers who've downloaded Status Quo and the 15,000+ who've downloaded Mutabilis. Hope you enjoyed the ride!

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 Thargoid warrior is a heavily built, dark-chitin covered insect measuring just over seven feet tall. Thargoids 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.

Little information has been obtained about Thargoid society or culture. The only known fact is that the society is hive based, with no sense of close family. It is thought that the society is divided into colonies, possibly reminiscent of Old-Earth insect species. The Thargoid language is obscure and confounds current translation technology, leading to meaningless (and occasionally amusing) wide-band comm transmissions during engagement.

Nothing is known about internal Thargoid politics. The Galactic Co-operative is officially at war with the Thargoid race and they are constantly under threat of planetary invasion. The Galactic Navy has engaged the Thargoids in a number of interstellar 'war zones', attempting to disrupt their chain of command - so far with little success.

Thargoid invasions usually seem to be prompted by the need for either agricultural or mineral resources, rather than a sociological or anthropological need to expand or colonise. In fact, the animal life on an invaded world is largely ignored unless it poses a threat. Thargoids do not colonise invaded planets and always retreat when they have acquired the resources they need.

Thargoids are thought to have a natural affinity with space and with witch-space in particular. Thargoid warriors seem to spend a large amount of time in space. Naval pilots and crews report that the warships in the war zones are encountered on repeated occasions over a period of months - often without respite.

The location of the Thargoid homeworld is unknown, prompting many to speculate that they are a space-born species. How they originated is a mystery.

Thargoids. Insects with a severe attitude problem. Where they come from, no one knows.

Galcop declared war on the Thargoids backs in 2851 but technically it's not a war, as the Thargoids have never responded to any official attempts to broker talks. Some have speculated that this is due to their hive structure and there is no central 'authority' with which to negotiate. We think they just don't care or maybe they just like fighting. They've supposedly had their 'fear-glands' removed, after all.

Thargoids simply attack on sight. What are they trying to achieve? No idea. All we do know is they steal resources, disrupt supply lines and cause havoc wherever they appear. Other than that they seem to have no particular goal in mind, which makes defeating them extremely problematic.

Traders live in fear of encountering these dark and malevolent octagonal vessels and for good reason. Thargoid technology is superior to ours – there, we said it! Thargoid ships have no obvious engine exhausts, yet are remarkably quick and agile. Laser and shield technology is likewise superior. Thargoids don't appear to use missiles but deploy 'Thargons' – small autonomous vessels – which harass attackers from all sides.

Thargoids are blamed for witch-space mis-jumps and are reputed to be able to navigate inside (and rip ships out of) witch-space at will. Few pilots survive the experience of being ambushed by a Thargoid squadron in such a fashion.

Our advice is simple. Unless you have a serious iron-ass and really know what you're doing, run like hell. Don't attempt comms, don't give them the benefit of the doubt. They're implacable, fearless and bent on destruction. Kill the bugs, before they kill us!

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

A state of war exists between the Galactic Co-operative and the Thargoid race. All pilots are required to log any sightings of Thargoid vessels immediately it is possible to do so. All pilots with a rank of 'Dangerous' or above are required to engage Thargoid vessels whenever directed to do so by Galcop personnel.

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

Chapter One

Guttural clicks emanated from their mouth parts and light reflected dimly from shiny-slick grey-green chitin as their limbs grasped the crumpled and blackened bits of debris, slowly turning and inspecting them. To ordinary eyes none of it would have been worthy of a second glance; hull plating, smashed equipment, conduits and charred circuitry. The two insectoid creatures were clearly not of this opinion; they were feverishly looking through the wreckage.

It was a crashed vessel, wrecked and ruined many years before. How it had come to be marooned on an asteroid in the depths of space was unclear; clearly the victim of some untold calamity. Much of it was completely missing but there was enough left to make out the vague predatory outlines of a human warship, a catamaran vessel, famed and feared for its prowess in battle many years ago.

The Thargoids had ignored the external hull; they were interested in what remained of the on-board systems. The vessel's tarnished nameplate, surviving against all odds, was of no consequence to them. They passed the small emblem bearing the moniker *Falchion* without hesitation or recognition.

Much of the ship had already been salvaged. It had borne a strange and powerful weapon on its forward gun emplacement. Whilst ruined, enough remained for the Thargoids to begin reverse engineering the design. It promised to make a significant difference to their efforts.

Having scanned the immediate area they proceeded further along the hull, towards the most intact part of the hapless vessel. The hull was shattered but some elements of the interior still remained in place. Recognisable bulkheads and passageways could be seen, alongside the tattered remains of interior decorations. Beyond this was the core of the vessel, containing the smashed and compacted witch-drive mechanism. The Thargoids were still surprised by how primitive mankind's grasp of that remarkable technology remained.

One Thargoid carefully examined a shattered segment of computer core and began attaching power conduits to it. It flickered into life. Damaged holofac emitters flashed grainy images of stored information. Figures moved, argued and gestured. The Thargoids downloaded the information, translating it as they went. The images were old, time-stamped from over a decade before.

The images stabilised. A tall human man, with a pale thin face and a hooked nose; a young woman with simple brown hair and wide eyes held in his grasp by the throat, internal fluid seeping

from a wound on her face. As the Thargoids watched the man threw the woman to the floor.

The man stepped back whilst speaking to the woman, wiping the unpleasant fluid from his fingers with a small piece of fabric.

The woman tried and failed to stand up, clearly injured. She touched her face, smearing the garish red human ichor across it.

Now the man was laughing as he spoke to the unfortunate woman. Whatever he said it clearly upset her. Liquid was leaking from her eyes. She shouted back defiantly, shaking her head, mouthing a single word.

‘DUX DUCIS, INCOLUMITAS!’ The Thargoids intoned excitedly, having correctly translated the woman’s speech.

They stopped the recording and chattered excitedly amongst themselves for a moment. Then they turned their attention back to the flickering images.

The man’s face showed clear signs of his superior position. He spoke again before being interrupted by something out of sight of the recorder. Both he and the woman turned to look at whatever it was. To the man it was good news, to the woman, very much the opposite.

The recording captured the dismayed expression on the young woman’s face and then froze. The Thargoids scanned it repeatedly, increasing the resolution and then searching throughout the remaining data for any other potentially pertinent information. The Thargoids studied the image intently, analysing the woman’s facial structure; determining, extrapolating.

The second Thargoid moved to the rear of the hull. There was debris here but something else, a dark stain, long since dried. It was quickly scanned and a holofac image of a complex double-helix organic molecule appeared.

A series of clicks, followed by...

‘RAGAZZA!’

‘And the topic on everyone’s mind is the increasing ferocity of Thargoid attacks on outlying systems. Only last week transport ships travelling via Teorge were raided. Survivors report that the Thargoids destroyed defending escorts within minutes and then ripped the holds out of the freighters, leaving them critically damaged and unable to navigate.’

‘Hundreds of lives were lost in this latest incident. Galcop advises all trading convoys to

bolster their defences and only travel on Behemoth patrol routes. Thargoid incursions in the Formidine rift appear to be increasing dramatically. We asked Galcop and the Navy for an interview but, as usual, they declined. What's really going on out there? Truth is, we don't know. This is Kiri Mereso, for the Tionisla Chronicle, wideband channel three eighty five point two...'

Commander Myy'q waved his hand vaguely in the direction of the vid-link in order to silence it and relaxed back into the Sargainian-Wax chaise-longue. Soothing music began to gently waft through the room.

'Can't they talk about anything else?' he complained, contemplating the view in front of him.

It was spectacular. A Leesti-pine table, diamond turned and polished, stretched the length of the gently curving observation deck, dominating the room. It stood upon a Sotiquan redweed plush-pile carpet, woven from strands of the famous plant. Still alive, it caressed and massaged the feet of those lucky enough to walk upon it.

Upon the table was a veritable cornucopia of exotic dishes from the eight charts; colours from across the spectrum, including some that were recommended to be eaten under ultraviolet light for maximum effect. There were morsels, aperitifs, hors d'oeuvres and selection of fine cuts aplenty, enough to cause even the fussiest gourmet to salivate in anticipation.

Accompanying this was a sophisticated selection of wines, some brewed traditionally from fruits and berries, others from more esoteric ingredients including grain, algae and even, in one case, live invertebrates.

Everything was served on the latest trend in cuisine; cutlery and tableware machined from the surface material of a white dwarf. Impossibly thin, unbreakable and ridiculously expensive, it was all the rage.

The eight huge plast-alloy windows that comprised the arching exterior of the deck afforded a stunning backdrop, giving an almost 360 degree view of the space around the restaurant ship. It paled into insignificance when contrasted with the feast laid out within. If he had been bothered to look Myy'q would have seen a flotilla of vessels slowly making their way through the vacuum of space.

'I mean, it's so depressing,' Myy'q continued. 'Thargoids here there and everywhere, looting and killing. What's the galaxy coming to, that's what I want to know.'

His sole companion was a demure lady feline, clad in dark mauve fur, who was serving Myy'q wine from a decanter hewn from a single carbon crystal. She topped up his glass with a coquettish wink, salaciously arching her tail in a suggestive way.

Sootia had a job to do, she knew what was required and she was good at it. Myy'q was not a traditional customer. Most of their clients came from the elite social classes. Myy'q was clearly a trader, not somebody they would normally consider entertaining. She had been momentarily shocked when she had seen the run-down vessel in which he'd arrived. It was just so - ordinary.

'I mean,' Myy'q continued, swirling the wine in his glass. 'Here I am, enjoying a small but well earned treat for all my hard work and all they can talk about is the war. I mean, it's not happening here is it? It's only those ghastly outlying systems that complain and they always complain! Bet it's all overhyped. It usually is.'

Sootia was too well trained to roll her eyes at the 'well earned treat'. A repast such as that provided by the Zaracean Cuisine Guild was no 'treat'. The restaurant ship *Preen* was the pride of the Zarace civilian shipping lines. A custom built, no expense spared Emerald class cruiser, entirely given over to staterooms, galleys, kitchens and every style of on-board restaurant from the flamboyant to the intensely personal. More than three kilometres from end to end and crewed exclusively by the native felines of Zarace, it was one of the premier eating experiences to be enjoyed in Chart one.

It was cheaper to buy your own ship than to eat here; the pinnacle of gastronomy. Ludicrously expensive, it was the preserve of the fabulously rich or those with rather mixed up priorities.

'You know what I think?' Myy'q said, favouring her with a glance. 'I reckon it's a tax gimmick. Galcop wants a new set of ships and they're getting us to pay for it. Taxes are outrageous, worse than they've ever been.'

He wiped his mouth with a napkin, focussing his attention back on to the wine.

'Now that is good stuff.'

Sootia refilled his glass, sparing a glance out of the observation windows, her vertical irises narrowing slightly. Even to the least experienced space traveller, it was obvious that the convoy looked a little unusual. Every large ship was flanked by at least two escorts and these were not the run of the mill Sidewinders or Mambas; hired Black Monk Heavy Gunboats nestled alongside navy spec Mk2 Vampire interceptors. There was enough firepower out there to start a small war. It seemed overkill for a trading convoy that normally faced nothing more dangerous than the after-effects of its clients' occasional over-indulgence.

Sootia had known some folks on the Teorge convoy that had been raided, few of them had survived. Her cousin had been one of the lucky ones. All of his human friends had been killed, along

with the hired hands in the escort ships.

And Teorge wasn't that far from Zarece.

'Scaremongering, that's what it is.' Myy'q drained his glass again. 'You see? As simple as that.'

There was a flash of chromatic light from the windows. Sootia instantly looked up. No more clients were expected until later on today. An unscheduled visitor? Impossible. Reservations were booked years in advance.

'More wine my dear, more wine. Time to drink a toast to...' Myy'q frowned. Sootia was staring out of the window, the decanter held loosely in her paw. As he watched, the decanter slid away, dropping to the floor with a ringing crash, splattering both of them in vintage Caribinay. The thick wine oozed across the carpet, which rolled up slightly, becoming instantly intoxicated.

'What are you doing!' he yelled. 'Have you any idea how much that...'

Sootia was backing away from the windows, one careful cautious step at a time. Myy'q could see her fur was standing on end in alarm. He turned and almost fell off his chair, his face lit by the blaze of unnatural light from the observation windows.

The soft music in the room was suddenly interrupted by a rough authoritative voice.

'All ships, intercept and defend! Scramble! Intercept and def...' the voice was cut off abruptly by another; deeper, rasping, deafening.

'VULGATE! DUO, QUINDECIM, NOVEM!'

Myy'q recognised the sound of that voice and a thin film of cold sweat broke out on his brow. It was how the translator circuits rendered Thargoid communications. Even if he hadn't, the sight of four octagonal Thargoid warships heading directly towards the convoy left little doubt as to the current situation.

By Randomius...' Myy'q croaked, his mouth dropping open.

'Turrets armed and tracking. Shields to full power. All escorts to attack formation. Fire at will, commanders! Fire at will!'

Myy'q saw the ten escorting Vampires streak quickly into a delta formation, triggering their fuel injectors in a sequenced and professional manner. The Zaraceans only employed the best.

'Vamp Leader to Vamp group. Engage targets in sequence. Concentrate all fire on primary

target and then switch to secondary. Lock missiles.’

Myy’q saw the Vampires roll into a circular formation, allowing them to all fire simultaneously. The distance between them and the incoming Thargoids closed rapidly.

A third voice, deep and sonorous, echoed from the speakers. ‘Cleric to Monks. Hold formation and watch for stragglers. We’ll fleece the unwary. Hold position and consolidate your assets.’

The eight Black Monk Gunboats dropped into defensive positions, blocking the route between the incoming Thargoids and the fleet.

The Thargoids had adopted a ‘wall’ formation, travelling through space in a square two by two grid arrangement. Myy’q frowned. It was an unusual tactic for them. Thargoids usually swarmed in an almost random manner, deploying their remote controlled ‘Thargon’ autonomous craft as extra firepower. There was no sign of Thargons. The alien ships were driving in a straight line towards the convoy with no evasive moves at all.

Something is wrong here.

The Vampires were almost in range...

‘Vamp leader to Vamp group, fire on my command. Three, two...’

There was a flicker of light from each of the Thargoid vessels and strands of clear white energy lashed out from each of them. The battlefield was obscured by a scintillating inferno of coruscating light.

But Thargoid weapons are green, what...

Myy’q rubbed his eyes only to see flames, spinning debris and disintegrating wreckage. He blinked and squinted. For a moment nothing happened. He held his breath.

Yes! We got them!

The Thargoid warships emerged from the destruction; unharmed, unstoppable, unaffected.

No!

The Vampires were gone. Myy’q stared in astonishment and fear. Not a single one had survived. The Thargoids were bearing down on the fleet, still in formation.

‘VULGATE! DUO, QUINDECIM, NOVEM!’ The terrifying proclamation crashed through the audio circuits of the convoy ships. Myy’q had no idea what it meant. He winced at the volume.

They never make sense... but they never say the same thing twice either..

‘Cleric to Monks. Market has crashed. Depreciate the foe.’

The Black Monk Gunboats lumbered forwards, their turret mounted weaponry peppering the Thargoids with long range fire. Myy’q saw the Thargoid vessels’ shields glowing green as they repulsed the attack.

Abruptly, the Thargoids broke formation, rotating their ships and moving to intercept the Black Monks. Actinic laser fire from the defending ships criss-crossed the dark sky, catching one of the Thargoid warships. It succumbed to the combined attack, its shields collapsing. Myy’q watched the lasers hitting the exposed surface of the ship before it exploded violently.

Hurrah!

The three remaining Thargoid vessels triggered their weapons in response. Myy’q gasped as the lead Thargoid vessel emitted a blazing, twisting, raging storm of tormented energy which angrily arced towards the nearest Black Monk ship; streaming tendrils of white fire mixed with lightning. He’d seen nothing like it before.

The Black Monk was impaled by the stream. Myy’q saw it drill straight through the ship, slicing it clean in half, leaving two neatly dissected sections of flaming hull, spewing debris and bodies into the void which floated past the windows of the *Preen*.

Sootia screamed in horror.

The other Thargoids opened fire a moment later, with identical, devastating results. The Thargoids were able to aim their weapons off-axis, making it impossible for the heavy Black Monk Gunboats to dodge. Despite their heavy armour, defensive fire and powerful shields they were no match for the Thargoid weapon. It was a massacre.

Ship after ship was hunted down and slaughtered without mercy, cut to scrap in a terrifying twisting cacophony of clashing metal and blistering weapons fire. Frantic calls from the defenders echoed briefly over the wideband, before being abruptly cut off. Screams of the dying faded into the darkness. It was over in seconds.

Dear Randomius, not us, not me!

The Black Monks were gone.

The Thargoid vessels swarmed amongst the civilian ships of the convoy. Myy’q was just able to see the ghostly emanations of scanning beams flickering over one of the transports. The ship’s hull

flickered gently, as if being caressed.

They're looking for something, perhaps they'll let the civilians go...

As if reading his mind the Captain of the transport opened up his wideband transmitter, his human voice high with fear.

'Thargoid vessels, we surrender! Take any supplies you want! We surrender! No conditions!'

The ghostly scanning beams converged on the bridge of the transport for a brief moment.

'Frak, engage the witch-jump motors... just do it...!'

'They won't engage, sir... something is...'

'VULGATE! DUO, QUINDECIM, NOVEM!' The strange prose resonated across the fleet, all the more terrifying for its new found familiarity.

Next moment, the streaming energy weapons burst forth. Myy'q stumbled back from his chair, tripping over the prone form of Sootia, who was now cowering under the table. By the time Myy'q had dragged her out and tried to wrestle her towards the exit the transport was gone and the Thargoids were heading across the formation, scanning the remaining freighters and passenger vessels. Each one was dispatched in turn after a brief pause and another doom laden proclamation from the invaders.

'We've got to get to the escape pods!' Myy'q cried. 'Now!'

Sootia was slack in his grasp, her eyes still locked on the observation windows where flash after flash signalled the demise of the rest of the convoy.

'No!' She gasped. 'This can't be...'

Myy'q turned to see the Thargoids coming about from their final quarry and heading towards the restaurant ship.

Too late...

The windows of the observation deck flickered with the ephemeral light of the scanning beams. The light cut out, the huge green pulsing hulk of a Thargoid warship blotting out the light of the stars, of the sun...

Sootia grabbed him close in an embrace, shivering and wincing against him. He closed his eyes, resigned to his fate. He could hear blood pounding in his ears, his heart racing. He counted the beats; one, two, three... how many more before they were obliterated? Would it be instantaneous or

would they suffer a short choking death in the vacuum of space?

There was a series of clicks from the wideband transmitter, followed by a burst of static.

Myy'q opened one eye. He could see stars. He opened the other.

The Thargoids were gone. The space outside the observation deck of the *Preen* was filled with spinning wreckage but there was no sign of the hostile invaders. Tremulously, a growing awareness filtered into their stunned minds.

They let us go... but why?

Sootia whimpered beside him but he stroked her head and raised it to him.

'They've gone. We're alive. Look!'

The *Preen* was alone in space. Intact, undamaged, un-raided; lone survivor of a senseless attack. Thousands had died aboard the other lost vessels of the convoy, not counting the vain sacrifice of the defending gunboats and interceptors.

Myy'q recovered quickly, more used to the shock and awe of space combat. His mind was trying to understand his unlikely survival. He released Sootia and picked the remains of the decanter up from the floor, turning it over in his hands as his mind turned over their unlikely survival.

Myy'q looked at Sootia. Her feline eyes gazed back; uncomprehending, still terrified.

Then it came to him.

Chapter Two

The musicians on Teanrebi were some of the most accomplished in the chart and the Worshipful Company of Historical Instrument Makers had provided them with the fruits of their unique craft. Their skills were reported to be centuries old in origin, with tools and techniques that dated back to the diaspora; the semi-mythical exodus from the homeworld, Old-Earth.

Certainly many of the instruments were more than just antiques. Many were made of obscure materials, some even organic plant matter, the turned and polished remnants of old trees dating back into times before space flight was even thought possible. Those carefully preserved devices remained capable of catching emotions and captivating audiences in the right hands and yet had seen a thousand years of history pass them by. History: with all the progress, cataclysms, celebrations, despairs and atrocities that ten centuries of time had visited upon the people of the universe.

Jim McKenna had always loved ‘real’ music. It was a unique and distinguished form of entertainment in current times. With a population of trillions, the aligned worlds had few opportunities to experience such a spectacle in its true form; live; with instruments played with no recordings, no enhancements, no storage and transmission technology.

The Teanrebi Michel-Jarre Hall was a unique structure. Designed to house several hundred thousand people for concerts, untold credits had been spent on ensuring that its natural architectural shape and composition carefully conveyed sound from the centre even to the extreme edges of the hall. There was no electronic manipulation, merely the acoustic design. It was the only music hall of its type in the chart and had no real equal outside of that.

Needless to say, concerts were rather oversubscribed and reassuringly expensive. It was the preserve of those with eclectic, otherworldly tastes and significant disposable income. The Teanrebi Ancient and Philharmonic Orchestra was rather specialist entertainment.

The interval was drawing to a close. Jim ran a hand through his hair. It obstinately flopped back onto his forehead. He could see it in front of his vision. Grey. No hint of the strong black it had once been. Time had passed, a lot of time. He leant back in his seat and surveyed the huge hall. The guests were beginning to filter back in ready for the second half. The seat next to him was still unoccupied. The musicians were retuning the instruments. It was sign of their age that they needed constant adjustment – some even between pieces, let alone performances.

The backdrop for the musicians was a holofac display. It had been showing ancient footage

from Old-Earth; rolling oceans, huge swaths of green grasslands and woodlands, mauve mountains capped with snow. It looked like a beautiful place.

I wonder what it's really like? Not that we can ever visit it. Galcop saw to that centuries ago. Anyway, my travelling days are over...

She was making her way back along the aisle. Jim looked up with a sigh. Slim and dressed in a white dress that flattered her figure despite the years that had continued to spin past in a blur. His wife of eight years. She negotiated her way around a rather large couple who struggled to get out of her way, with smiling apologies and embarrassed laughs. She waved at him once she'd got past, her eyes sparkling.

He smiled back, half-heartedly.

She sat down next to him, giving him a quick kiss on the cheek.

'Got them,' she said, waving some comm-tab slips at him.

'Really?' he said, tiredly.

'You could show some enthusiasm,' she snapped. 'Do you know how much these are worth? All the entertaining I had to organise to associate us with these people?'

'I remember,' he replied, looking back at the musicians, wishing they would start. Escapism, that was what he needed.

'They are only the most influential people on the whole damn planet!' she fired back.

'Remember how we got that research grant organised?'

'Selling our souls for the sake of politics,' Jim returned.

'We've got standing and respect,' she retorted angrily, 'despite your embarrassingly inept attempts to socialise. People see us in the right places, with the right people. We can finally make something of all of this hard work!'

'I'm sure you're right,' Jim said.

She glared at him but whatever she was about to say was lost as the lights dimmed and the musicians stopped their tuning exercises.

'How long is the second half?' she moaned.

'Two hours,' Jim replied, irritated.

'Ugh,' she said, composing herself in her seat and adjusting her hair. 'Quite what you see in

all this is beyond me. It's just fortunate the Pasquals and the Harrisons are here. Hardly worth coming otherwise...'

'Shhhh!'

The lights had faded to a faint background illumination. The holofac backdrop of Old-Earth faded and was replaced with a star-scape. Uncounted tiny dots blazed against the infinite depths of space. The effect was dramatic. Jim gasped. He'd not seen anything like it since...

...since a long time ago. Another time, another life...

The conductor strode onto the stage, bowed to the orchestra and then turned towards the audience. A single spotlight picked him out. He was dressed in appropriately historical garb; an almost baroque collection of pantaloons, tuxedo and ostentatious bow-tie. He gestured with his baton and the orchestra poised, ready to play.

'My Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen,' he announced. 'Today I have the pleasure of introducing a prologue to our second half. A surprise addition! One of our most celebrated young composers, recently having achieved his mastery here at the Teanrebi Guild of Musicians...'

There was a muted rumble of anticipation throughout the hall. People were leaning forward to get a better view.

A young man joined the conductor on stage, simply dressed in a smart modern suit, bowing to the audience and receiving an enthusiastic round of applause. Jim recognised one of the rising stars of the Guild. Despite his relative youth he had mastered several of the ancient instruments and had composed new material based on their capabilities. Many envied his talents but none could deny them.

'This isn't on the programme...' his wife complained from beside him. 'Who is he?'

Jim rolled his eyes. 'Don't tell me you haven't heard of Jean Equinox?'

His wife looked blank. 'No, is he well connected?'

'He's a musician. From Anle.'

She looked down and sniffed. 'Anle? Oh dear. Poor fellow. I guess this is his chance to drag himself up out of the gutter...'

Jean brought out his instrument, a small antique construction; wood, with a mere four tensioned strings. He positioned it at his shoulder in what looked to be an awkward fashion, with another tensioned pole poised ready to be drawn across it.

The conductor was still making introductions.

‘...a piece of his own composition and a treat for the rest of us. May I present, Jean Equinox, on violin, with *The Mystery of Raxxla!*’

Jim started involuntarily, leaning forward himself to scrutinise the musician. Without hesitation the music started. It was a deep and meaningful melody, wrapping itself around the audience and transporting them deftly into space; into mystery and enigma. The music was astonishing, the expertise demonstrated by the orchestra overwhelming. Jean was furiously playing, his fingers and hands a blur of motion, yet the sound generated was pure, unhurried and intoxicating.

Jim felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise up and a shiver ran down his spine.

My God, he's talented. He could have been there, it's as if he knew what it was like...

‘Not very tall is he?’ his wife whispered. ‘And they could have brushed his hair before he came out...’

‘Quiet!’ Jim snapped. His wife looked offended.

It was too late. The magic had been broken. Jim was back in his seat, not flying through the depths of space hunting for a lonely forgotten world.

‘Do you always have to spoil everything?’ he muttered under his breath.

‘It's such a dirge!’ she responded.

She shook her blonde hair and took out a compact, checking her lipstick and eyeliner. The opulent sea-borne Orevian gems sparkled at her neck, complimenting the low cut shimmering white dress she wore. Her eyes, a startling bright blue, looked back at him without comprehension. She looked perfect as always, the epitome of what the wife of a successful professional should look like.

‘Sonia...’

‘What? Look, the Pasquals are leaving!’ she began. ‘We need to make sure we catch them before they go! I haven't secured anything for the end of the month yet...’

‘Sit down! Quiet!’

She looked at him crossly. ‘Well, I...’

People around them were looking across with irritated glances. She subsided, crossing her arms in a huff. Jim sighed; he'd suffer her pent up frustration later.

Yet another row...

The music continued unhindered. Jim was just beginning to relax and enjoy it when the holofac screen behind the orchestra flickered. The star-scape vanished and was replaced with the image of a familiar news announcer.

I can't even get five minute's peace! What can this possibly be?

Clearly it wasn't part of the rehearsal, the orchestra looked up in surprise and bewilderment. The news announcer's voice sounded out. The orchestra stopped playing untidily, looking around at each other in confusion.

'We apologise for the interruption. We are bringing you breaking news from the Tionisla system.'

Jim stared at the images that appeared in front of him, a cold hard tension growing in the pit of his stomach.

It was an old ship, though it had been maintained meticulously. A design from more than a decade before, already regarded as something of a classic. Snub-nosed and angular, it had been elegant once but fashion had moved on and left its design behind. It remained a head turner, out of rarity only.

Any thoughts that it was an easy target would have quickly been dispelled by its response when under threat. It was a 'sleeper', an understated ship packing a punch far above its weight. One to avoid.

Twin wing-mounted military lasers were the only visible modification. Hidden discreetly along the fuselage were the spikes of shield enhancements, stealth technologies and non-standard ordnance pods. The characteristic stains of laser impacts marred the paintwork, duralium hull and lettering. Clearly a ship that had seen action.

Seconds before, the old Mk1 Vampire had materialised in the depths of the Tionisla star-system, arriving by witch-space – that mysterious mechanism for traversing vast interstellar distances in the blink of an eye. It had angled itself quickly towards the planet, triggering its local space 'Torus' drive, aiming directly for the *aegis* – the safe zone around every planet in which the space stations orbited.

Ahead the famous Tionisla Graveyard glistened like a galaxy in miniature, a sparkling array of tiny dots from this distance, a spiral slowly rotating about a central core of light. To be interred there was the mark of astonishing wealth; to be part of that vast floating mausoleum set you apart

from the merely rich. There you could find the ships, tributes, statues and shrines of those that had tried to make a permanent mark on the universe, unsatisfied with their mortality. You'd also find the traps left for the unwary or those with a view to grave-robbing.

To the right, glowing on the dark side of the planet like a small moon, was the vast construction that was the Tionisla Chronicle Array, essentially a huge transmitter, beaming news, information and opinion across the chart. Not the last word in sophisticated entertainment, yet it was arguably one of the most successful media outlets.

The pilot spared neither any consideration. Both constructs were part of a familiar backdrop, nothing looked out of place. In common with most combateers the pilot was only interested in what was unusual; a ship flying on an odd vector, groups of vessels hovering around an asteroid, the tell-tale flashes of light in the darkness of space; the signature of a battle.

Thin, pale-skinned and delicately boned hands adjusted the throttles and navigation controls with a quick and practised air, setting the auto-pilot to manage the approach. Satisfied that everything was in place their owner sat back in the pilot's chair and surveyed the main viewer with a frown. One hand brushed through simply cut dark-brown hair, revealing a narrow, attractive but otherwise unremarkable human woman's face, unadorned with any form of make-up or jewellery; no earrings, no bangles, no piercings.

No ring...

Nothing save a thin necklace supporting a tiny data cube.

The only other feature of particular note was her eyes, a deep brown with a hard, cold and distant look to them; eyes that didn't match the youthful appearance. A woman not yet old but no longer young.

Rebecca Weston had been in space a long time, there was little that took her by surprise. A simple run to Tionisla should have given her no qualms at all after fifteen years behind the helm of a space-going combat vessel.

Who am I kidding? This might be it. Tionisla is where it happens after all. So where are they?

She bit her lip and zoomed the scanner in and out. It remained blank.

Nothing.

Rebecca was en route to Tionisla because she had been invited to a behind-the-scenes preview of a new ship. The Isis Interstellar Corporation shied away from marketing and direct

publicity, preferring to sell their expensive and unique vessels by word of mouth and cultivation of clients with whom they fostered long-term relationships. Their ships were exclusive, on limited production runs and hand built. Second-hand examples were cherished and much sought after. There was no such thing as an entry-level Isis. For a given amount of money you could buy tougher, faster and more powerful – but you wouldn't get an Isis. Isis ships were bespoke, personal, unique.

Rebecca had been obsessed by ships from a young age. Born in space, she had never lived planet-side for any length of time and her first memories of childhood were of looking out of a station viewpoint and seeing trading vessels jockeying for position in the docking queues. Back then most of them had been named after snakes: Cobras; Adders; Pythons; Sidewinders. She'd known them all off by heart. Simpler times.

Before the war.

She fingered the necklace with her right hand, maintaining a firm grip on the flight controls with the other, idly turning the cube about in her fingers. She remembered an intelligent stare, greying hair, a wistful innocence and a caring expression.

He never understood this... and it was such a long time ago.

She also remembered the blazing argument, fury whiter and hotter than the core of a pulsar.

And we never spoke again after that...

Rebecca focussed back on her flying. It wouldn't pay to day-dream. Space had always been dangerous. Bad stuff had a habit of sneaking up on you if you didn't pay attention. Rebecca had lost count of the fights she'd been involved in over the last decade. No matter where you went or what cargo you carried, there was always someone who thought they had a right to take it from you. That meant you needed weapons, shields and missiles, a plethora of expensive and sophisticated hardware. It also meant fear, uncertainty, doubt and stress.

But this paled into insignificance next to the 'threat'.

Ships sometimes just disappeared, travelling into witch-space and never coming back. Ships ambushed by packs of hunters intent on nothing but destruction. Planets raided for supplies and raw materials, without thought for the consequences. Traders, pirates, police, navy, civilians – everyone was a target, no one was safe. You never knew where they would strike next, who they'd hit, what they'd do.

Mankind had been at war with them for centuries but it had really only been a skirmish up until two years ago. Rebecca recalled as a young woman how she had once looked forward to a fight

with them, as a test of her prowess.

Prak I was dumb – lucky to still be here. That was before we knew what they were capable of.

Rebecca's hands trembled on the controls. The Vampire twitched in response, nosing down and up as her knuckles cracked.

Thargoids.

She checked the scanner one more time. Still blank. The reassuring thrum of the engines echoed through the old ship. Tionisla grew slowly in the forward viewer.

The narrowband comms crackled. Rebecca tweaked the reception, suspicious of anything happening around her. She could make out no direct comms but something was happening nearby, just out of range of her scanners. She triangulated the position. Portside, 284 degrees.

She flicked on the port side video link. Sure enough, she saw flashes of light in the darkness. The death knell of a ship.

PingPingPingPingPing!

Rebecca jumped at the distinctive sound of a Remlok distress beacon.

Damn.

She was duty bound to assist. A Remlok survival mask was your last hope in the event of a catastrophic disaster. It was designed to keep you alive if you'd lost your ship, your escape pod, even your spacesuit. All pilots had to respond immediately to the call of a Remlok.

Telemetry came in a moment later. A Python was forty thousand clicks behind her and a Boa with its escort thirty-five thousands clicks to starboard. She was the closest, having avoided the main spacelane into Tionisla for a quick transit.

'So much for arriving early,' she snapped, adjusting the course of the Vampire to intercept the distant beacon and informing the other commanders that she'd handle the rescue.

She triggered the torus drive and the Vampire leapt forward, Tionisla sliding off to starboard as minute space debris flashed past, vaporised by the shields. It almost looked like stars rushing past the ship.

The drive cut out less than thirty seconds later, jammed by the presence of another vessel. Rebecca scrutinised the viewer for a moment, before locking the targeting scanners.

Cobra Mk4, Mass 150 Metric, Speed 0.0 LM.

‘The new one,’ she mused to herself. She hadn’t seen the new Cobra yet. Was it the hunter or the hunted?

A moment later the targeting computer answered her question for her.

Legal Status : Clean. Bounty 0.0 Cr

She could see the signal from the Remlok, it was about two clicks away from the Cobra. There was nothing else on the scanner. Rebecca immediately performed a scan for gravimetric emissions, the signature of a cloaked ship, but nothing appeared.

She nosed the Vampire forward, wary of a trap, pulling into visual range.

The Cobra was spinning out of control, surrounded by a cloud of debris, gas and frozen fuel. A jagged gash was all that was left of the starboard flank of the ship. Past the starboard outrigger engine the hull was entirely missing. Rebecca could see four or five hull breaches without even trying hard. The Cobra was utterly wrecked.

‘You spend thirty years waiting for the fourth version of the thing - expecting it to be great,’ Rebecca muttered under her breath. ‘And it’s a dud.’

She could see the cockpit was open to vacuum, it looked like the pilot must have been sucked out into space during whatever it was that had befallen the ship. Hence the Remlok.

There were scorch marks up and down the hull. In places the duralium hull plating had been ripped clear of the superstructure, revealing the criss-crossing supports beneath. Rebecca had never seen a ship so badly damaged yet still even vaguely intact. Missiles obliterated ships completely in her experience and lasers almost always triggered a complete destruction of the vessel too. This was something else...

Yet somehow familiar. Where have I seen damage like this before?

She guided the Vampire towards the Remlok signal, gently coasting inwards to ensure that she didn’t run down the pilot. The salvage system aboard the Vampire activated on proximity and guided the unfortunate pilot aboard.

The ident computer beeped.

Life signs weak but stable. Medi-comp activated.

Congratulations. You rescued Commander Cheyd from Enrienge.

Leaving the ship on autopilot, Rebecca dropped down to the Vampire’s small cargo deck. The

medi-comp equipment had already organised itself in the bay and was busy working on a small figure, already supported and moved onto a bio-bed.

Rebecca looked at the life sign indicators and then studied the pilot in some surprise. He was small, not even as tall as her, with a shock of white hair around his thin face. It wasn't so much the hair that surprised her; it was the colour of his skin, a shocking cobalt blue.

The medi-comp interfaced with the Remlok and the transparent skin that had protected the creature from the vacuum of space folded away back into the Remlok Mask. The Mask detached with a slight puckering sound.

The creature's eyes flickered open, revealing bright penetrating yellow irises. A gasp of surprise escaped him as he caught sight of Rebecca.

'Who? Where am...?'

Rebecca stepped forward slightly.

'Rebecca Weston.' She gestured around her. 'This is the *Eclipse* and you're lucky to be alive Commander. Lie still, you were hurt pretty badly. The medi-comp is working on it.'

'Cheyd Vlos'Oplyn,' the creature replied, with a gasp. 'Commander Cheyd, erstwhile of the *Holdstock*. Cheyd will do. I guess I owe you my life.'

'I guess you do,' Rebecca said. 'I'm afraid your ship is frakked. What hit you? Doesn't look like a pirate attack.'

Cheyd managed to shake his head. 'Here in Tionisla? No.'

'Them?' Rebecca said, visibly tensing.

'If you mean the Thargs. Yes,' Cheyd said.

'What did they hit you with?' Rebecca demanded.

Cheyd looked distant for a moment, before shaking his head.

'I never even saw them coming. One moment my scanner was blank, next there were five Thargoids around me, flying in formation...'

Five Thargoids. This is it. Just as Rebka said...

'...They came out of nowhere. I evaded of course, I figured I was in good shape. I was flying a new ship after all, designed with this sort of fight in mind. Great ship you know; mil spec shields, ion cannons, nanite reinforced hull...'

‘But?’ Rebecca demanded, interrupting.

‘They fired something, I don’t know what it was... I’ve never seen anything like it. A stream of energy. Took the shields out in the first hit... The second blew out all the on-board avionics. The third blasted out the cockpit and I hit space commander. I didn’t get a single shot in...’

‘An energy stream?’ Rebecca looked up and away, thinking hard.

‘Bright white... Definitely not a laser.’

White? Thargoid weapons are green. It can’t be. Rebka never said anything...

‘I’ve been talking to you longer than the whole fight lasted. It was weird. They shot me to pieces but I don’t think I was the target. They didn’t deviate from their course by an iota. They had some kind of omni-directional turret I guess...’

The medi-comp machinery hissed, applying injections to the commander.

‘Where?’ Rebecca cried. ‘Where were they headed?’

‘In system.’ Cheyd closed his eyes, fighting to stay conscious as painkilling and sedative drugs were pumped into his bloodstream. ‘Straight for... Tionisla.’

‘Oh Prak.’ Rebecca swore. She secured the medi-comp unit and arranged for it to be safely arranged in the cargo-bay in case she ran into the battle she was anticipating. It wouldn’t do for her rescued passenger to end up killed for the sake of a little attention to detail. Then she ran for the bridge.

Rebecca jumped into her pilot seat and buckled in, triggering the engines and ramping them up to full power. The Vampire tore up away from the wreck of the Cobra and headed in-system, towing a trail of flaming injected exhaust. The moment she was out of range she triggered the torus drive, hurtling towards the planet.

ETA Tionisla Aegis, 3.5 minutes.

She fingered the necklace around her neck before pulling it away. The small cube tumbled free. She rolled it around in her hand for a moment before inserting it into a small receptacle on the Vampire’s console.

A holofac image appeared. A woman, old, grey and lined; deep brown eyes glowing with a mischievous twinkle.

‘Hello Rebecca. What can I do for you this time?’

‘No time for games, Rebka. It’s 3151. I’m at Tionisla. Thargoid war, remember?’

‘I remember it well. Station five?’ Rebka’s eyes narrowed. ‘You ready?’

‘I guess so. I’ve been over the attack pattern a hundred times. You might have told me the Thargoids were equipped with plasma accelerators.’

‘Thargoids don’t have plasma accelerators.’ The old woman frowned.

‘I just missed five Thargoids inbound to Tionisla who ripped the prak out of a brand new ship. White fire, blown hull plates. Just like when Zerz ripped my old ship up eleven years ago! Plasma accelerators!’

‘There’s nothing in my memory about plasma accelerators in the Thargoid war.’

‘There must be! Recheck.’

‘I might be old but there’s nothing wrong with my memory, Rebecca.’ The old woman’s holofac looked aggrieved.

Arguing with a sarcy computer simulation of a possible future me!

‘So when you engaged the Thargoids, they were only armed with lasers?’

‘That is correct.’

‘This timeline sucks.’ Rebecca snapped.

‘It’s diverged,’ Rebka replied. ‘Something has happened to change events again. You must find out what it is...’

Tell me something I don’t know...

‘I’ve got a slightly more immediate problem!’ Rebecca snapped. ‘Plasma accelerators. What’s the defense? How do I counter them?’

Rebka hesitated and then shrugged. ‘You can’t.’

‘You’re an AI simulation from the year 3199, don’t give me that! Work something out!’

‘The plasma accelerator isn’t invented until 3164. There’s no defence for it in 3151, not until the 3170s. Especially not in a Mk1 Vampire from 3140! You can’t win!’

‘Oh, this day is just getting better.’

‘Rebecca. You have to abort this. You won’t survive!’

‘Leave Station five to them? And just let four hundred thousand people die? Yeah, right.’

Rebecca pulled the cube out of the console and replaced it around her neck. The holofac faded.

Who needs artificial intelligence anyway? It's not like anyone one will care if I get spaced...

She switched on the wideband.

Static crashed out of the audio system, overlaid with a curious pulsating warble. Rebecca recognised it immediately.

A jamming signal!

'Tionisla approach, this is Vampire *Eclipse*, can you read me? Thargoid ships inbound. I repeat, Thargoid ships inbound! Do you copy?'

Tionisla was growing faster on the viewer, the graveyard disappearing into the glare of the sun, only the Chronicle array continued to cast its reflected glare. Rebecca could just make out the glow of the orbital stations.

There was a brief flare of light. One of the stations flickered and disappeared.

Kiri Mereso sent the mental impulse that switched off her embedded recording mem-chip and dropped back into her chair with a long sigh. She kicked off her boots and rested her feet on the desk, scowling at the holovid in front of her.

'I spent hours on that. Look what's left! Hardly any of my stuff ended up in the copy! All the journalists are out covering the war and what do I get? Babysitting the frakkin' transmitter.'

She took out a small compact from her pocket and scrutinised her face and hands. At a brief touch, a small army of nanobots immediately took on the job of polishing her nails, adjusting her pencil perfect eyebrows and re-colouring her iridescent hair.

'I deserve more than this,' she pouted. 'And if I have to say that stupid catchphrase one more time I'm going to scream!'

'Transmitting the copy is important work...' said a quiet voice from the next desk. Tania D'Mentiot was one of the techs supervising the distribution of content around the chart. She loved her job, getting huge satisfaction from seeing the viewing figures respond to what the Chronicle transmitted. Every little bit of news, celebrity gossip, hearsay and rumour came through these systems.

‘I know, I know. Mum tells me often enough.’ Kiri pulled a face. ‘Gotta understand all parts of the business, see it from the inside, learn the ropes, get a feel for all the departmental operations. Prak, you’d think she could do better than puffing out all those old clichés.’

‘It will help in the long run,’ Tania replied carefully.

And you should be grateful, you spoilt little bitch! We’re the ones doing the babysitting around here. You’ve already got it made, all you’ve got to do is wait a little. We’ve all got the long slog ‘til retirement.

‘It’s alright for Mum. She made it during that Lave business back in ‘38. And here’s me, stuck in the back-office whilst the biggest news story in history is happening.’

‘Maybe she wants you safe. It’s a war after all. People are dying out there.’

‘She’s getting old. Safe! Journalists don’t want to be safe! If that’s your attitude then you might as well give up and grow herbs on Leesti.’

Tania bit her tongue to stop a retaliatory remark. She couldn’t bring herself to suck up to the boss’s daughter but it wouldn’t be a great career move to antagonise her either.

She’s only here for a few more days, then I get my peace and quiet back.

‘Newsfeed is due to go. Do you want to send it?’ Tania asked.

Kiri threw her a look. ‘Oooh. Let the little girl press the big red button? How exciting!’

‘Up to you,’ Tania said, clamping down on her infuriation.

Kiri made a big show of climbing out of her chair and stomping over to Tania’s desk.

‘What do I do?’

‘First we have to secure the bandwidth, see those monitors? That ensures we can transmit.’

Tania gestured at the big monitor screens overhead, which burst into life, displaying statistics, graphs and monitoring information.

‘Ok,’ Kiri said in a bored voice.

‘Then we’ve got to ensure the syndication is connected and our relays have the proper acknowledgement.’

‘Figures.’

‘I thought you’d like that one, that’s how we make our money. You can watch the cash roll in.’

‘And?’

‘We do a test transmit to the local stations first just to make sure everything is up and running. If you check over there you’ll see the status for the locals.’

Kiri looked across at the furthest monitor. She looked, blinked, looked again and then turned around.

‘I’m assuming there’s not supposed to be a red flashing light?’

Tania frowned and turned to look. ‘What?’

‘Station three. Look, red. It says “no connection”.’ Kiri made way for Tania as she came over.

Tania typed in some commands. The red light refused to go out.

‘That doesn’t make any sense; we’ve got triple redundancy on all comms,’ she said, quickly going through the diagnostic sensors. ‘We’re not getting anything from three at all. What’s going on? Can you punch up some video?’

Kiri rolled her eyes. ‘Make me do all the work, why don’t you.’

She walked across and accessed the external video cameras on the Chronicle array.

Tania was absorbed for a moment before she realised Kiri hadn’t responded. She turned to see the infuriating girl staring at the screen.

‘You got that vid yet?’

Kiri didn’t answer. She was staring, her mouth hanging open.

‘What...’

Tania looked at the screen. Instead of the familiar vista of the spinning Coriolis space station, there was a flaming spinning ball of disintegrating wreckage. Surrounding it, moving outwards, pursuing and destroying a rag-tag collection of vainly fleeing vessels was a set of five Thargoid warships.

‘Stards!’ Tania whispered. ‘Thargs. Here in Tionisla.’

‘What do we do?’ Kiri managed to stutter, her nonchalance evaporating.

‘Call for help.’ Tania snapped, already setting to work. ‘Send for the frakkin’ Navy.’

‘And then?’

Tania favoured the girl with a knowing look. ‘We switch on every camera we’ve got and you

get to do your big news story. Welcome to the front line.’

Rebecca saw the broadcast at the same time as everyone else in the Tionisla system. Grainy, distorted images flickered across the wideband as the Chronicle transmitter punched through the interference.

‘This is Kiri Mereso on board the Chronicle Array. We’re bringing you live and shocking video feed from the Tionisla system! Station three has been attacked and destroyed by Thargoid invaders. I’m broadcasting live from the Chronicle array and we can see everything. The station has gone, there’s nothing left. Ships are being destroyed as we speak... there’s another! This is horrible... All those people...

‘They’ve destroyed all the ships that tried to flee; they’re not leaving any survivors. It looks like the Galcop ships never even got a chance to launch...

‘No, not true! We can see Vipers coming in now. They’re engaging the Thargs... there’s heavy fire being exchanged... we can’t see what’s happening. Clearing now...

Rebecca distinctly heard the startled gasp from the reporter.

‘The Vipers are gone. Frak! The Thargs are still there. I don’t understand this; I’m just telling you what I’m seeing. Our defences have all been destroyed! If anyone can hear us, the Tionisla system is being invaded. This is Kiri Mereso on board the Tionisla Chronicle Array! We’re calling on all channels for assistance.’

Rebecca could see the Chronicle array to the port side of her ship as she raced towards station five. The array was at the external Lagrange point, far higher than the stations.

‘We’re picking something up, some kind of transmission. Just processing it...

Rebecca spared the console a brief look.

ETA Tionisla Aegis, 1 minute.

‘The Thargs are transmitting a message. I don’t know what it means... here, we can relay it...’ The reporter’s voice was replaced by the harsh translated tones of the Thargoids. Rebecca instantly recognised it from previous encounters.

‘VULGATE! DUO, QUINDECIM, NOVEM!’

Odd, they usually just insult you before they kill you...

‘We’ve no idea what it means... the Thargs have never used this before as far as we can tell. This is something new... wait, they’re moving. Moving fast! We can see at least five of them. They’re heading towards station five. No! Can you hear us station five? Inbound Thargoid warships!’

The video feed switched. A Coriolis station appeared. Rebecca could already see a phalanx of police vessels in an X formation, a mix of Mk1 and Mk2 Vipers, heading away from the station on an intercept course.

‘Station five has launched defences... they’re going to head off the Thargs before they can get in range...

Rebecca could see two remote points of light converging. She punched the narrow-band transmitters.

‘Galcop Vipers. Do not engage directly. Thargoids are armed with plasma weaponry. Do not engage!’

Rebecca knew it was in vain, the transmission bandwidth was swamped; partly with interference, partly with the Chronicle transmitter overpowering everything else. Her ship-board transmitter had no hope of punching through.

The lights converged.

Too late...

‘...this is terrible! The Thargs seem to have some kind of new weapon. It’s obliterating our ships! They’re being ripped apart! They’re getting through! There are thousands of people on the station! The Thargoids are going straight in! Oh frak... no...’

Mass locked. Hyperspeed aborted.

‘Station five, I’m a hundred clicks out. Report status.’ Rebecca snapped into the narrow-band, hoping to break through the interference again.

Something got through.

A garbled message came back. ‘.....defences! Ships lost, we can’t... transponder! ... incoming... Mayday! Mayday!’

Rebecca instinctively triggered the fuel injectors, her ship lurching forward furiously, burning a blazing path towards the station. As she closed she could see ships of all shapes and sizes fleeing the scene. None were staying to defend the station. They were all running.

Cowards. Unbelievable!

The signatures of three more ships appeared on the scanner, launching side by side from the station. These three didn't flee but took up point defensive positions between the station and in the incoming Thargoids.

I was supposed to do this single-handed...

Rebecca triggered the ident computer and performed a fast scan.

Caduceus Omega, Mass 250 Metric, Speed 0.0 LM. Call sign 'Persistence of Memory'

Caduceus Omega, Mass 250 Metric, Speed 0.0 LM Call sign 'Hammer of Sorrow'

Cobra Mk3, Mass 150 Metric, Speed 0.0 LM, Call sign 'Dark Star'. 15% Discrepancy

'Souped up Cobra and a pair of bio-ships...'

Almost immediately the *Dark Star* opened a narrowband comms channel.

'Señor, you have your targeting computer pointing at the wrong ships. We aren't the bad guys... at least, not today... You might want to focus on the bug-eyed monsters heading this way.' The voice had a peculiar accent Rebecca hadn't come across before.

She blinked in surprise.

'You making a stand?' she snapped.

'Ah... Señorita! My humble apologies... And yes, I guess we're throwing our hats in the ring so to speak...'

'I haven't got a hat,' said a strangely clipped voice emanating from the first Caduceus, the *Persistence of Memory*. 'Does that let me off the hook?'

'Not unless you want the hook buried in your back,' said a deeper, almost mechanical, voice emanating from the other Caduceus, the *Hammer of Sorrow*.

'Subtle as always,' the clipped voice replied.

'Who are you guys?' Rebecca demanded.

'Looks like we're your last best hope,' the pilot of the Cobra quipped back. 'Now get the frak out of here. All hell is about to break loose and you don't want to be around for that.'

'I'm here to help,' Rebecca replied sternly.

'What are you flying, señorita? Daddy's Ophidian?'

Rebecca's lip curled in anger at the jibe. 'Vampire. Mine!'

Son of a bitch...

'Mk3 or MK4?'

'It's a Mk1!'

'Could be worse,' the deep voice said. 'Then again, could be a lot better.'

'Maybe we could use her as bait?' The clipped voice suggested.

'What's your combat rating?' the Cobra's pilot asked.

'I'm Deadly,' Rebecca replied. 'And...'

'Thank Giles, we're saved...' the deep voice was clearly unimpressed.

'Prak!' the clipped voice said testily. 'Stop wasting our time little female! Get back to your brood!'

'Señorita, this is not your time to die... Jump while you still can. We can hold the fort.' The Cobra pilot's voice was dismissive.

'We have... some experience with this type of altercation,' the deep voice intoned, almost amused.

'I'm not leaving!' Rebecca fired back angrily.

The pilot of the Cobra had clearly had enough.

'Listen to me, Señorita. Things are about to get awful messy out here. We probably aren't coming back from this little jaunt... An inexperienced pilot in a deadbeat old ship is a liability we don't need... The Chronicle has told us Navy reinforcements are on their way. They'll be here in a few minutes. Now... Amscray!'

Arrogant 'goid! You don't know what you're dealing with here!

'Listen! The Navy won't get here in time,' Rebecca snapped back, 'Trust me. I know.'

'How can you possibly...'

'And I also know the Thargoids are packing a plasma accelerator which will cut through your shields like they're Ontiat crème brûlée! You can't hit them head on, it's suicide. One solid hit and you're frakked. I know how to take them out.'

At least, I hope I do!

There was a poignant pause on the narrowband comms.

‘Given we were just discussing the whole head-on-assault-thing, can we listen to the little human girl’s option now?’ the clipped voice said, with a hint of a snigger. ‘Can’t stand crème brûlée.’

‘She could be right,’ said the deep voice. ‘Remember station three? I dislike traps. Another option would be refreshing.’

‘Ok, I’ll bite... What’s your plan, señorita?’ the Cobra pilot said, clearly irritated.

Rebecca angled her ship between the pair of Caduceus and above the Cobra, triggered her injectors and dropped into a diamond formation with them.

‘First you can stop calling me ‘señorita’. The name’s Rebecca.’

‘Derik Roh’i,’ said the clipped voice. ‘And don’t bother trying to pronounce it properly.’

‘I’d prefer not to divulge mine over an open channel,’ the deep voice said laconically. ‘Maybe later, if we survive.’

‘Coyote,’ the Cobra pilot snapped. ‘And we’re still waiting for the plan.’

Rebecca had been punching commands into her console all the while.

‘Set your gravitic dampers to a ninety degree offset and switch off your Newtonian flight baffles. Coyote, you can override your outrigger engines to achieve the same thing. Strafing moves, with high speed passes. Separate your velocity and attitude vectors. I’m assuming you’ve all got flank weapons?’

‘Newtonian flight?’ Coyote growled. ‘You’re testing my patience now...’

And maybe you’re not the pilot your ego thinks you are!

‘Arrgh! Noooo!’ Derik cried. ‘That stuff does my head in!’

‘It has the virtue of hardly ever being tried,’ the deep voice said. ‘We’ll have the element of surprise if nothing else...’

‘Our only chance is to be unpredictable,’ Rebecca ignored their complaints. ‘Their weapon has greater range but lower accuracy. It also needs to be cycled. With five of them that’s no disadvantage. We need to engage at close quarters and use off-axis tumbling techniques. Stay right next door to them. If they gain any distance on us we’re toast.’

‘Unpredictable I can do,’ Derik replied.

‘If we’re still alive at the end of this,’ Coyote said, ‘You and I are going to have some serious

words young lady.’

‘Not until after I’ve had a serious drink,’ Rebecca snapped back.

‘Can I suggest we focus on the task in hand?’ the deep voice intoned, interrupting their bickering. ‘Any other cogent advice, Rebecca?’

‘Yeah,’ Rebecca fumed, triggering the injectors. ‘Try to keep up with the old deadbeat ship.’

The *Eclipse* began a rolling intercept with the Thargoids. She flipped on the rear view. The three other ships were just getting up to speed, their injectors flaring angrily behind as they copied the curving trajectory and then broke off, following random patterns in an attempt to confuse the Thargoid invaders.

‘I hope she doesn’t get spaced,’ Derik quipped, watching the old Vampire out-accelerate his Caduceus. ‘I’m beginning to like her.’

Kiri Mereso was still watching the live video feeds.

‘Ships are still fleeing the station. We’ve got confirmed reports that the Navy is incoming but they won’t be here for another five minutes! The Thargoids are closing fast now. We’re going to try to switch to the video feed from Station five... bear with us...’

Tania managed to grab the uplink. Station five was undamaged and able to transmit directly to the Chronicle Array.

‘We’ve got connections across the Chart now. If you’ve just joined us – this is live coverage of the Thargoid invasion of Tionisla! Thargoids are attacking and one of our orbital stations has already been destroyed. Thousands are already dead, the destruction is terrible. The Thargoids have taken out our defenders and are making their way towards Station five. Our thoughts go out to those brave pilots and civilians... Oh... Station five is undefended, ships are trying to evacuate as fast as they can but there is no way that everyone can get out in time...’

The video uplink switched to the view from Station five.

‘Wait... this is Station five’s video feed. I can see four ships now, privateers by the look of it... I think... yes they’re going to try to defend the station! Thank Randomius!’

‘We can see four ships. I can make out a Cobra, what looks like an old Vampire and two bigger ships of a type I’ve never seen before. They’re taking a stance, yes, they’re engaging! They’re all that stands between Station five and the Thargoids. They’re outnumbered and outgunned. Can

they hold the Thargoids off for long enough...

‘They’re... that’s strange! The privateers are using some unusual tactics. Their ships are... well they’re sliding... that’s the best way I can describe it! They’re not moving in the direction they’re pointing. Weapons fire is all over the place. It’s got the Thargoids confused for sure. They’ve broken off their attack on the station to deal with the privateers...

‘The Thargoid weapon is something else, a beam of intense white light! We saw it cut a Viper clean in half with a single hit... Oh God... that was a close call for the Cobra... he’s ok though! All the ships are tumbling and spinning now, it’s very close quarter combat... but they’re not being overwhelmed... at least not yet!

‘We’ve got idents on three of the ships, the other doesn’t seem to be listed. The big ones are called ‘Caduceus’ apparently! Let’s call ‘em Caddies. Tough ships whatever! We’re trying to find out who they are... Yes! Yes! One of the Thargoids is down! The privateers have got some heavy firepower backing them up, not to mention... look at that evasive move by the Caddy! Some serious flying!’

The Station five video cameras were tracking the battle as it raged between the invaders and the defenders. Despite the loss of one vessel, the Thargoids remained implacable, indefatigable.

‘Heavy fire still being exchanged! Damage to one of the Caddies now. It’s limping... the Vampire has come to assist... Wait there’s something else. The Thargoids.... Scanning beams! What are they doing? They’re scanning one of the big ships...’

‘VULGATE! DUO, QUINDECIM, NOVEM!’ the proclamation crashed across the wideband again.

‘The Thargoids keep transmitting this message! We’ve been trying to figure this out but we’ve drawn a blank so far... now they’re scanning the Cobra...’

‘VULGATE! DUO, QUINDECIM, NOVEM!’

‘They seem to be ignoring the other big ship for some reason... now moving towards the Vampire! Scanning beams again... they’ve locked on...’

Rebecca’s tactics had been a partial success; at least they hadn’t been destroyed during the interception. Flying without Newtonian baffles was an exercise in total frustration, testing the ability of a pilot beyond reasonable limits, trying to marry velocity vectors and directional orientation. It

was fine as an exercise or when doing basic orbital manoeuvring but in the midst of combat it was disorientating, wearisome, difficult and confusing.

That confusion had saved them though. The Thargoids had taken a crucial few seconds to adjust and in that time the privateers had closed sufficiently to negate the long range advantage of the plasma accelerator.

But fighting a talented foe, with counterintuitive flight controls at point-blank range with effectively no shields, was no walk in the park.

Coyote had a lucky escape after two of the Thargoids tried to bracket his ship with parallel bursts of plasma, only Derik's swift intervention prevented his destruction. The pilot of the *Hammer* had taken advantage of this diversion by pummelling one of the Thargoids into submission. The respite was short-lived. Undaunted the Thargoids spun around and triggered their weapons again, slicing deeply into Derik's ship. He rolled it away, engines spluttering. Damaged but not mortally wounded. Rebecca decoyed the Thargoid away, trading fire.

'Heavy damage! Lost my shields!' Derik's voice called on the narrow-band. 'Down an engine too - sorry 'bout that.'

'You'll hear no complaints from me...' Coyote's voice came back. 'Frak, what's that?'

'Scanning beams,' said the deep voice. 'They're prioritising targets. Watch for their next move!'

'VULGATE! DUO, QUINDECIM, NOVEM!'

'Yeah, whatever,' Derik announced as his ship was flashed by the spectral beams of light. 'Come here bugs!'

'Drawing a bead on you Coyote!' Rebecca warned, triggering a burst of fire at the nearest Thargoid warship.

'Comprende.' Coyote's Cobra spun rapidly around all three axes, triggering its injectors at random intervals. Blistering laser fire burst forth as it stabilised. The Thargoid warship over-shot but its scanning beam raked across the older ship.

'VULGATE! DUO, QUINDECIM, NOVEM!'

'Looks like you're next on the bug quest, girl! I suggest you get yourself elsewhere!' Derik snapped as the turrets on his Caduceus blistered against the Thargoid shields.

Rebecca winced as the scanning beams caused flickers of light to bounce around her cockpit.

She triggered the injectors to give herself a little more room to manoeuvre.

‘RAGAZZA! DUX DUCIS, INCOLUMITAS!’

‘These bugs are really starting to freak me out... prak!’ Derik called. ‘Girl, woman... whatever! They’re all heading your way!’

Rebecca saw the change in tactics at the same time as the others. All four remaining Thargoids were making a bee-line directly for her.

‘Oh frak...’

‘Move!’ Coyote bawled. ‘Get your ass moving girl!’

Rebecca fled, the Thargoids in single-minded pursuit. Coyote and the *Hammer* pilot managed to destroy one of them as they passed. They seemed suddenly oblivious of the other ships.

Green lasers flickered out in the void.

‘Something strange is happening. The Thargs are all chasing the Vampire! They’re ignoring the other ships... another Tharg down! Yes! One of the privateers is falling back, too much damage. The Vampire is running, the three remaining Thargoids are following it! The other two privateers are close behind... wait! One of the Thargoids is breaking off to engage them... the Caddy is taking it on... the Cobra is still pursuing the other two...’

‘The Thargoids following the Vampire have switched to their normal weapons. Maybe they’re damaged? No, it as if they’re trying...’

‘The Vampire is being hit, its shields are failing! I can see plasma beginning to leak from its drives! The pilot’s going to have to eject...’

The enigmatic pilot of the *Hammer* experienced a brief moment of pleasure as he dispatched the third Thargoid invader. Adjusting his scanner he could see the battle had spread out away from the Station. The Thargoids had made a fatal error in single-mindedly pursuing the Vampire.

But they never do anything without a reason, the cold calculating bastards.

The Vampire, whatever the piloting merits of the irritating but surprisingly well informed woman aboard, should have been inconsequential. The two Caducei were the bigger tactical threat but the Thargoids had deliberately thrown away the advantage they’d gained once Derik’s

Persistence had been crippled. The *Hammer* was the next logical target. Then the *Cobra* and *Vampire*, unequipped with turret weapons, would have been quickly mopped up.

The question is why?

Derik's *Persistence* had fallen back towards the station, unable to stay with the battle. The *Hammer* was likewise too far away to assist now. The *Vampire* was heading towards the graveyard, presumably looking for some cover, the Thargoids in close pursuit. It was already trailing a plume of plasma.

Shame. She had some talent. Looks like our over-attired contrabandista was right...

Rebecca was jerked violently as Thargoid laser fire streaked through her ship's depleted rear shields and ripped into the hull. She could see plasma leaking from the starboard engine. Damage reports flickered up on the console. The *Eclipse* was dying around her.

Warning! Energy unit damaged.

Warning! Starboard engine at 40% of rated output.

'Come on girl. We can do this!'

She could only roll quickly to the right now. With the starboard engine down on power her options for evasive moves were rapidly shrinking. The Thargoids were no fools in combat. She compensated for the increasing yaw as she burnt the remaining fuel in her tanks trying to flee.

Ahead the Orbital Graveyard grew on the scanner. Green lasers licked across the hull. She had an idea...

Rebecca snapped off the yaw compensators abruptly and the *Eclipse* spun violently out of control.

Warning! Excessive yaw. Abort manoeuvre.

Warning! Excessive yaw. Abort manoeuvre.

She slammed the yaw compensators back on, steadied the ship and fired the injectors again. The starboard engine refused to engage, forcing the ship into an oscillating spiral.

Stay with that bugs!

Green laser fire passed close by the cockpit. Both Thargoids were still directly on her tail. Rebecca couldn't believe it.

I couldn't have kept up with that... these bugs are seriously committed...

'I could do with a little help here...'

The Thargoids closed once more.

Coyote cut his thrusters as Rebecca's *Eclipse* suddenly spiralled upwards off the forward viewer. The pair of Thargoids broke off in opposite directions, equally bemused by the erratic motion of the Vampire. It was difficult to tell if Rebecca had planned the move or simply lost control of her ship. Coyote saw the *Eclipse* steady and then spiral back around.

'This girl flies like a banshee in a blizzard,' he muttered, slipping in behind one of the Thargoids and delivering a belly full of laser fire into its shields.

Green lasers flickered out towards the spiralling Vampire, narrowly missing it. A moment later he had to duck his ship aside as the streaming white weapon blazed forth towards him.

They're trying to take her alive!

The girl's voice came across the narrow-band, beginning to sound desperate.

'I'm right behind you,' Coyote fired back. 'Stay on course; we can outmanoeuvre them inside the graveyard. Almost there...'

The outer graveyard markers flickered past. The Vampire didn't reduce speed, narrowly avoiding a collision with an ancient Adder class vessel drifting indolently in front of them. The Thargoid immediately behind vaporised it with a flash of the streaming weapon. Coyote was forced to fly around the resultant debris. He rolled his Cobra completely, bringing it back on course.

There was no sign of the Vampire.

Did they get her?

Space was suddenly full of objects, a tumbling menagerie, all heading in his direction.

'Mierda!'

Ships, mausoleums, gravestones, markers, beacons. Thousands upon thousands of tumbling artefacts clouded the scanners, streaking past at insane speeds. An artificial asteroid field. Coyote pulled behind one of the bigger monuments, trying to figure out where the Vampire had gone.

Instruments were useless. Visual flight rules only. Informed guesswork. Seat of the pants.

'Where the frak are you?' the girl's voice called.

Still alive then...

Coyote triggered his own injectors, an almost completely reckless move under the conditions. A horrific scrapping sound indicated he'd not gotten away with the gamble completely. Green hull plating flashed in the darkness.

The second Thargoid hadn't seen him coming. The full might of the Cobra's weapons struck out. The Thargoid didn't even react before exploding into a million shining shards.

'Just the one left. Hang on!'

Rebecca saw the other Thargoid explode out of the corner of her eye but there was no respite. Coyote was too far away to help her with the final assailant. It was impossible to fly safely inside the graveyard at full throttle. Sooner or later...

Warning! Witchdrive fuel exhausted.

A gravemarker drifted across her flightpath. Rebecca instinctively spun her ship to the left, forgetting she'd lost an engine. The *Eclipse* banked slowly... much too slowly...

Frak!

The impact was short and abrupt. Rebecca thought she still had control until she felt the nose of her ship drop and saw the flight instruments start spinning. The *Eclipse* failed to respond to her inputs, yawing and rolling indolently. The Thargoid behind triggered its weapons, the green lasers surgically slicing deep into the Vampire's engine nacelles and exhaust manifolds. Plasma spewed into the void.

Warning! Engines off-line.

Warning! Reactor malfunction.

Warning! ECM damaged.

Warning! Energy low!

Red lights and warning symbols flickered across the heads-up display before disappearing entirely. Rebecca briefly saw another artefact hurtling towards her, the terrifying crack of the hull shattering around her and felt the flight harness biting into her flesh.

Warning! Escape pod auto-eject off-line.

Warning! Artificial gravity off-line.

Warning! Inertial management system off-line.

Warning! Hull breach. Integrity failure.

Flying shards of debris slashed her arms and face as the hiss of escaping air pounded through the cabin. One piece sliced across her neck.

She saw her necklace and the data-cube fly across the cockpit and get dashed to smithereens against the bulkhead.

No! Rebka!

Rebecca tried to reach for the escape pod controls. Her senses were overwhelmed with pain as the g-forces caused by the spin of her disintegrating ship took hold.

Reach! Press it... reach...

Mercifully it was short-lived. Blackness engulfed her.

Chapter Three

Coyote nursed his Zaquessoian Evil Juice, staring out across the emptiness of space towards the planet Tionisla. The view was now filled with Navy gunships, frigates and a pair of behemoths, slowly patrolling the space lanes around Tionisla all the way out to the distant jump point. They were trying to look as if they had something to do. No further Thargoid vessels had been spotted.

The panoramic holofac behind him continued with the over-excited coverage from the Tionisla Chronicle. The young reporter he'd seen aboard on the vid-feed aboard his ship was milking the news for all it was worth, long after the events had calmed down. Big news indeed but it didn't justify the unending analysis.

He'd chuckled at the attempts to identify the 'Saviours of Tionisla'. The journos had found each combateers' carefully crafted alter ego in the public data-feeds. Coyote was a gemstone dealer, Derik a haberdashery salesman, even their mystery companion had claimed to be a Factorian Cleric. The young woman had shown a distinct lack of imagination. She was merely listed as a miscellaneous trader.

As he watched, the coverage moved to video footage of the woman's wrecked ship. The Thargoids had been carefully trying to disable it during the attack but the impact against the gravemarker had put paid to that. Coyote had watched as the ship struck, lost power, spun and begun to disintegrate. The wings, nacelles and parts of the hull had been ripped off. What was left was little more than a carcass. There had been no response to any hails.

She flew well but 'Deadly' just isn't enough. Well, we warned her...

'We still don't know the fate of the commander from the *Eclipse*,' Kiri Mereso's voice burbled across the news feed. 'But one thing's for certain, the ship is a total loss...'

In Coyote's other hand was a small business card. It was entirely blank apart from a small piece of text on one side. He turned it over in his fingers.

Latitude Bar : 18:00 : Station Time : Tionisla 5

Nestling close to the station he could see the mecbots working on the extensive damage to Derik's Caduceus. The plasma weapon had torn a huge gash in the ship. A lesser vessel would have been pulverised, only the remarkable tenacity of its design had saved the day. The Caduceus was a strange and mysterious bio-ship. It was a self-healing and, to Coyote's way of thinking, slightly

sinister vessel. Damage like that would normally take days to repair; it seemed as if the ship would be restored in hours.

The pilots of the Caddies were equally particular. Derik Roh'i had turned out to be a large green lizard, ostensibly from Tionisla itself. Other than resembling an oversized Old-Earth velociraptor, his main distinguishing feature was the ocular implant that replaced one of his eyes.

Coyote had warmed to him quickly after meeting him a couple of days before, sensing a fellow combateer of wide-ranging experience and ability. The lizard had an offhand, off-base manner which Coyote found disarming. Derik's companion was not so engaging. Coyote repressed a shiver just thinking about it.

'Still freaked out?' the lizard inquired, peering at him intently.

'You're going to tell me you get used to it?' Coyote snapped back, annoyed.

'Nope. Still makes me want to puke after five years,' Derik chortled.

'What happened? Without the really gory details... por favor.'

'Thargoids in the main,' Derik replied, a trifle wistfully. 'Though he wasn't in great shape before that. Let's just say he's been around a bit. More than a couple of lifetimes I'd be guessing.'

Coyote shrugged.

'Why is he here?'

'Same reason as the rest of us. Elite combateers assembled on false pretences.' The lizard looked briefly aggrieved but it was difficult to be sure of expressions on the reptilian face. Derik flipped a small piece of card around in his claws. It was identical to Coyote's.

'All answers at eighteen hundred, eh?'

Coyote grinned and lit a colita, leaning back in his leather button-backed seat and staring out of the windows. The private lounge was not far from the station egress, in the premier real-estate zone. Coyote had been encouraged to 'make himself at home' by the subservient staff. No stranger to the finer things in life, he'd been impressed by the level of opulence on display in the lounge. Entertainments ranged from the exotic to the carnal and back again. So far he'd accepted only the drink.

'What did they spin you?' Coyote asked.

'Some kind of premier flight school,' Derik replied. 'Teaching Jamesons how to avoid the nav

buoy. My services are needed apparently. That is actually something I wanted do when I've finally rid the 'verse of pirates. You?'

'Special Ops,' Coyote said. 'Usual deal... Something moved incognito with a high price tag... Contacts were sound and the job checked out... I figured it was some secret to do with the war effort.'

'For certain,' Derik said with surety. The lizard always spoke his mind. Coyote liked that. He figured Derik would be a loyal ally or an implacable foe, with no room in between.

'What makes you say that?'

'Shulth Industries,' Derik said. 'Our mutual friend is the brains behind the Caduceus bio-ship. Bio is his business. Extremely dirty technology. Extremely dirty indeed.'

'Udian Foraga Shulth?' Coyote said. 'Caray...'

'The same.'

Coyote whistled.

'I heard that he sterilised a bunch of Thargoid infested worlds...'

'Chart four. Fifteen systems.' Derik nodded. 'I learnt to respect his abilities a long time ago. I worked with him once.'

'Do you trust him?'

Derik laughed showing twin rows of immaculate razor-sharp white teeth. 'Trust is not a word that sits easily with the Shulths. If he's pulling some of the strings behind all this we're in for some fun, that I do know.'

'I guess we'll know soon enough...' Coyote said, looking at the ancient chronometer that was marking time on the wall as it had for centuries. It was an old naval piece, a mechanical antique from long ago. It was fifteen minutes to six.

Coyote rubbed his chin thoughtfully and resumed his study of the ships outside. Derik's Caddy bio-ship caught his eye again. The strange hull plating seemed to be rippling, as if the ship were shivering in the cold of space.

'You're thinking of our little tête-a-tête with the bugs?' Derik changed the subject abruptly, another lizard characteristic. 'That plasma weapon?'

'I'm thinking our little señorita left a lot of questions unanswered...' Coyote said, favouring

him with a look. 'She knew a little too much about what was going on.'

'Who was she?' Derik asked.

'I had her checked out,' Coyote handed a comm-tab over to him. Derik scanned it briefly.

'Commander Weston. Age 39. Deadly. Native of Tianve. Trader. Sheesh... nice credit balance. Wonder who gets that now?' He paused in surprise, jabbing the display, expecting to read more. 'Is that it?'

Coyote nodded. 'Exactly. No history with the bugs, with Galcop, nothing. According to this she was never even tagged 'Offender' and I know some people who... know some other people. Nobody is that clean with that much money, trust me on that.'

'Takes one to know one.'

'Claro,' Coyote replied with a chuckle.

Derik looked askance. 'Galcop insider?'

'She had history we can't see, mi amigo... Turning up like that was no coincidence.'

'True enough. Maybe she was on our mystery list too,' Derik said.

'She was only Deadly... This show was for elite combateers. You said so yourself.'

'You saw how she flew. She'd been around. If her background is bunk maybe the rating was too...'

'I pulled her ass out of the fire...'

'Almost.'

'Not my fault she bought it,' Coyote fired back. 'She shouldn't have gotten involved.'

'She probably saved all of us from an early demise,' Derik countered. 'That trick with the off-axis...'

Coyote stopped and glared at the reptiloid. Derik returned the gaze without reacting, his reptilian ancestry making it easy for him to appear inscrutable.

'Flying a little close to the sun there aren't you, gecko-face?'

'I have a surprisingly thick skin,' Derik inclined his head slightly. 'Listen, it's not your fault. Like you say, we warned her. She knew what she was doing. It happens. At least give her the credit for making a difference.'

The damn lizard is right. We'd have been wiped out. I just don't like being indebted to anyone. Especially if I can't pay them back...

'Maybe you're right. I just want to know why the bugs wanted her so bad they were prepared to die for it,' Coyote said, relighting his colita.

'What happened to the last ship?'

Coyote frowned in recollection, puffing out a cloud of sweet-smelling smoke. 'It just sat there, squawking on the wideband as if it were standing guard. That same phrase over and over again... until I put it out of its misery. What the frak does that mean? There's nothing in the data-banks...'

'You expect Thargoid comms to make sense?'

'No but they're usually consistently weird. I don't like mysteries... That last ship willingly died so it could divert its power to a long range transmission. They were trying to take her alive and when they couldn't...'

The doors to the lounge spun apart, retreating into the walls in a lavishly flamboyant style. Coyote turned his head slightly as a huge mechanical contraption made its way into the room. It moved slowly forwards on three articulated legs accompanied by the creaks and whirrs of bio-mechanical muscles. Coyote recognised aspects of it; a support pod, the auxiliaries from a cargo mech, ports for energy capacitors. Other parts were less obvious, appendages that could perhaps have grasped tools or guns, optical feeds and sensory apparatus. Some were clearly mechanical, others looked disturbingly biological.

What has to happen to a man for him to be content to live like that? When my time comes...

'Answers will shortly be forthcoming,' the machine rumbled, moving further into the room. The doors closed behind.

Coyote and Derik looked around. 'What?'

'The woman survived,' Udian replied.

'Really?' Coyote replied, looking back at the wreck of the *Eclipse* on the viewer. It didn't seem possible anyone could survive that.

'Well all hail Randomius,' Derik cackled. 'It's a miracle.'

'Isis ships remain impressively tough, despite their rather ostentatious design. The cockpit remained remarkably intact. Her injuries were not extensive despite the wreck of her vessel.'

‘Coming from you, Udian, that’s not exactly reassuring,’ Derik quipped. ‘Are we talking “Yes, recognisably still a human” or is she going to be floating in a bottle of nanobot juice with her vital organs sloshing about?’

‘Lacerations and minor peripheral damage caused by inertia. Nothing of any concern. She will make our little rendezvous.’

Derik nodded at Coyote. ‘Told you she was on the list.’

Coyote pushed his sombrero up a touch and regarded the bio-mechanical creature. ‘You going to tell us what all this is about?’

‘I’m as much in the dark as you are, Carlos Estevan Maynard.’

Coyote schooled himself not to react. Hardly anyone knew his real name and for a stranger to find that out...

‘Coyote to you... and I find your statement hard to believe,’ Coyote replied, carefully, trying to gauge the meaning behind the threat.

‘An intriguing invitation was all I received. I have my suspicions, nothing more,’ Udian replied, evasively. ‘Doubtless you know my background?’

‘I may have read something in passing.’ Coyote was accustomed to having eye-to-eye contact with an adversary. Being unable to read Udian’s expressions left him feeling at a disadvantage, though he had no desire to gaze a second time on what lived inside that cold metallic exterior.

‘Then you’ll know I have no love for the Thargoids and a penchant for bio-technology. I can only assume I am here for that reason. You, on the other hand, are a smuggler of enviable reputation. Derik here, is a feared and respected bounty hunter of some notoriety. Someone has assembled us for a purpose; we would appear to be experts in our respective fields. I can only assume this woman has some unique skill of her own. She clearly was apprised of this situation in some fashion.’

‘And you’re going to tell me you know nothing of this...’ Coyote scanned the data-tab. ‘This... Weston woman?’

‘I have not encountered her before today,’ Udian continued, interrupting Coyote’s next question. ‘And I’m as interested as you to discover why the Thargoids found her worthy of their attention.’

A tiny hatch opened on the side of the machine and a small manipulator arm flicked out. It withdrew a small piece of card and placed it on a nearby table.

Coyote didn't believe a word of it. He glanced at the chronometer. Ten minutes.

Jim stared in horror at the video feed from the Tionisla system. The attack on the third Tionisla station was terrifying and when it was destroyed both he and Sonia were aghast. Ships were flashing into destruction wherever the camera was pointed. They watched in dismay as the invading Thargoid warships began heading out towards the next station.

'Why don't they shoot them down?' Sonia demanded.

'Can't even get close,' Jim snapped. 'Didn't you see that weapon?'

The video feed swapped to the beleaguered remaining station.

They don't stand a chance! That looked like a plasma accelerator! How does that make sense?

The young woman from the Tionisla Chronicle was still overlaying her own thoughts on the events as they happened, her voice close to hysteria. Jim saw four ships taking position between the station and the incoming invaders.

'What are they doing?' Sonia asked, puzzled.

'Making a last stand,' Jim said sadly, 'Brave but stupid. They'll be cut to scrap.'

Jim watch the battle unfold, surprised to see the defenders weren't instantly cut to ribbons. The defence strategy was ingenious.

Almost as if someone knew what was going to happen...

The ships were hard to see, mere bright spots against the darkness of space. One of the cameras managed an unsteady close up. Jim saw two large menacing vessels, a familiar Cobra and then a snub-nosed vessel, spinning around evading the Thargoid fire.

Vampire! It can't be...

He managed to grab a freeze-frame and enhanced the hull markings.

'What are you doing? This is happening now!' Sonia asked, irritated. 'Un-pause it!'

'This is important,' Jim fired back, scrutinising the image.

Oh God, it is!

'What's so special about that ship?' Sonia demanded. Jim didn't answer but he did resume the

video feed.

The battle raged, some of the Thargoids being destroyed. The defenders suffered damage too, the two bigger vessels backing off. Jim saw the remaining Thargoids tracking the Vampire, with the Cobra in a vain pursuit.

The Vampire was clearly damaged.

‘No...’ Jim mouthed, almost silently. Sonia looked at him and then turned back to the screen, her eyes narrowing shrewdly.

The ships vanished into the distance of the Tionisla Graveyard. The girl from the Chronicle was still providing the commentary.

‘We’ve lost sight of them now! Can’t see much. There are still flashes of laser fire. Can’t see why they went for the Vampire... Explosion! Someone bought it... more fire! It’s not over yet. Another flash... two ships destroyed! Which ones? The laser fire seems to have stopped. Yes, looks like it’s over one way or the other...’

Jim reached out and switched off the monitor, his face ashen.

‘Are you going to tell me what’s going on?’ Sonia demanded, crossly.

Rebecca examined her face in the holofac imager, scrutinising the repair work done by the bio-operatives. She felt good, nothing more than a slight headache. Everything looked perfect; the medical nano-bot infusion still impressed her even after all these years. Her insurance had covered the close to astronomical medical bills incurred.

It was not something most folks could afford and even she blinked when she saw the Health Extreme invoice. Not that credits were a problem for her nowadays. She’d never been particularly vain but in a moment of self-indulgence she’d signed up for the treatment, usually reserved for celebrities and the super-rich. Nano-bot injection kept you looking as young as you wished, even past the galactic mean lifespan of two hundred years or so.

I deserved it after what happened with him...

She’d been tempted by some of the other services offered. Health Extreme could alter your DNA, allowing you to augment your body and change your physical appearance. Most people did apparently; Rebecca had settled for ensuring that grey hair would never be an issue and removing an almost invisible scar from her right cheek. As a result she looked younger than she had a decade ago.

It was something she'd found very useful in negotiations; she'd got used to being underestimated but it was even more of an advantage now.

A little too close for comfort that time though...

A melancholy feeling crept over her as she reviewed the incident. Her ship, *Eclipse*, was wrecked. Some trash collector had already claimed salvage on what was left of the hull and it had already been written off as a total loss. It had been a good ship, her refuge in too many escapades; a friend, a trusted companion.

Never seem to keep friends for long...

Now it was gone, shot to pieces by those insectoid scum.

They'll pay for that.

She called up the Chronicle vid-footage of the attack and watched it end-to-end. She frowned as the Thargoids singled her out, chasing her up and away from the station and into the graveyard with the Cobra pilot, Coyote, struggling to keep up. It had happened too fast, taking her by surprise. She bit her bottom lip as she saw the Thargoids rip into her ship, draining its life and finally leaving it drifting out of control. Coyote's Cobra dispatched one Thargoid and was heading towards her but it was too late, the *Eclipse* was crippled. The Thargoid floated, poised nearby.

But it didn't kill me.

The Thargoid simply sat stationary, its engines and weapons quiescent. It was transmitting, blasting out with all its power a simple repeating message. Rebecca pinched the holofac sound from the display with her fingers and flung it onto a new screen, requesting a translation of the words.

Search term "Ragazza dux ducis incolumitas." - no results.

Coyote's Cobra barrelled into view, dumping prodigious firepower into the immobile Thargoid. It made no defensive move, succumbing a few seconds later. Coyote's Cobra took the battered remains of the *Eclipse* in tow.

Damn. The arrogant 'goid saved my life, he'll be insufferable.

Time to go. Missing the preview of the new ship was not an option, especially now she was back in the market. She'd have to deal with the combateers afterwards, she was half surprised they weren't waiting outside her dorm, with a bunch of questions and maybe a blaster or two.

The Isis instructions were specific.

Latitude Bar : 18:00 : Station Time : Tionisla 5

The door snapped open as she arrived. The bar was virtually deserted. She caught a faint whiff of some noxious fumes she didn't recognise. She gazed uncertainly around. There was no obvious sign of anything to do with the Isis Corporation at all. She tensed, sensing a trap. Her hand strayed reassuringly to a small device on her belt. She tapped it gently, her hand then lightly resting on the svelte holstered hand blaster strapped to her waist on the left side.

Other than a few serving staff, there were only two other individuals in the room. A figure reclining in one of the luxurious seats wearing a ridiculously oversized hat that concealed his face from where she was standing and a tall reptilian creature with a replacement eye, who might have been grinning at her, it was difficult to tell. Other than that the place was deserted, though there was a strange pile of cargo mech equipment in the far corner. It looked peculiarly out of place in the plush lounge. She wondered why it was there.

'Isis Interstellar?' she asked.

The lizard strode across to her, covering the distance in a few strides. He towered over her. She regarded the strange eye-implant and the large bulky weapon strapped to his side with caution.

'Quite possibly.'

Rebecca immediately recognised the clipped voice, her eyes widening.

'You're...'

'Derik.' The reptile was definitely grinning now. 'Good to see you in one piece.'

He held out a clawed hand. Rebecca took it and was rewarded with a swift violent shake that almost dislocated her shoulder.

'Is this some kind of trick?' she asked, looking around at the otherwise empty room.

'Your guess is as good as mine,' Derik replied, straightening his posture and looking down at her. 'I'm assuming you recognise this?'

He held out a small rectangular piece of card. She held up the one she'd received in the Isis invitation. It was identical.

'A stitch up,' Rebecca said, deflated. 'No new ship?'

'That remains to be seen...' said another voice.

The reclining figure stood up slowly, rather in the manner of an old man but didn't turn around.

'You're Coyote?' Rebecca demanded.

Coyote pushed back his sombrero and relit his colita, puffing smoke across the room. Only then did he turn and favour her with a stare by return.

'That would be me...'

Rebecca strode past Derik and stared up at Coyote. He was a foot taller than her. She took in his tall muscular frame, dark hair, full beard and the tatty sombrero perched on his head. Deeply etched laughter lines marked a face that had seen most things many times before. In turn he studied her; the petite frame, the youthful appearance, the simple dark-brown hair, the lack of make-up or feminine accessories.

39 my ass! She's just a girl, a pretty one at that. No sign of any injuries... so who do we have here?

'Thanks for saving my life,' she said demurely, her eyes widening alongside a faint smile, 'That was some piece of flying and no mistake. Really amazing. Glad you were out there, I got a little out of my depth, thought I could handle it...'

Rebecca hesitated and looked away as if embarrassed, her countenance dropping.

'It happens señorit...' Coyote began.

Rebecca slapped him across the face, the blow fast, like lightning. The colita spun across the room, trailing sparks.

'Saw that one coming.' Derik gave a coarse reptiloid chuckle. 'You must be losing your edge, Coyote.'

'Never insult me again,' Rebecca said, giving him a cold glare and then turning away.

Click!

Coyote had drawn a weapon from a concealed ankle holster in a smooth and practised move. It was a pistol, an antique projectile weapon but no less deadly than a blaster at close range. It was levelled at Rebecca's head. In truth he'd been surprised, clearly there was more to this woman than met the eye.

Rebecca had been equally rapid. Her svelte hand blaster was likewise pointing directly back

at Coyote. He eyed her outstretched arm briefly.

Left-handed; unusual...

‘I’ve killed men for less,’ Coyote said furiously, in a voice just above a whisper, his face still stinging, ‘Tell me why I should treat you any different.’

Cool grey eyes fenced with deep brown; measuring, judging and calculating. Coyote’s eyes narrowed, accompanied by a slight frown.

The eyes... something hard, almost brutal there...

‘I’m not asking for different,’ Rebecca replied, staring back. ‘Don’t belittle me again.’

‘And if I do?’ he returned.

Derik moved quickly across, sticking his head between the two antagonists. His reptilian face snapped from one to the other, while his ocular eye implant glowed malevolently.

‘While I’d love to keep watching your species’ tedious predilection for indulging in unresolvable sexual superiority contests, can I inject a note of practicality? We’re a little light on half decent combateers right now, losing another pair won’t do any of us any good. Por favor? Pretty please? Hmmm?’

Rebecca lowered her gun, indolently spun it around her finger and holstered it again, without taking her eyes off Coyote. She side-stepped Derik, ignoring him completely.

‘You might as well shoot me now and get it over with.’ She shook her head slightly and tilted her head up defiantly.

‘Humans!’ Derik spat and rolled his eye.

Coyote had followed her movements with his own gun, trying to get the measure of the woman. He was used to outmanoeuvring an opponent, using their own strength against them. She’d given up the mutual advantage of her own weapon, putting herself at a disadvantage, yet she continued to challenge, to goad. Clearly she was accustomed to being underestimated; it was a powerful ploy. Most men would be taken in by the girlish looks and subservient act.

And trying to make a Pajero out of me... Let’s see how far your bravado can be pushed little one...

He pulled back the hammer on the pistol. It snapped into place with a thick click. He kept his eyes on Rebecca throughout, looking for a flinch or a blink. There was nothing.

‘Back off!’ Derik growled. ‘Both of you!’

A graze, just so the little bitch knows the score...

‘Boo!’ Rebecca suddenly snapped out, leaning forward abruptly.

The pistol fired, a surprisingly loud noise in the quiet of the bar. Coyote had aimed just to the left of Rebecca’s head but she’d stepped into the path of the bullet...

There was a flash of chromatic light and whirring noise as the bullet ricocheted back punching a neat hole through the outer rim of Coyote’s sombrero and embedding itself in the bulkhead behind him. It was instantly absorbed by the self-sealing fabric, preventing a breach of the exterior hull.

‘Frakkin’ hell!’ Derik growled, jumping back in surprise and alarm, almost falling over a barstool.

Smoke curled from the expired round in the pistol. Rebecca’s defiant look had changed to smugness.

Coyote regarded the hole in his Sombrero out of the corner of his eye and then turned his attention back to Rebecca.

Underestimated her twice in as many minutes... not good. Lesson learnt. But even Elite combaters know when to quit...

He lowered his gun with a wry grin.

‘You win... Care to enlighten me, por favor?’

‘My sensors indicate she is surrounded by a compact force-field generated from a device on her belt,’ a deep voice rumbled from the corner of the room.

Rebecca’s gun was back in her hand in an instant. She backed up quickly, looking confused.

‘You might have told me,’ Coyote snapped.

‘You didn’t ask.’

Udian uncoiled himself from the position his mechanical body had adopted in the corner of the room. Rebecca’s mouth dropped open as he climbed up to his full height. Deep-hued ocular scanners regarded her and he began advancing slowly across the room towards her.

‘Hold it right there!’ she gasped, levelling her blaster at various parts of oncoming machine, unable to decide where to aim. She stumbled backwards as Udian rumbled heavily towards her.

‘You can put away your little pea shooter, child.’ Udian marched relentlessly onwards. ‘You’re outgunned. Your force-field won’t cope with this and the less said about the collateral damage, the better.’

Metal canopies around the metallic central casing folded back abruptly. Two lethal looking chain guns appeared with a heavy mechanical thud. Both spun around and locked directly onto her with a noisy clatter. Udian continued stomping across the room.

Rebecca let out a small shriek and stumbled backwards, tripping and falling onto the floor and scrambling away in an ungainly fashion.

‘Party’s over. Time to play nice.’ Udian stopped, leaning over Rebecca, who was now penned in the corner of the room. The chain guns loomed in her vision.

‘Who...’ Rebecca frowned, looking up at the fearsome machine. ‘What are you?’

The machine leant forward, looming across Rebecca. A panel slid back, revealing a tank filled with bubbling bile-coloured liquid. Within that there was... something. Organic; leathery; the shattered remains of a creature that might once have been a human being. Grotesque and withered limbs were plugged into bio-metallic interfaces. Internal organs bobbed in a sea of nanobot fluid, sloshing, moving, pulsing...

Coyote was gratified to see Rebecca’s face pall, taking on a sick green-grey sheen as she stared into the tank. She swallowed and gasped.

‘The name is Shulth. Udian Foraga Shulth,’ the machine intoned.

‘Shulth?’ Rebecca said weakly, ‘As in...’

‘Yes, all that and more,’ Udian replied.

‘Oh,’ Rebecca gulped.

‘Everyone’s always heard of him, no one’s ever heard of me!’ Derik complained, testily.

The elaborate doors snapped open again. The four combateers turned as two more individuals entered the room.

The first appeared to a man of average height. His age was difficult to gauge, probably in his forties. He had a tall erect bearing and was wearing dark clothes, which were a narrow shade away from being a uniform. His hair was grey with traces of black and his hazel eyes narrowed before scanning the room swiftly, clearly making a count. He seemed vaguely familiar to the assembly but they couldn’t place him.

He took in the situation without reacting; Coyote, Rebecca and Udian were still facing each other with weapons drawn in an attitude of mutual annihilation. Derik remained standing to the side looking disgusted with them all.

‘I see you’ve introduced yourselves,’ he said. His voice was soft, cultured and reassuring. ‘Perhaps we could dispense with the weapons for the time being?’

Udian stomped back, the chain guns folding neatly back into his carapace. Coyote carefully re-holstered his own weapon and turned his attention to the newcomer. Rebecca scowled and then capitulated, climbing back to her feet.

The man stepped aside revealing the other entrant.

The second individual was a trolley.

At least, that was how it appeared. A small metallic case floated into the bar, supporting a transparent sphere. Inside the sphere was....

Coyote and Rebecca exchanged a look.

...a brain.

They could all see the convoluted and distinctive patterning of the grey lump of organic matter, floating in a soup of milky white translucent fluid. They could make out connectors, supports and small lights all intricately connected to the brain, acting as conduits to the outside world.

The trolley proceeded into the room and stopped abruptly. The sphere detached itself, sprouting delicate appendages that might have been arms, fingers or even tentacles. It jumped down and scuttled across towards Rebecca.

She stepped back, staring down at it, her mouth hanging open.

‘Blaze O’ Glory. Chief test pilot for Isis Interstellar.’ The voice was bubbly, amused even. ‘Pleasure to make your acquaintance at long last Rebecca Weston.’

A manipulator was extended in her direction.

Rebecca crouched down and took it gingerly. ‘Charmed, I’m sure,’ she managed.

The doors closed. The man coughed politely and the combateers turned their attention to him.

The man introduced himself with only the bare necessities. He was an aide to the Galactic Navy, a Galcop commander by the name of Garew Ward. He submitted to a scan by Shulth who

indicated that his credentials checked out. He apologised for the manner in which they'd been assembled and then cut to the chase.

'Five weeks ago we received word that the Thargoids were conducting unusual activity in Chart Eight, near the planet Oresrati...'

Rebecca frowned. Coyote caught the look that briefly crossed her face.

'...The team sent to investigate never reported back,' Garew continued. 'Then civilian shipping in the area was reported overdue and never arrived. At around the same time, the Thargoids withdrew from all the interstellar war zones where we've been engaged with them for the last two years. They gave up strategic gains, resources, access routes. Everything. We dared hope that they were finally admitting defeat. They had simply disappeared.'

'Then, without warning, they came through the Formidine Rift. First we had incursions at Arusqudi and Orteve, followed by Teorge. Within days there was another at Riiser. A civilian fleet was ripped to shreds at Zarace. They'd completely circumvented the Xexedi Cluster. We've been keeping a lid on casualties but there have been millions. By the time we'd mobilised a sufficient force they were already due at Aesbion. The fifth Armada was assembled to meet them.'

'And?' Derik asked.

'We met them,' Garew said. 'Four behemoths, twenty-five pulsar frigates, fifteen squadrons of twenty Vipers. Military grade, state-of-the-art weaponry; trained, disciplined fighters. The Thargoids had taken up station around a moon. They were disorganised, unstructured, clustered in a chaotic array of various ships and configurations. They had the numerical advantage but no structure.'

Garew let out a deep breath.

'We engaged with standard tactics, concentrating fire on individual ships by squadron, taking them down one by one. We wiped out hundreds of ships. The firefight raged for hours. We'd lost a third of our ships before we began to turn the tide. The Thargoids began to retreat, heading out-system. We pursued them, determined to force them back and secure the affected systems.'

Garew clasped his hands together and surveyed them once again.

'On the edge of the system the Thargoids turned, spread out and halted. We formed up ranks and were about to press our advantage. Then we picked up inbound witch-space signatures. Front, flanks and rear. Thargoids appeared out of nowhere; hundreds, thousands of them. We were surrounded. A trap.'

Garew hung his head. 'It was a massacre; some of the Thargoids had this plasma weapon, cutting through our ships as if their shields were down. Even without that, their overwhelming numbers would have easily secured victory. They completely changed strategy, that and the endless repeating message. We couldn't even flee, they were able to jam our witch-space drives. Only a handful of our ships survived.'

'It's a surgical attack strategy, aiming for one thing. They're trying to isolate Lave. We've kept Tionisla for now but it's only a matter of time. We've got reports of more Thargoids entering the Erlasian Gulf and still more massing at Teaatis and Legees. They've thrown every single resource they have at Chart one. Our fleets are still deployed across the Charts. We've got re-enforcements on the way but by the time they get here...'

'We have the third here at Tionisla, the seventh and the ninth at Lave, with various other groups assembling at Leesti, Diso, Reorte and Oerve. Our tactical simulations predict Lave will be overrun in two weeks. Every single Thargoid force we have data on is moving towards Lave, as fast as they can.'

'Why Lave?' Udian intoned. 'What are you hiding there?'

Garew looked back at the enigmatic machine.

'Nothing,' he responded. 'You'd gratify the Navy's top strategists if you could figure out their aim. We see no obvious benefit to appropriating Lave. Yes, it will be demoralising but it's not a tactical position from which we see them launching a subsequent invasion. As a military target it's simply not worth the trouble. It makes no sense.'

'Clearly makes sense to the 'goids,' Derik interjected.

Garew paused and looked at each one of them in turn. Rebecca was frowning, Coyote looked pensive. Derik's and Udian's expressions were as unreadable as ever.

Coyote looked up after a moment.

'This is all very tragic...' he said, fixing the commander with a stare. 'But I fail to see what it's got to do with us.'

'Yeah, we kicked some bug ass,' Derik added. 'But four ships - sorry, two and a half ships - won't make a dent in a Thargoid invasion fleet no matter how good we are.'

Garew smiled wanly at them. 'You're quite correct. But a career in the Navy wasn't what I had in mind. The four of you hold the solution to this situation.'

Garew gestured to the holofac emitters and the Tionisla Chronicle newsfeed faded away, being replaced by a familiar map of Chart One. All the systems were familiar, from the Core Worlds east of Riedquat, all the way to the Pulsar Worlds eighty light years away near Rebecca's home of Tianve.

'The Thargoids are here, here and here,' Garew said. The appropriate sections of the chart adjacent to the Lave region turned red. 'Given they are throwing everything they have at Lave, we've an opportunity to cripple them severely. Udian Shulth, as you're no doubt aware, is a bio-weapons specialist. He already has proved that bio-weapons are effective against the Thargoids in the past. Unfortunately they were able to counter the effects within weeks, preventing their annihilation. What we need is a more powerful bio-weapon.'

'And know you of such of a thing?' Coyote asked, stiffening noticeably.

Garew nodded, looking over at Udian.

'Indeed,' Udian replied. 'I've created a new strain of genetically-keyed bio-weapon. It will take the Thargoids and their technology apart on impact.'

'So what's the problem?' Rebecca asked. 'Just splat the bugs. Let them have it.'

'The problem is that the weapon is a prototype,' Udian replied. 'It's yet to be tested on actual subjects. Galcop's regulations are needlessly bureaucratic and quite obstructive.'

'And waived for the duration of this emergency,' Garew added smoothly.

'Perhaps if you'd allowed my research to continue unhindered, you would be in a better tactical position right now...'

'...Perhaps if you were prepared to collaborate effectively with Galcop we wouldn't need to hinder you.' Garew replied, tartly.

'The bottom line is that you don't know if this thing works,' Derik interrupted.

Udian moved slowly forward. 'It was thought appropriate to test it before relying on it to change the course of the war. Going into battle with a potentially ineffective weapon at the expense of traditional munitions is not advisable.'

'Smart move,' Rebecca snapped. 'So, how are you going to test it? Got some tame Thargoids somewhere?'

Garew smiled smugly at her. 'Yes, we have.'

He pointed at the Chart holofac and snapped his fingers. A planet was highlighted on the far right of the Chart.

‘Beenri?’ Derik said with a grimace. ‘It’s a hellhole and on the wrong side of the Tortuga expanse. Anarchy central!’

‘Beenri,’ Garew repeated. ‘Radius 3833 kilometres. Feudal, Poor Agricultural. Tech level 3. Population 1.7 billion harmless fat insects. That’s the official entry. In truth, a terraformed planet given over to a Thargoid breeding experiment that’s been running for over two hundred years.’

‘1.7 billion Thargoids?’ Rebecca whispered.

‘Nice,’ Derik whistled.

‘Genetically speaking, yes,’ Garew said airily. ‘Though they don’t share the intelligence or the warlike tendencies of our insectoid friends. Ideal test material. We’ve been conducting experiments on them for decades, trying to engineer weapons that are capable of eradicating them in one fell swoop.’

‘For ‘we’ read ‘I,’ Udian interjected.

‘Quite,’ Garew said. ‘Highly illegal and morally questionable. Yet, as it turns out, utterly essential.’

‘So why haven’t you tested the weapon?’ Coyote asked.

‘The weapon was developed at Ermaso and remains there,’ Udian replied smoothly. ‘Fortunately the Ermasians have a rather more liberal attitude to research...’

‘You mean they’re happy as long as they get a cut,’ Derik replied.

‘They are an enlightened culture,’ Udian answered, unruffled.

‘Sure, if you like grubs and ants.’

‘Only one problem with that,’ Rebecca interjected. ‘Moving bio-weapons is illegal and you couldn’t do it openly, the bugs would be all over you.’

‘Correct,’ Garew replied. ‘This mission must therefore remain clandestine.’

‘So,’ Coyote said. ‘You’re asking us to smuggle a priceless illegal cargo, three quarters of the way across the chart, without being taken out by the Thargs, police or pirates.’

‘You’re the best smuggler in the business, so rumour has it. Time to prove it,’ Garew said.

‘Won’t be easy...’ Coyote mused, looking at the chart holofac. ‘You’ll need to travel through

the most problematic systems in the chart. You couldn't have chosen a more difficult place to get to.'

'Why thank you,' Udian said.

'Derik and Udian will carry the weapons, you'll act as guide,' Garew acknowledged.

'And what do we do when we get there?' Derik asked.

'I would have thought that was obvious,' Udian replied with a coarse chuckle. 'We test the weapon.'

'Pick a few subjects to ensure it works? Stick some dumb bugs in a ship and shoot it down? How exactly?' the reptiloid glared back.

'Much more simple,' Udian replied. 'We deploy the weapon from orbit and ensure that the entire population of Thargoids and their hives are eradicated. Wipe the planet clean of their filth.'

'Mass extermination?' Coyote growled, under his breath. '1.7 billion of them?'

'They're Thargoids. Call it pest control. We've got to be sure it works,' Garew said, '...before we use it on the Lave system.'

Coyote, Derik and Rebecca gasped simultaneously. Only Udian remained unmoved.

'Say that again,' Coyote said in a whisper.

'We're going to allow them to take Lave,' Garew said. 'Oh, we'll make it look convincing of course. Put on a good show. But the Thargoids will be allowed to take the system. We probably have no choice. Whatever they want there they can have it. Once they're in, we'll cordon it. Witch-space jammers will lock them in. Then Lave goes down in history as the final solution to the Thargoid menace.'

'You're mad...' Rebecca said, her face ashen.

'It's us or them. We're losing. They can penetrate our defences at any time they choose. Tionisla was a close call. Without your intervention all the stations would have been taken out. The same story will be repeated all over the Chart unless we stop them. Time to choose which side you're on.'

Coyote and Derik exchanged a look; they appeared distinctly ill at ease.

'And what about me?' Rebecca demanded. 'What's my part in this crazy plan?'

Garew smiled. 'Ah yes. Rebecca Weston. Perhaps you'd like to explain how the Thargoids came to be in possession of the plasma accelerator that nearly killed these good gentlemen?'

Rebecca looked around. Coyote, Derik and Udian were eyeing her speculatively.

‘I don’t know how the Thargoids got the weapon,’ she said cautiously.

‘Come, come.’ Garew said. ‘You know who last had control of it.’

‘No I don’t...’

‘Zerz Furvel’s secrets didn’t die with him you know,’ Garew said.

How much does he know?

Rebecca stared at him. ‘But... he’s dead. His ship was destroyed. Ten years ago. I saw it!’

‘The wreckage of an Imperial Courier was found in the Oresrati asteroid belt,’ Garew informed her. ‘Stripped clean by the Thargoids. The ident was confirmed as the *Falchion*, Zerz Furvel last known to be in command. Research records indicated he was working on plasma weaponry shortly beforehand. The Thargoids deploy plasma accelerators on their vessels immediately afterwards. Seems a pretty obvious connection.’

‘So? That’s got nothing to do with me!’

How could the Falchion have ended up back at Oresrati?

Garew flicked his fingers at the holofac and a grainy video image appeared.

‘Investigators found this footage in what remained of the memory core of the *Falchion*.’ he said, matter-of-fact.

From the video vantage point they could see a tall lean man holding a young woman in his grasp. His right hand was clenched around her throat, her hands scrambling, trying to free herself. Blood was flowing from a knife wound in her cheek.

Rebecca looked at Garew in fear and surprise. He stared back, his face stiff and grim, his gaze intense.

Does he know? Surely he’s not going to tell them about...

Coyote and Derik leaned forward. The woman’s face was unmistakable.

It’s her! But she looks exactly the same then as now...

As they watched Rebecca was flung to the floor, lying prone and stunned.

‘You can’t goad me into killing you, I know that’s what you want.’ The man wiped blood from his fingers with a small piece of fabric. ‘I’ll give you credit, you are cleverer than you appear.’

On the holo-fac Rebecca tried and failed to stand up, clearly injured. She touched her face, smearing blood across it.

'With you gone, Jim would have no reason to co-operate with me, would he?' the man continued. *'He'd probably sacrifice himself in a vain attempt at being noble too.'*

'Leave him alone...' the holo-fac Rebecca cried, in distress.

'You were trying to protect him. Nice try; it was very convincing. Unfortunately for you, I am not the fool that Jim is...'

'You won't get to use the plasma accelerator!'

The video crashed with static and stopped. Rebecca schooled her expression, suppressing her surprise and confusion.

But that's not what happened! What's happening here? Jim always told me to deny everything about...

'More than ten years ago,' Garew commented. 'Perhaps you'd care to let us know what you were doing there?'

Rebecca's thoughts were racing. Garew's eyes were locked on hers, his gaze intense. She looked into them and frowned.

'I was on an undercover Galcop mission... to track down Zerz Furvel,' she managed. 'He was Galcop's chief technician. A design genius with a speciality in high performance weaponry.'

'You killed him?' Udian interjected in surprise. 'Rather a waste. He had an admirable talent. I met him once, though he didn't approve of bio-weapons. He was a directed energy bigot with a rather narrow focus.'

'He'd faked his own demise at Diso in order to pursue the manufacture of this plasma weapon in secret,' Rebecca continued. 'I tracked him to a base on Oresrati after a long chase across the charts. He was better equipped than I anticipated. This portable shield generator was his – it stopped me from being able to apprehend him.'

Rebecca unhooked the small unit from her belt and placed it on a nearby table.

'I was caught but I'd already sabotaged Zerz's witchdrive. He dumped me on Oresrati to die, unaware I'd arrived in a cloaked ship – Galcop had given me a specially equipped ship called the Constrictor. By the time he tried to witch out I'd managed to get back to my own ship. I confronted him in space. We fought, he lost. I thought the *Falchion* had been destroyed. Apparently not...'

‘And the Thargoids?’ Garew prompted.

‘If they found the *Falchion* they found the remains of the accelerator. I guess they must have reverse engineered it somehow,’ Rebecca said, looking at him carefully. ‘If they found that vidclip, they also know about me, which...’

Her eyes widened.

‘Explains why they’re after you now,’ Derik added. ‘Presumably they think you’ve got more information or more tech.’

‘And have you?’ Coyote said, looking at her thoughtfully.

‘No,’ Rebecca said. ‘I don’t even know how the accelerator works. I’ve only worked out some tactics to counter it. I’ve fought it twice now and survived. That shield generator is the only other thing I have.’

‘Pretty effective tactics,’ Derik said. ‘We’d have been spaced without your tricks.’

Coyote picked up the small unit and turned it around in his hand, before tossing it to Derik. The reptiloid stared closely at the device before passing it to Shulth.

‘Ingenious,’ Udian declared after a moment. ‘Even more impressive considering it was created a decade ago.’

‘Zerz was no fool,’ Rebecca confirmed.

‘Rebecca here has the most experience with the plasma weapon,’ Garew said. ‘And we can use that.’

Derik looked enthusiastic but Coyote and Udian appeared unmoved.

‘She’s not Elite,’ Coyote said, dismissively. ‘We can handle it now.’

‘Perhaps not in kill count,’ Garew said, seeing Rebecca bristle immediately. ‘But experience counts. The Thargoids will be wise to the last set of tactics...’

‘I’ll take you on any day,’ Rebecca interrupted, glaring at Coyote.

Coyote smiled wryly. ‘And you would lose.’

‘In your dreams,’ Rebecca said aggressively, stepping forward.

‘Enough!’ Garew snapped impatiently. Rebecca glared but subsided.

‘With her ship destroyed you need more firepower,’ Garew continued. ‘Which is where Blaze

comes in.'

Garew gestured to the brain-sphere, which jumped onto the table and spun around on its manipulators. The holofac of the chart faded and was replaced with the Isis Interstellar logo.

'Thargoid incursions were a high priority when we designed the latest Isis mainstream vessel, our celebrated Diamondback Purgatori Fighter. You're doubtless familiar with the Vampire Mk4,' Blaze O' Glory spoke with a snappy, quick and enthusiastic sales-y tone. 'But Isis never stands still. We're always searching for more power, more speed, more élan.'

A deep chord sounded from the audio system, the holofac dimmed and then flashed up a phrase.

Isis Interstellar Presents...

'How do you counter top speed, high manoeuvrability and omni-directional weapons? You make yourself impossible to hit and ensure your every strike has devastating consequences.'

The Legend...

'Boasting power-reinforced hull integrity and high compression gravity-plating, we can afford to divert increasing power to roll, yaw and bow thrusters.'

The Original...

'Manoeuvrability that ups the game to the next level...'

Updated...

'Enhanced power-plant, engines based on captured Thargoid technology, intercooled and double-fluxed weapons design...'

Vampire Mk5. The bite... is back. Impress space, Commander!

A ship appeared on the screen, slowly rotating. A dark and aggressive looking vessel, sleek and menacing.

Rebecca stared at it, taking in the stats. Her mouth dropping open in astonishment.

'Three lasers?' she said, in disbelief. 'But how do you cool...'

'Military of course. Cooling is routed throughout the entire hull. The serrated design and conductive materials make the entire exterior hull a cooling panel.'

'Missiles?' Derik inquired.

‘Eight mounted. Option of twenty-two if you forego cargo and use rotating load assemblies. Or you can have supplementary fuel tanks. Customer choice.’

‘Twenty-two!’ the lizard exclaimed. ‘Frak! It’s a one ship armada!’

‘Curve factor?’ Rebecca had pushed back to the front, looking at the screen in detail.

‘Twice that of the original Mk1. Vectored thrust nozzles allow the talented pilot to switch to Newtonian flight and back again at will.’ Blaze was unfazed by Rebecca’s rapid-fire questioning. Clearly he was used to demanding customers.

‘Top speed?’

‘We’ve clocked it at .47 Light-mach off boost. I reckon we can get a little more.’

‘How’s it fly in battle?’

Blaze spun around on the spot, almost dancing with excitement. ‘That’s the question!’

‘I thought you were the test pilot?’ Rebecca asked.

‘Not this time.’

Rebecca stared at Blaze. ‘You haven’t actually flown it yet?’

‘Not in anger,’ Blaze replied. ‘Hope you’ll take up that challenge.’

‘Challenge?’ Rebecca demanded. ‘You want me to fly an untested prototype into a briar patch with a bunch of Thargs?’

‘You got your own ship?’ Garew interjected, with a wry grin.

Rebecca glared at him, feeling a renewed sense of loss as the image of her shattered ship passed through her mind.

‘I can buy one...’ she began.

‘Yes. A base Cobra or a mildly tweaked Asp. There’s no time. You need this ship,’ Garew said. ‘And it’s not untested. It’s perfectly flightworthy. Blaze here just wants you to shake it down. You want this ship, trust me.’

Rebecca looked back at the ship, torn between desire and frustration.

‘Uber, overpowered and gauche,’ Coyote commented from the rear of the room. ‘But even a ham-fisted amateur could be Elite with a ship like that...’

Rebecca’s hands balled into fists and she stepped towards him again.

Derik pulled her back. 'Easy tiger...'

Garew nodded to Blaze. 'Thank you. That will be all.'

The brain-sphere jumped back onto its trolley and then quickly rolled out of the room. At some unspoken signal the attendants in the bar also left, leaving the four combateers and Garew alone.

Coyote pushed his way to the front of the group as the doors snapped closed again.

'All very impressive...' he said. 'Now, let's talk payment. What's in this for us?'

Garew eyeballed him back. 'Apart from the satisfaction of defeating the Thargoids and the eternal gratitude of Galcop and the aligned worlds?'

'Yeah, apart from that.'

'Rebecca keeps the new ship...'

'Oh yes...' Rebecca said, lust in her eyes. Garew smiled.

'...plus any enhancements she sees fit to recommend. Derik is chief instructor at the Aegidian flight school on Aesbion. Udian gets certain freedoms and absolution for previous altercations with Galcop and you...'

Coyote raised an eyebrow.

'...Get to name your price.'

'Really? And what is it you think I want?'

'Money, Influence. You name it, I'll make it happen.'

Coyote grinned. 'Then I'll take a case of vintage four-leaf smoked and irradiated Zaquessian Evil Juice... a crate of Japatian colitas... and you will personally polish all the brasswork on my ship.'

Derik suppressed a laugh and managed a truncated snort instead.

Garew's eyes narrowed. 'Jesting with me is not advisable...'

'Then I've an alternative plan...' Coyote said, dismissively. 'By my reckoning Lave and most of Chart one is doomed, that's clear enough... So why don't my compadres and I load up with a few tonnes of Tionislan flapjacks while there's still a market, grab a galactic jump overcharge, get the hell out of here and flip you the bird from the station egress?'

‘Sounds like a plan to me,’ Derik agreed, with a snigger.

‘You won’t do this?’ Garew asked, glaring at Coyote.

‘You’ve got the wrong man, Garew,’ Coyote snapped. ‘You must have done your homework. I may be a smuggler but I have rules. I don’t touch slaves... or firearms.’

Garew smiled faintly and looked across at Udian. The hulking form of the bio-mechanical creature seemed to tense.

‘As I predicted...’ Garew said, quietly.

‘This is not necessary, Garew,’ Udian’s said. ‘We have alternatives.’

‘I disagree,’ Garew replied. ‘Coyote is the man for the job.’

‘No, he isn’t...’ Coyote snapped back.

Rebecca flinched, her eyes felt suddenly scratchy. She brushed and rubbed at them. The feeling refused to go away. Instead it got worse. Her head throbbed, a headache flashing painfully across her temple. Colours flashed and her vision tunnelled in around her.

‘I can’t see!’ Derik yowled next to her. ‘What is this? Frak!’

Rebecca panicked and flung out her arms to steady herself, her vision totally gone. She stumbled backwards, crashing into Coyote, who was likewise incapacitated.

‘Since you arrived, you’ve all been infected with an airborne strain of obedient Galcop modified nano-bots,’ Garew’s voice said. ‘We mostly use them for crowd control but they’re as effective for coercion, even at a distance. Right now they are merely jamming your optic nerves. By direction, they can repair, revitalise and rebuild damaged tissue. Of course, they can also impair the proper functioning of organic material or, if instructed, disassemble them entirely.’

‘Damn you, Shulth!’ Derik hissed. ‘I recognise your hand in this!’

‘Galcop has put much of my work to use without my permission,’ Udian’s voice rumbled back. ‘I cannot control everything. You would be wise to obey.’

Derik’s reply was a flamboyant string of wide-ranging obscure profanities.

Suddenly Rebecca could see again. She caught her breath, looking at both Derik and Coyote. Both of them appeared to be still blinded.

‘Now I have your full attention,’ Garew continued, ‘let me be absolutely clear. My job is to ensure Galcop’s survival. I have the means and you now know I have the will. Defy me and you will

die rather unpleasantly at my whim. Obey and you can have whatever you desire. You will comply with me, one way or the other.'

Garew twitched his fingers. Coyote and Derik stumbled backwards, blinking, clearly being able to see again.

'I should...' Coyote began but a metal manipulator blocked his path, flashing in front of him in an instant.

'Don't,' Udian said heavily. 'The 'bots will activate automatically if his vital signs are excessively disrupted. Kill him and you kill all of us.'

'Udian,' Derik snapped. 'Why do you always have to be so bloody thorough?'

'Decided on your fee?' Garew said, enjoying the frustrated look on Coyote's face.

'I'll think of something...' Coyote replied in a voice laced with menace.

Garew surveyed the group. 'You launch tomorrow. I suggest you start preparations.'

Nobody moved.

'Where's my ship?' Rebecca asked, after a long pause.

'Contact Blaze,' Garew replied. 'He'll escort you.'

'Better get going then,' she said, ignoring the rest of them and stalking out of the bar. Garew let her go and then turned to follow her.

'Looks like you Elite combateers are playing catch-up again,' he said over his shoulder.

Chapter Four

Rebecca heard a knock on the door of the apartment she had rented temporarily on station five. She checked the intercom, scowling at the face that appeared on the holo-fac. It was Garew.

‘May I come in?’ he inquired.

‘Do I have a choice?’ she snapped back.

‘Not really, no.’

Rebecca waved her hand at the door and it slid open. Garew strode in. She glared at him as the door closed behind him.

‘Seen the new ship yet?’ he asked.

‘Say your piece and get the frak out of here,’ she shot back.

Garew smiled at her. ‘I’m trying to protect you, believe it or not.’

‘Oh yeah? Pumping me full of bad-ass nanobots. Protecting me!’

Garew sighed and leant on the edge of a chair, watching her for a moment.

‘Tell me about Zerz.’

Rebecca stared at him and then shook her head.

‘No.’

‘No?’ Garew seemed surprised by her flat denial.

‘No,’ Rebecca repeated. ‘Figure it out for yourself.’

‘I could have you incarcerated to keep you safe from detection,’ Garew said idly. ‘As the gecko pointed out, a handful of pilots won’t make a big difference. The Thargoids consider you important enough. Perhaps I shouldn’t risk you having your freedom.’

‘If I was that dangerous you’d already have killed me.’

‘The thought had crossed my mind,’ Garew replied. ‘Should I, do you think?’

‘You need me to fly escort. I’m the only one who can outfly them.’

‘True enough.’

Rebecca scowled and decided to confront Garew. ‘All this over a weapon?’

‘Don’t play the innocent with me,’ Garew said with a faint smile. ‘The plasma accelerator is not just a simple weapon. It completely changes the game. With a weapon like that...’

‘Whatever you say,’ Rebecca replied, ‘just another gun to me...’

Garew noticed the look on her face. ‘So I’ll ask again. Tell me about Zerz...’

‘Galcop must already know about it...’

‘Not enough to build one, the detail is what counts. You were there, tell me.’

‘No. Go screw yourself.’

Garew twitched, sighed and flexed his fingers. Rebecca had already noticed the small fingertip data control he’d used to control the holo-fac. Clearly it had other uses.

Her legs tingled and she abruptly found herself on her knees in front of him, unable to move.

‘I have limited patience, Rebecca. I have already probed your memory by means of the nanobots. It appears you’ve found a way to obscure the truth. I admire your ingenuity.’

‘There is no truth! I don’t know anything!’ Rebecca screeched.

Garew continued undeterred. ‘As you have observed, I can torture the information out of you easily enough. Remove your fingers, pressure your brain, cut off your lungs. Is that going to be necessary?’

‘You already know as much as I do,’ she cried, beginning to sound desperate. ‘I don’t understand it or know how to use it! I don’t know how to make it. There is nothing else to tell!’

Garew walked around her, running a hand over her hair, almost possessively. Rebecca shivered, moving her head aside angrily.

‘The Thargoids want you. They want you because you know something vital, something else about the plasma accelerator,’ Garew said, almost in a whisper. ‘Tell me what it is.’

‘I don’t know,’ Rebecca said, tears starting to form in her eyes.

‘Why do the Thargoids want you?’ Garew reiterated, enjoying the fear he could see building in Rebecca’s eyes.

‘I don’t know!’ Rebecca snapped the answer back, her voice increasing in pitch.

‘What does *Ragazza dux ducis incolumitas* mean?’ Garew’s voice rose in intensity.

‘I don’t...’ Tears dripped down a cheek.

Garew twitched his fingers. Rebecca felt a burning, intense pain in her throat, she struggled to breathe, her hands going to her neck in a desperate bid to ease the passage of air into her lungs. There was nothing to fight against. She choked. Spasms of pain arced through her body, forcing her to the floor. Lights began to flicker at the edge of her vision.

Suddenly the pain vanished, as quickly as it had arrived. Rebecca slowly propped herself up on her elbows.

Garew had seated himself on one of the comfortable sofas in the room, watching her with amusement. His legs were crossed and he was leaning back nonchalantly.

‘I can continue this all evening if you insist. I will have the information I require.’

‘I don’t know...’ she managed to gasp, sobs wracking through her. ‘Please...’

Another twitch from his fingers. Pain slashed into her again, spinning her around and throwing her to the floor on her back. She felt her back muscles go into spasm as she desperately clawed at the fire burning through her chest. Her fingers clenched and she screamed. It felt like eternity but a mere ten seconds passed until Garew released her again.

‘You don’t seem to understand, Rebecca. Tell me what I want to know.’

Rebecca rolled onto her side, breathless and gasping. Her body was still shuddering as the pain receded.

‘Rebecca?’ Garew inquired, his voice almost gentle.

‘I can’t tell you something I don’t know...’ she managed to cry.

Garew was suddenly on his feet. He grabbed her by the hair and dragged her across the floor. Her body slammed into the chairs on the far side of the room, further knocking the breath out of her. She cried out in pain and stunned surprise.

‘Don’t toy with me,’ he whispered in her ear, pulling her head back. ‘What will it take? No one can help you. Your legality and identity is in my control. I can maim and heal you over and over. I can humiliate and deprave you time and again. I can sever your primary cognitive functions and turn you into a vegetable. Tell me what you know.’

Rebecca had no voice to reply with, she was gasping for breath.

‘Now,’ Garew said softly and slowly releasing her. ‘*Ragazza dux ducis incolumitas*. What does it mean?’

Rebecca managed to briefly shake her head, trying and failing to climb back to her knees.

‘I don’t know...’

And then there was nothing she could do but scream.

Derik, Coyote and Udian remained in the bar after Garew and Rebecca had left.

‘Just whose side are you on?’ Coyote demanded of the hulking metal creature.

Udian stopped and the cylinder containing his body spun through a half circle. The ocular sensors regarded Coyote emotionlessly.

‘I would have thought that was obvious,’ the machine replied.

‘Answer the question you ugly bag of bolts!’ Derik growled.

‘If you intend to defeat the Thargoids, you’ll find me a worthy ally,’ Udian replied. ‘Does that satisfy you?’

‘Hardly,’ Coyote replied. ‘If this is going to be my mission I get to call the shots. Will you follow my lead?’

‘I am unused to taking orders from anyone,’ Udian replied, slowly.

‘We’re all used to operating alone...’ Coyote shrugged. ‘My question stands.’

Udian remained unmoved.

Coyote pressed it home. ‘Will you follow my lead when I make the call?’

Udian’s sensors refocused slightly, before turning to head out of the bar. ‘I’ll do what needs to be done, no more, no less.’

Coyote frowned and studied the enigmatic machine for a moment.

‘Claro...’ he mused spitting on the floor as the big machine whirred through the exit. Derik watched it go with a grimace.

‘Told you trust doesn’t sit easily with the Shulths,’ the lizard said. ‘You’ll not get much more out of him. He’s Garew’s pet now...’

Coyote abruptly slammed down a hand on the nearby table. ‘Garew! Manipulating bastard! I’ll find a way out from under these nano-bots and when I do...’

‘You can join the queue,’ Derik replied. ‘I want a piece of his ass too.’

‘I’ve never smuggled weapons. I don’t smuggle weapons...’ Coyote fumed. ‘I won’t do it. I made a promise...’

‘Then he’ll kill you,’ Derik said.

‘Then that’s how it needs to be,’ Coyote growled.

Derik blinked and downed the rest of his drink. ‘Funny. Didn’t have you figured as an idiot.’

‘What?’ Coyote spun on the lizard angrily.

‘Listen buddy. Garew will kill you and then choose the next best man. Somebody will take the job. Blow your life on a stand if you will, it won’t make a difference to the outcome. You’ll just be dead is all.’

‘It’ll make a difference to me,’ Coyote fired back with a glare.

‘Yeah,’ the lizard replied offhandedly. ‘You’ll be dead.’

‘I have principles...’

‘And I can admire that,’ the lizard shot back straightaway, matter-of-fact. ‘But who’s gonna care about your principles when you’re just a stain on the floor? Dead lizards don’t talk, neither do dead men, far as I’ve seen.’

‘Garew’s bluffing...’ Coyote replied.

‘Get real. You must have seen his type before. Meticulous planning, no sense of humour. He’ll kill us for certain if we don’t comply. We’re screwed... properly screwed. Maybe worse than we know. We either do or we die.’

Coyote shook his head. ‘Not acceptable...’

‘Listen buddy,’ Derik continued. ‘We’re not arming a bunch of terrorists; we’re not supporting a despotic regime...’

‘You sure of that?’ Coyote asked, looking back the lizard.

‘The Thargoids need to be taken out either way. There are worse crimes. Let your conscience off the hook.’

Coyote shook his head.

‘Hey, I won’t shed my skin over it,’ Derik said with a shrug. ‘It’s your funeral. Tell me one thing though...’

Coyote looked around at the lizard, who was now leaning back nonchalantly.

‘... how the fark are you going to get your revenge if you’re dead? Garew gets away and deals out the same old fark to another bunch of shmucks like us. Thanks a lot buddy.’

Coyote capitulated with a heavy sigh. ‘You son of a ‘goid...’

Derik grinned and waited. Coyote leant forward, chin in his hands, thinking hard. He stared out of the window.

The damn lizard is right...

‘Ok. Let’s do this,’ Coyote said, resolutely, turning and standing up in a smooth move. ‘Screw him, screw Udian and screw the girl...’

‘I think she might have something to say about that...’ Derik cackled.

Coyote laughed ruefully, then sauntered over to the bar and grabbed another set of drinks for them. He clinked glasses with the lizard, before setting thoughtfully for a few moments.

‘Galcop must be crazy, trying a stunt like this,’ Coyote said, staring out of the viewpoint at the massed ranks of military ships.

‘No they’re desperate. Maybe it is the only way Galcop can beat the bugs,’ the lizard seemed at ease with the situation.

‘Killing an entire planet?’

‘I won’t lose much sleep over killing Thargoids, will you?’

‘Assuming he’s telling the truth.’

‘Assuming that,’ the lizard cackled.

Coyote pushed his head back, laughing bitterly and allowing his sombrero to slide down over his face a little. He relit his colita.

‘Garew. The friendly face of Galcop,’ Derik said with a grin.

‘You have a way with words,’ Coyote said, returning the grin. ‘In my experience Galcop plays by the rules and makes everyone else play by the rules... until the rules get in the way. Then it’s open season.’

‘Genocide on a planetary scale isn’t exactly the mark of the virtuous.’

Coyote nodded in agreement.

‘And what about your hot date?’ Derik continued.

Coyote chuckled. ‘You didn’t believe the story about her being on a secret mission?’

‘Pah,’ the lizard stuck out his tongue. ‘Did you?’

Coyote puffed on his colita. ‘Some of it was true... but there’s a lot more to that tale than we got told. Maybe she’s working with Garew...’

Derik took the comm-tab Coyote had been using earlier and scanned through the small amount of text. ‘Commander Weston, unblemished record, massive cash. Like you said, that’s mad. Who is she, that’s what I want to know.’

‘Claro...’

Derik hissed through his teeth.

‘So, let’s summarise,’ he said. ‘We don’t trust Shulth. Garew has us over a canister and Rebecca is holding out on us. We’ll have the entire chart trying to kill us, delivering a weapon which may or may not work against a target we’ve got serious reservations about destroying in a time span which is marginal at best. We’ve got no choice because if we don’t comply we’ll get disassembled at a cellular level and the Thargoids will vaporise anything that’s left.’

‘That pretty much sums it up, mi amigo...’ Coyote said, chuckling. ‘Oh and I don’t trust you either.’

Derik cackled. ‘Ooo, I’m hurt!’

‘Another drink?’

Garew stepped over the woman’s prone form and sat down once again. He was impressed. He’d seen stronger and tougher men crumple under far less duress than this petite woman had endured.

She’d continued denying any knowledge until the point her body shut down in shock. In her final moments of lucidity she had continued crying out all she knew of the plasma accelerator. It was nothing he didn’t already know. Garew had stopped just short of killing her. Blood was running from her mouth, mixed with saliva where she’d bitten her own tongue.

She had strength, he respected that. A woman used to fighting her corner and winning. It had been extremely gratifying to break her down, seeing her crumple, her self-assuredness fade into

despair.

But the Thargoids already have the plasma accelerator. Why do they need her now?

Garew sent a set of commands to the nano-bots via his fingertip interface. Udian's creations were almost alarmingly effective. Such power had to be treated with caution. It would be easy to... overindulge, particularly with a woman such as her. Fortunately he had mature sensibilities; a lesser man would have doubtless been tempted to take carnal advantage of such a situation.

As Garew watched he could see muscles flexing in the woman's body, bones knitting and tendons reattaching. The nanobots were as efficient at reassembly as they were at the other tasks he had asked of them.

Perhaps it would be better to kill her, to remove any uncertainties from the game?

It was the safest course of action. But that would leave things unresolved and no pilot for the new ship. The team would need the extra firepower. Yet, there was an advantage to be had here; the Thargoids had already paid dearly for it, doubtless they would continue to do so.

How to play the hand?

Yes, letting her go is high risk but if the Thargoids are pursuing her single-mindedly... I can turn that to our benefit.

Rebecca chose that moment to stir. She gave a momentary shriek and her eyes snapped wide, staring across the room. Her gaze didn't move, it stayed locked on something far behind Garew or even the bulkhead beyond, her body trembling.

'Welcome back,' Garew said softly from his position on the couch.

Rebecca scrambled backwards as best as she could, her hands touching parts of her body, surprised to find herself intact. Pain was still with her; the fading burns of cracking bones and ripping muscles but she could find no evidence of permanent damage.

The nano-bots! What he did....

'Efficient aren't they,' Garew said. 'I trust you won't be needing a further demonstration.'

'I can't tell you something I don't know!' Rebecca screamed, tears coursing down her cheeks, fear beginning to overwhelm her. She had crawled into a corner. Her body was shuddering uncontrollably in shock and reaction.

'Please... don't...'

Garew slowly stood up and walked over to her. She whimpered, trying to push herself further into the corner, her hands coming up to fend him off, shaking impotently. He knelt down next to her, gently stroking her hair. Rebecca sobbed and flinched.

‘I believe you, Rebecca,’ Garew said, taking her chin in his hand and turning her head towards him. He was gratified to see the almost incoherent fear in her eyes.

‘Please... let me go,’ she managed to whisper. ‘Please...’

‘I will Rebecca, I will,’ he promised. ‘But you must do something for me first.’

Her eyes widened in dread.

‘You will take the new ship. You will accompany the mission to Beenri. You will ensure the success of the attack. Do you understand?’

Rebecca nodded briefly.

‘Fail or attempt to flee and I will see that you revisit your recent experience to its ultimate conclusion. These nano-bots are capable of communication and instruction across the chart. Do not underestimate their reach. Do I make myself clear?’

Rebecca shuddered but she’d regained enough strength to raise her head. She spat in Garew’s face.

‘You utter piece of frak...’

Garew wiped away the offending material. ‘You don’t understand, Rebecca. I only do what is required. It’s no different from what you do.’

‘I don’t torture people!’ she cried, her voice shaking.

‘No? You laser pilots into oblivion, don’t you?’ Garew replied easily. ‘What do you think goes through their minds in those last few moments before their ships disintegrate around them, Rebecca? We both do it because it is necessary to do so.’

‘You’ll pay for...’ she began.

‘Spare me the useless posturing,’ Garew snapped. ‘You know as well as I do that you’ll never find me. I will disappear; I’m a creature of necessity, Rebecca. You may not like what I do but it’s required. Galcop must survive. Complete the task, receive your reward and that will be the end of it. Or I can kill you now. It’s your choice.’

Rebecca wrestled with herself for a moment, before nodding and collapsing forward, her head

bowed.

Garew eyed her speculatively.

‘Fly the mission, Rebecca. Do what needs to be done. I’ll be watching you.’

He left her shuddering in the corner. The door hissed closed behind him.

For long minutes she was unable to move. She reached out a number of times, trying to draw enough strength to crawl across the floor. Finally, shaking from head to feet, she managed to grab one of the portable commtabs. With unsteady fingers she managed to punch out a message to the only person she thought could help her, the only one she thought she might be able to trust.

Udian climbed aboard the *Hammer* and ensconced himself in the highly modified bridge module. The carapace and bulky limbs that served him outside of the ship disconnected and retreated into matching compartments around the bulkheads. His container unit was lowered into place and new interfaces sprang from the cubicle to connect with him.

For a moment there was disorientation, as his other sensors disconnected, before the breathtaking clarity of the ship’s information feeds became his eyes, his ears, his touch and taste. He became part of the ship...

No, I am the ship. Hammer; Shulth. There is no appreciable difference anymore...

He could feel the status of the ship. The engines pulsing like well exercised muscles. Energy conduits pushing throughout like veins and arteries. The twin core powerplant of the ship glowing like a powerful heart. His heart.

The moment of euphoria passed and he began to assimilate the information he’d gathered. Without needing to resort to the clumsy mechanics of a keyboard or even more laborious speech he sent his request out across secure channels.

Derik Roh’i – Native of Tionisla (G1). Age 56 Standard Years. Callsign ‘Wyvern’

Occupations: Bounty hunter, warrior, occasional freelance test pilot

Combat rating: Elite

Vessel : Caduceus Omega ‘Persistence of Memory’

The Roh’i family are unique among the Lizard species. Being hybrids, the Roh’i are practically a species unto themselves. Crossbreeding with other Lizard species and subtle genetic

editing have strengthened the Roh'i bloodline over the centuries. The Roh'i estate is located on a small, privately owned continent and is the HQ of the Roh'i's space trading business.

Udian was familiar with the lizard's background having worked with him before. He skipped to the next entry.

Carlos Estevan Maynard – Native of Zaquesso (G5). Age unconfirmed, believe middle 50s. Callsign 'Coyote'

Occupations: Bounty Hunter, smuggler, self-styled 'Contrabandista'

Combat Rating: Elite

Vessel : Cobra Mk3 (noted to be heavily customised) 'Dark Star'

Carlos 'Coyote' Maynard is the seventh child of an Anglo-Chinese father and Spanish mother. A poker player, veteran combateer, occasional heavy drinker, with a penchant for Zaquessoian Evil Juice, he is a lover of marijuana, cigars, coffee and fine cuisine, as well as women with dubious morals and ancient music played at excessive volume. Usually to be seen in a faded black ship-suit, he is rarely without his worn head covering (ref: sombrero) and is known to carry a pistol (ref: projectile weapon of antique design) in an ankle holster, which, by report, he is not afraid to use. He has a reputation as an inveterate 'contrabandista' but only deals in narcotics and 'special' contracts... trading in slaves or firearms is anathema to him. He is a master of the art of smuggling... if you need something 'special' transported covertly across the chart, Coyote can deliver... at a price.

Udian studied the report for a while. Coyote matched the description exactly, his informers had done well. Coyote had reacted as he'd expected to the necessity of moving the bio-weapon. Garew appeared convinced that Coyote was the right man for the job. Certainly no one else had the experience demonstrated by a lifetime of smuggling through the charts. The ethical stand on weapons was unfortunate. Ethics made things far too complex. A weakness to watch.

Udian skipped to the next entry.

Rebecca Weston. Native of Tianve (G1). Age 39 standard years. Callsign 'Kitalpha'

Occupation: Trader

Combat Rating: Deadly

Vessel: Vampire Mk1 (noted to be heavily customised) 'Eclipse'

Rebecca's official Galcop history has been heavily edited to give the impression of a typical

trader profile. This has been done at an exceptional level of quality. Determining her original profile required significant investment of resource.

Udian inspected the text more closely, already intrigued.

Since 3140 her record appears to be current and events are believed to be a reasonably accurate record of her activities – unremarkable in the main. She achieved her ‘Deadly’ combat rating in 3144 but progress towards Elite status has slowed, particularly in recent years. The editing is concerned with events between the years 3138 and 3140. Her official profile before 3140 can thus be considered a complete fabrication.

Prior to 3138 we believe she was called Rebecca Tyley, daughter of Reet and Rihanna Tyley, both traders from Tianve. Rihanna Tyley was reported missing in 3117. Born in 3112, Rebecca first achieved notoriety during 3132 for singlehandedly destroying a fully armed Python-class Cruiser with a poorly equipped Sidewinder scout ship. Reet, along with Rebecca’s brother Red Tyley, was killed by assassination in 3138, leaving Rebecca the only survivor from the family (she is officially listed as killed in the same incident). The assassination appears to have been ordered by Galcop to prevent the usage of the first prototype Quirium Cascade Mines, invented by a scientist by the name of James Feynman (also heavily edited and now known as Jim McKenna). Full details can be accessed in the attached confidential Galcop document ‘The Achenar Plot, changing the Status Quo.’

Udian chuckled to himself.

Hence the name – The Tyley-Feynman Quirium cascade mine. Somebody somewhere has a twisted sense of humour...

He returned to the text.

Determining entries for the period around 3140 is more complex and data is incomplete. Indications are that Rebecca and Jim were responsible for the death of Zerz Furvel, Galcop’s erstwhile chief technician, in a dispute concerning some kind of immensely powerful weapon. Entries are restricted at the highest level of Galcop encryption and security, which we’ve been unable to penetrate. Some entries conflict in their reference to the encrypted material. Some consistently refer to a weapon; others appear to indicate a location or destination. The precise details of the event remain elusive and, we suspect, not stored in accessible or networked format. It is a secret of significant notoriety, eyes only.

Had Udian still been in possession of eyelids, he would have blinked in surprise. His network

of cryptographic specialists, informers and spies had never submitted an incomplete report before. There had been no secret that he'd not found a way to access. Galcop strived to keep him out but always failed.

Yet this is so dangerous Galcop considers it the ultimate secret; they won't even enter it into a databank. What did this woman do? Clearly Garew knows at least part of it. I must discover the truth...

The commlink buzzed for attention.

Speak of the devil and he will appear...

The screen illuminated. Udian focussed on Garew's undistinguished face.

'Greetings,' Udian intoned.

'Are you ready?' Garew replied immediately.

'Everything is prepared,' Udian answered smoothly.

'The bio-weapons remain the top priority. Ensure Beenri is dealt with, regardless of any reservations the others may have.'

'You mean Sigñor Maynard,' Udian replied with a chuckle.

'He'll get you there, you can dispose of him and the gecko afterwards as you see fit. They'll have served their purpose.'

'And the woman?'

Garew's eyes narrowed. 'What about her?'

'For a mere Deadly combateer she has an interesting background...'

Garew paused for a moment. 'Let's just say she has been to some interesting places.'

'Indeed. What function does she serve on this particular mission?'

'As discussed, additional firepower...'

'I am not a fool,' Udian interrupted immediately. 'You could do better than a mere Deadly combateer.'

Garew leant back and regarded Udian for a moment.

'She...' he said, with a faint smile. 'She is plan 'B'.'

As Garew explained the details, Udian was unable to raise his eyebrows a second time.

Rebecca followed Blaze down the convoluted corridors, noticing the various retinal and DNA scanners checking her along the route. She was given an approving nod by the Isis guards on duty outside.

The doors to the hangar snapped open, revealing a dimly lit bay. The ship inside was in silhouette, framed by the energy barrier separating them all from the vacuum of space.

Blaze rolled to one side, allowing Rebecca a moment to view the vessel before he activated the lights.

‘We based a lot of the command and control on the original Mk1,’ Blaze said, conversationally. ‘A lot of folks thought we’d gone too far from the original simplicity with the intermediate versions. The Mk5 is more like the Mk1 in spirit; simpler and lighter, less automation or cossetting; more demanding of the pilot.’

Rebecca took in the lines of the ship for a moment.

‘What’s its name?’

‘Doesn’t have one,’ Blaze admitted. ‘It’s the first Mk5.’

‘Every ship has got to have name.’

‘Why not call it after your old *Eclipse*? A fine name.’

Rebecca shook her head. ‘No, she died. Time to move on. Switch on the lights.’

Blaze fired up the hangar illumination. Despite the fierce brightness the ship still looked dim, hard to see clearly. Eyesight seemed to slide off its mysterious profile.

‘So...’ Rebecca mused. ‘Swift, surgical. Spins on a credit piece. Hard to see coming. A ghost with attitude. A little like me.’

Blaze looked at her as she walked up to the blunt snub-nosed bow of the ship. It reminded Rebecca of her old ship. She held out a hand towards it, as if she was trying to communicate with it.

After a moment she nodded, mouthing something to herself.

‘So, what do you think?’ Blaze asked, impatiently.

Rebecca touched the vessel, feeling the curiously rough surface of the hull.

Her eyes narrowed. ‘Be good to me, *Spectre*.’

‘...Galcop is requisitioning supplies for the war effort. Lance and Fermann, Cowell and MgRath are just two of the most notable companies who’ve had their factories turned completely over to manufacturing replacement ships and weapons. All licensed pilots with a rank of ‘Dangerous’ or above are required to engage Thargoid vessels whenever directed to do so by Galcop personnel. Supplies of food and essential goods are being rationed via the marketplace as trading convoys are finding it increasingly difficult to maintain supply. The Galactic inflation index has shot up three points in the last week and worries over the aligned worlds’ economic stability continues to lead to severe price fluctuations...’

The news cast was interrupted, replaced by an authentication screen.

‘Incoming text communication,’ a computerised voice announced.

Jim looked up and picked the comm-tab up. ‘Play.’

‘Message is encrypted and marked as highly confidential,’ the computer responded. ‘Unlock required. Code prompt is Mutabilis forty-two.’

Jim blinked, he’d not been prompted for that code in years, not since his old colleague Geraint had used it for clandestine comms during that business with the Q-Bomb. That was over thirteen years ago. Only one other person knew that code.

Rebecca!

Jim mumbled out a complex security code.

The message was stark.

‘Jim. Trouble. The War, Bugs, Galcop and you know what. Call me. R.’

His fingers trembled as he read it, then his hand shook and he dropped the comm-tab on the floor. It bounced with a loud rattle.

‘Jim?’ Sonia asked from the room next door. ‘What are you doing?’

She was getting ready for another evening soirée. The Pasquals were due at their apartment at any moment, for another socialite dinner party. Sonia was putting the finishing touches to her make-up. Preparation for the evening had started the night before.

‘I need to deal with something.’ Jim’s voice was hoarse.

‘What? Now?’ she said, crossly, coming into the bedroom. ‘They’ll be here in ten minutes!’

‘Yes now.’

‘It’ll have to wait, this is more important!’ Sonia seethed, putting her hands on her hips.

‘No, it’s not.’

‘I’m not losing this opportunity to raise our profile. All the work I’ve put in!’

‘Sonia! I need to do this.’

Sonia glared at him, walked past and then made a grab for the comm-tab. Jim fumbled for it, trying to stop her but she got hold of it and wrestled it away from him.

Sonia read the message quickly and then turned her narrowed eyes on him.

‘It’s that woman, isn’t it? The space cowgirl...’ Sonia’s glare was accusing. ‘What’s her name? Rachel? Rosanna?’

‘Rebecca,’ Jim said, slowly.

It even hurts to say her name, even after all this time. Brown hair, brown eyes, biting her lower lip I’ll bet...

‘Listen, she’s in trouble. I can help. That was her ship on the news. The war...’

‘She’s in trouble!’ Sonia threw the comm-tab at him. ‘What about us, Jim? You’re still obsessed with her, aren’t you?’

‘No...’

‘Yes you are!’ Sonia blazed. ‘You can’t walk past a ship without wistfully looking at it. I’ve seen you! Wondering where she is and what’s she’s doing!’

‘It’s not like that...’ Jim replied, guiltily.

‘You can’t wait to crawl back to her to make up for whatever mistake you made back then!’ Sonia fired back.

‘It’s not that. It’s the war, she needs my help!’

‘Randomius, you’re so deluded!’ She turned away, a hand on her forehead.

‘It was over a long time ago!’ Jim fired back. ‘She chose a different route...’

‘And you never committed to this one!’ Sonia screeched. ‘Are you with me here in civilisation or are you out there scratching an existence between the stars? Whatever you do, stop sighing and wallowing in melancholy over the past and make a decision. I’m not living with her

ghost anymore!'

Jim looked at her. 'Sonia, wait... please. Let's not be rash...'

'No. I want to be rash!' she shot back. 'Make your mind up. Her or me?'

Jim stared at her for a moment without responding. His mind racing.

'So that's it is it?' Sonia said, 'Eight years, Jim. Eight years! Is that all I meant to you?'

She began opening wardrobes, gathering clothes and throwing them across the room. Jim followed her as she moved like a whirlwind around the room.

'Sonia...'

'What is it about her?' Sonia asked, suddenly turning on him. She started throwing things at him; clothes, vases, pillows, light fittings, anything she could lay her hands on. 'She's no oil painting! She's got no manners, no figure. She swears like a Galcop trooper. Covered in engine grease I'll bet! No class, no breeding. She's beneath you. Probably shacked up with a dozen men since the last time you saw her! You'll be lucky if she even remembers you. Dirty little whore...'

Jim grabbed her furiously, almost lifting Sonia off the floor.

Her eyes widened in surprise. 'So... that's the truth is it? You dumb sap. You still love her don't you?'

'I...' Jim couldn't answer. His heart was thumping painfully. To his surprise Sonia started laughing.

'Hilarious! Go to her. Go on.' She folded her arms.

Jim looked at her in surprise. 'You aren't...'

'What?' Sonia demanded. 'Heart broken, begging you to stay?'

'I...'

'What do you think? It was only a matter of time before I forced you to stray. It's only because you're such a coward that you stayed so long! Didn't think I could make your life much more unpleasant!' She picked up the comm-link and gestured with it. 'A little creative embellishment and I've got grounds for divorce - your money, your reputation and anything else I want. I'll take everything, clean you out and move on up.'

Jim stared at her in astonishment.

The last eight years. I thought we had something at the start... it was really all a game? Just

social climbing?

Sonia laughed cruelly as she watched the thoughts cross his face.

‘You conniving little...’ Jim lowered his hand.

Sonia’s face was triumphant but cold. ‘Go to the scrawny little space-bitch, go on. Get out of *my* apartment.’

Jim fled.

Rebecca had spent the rest of the morning going over the flight prep for the *Spectre*. She was itching to take it for a test flight but there was no time if the team was going to meet the launch window at ten. With two hours to go she’d done everything she could in advance.

The new ship was filled with all sorts of new technology but for the most part it was refinements on existing stuff she was familiar with. The big exception was the drive unit. She’d fired it up on idle and walked around to the rear of the ship just to take it in. It was totally foreign to her. All ships prior to this had flux exhausts where reaction material from the quirium sublight engines was vented out of the rear. It gave a distinctive cyan plume. The *Spectre* was different.

There was nothing but a dull flat panel at standby but when the engine was activated it cast an eerie and unearthly green glow across the hangar. Based on captured Thargoid technology, it used a completely different principle. The ship also lacked traditional fuel-injectors; after-burners which temporarily boosted a vessel speed at the cost of ruinous fuel consumption. The *Spectre* featured some kind of gravity lensing to achieve boosted speeds.

‘Quite a ship,’ said a heavily accented voice from behind her.

Rebecca turned and saw Coyote looking at her from across the room. He was smoking one of his foul smelling colitas, his head wreathed in a swirl of smoke that curled around his strange oversized sombrero.

‘No smoking in the hangar,’ Rebecca fired back.

Coyote grinned at her. ‘I beg your forgiveness...’

Rebecca remotely shut down the ship and locked it up. The strange green glow faded. She walked back across the hangar to gather her jacket. Coyote was regarding her from the entrance. He hadn’t moved.

‘You still here?’ she asked.

‘We need to talk...’

‘Weather’s nice this time of year apparently,’ Rebecca snapped. ‘I don’t read the news but I hear there’s some Thargs heading this way. Best to be careful out there, yeah?’

She tried to walk past him but he blocked her.

‘We’ve done this once,’ she said, glaring at him, trying to push his arm out of the way. She might as well have tried to move a Leestian oak tree. ‘You lost, remember?’

‘And we’ll do it again if we need to...’ Coyote replied easily. ‘If we’re going to survive this, we need a few rules of engagement...’

Rebecca narrowed her eyes at him. ‘Say your piece.’

‘We’re in a tough spot here... if we’re going to make it we need to be able to work together. If I’m going to lead us across...’

‘Who said you were leading?’ she countered. ‘Guess you did, right?’

Damn you woman, we don’t have the time for this...

Coyote paused, keeping his voice level, biting down on rising fury. ‘Can you get the four of us across to Beenri without being spotted?’

Rebecca pursed her lips before reluctantly admitting. ‘No...’

‘I can... That’s what I’m bringing to this shindig. Which means I make the calls on time, location and jump. When we attack and when we run. Can you deal with that?’

‘Guess I’ll have to,’ she replied sullenly.

‘Guess you will,’ Coyote replied, his cool grey eyes staring into hers again. She sniffed.

‘Makes sense, I suppose,’ she said, returning the stare fiercely.

Coyote sighed and then asked his next question. ‘So what’s the deal with Garew?’

He noticed her eyes dance away, an expression of horror briefly crossing her face, before it was ruthlessly stamped into submission.

‘What about him?’ she snapped. ‘He’s got all us in a missile lock.’

Coyote nodded. ‘True enough. Anything else you want to tell me?’

‘No. There’s nothing to tell,’ her answer was hard, immediate. She was avoiding his gaze

quite deliberately.

Coyote frowned and studied her for a moment.

‘You’re a liar, Rebecca,’ Coyote replied. ‘And not a good one. That tells me...’

‘This lecture ever going to end?’ she interrupted. ‘I’ve got work to do...’

Coyote nonchalantly leant toward her, propping up his sombrero a touch, deliberately encroaching on her personal space.

‘Listen señorita,’ he said, his voice lowered. ‘We’ve all got secrets. I get that. But if it’s something I need to know you’d better be telling me. You can’t hide behind your shield forever. Comprende?’

She regarded him for a moment and then whispered back. ‘Listen close, old man. Here’s some free advice...’

Coyote regarded her with irritation.

‘...I’m not the one you should be worried about.’

She pushed past him.

Watch your six, Coyote... watch your six...

Derik grimaced as he watched Udian ingest some foul-looking bio-nutritional soup through one of his external access ports. A cylinder of fluid drained noisily. They were assembled in the bar where they’d met the previous evening.

Rebecca had arrived a few minutes before, ignoring everyone else in the room. She had sat near the observation windows, staring out into space without moving. Derik looked up as Coyote entered. He looked pensive.

‘How’d it go?’ Derik muttered under his breath

‘Not as well as I’d have liked,’ Coyote replied, quietly.

‘That well? I thought you were quite the ladies’ man,’ Derik replied. ‘Didn’t your irresistible charm have her swooning?’

Coyote raised his eyebrows at Derik. ‘You can do the pep talks next time.’

‘Oh no you don’t. You’re the boss. I’m just the hired help around here. Staff trouble is your

bag.’

‘Thanks for the backup, mi amigo...’

Derik grew serious. ‘I still think she can help us.’

Coyote sighed. ‘I don’t doubt her skills. She’s a force and no mistake... it’s the baggage I’m worried about.’

He walked to the centre of the room and surveyed the three of them.

‘It’s time,’ he said, softly. ‘Time to go.’

Rebecca jumped to her feet and walked across to them. Udian strode across in two long thudding steps.

‘Ready,’ Udian said sonorously.

‘We’ve got two weeks to take the bio-weapon to Beenri and... make sure it works.’

‘Nicely put,’ Derik muttered.

‘First step is to get to Ermaso and retrieve the bomb.’

‘I’ll handle that,’ Udian interposed. ‘Get me to Ermaso.’

‘And does our illustrious leader have the route plotted?’ Rebecca asked.

‘We’re going via Qutiri...’ Coyote began.

‘Isinor is safer and quicker,’ Rebecca interrupted immediately.

‘We’re going via Qutiri,’ Coyote replied, patently ignoring her. ‘Otherwise we’re too close to Zaaalela. I’m guessing the bugs will be coming from there, if they’re already near Erlasa.’

‘Last thing they’ll be expecting I presume?’ Derik inquired.

‘Something like that...’

Rebecca snapped on the navigation console and smiled as the astrogation equipment came on line. The *Spectre* was equipped with a new military heads-up display, providing all the necessary information in a streamlined and easy to use form.

‘Bout time someone thought about the pilot rather than the magazine brochure.

She fired up the engines and brought the ship to a ready state, waiting for a cue from Coyote.

Ahead she could see the two Caducei, one each side of the hangar, with Coyote's innocent looking Cobra Mk3 in the lead.

The core-comm flashed a 'new message' symbol. Her heart leapt in anticipation.

Jim?

She called it up, only to be disappointed.

Dear Ms. Weston,

I never had the opportunity to thank you for rescuing me. Pressures of work prevent me from waiting until you've recovered from your injuries; I need to be back in chart three as soon as is practical. Having established your credit account is most enviable, a token crediting of cash seemed inappropriate. I have therefore left you with a piece of emerging technology from Deep Horizon Industries. It's a witch-jump wormhole enhancer. It allows you to prevent the closure of a wormhole at will. You'll find it stored in your hold. It may be useful given the current situation.

I hope our paths cross again. Once again, my thanks. Right on, Commander.

Cheyd Vlos'Oplyn, CEO DHI.

Rebecca triggered the hold inventory check. There was something there. One tonne of machinery apparently. She'd have to investigate that when she had time.

Coyote's Cobra fired up its engines and began climbing towards the hangar exit, ready for transfer to the station egress. The pair of Caducei followed suit.

She paused for a moment, her hand resting on the throttle controls. Her grip tightened, she moved her fingers towards the thrusters...

The intercom buzzed for attention.

And why won't this damn thing connect!

Jim pressed the transmit codes again.

'Please identify,' the vidcomm system prompted in a sultry female voice.

'Jim McKenna, for the third time!' Jim snapped.

'Identity established. Welcome to Corp-Comm, Jim, Your last transmission was...'

'Open commline to Tionisla, Station 5, Weston, Rebecca,' Jim had no time for pleasantries,

especially with an artificial intelligence.

‘Transmission bandwidth is limited at this time. Do you have an override code?’

‘Yes I frakking well do!’

‘If you would care to...’

‘Forty-two z, z singular z alpha.’

‘Code confirmed. Attempting to establish link. Please wait. We value your custom and I’m sure your call will be connected shortly. In the meantime Core-Comm would like to advise you of other facilities that you might...

‘No!’ Jim glared at the system unit as it spun up a series of holofac images. The Core-Comm sales AI lapsed into silence for a few moments.

‘Secure line established,’ it said, with what Jim fancied was a slightly peeved voice.

‘Jim!’

He looked back at the display and his heart jumped. She was there, whole, safe... alive. The big brown eyes, yet her face was drawn and pale. For a moment her face was bright with delight, before it abruptly faded.

She hasn’t changed one bit! But she looks so tired...

‘Rebecca...’

‘Been a long time.’

Jim nodded. ‘Yeah.’

They stared at each other for a moment. Neither prepared to speak.

‘I got your message,’ Jim managed to utter.

‘Took your time in answering,’ Rebecca fired back.

‘I had some things I had to take care of.’

‘Me too.’

‘You should have told me you were still going to Tionisla.’ He began, softly.

‘I couldn’t tell you.’

‘Why not?’

‘Was there some part of “I don’t want to know” I didn’t understand properly?’ she replied simply.

Jim stopped, his heart physically painful in his chest. He could feel it hammering within him. Rebecca was right, of course.

‘I’m sorry.’

‘Bit late for that,’ she fired back.

‘How do you think I felt seeing your ship get shot up live on the holofac?’ he answered angrily.

‘Poor you.’ She snapped. ‘Oh... and when was it you last tried to call me?’

‘We didn’t exactly leave the comm-lines open did we? Would you have answered?’

Now it was her turn to look uncomfortable.

‘Exactly,’ Jim concluded.

‘You could have tried though,’ Rebecca shot back. ‘At least I’d have known you still cared.’

‘I...’

‘Don’t Jim. Just... don’t.’

Jim glared at her. ‘I refuse to live my life based on what they told us.’

‘We’ve had this argument.’

Jim continued unabated. ‘Still doing whatever Rebka and Iacobus told you to? Makes us nothing but slaves to some fate we don’t know and can’t predict! Always living on the edge, taking risks, one step away from being spaced! Death always around the corner...’

‘So, you happy with the way things turned out, are you? Got the dreams you wanted? Everything peachy is it? How’s the delightful Sonia?’

Jim stared at her accusing face. He couldn’t answer.

‘Didn’t work out, eh?’ Rebecca snapped.

‘It’s over.’ Jim managed to say.

If it ever really started!

‘Guess you didn’t know better after all, did you? Maybe you should have stuck with someone who loved you.’ Rebecca’s voice was snide. ‘Only a suggestion of course.’

‘I...’

‘We had it all mapped out Jim. You saw the future we could have had. It was all there! Only in outline, not the details. I had some dreams... thought you did too.’

He couldn’t bear to see the look on her face, a face from his past; younger; innocent; hurt. Standing at the loading ramp of her ship, her small frame silhouetted by the glare of the bay lights, crying hysterically at the words he’d just uttered.

If only I could change what happened...

‘It was never going to work, Rebecca! You were always on a mission! I couldn’t cope with you always being at risk. Constantly worrying whether you’d come back alive from your latest mission? That was no life to live.’

‘That’s what you loved about me,’ she said quietly, brutally.

Jim punched the console in frustration, trying and failing to stop tears welling up in his eyes.

‘Damn it woman!’ he cracked out, his voice shaking. ‘You’re not invincible, haven’t you learnt that? You almost got killed today!’

‘You think I don’t know that?’ she fired back angrily. ‘I was trying to make a difference. Or have you forgotten about the Q-Bomb and... the other stuff? It’s what we used to do, Jim.’

‘I wanted to settle down, leave all the danger behind.’ he snapped at her.

‘There’s a frakkin’ war on! It was never an option!’ Rebecca shot back. ‘Thousands have been killed.’

‘Exactly my point! I know!’

‘No you don’t! I’ve seen it first hand. We aren’t safe, Jim. Nowhere is safe anymore.’

‘It’s the Navy’s job! What can we do?’

‘We can save a thousand lives by doing the right thing. Not running and hiding like a damn coward!’

Maybe they’re both right. I am a coward...

Jim sighed, deflated. He shook his head.

‘Jim. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean that.’

‘We going to keep arguing all night?’ he asked, looking back at her image. ‘You called me,

remember?’

Rebecca’s face hardened and she became all business-like.

She was always able to clamp down on what she was feeling...

‘They found Zerz’s ship.’

‘Who?’ Jim frowned.

‘Galcop.’

‘Wait a minute, Zerz’s ship was destroyed!’

‘They found it and the Thargoids found it before them,’ Rebecca continued relentlessly. ‘The Thargoids are coming and they’ve got the plasma accelerator. They reckon Lave will be taken inside two weeks.’

‘Two weeks?’ Jim’s mouth fell open. ‘Two weeks? That’s crazy, what about the Navy?’

‘Already falling back. Massive losses and the Thargoids have concentrated on Chart one. It’s not leaked onto the main feeds yet but it can’t be long before the snoopers get hold of it. They’re coming and we can’t stop them. It’s proper grim.’

‘Frak.’

‘Galcop reckons we’ve got a chance with some kind of new bio-weapon. Special Ops. Can’t tell you the details even on this channel.’

‘This sounds like another setup.’

Rebecca nodded shortly. ‘It is.’

‘What’s going on?’ Jim demanded. ‘Those other combateers you were flying with?’

‘No. One of them is plain scary but the others are ok. Don’t trust them obviously but I think they’re steady. Galcop on the other hand...’

‘What have they done?’

‘Nothing,’ Rebecca’s answer was evasive.

You can’t hide from me...

‘You were never good at lying.’

Jim saw the pained look cross her face.

‘And you were never good at being honest,’ she said, looking away.

Jim winced.

Rebecca changed the subject abruptly. ‘I’m test flying a new ship.’

‘Something special knowing you,’ Jim muttered.

‘Anyway that’s not the problem,’ Rebecca snapped. ‘It’s the Thargoids. Did you hear the strange words they were punching out?’

‘Yeah, nothing in the feeds about them at all. Strange. Vulgate. Duo quindecim novem?’

‘You don’t recognise them?’

Jim shook his head. ‘Should I?’

‘You used to be a genius and all...’

‘I’ll do a little more in depth research if you like. Why?’

Rebecca grew even more serious. ‘In the battle they scanned my ship. Then they all just came after me. They switched tactics, they gave up an advantage to go after me.’

‘They scanned you?’ Jim said.

‘And at the same time they started transmitting something else. I need to know why they’re after me.’

Jim frowned. ‘Can you send it to me?’

‘Got the audio here,’ Rebecca’s hands disappeared off the holofac as she turned aside. She threw a graphic onto the holofac screen.

A grating translated voice screamed out the Thargoid message.

‘RAGAZZA! DUX DUCIS, INCOLUMITAS!’

Jim winced at the volume before frowning and rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

‘Any clues?’

‘I’m not sure. It sounds like it might be some kind of Old-Earth language. Not one I recognise though. I’ll figure it out, where will you be?’

‘Beenri. We’re heading in the direction of Ermaso initially – meet me there if you want.’ She looked up at something out of range of the camera. ‘Gotta go.’

Jim reached out a hand towards her. 'Promise me you'll not take any stupid risks? If the Thargoids are after you...'

'Promises get broken, Jim.' She shot back, carelessly.

'Damn it Rebecca!' he yelled. 'I was wrong, I screwed up. I regret it ok? You were right, I was wrong! For frak's sake don't just leave like this...'

He paused, out of breath.

'You quite finished?' Rebecca said, unmoved. Her lips were pursed.

Jim looked at her, hoping for some kind of response. She simply stared back coldly and then abruptly pushed the cancel button. The small screen in the cockpit of the *Spectre* went dark.

For a moment she sat in silence, biting her lip. Her head dropped, her hair covering her face like an untidy curtain.

Then the sobs sounded through the cockpit.

'Form up. I want diamond formation for the jump, one click separation. I'll drive the passage, the rest of you hitchhike and save the fuel,' Coyote announced into the narrowband comms.

'It'll take us a lot longer to make the transit with four ships in a single wormhole.' Rebecca replied on the narrow band.

'First rule of smuggling. Never travel without full tanks,' Coyote fired back. 'Only one ship burns fuel at a time. Confirm.'

Rebecca subsided into silence.

Derik saw the three other ships move into position, he verified co-ordinates with the target computer.

Cobra, Starboard Front (Diamond). 1 km

Caduceus, Starboard (Diamond) 1 km

Vampire, Starboard Rear (Out of formation!) 1.1 km

Derik shook his head, flipping on the rear view. Rebecca's new ship sat vaguely visible on the edge of the screen, difficult to make out against the blackness of space. She was almost in formation, just not quite.

‘Confirmed,’ Derik said into the narrow-band. ‘Co-ordinates for Qutiri locked in.’

‘All secure for transit,’ Udian’s voice sounded.

There was a brief pause on the narrowband; just enough to be irritating.

‘All set. What are we waiting for?’ Rebecca voice snapped.

She’s really trying to wind him up. We need to sort this out soon one way or the other.

Coyote’s voice remained measured. ‘Engage cloak. Witch-space in fifteen.’

The four ships flickered and faded from sight. Shortly afterwards a single flickering portal opened up and brief ripples appeared in it as the invisible ships hitchhiked on the Coyote’s wormhole to Qutiri. The portal flashed, shrank and disappeared, leaving no trace of their passing.

Chapter Five

Jim had spent most of the afternoon trying to requisition a ship that was travelling towards the Galactic Centre. He'd struck out. Despite there being no real facts about the state of the Thargoid invasion of Chart One, rumours were spreading like wildfire. Jim had overheard a lot of them in the bars, restaurants and shopping areas around the station and was surprised how accurate they seemed to be based on what Rebecca had told him. Some of the guesses were wide of the mark but some of them had the situation pegged.

The Navy is losing. They're coming.

The sense of impending doom across the trading communities left the atmosphere sombre. Nobody had a desire to head towards trouble unless there was a lot of money involved. Jim didn't have problems with funds yet but he couldn't compete with a lucrative trading deal as an individual passenger. Jim had expected to already be aboard and travelling by now but no one had responded to his adverts on the core-comm. He'd been forced to go looking for a ride.

'Ermaso? You're kidding right? No one's going that way. Market is down ten points. The only way to make money is to be in the Centre now and bringing stuff out, not going in there.'

Jim had managed to at least start a conversation with one of the traders in the hangar area. He was a big man, covered in tattoos and sporting a huge grey moustache. He was stood in front of the loading bay of a huge Anaconda freighter.

'I can pay you.'

Until the bitch queen gets hold of my credit account that is... might as well spend it first!

'You can't cover the cost of the insurance risk my friend.' The moustache bristled. Big dark eyes looked at him with amusement. 'Can you afford a new Anaconda?'

'Whatever it costs. I need to get to the Centre.'

'Buddy, you could offer me a mil and I still wouldn't go. Scuttlebutt is that the bugs have got a new weapon which can slice you up good and proper. You saw what happened down Tionisla way. I've got my sources else-place. It's too dangerous. Most of us are making a hop to Chart Three 'til this blows over.'

Jim had similar conversations with a variety of reputable traders and others that clearly had a slightly more relaxed attitude to the requirements of authority. He'd had no luck there either.

He was almost at the point of considering whether or not he dared risk buying his own ship and trying to make his own way to the Centre when he caught the end of a conversation whilst walking back from the hangar deck. A feline Captain was arguing to and fro with an amphibious maintenance technician on the dockside.

‘...Let’s put it this way Captain. Your ship is impounded.’

‘You can’t do that. I need to earn a living!’ the feline’s sleek grey fur was standing on end. Jim had been around the cats long enough to know that meant they were either alarmed or apoplectic.

‘Call us old-fashioned but we have a cosy little tradition in these backwater parts of the chart. If we fix someone’s ship - we get paid.’ The frog-like tech shot out his tongue and flipped around a holofac screen with it. Jim could just make out a long inventory.

‘I have paid you,’ the feline snapped.

‘You’ve paid for the parts, not the labour.’

‘You didn’t quote for labour. It was all inclusive!’

‘You didn’t tell me about the state of your ship. Difficult to bolt up a new generator bearing when the housing bolts are all sheared and the mounting plates are buckled. We had to graft in a complete new chassis and skim the manifold. Lucky your ship didn’t come apart on you on the way in. Didn’t you spot you were blowing coolant? That glowing green stuff dripping out of the vents?’

‘My engineer is one of the best...’

‘That could be true but when all he’s got to work with is emergency hull sealant on critical components he’d have to be a magician...’

‘Perhaps we can come to some arrangement...’

‘Yeah we can. You pay me, you get your ship back.’ The frog’s tongue flickered around its face, keeping it comfortably damp.

‘But I can’t earn any money without my ship. You see the problem?’

‘I do. And it’s yours, not mine.’

‘This is extortion!’

‘No, it’s called business.’ The frog tossed a small energiser unit in the air and caught it. ‘See this? It’s your motivator for the gen-unit. Without this you’ve got no main power. I’m keeping it until I’m paid.’

‘I know a lot of traders you know,’ the feline was posturing angrily. ‘I can give you a negative review on Oobay...’

‘Buddy, I’m booked solid for months. You got nothing.’

The feline spat some kind of profanity at the frog and marched off. Jim followed him down a couple of levels. The cat entered one of the seedier bars on the station and pitched up at the bar, flicking his tail suggestively at the bar-girl.

‘You got the credit, Captain?’ she said, smiling sweetly. She was dressed in a shimmering scale patterned skin-tight outfit. Jim had seen the ‘fish-like’ style sweep the fashionistas in recent weeks. Her hair was styled like a fin on top of her head with the sides shaved down to the skin.

‘What do you think?’ the cat replied with a surly snap.

‘Iced water on the house then,’ the girl replied. ‘Tough times Mr. H?’

The cat took the proffered glass and gazed at it contemptuously, before putting it down on the bar. Jim walked up beside him. Jim ordered an Anlian gin and downed it, ordering another one before looking across at the cat, who now had his head in his paws on the bar top.

‘Trading tough?’ he said after a moment.

The cat looked around at him. Jim regarded the grey-furred feline for a moment, taking another hit from his gin. The fiery liquid burnt satisfyingly down his throat.

‘Always a challenge,’ the cat said with sudden enthusiasm. ‘Everyday’s a challenge, it’s what makes life exciting. The entrepreneurial spirit!’

Jim nodded. ‘Must be expensive though, with all that maintenance on a ship. Must add up.’

‘Ah...’ the cat replied with a knowing look. ‘Incidentals, incidentals. Minor considerations on the road to riches. A necessary evil of course.’

Jim looked shiftily over his shoulder. ‘I’ve heard that some of the repair techs around here are unscrupulous. Over-charging clients and such like. You want to be sure you don’t get caught by one of them. They’ll get you over a cargo pod and bleed you dry.’

The cat’s eyes narrowed for a moment. ‘I’ve heard that...’

Jim sighed. ‘Of course, I don’t need to tell an experienced Captain like yourself how to suck vacuum. I don’t suppose you’re heading towards Ermaso by any chance?’

The feline looked alarmed. ‘Frak no! ‘Goids everywhere by all accounts...’

Jim shrugged and made to leave. ‘Ah well. Shame. I’m trying to pay my way across the chart and no one’s interested in ready cash. What’s a paying client got to do? Sorry for wasting your time...’

‘Did you say Ermaso, my friend?’ the cat said, immediately starting after him. ‘I thought you said Erlazo! As it happens, I could be going that way in the near future...’

‘Really?’ Jim put on a face full of mock astonishment. ‘That’s excellent news!’

‘Ah... you know, the entrepreneurial spirit and all that.’

‘Exactly. Good to see it still flourishes even out here...’

‘Won’t be cheap of course,’ the feline said with a heavy sigh. ‘What with the war and everything.’

Jim smiled. ‘Shall we discuss the details over a drink? Evil Juice or Anlian Gin?’

The feline smiled. ‘Ah... well, I’m a fan of both if I’m honest.’

‘The name’s Jim.’ Jim extended his hand. The cat took it in his ample paw.

‘Hesperus. Captain Hesperus, at your service!’

‘All ships, course for the sun, por favor.’

‘Again?’ Rebecca demanded. ‘We only just refuelled! We can make three more jumps using piggybacking!’

Coyote’s Cobra was already angling towards the bright star at the centre of the Biramabi system.

‘First rule of smuggling...’ Coyote returned.

‘It’s stupid!’ Rebecca shot back. ‘We could be two systems ahead by now.’

‘Give it a rest woman...’ Derik interjected wearily. ‘Coyote’s running this show. We do as he says...’

Rebecca quietened down again, muttering something rude under her breath.

On the forward viewer they could see a belt of asteroids ahead. Slowly the enormous collection of rocks grew on the screen. Coyote adjusted course slightly to avoid one of them. The rest of the group followed his course.

Derik saw a light flicker on his console.

Oh here we go, private comms... Great for team morale...

‘Derik here,’ the lizard said, rolling his one good eye.

‘This is nuts!’ Rebecca’s voice came across on the private channel. ‘We’re wasting time. We could be almost there by now. All this caution is unnecessary. What’s he so frakkin’ worried about?’

‘I guess he’s got his reasons,’ Derik replied, manoeuvring around another rock. The asteroid field seemed unusually dense.

‘This is a communist system! It’s not exactly high risk is it? We’re off the space lane... there’s nobody out here!’

Derik saw Coyote’s ship slip ahead slightly; it disappeared from sight behind one of the larger rocks.

‘Just roll with it,’ the lizard replied, wishing she’d get off the airwaves. ‘We’ve still got time. Do as he says. He’s the boss.’

‘He’s throwing the advantage away.’

Derik frowned at his scanner. Coyote’s ship hadn’t emerged from behind the asteroid. He snatched a look at the viewers; Udian’s *Hammer* was cruising alongside with Rebecca’s *Spectre* to the rear. Coyote’s ship was nowhere to be seen. The jumbled collection of rocks was clouding the scanner.

Did he trigger his cloaking device?

Rebecca was still expectorating. ‘...we might as well be flying Adders for all the speed we’re using. I mean, what is the point? The Thargoids will probably get there first at this rate... Frak!’

Derik blinked as Rebecca’s ship was framed by glowing bursts of laser fire.

About time she was brought into line. Wonder why she’s so pissed? This should be interesting...

‘Second rule of smuggling,’ came Coyote’s voice, interrupting their comms. ‘Never assume you can’t be overheard.’

More lasers skittered across the shields of Rebecca’s ship. She pulled up out of the formation instinctively. Derik could see Coyote’s *Cobra* on her tail.

‘What are you doing, you stupid ‘goid?’ Rebecca shouted.

‘Third rule of smuggling,’ Coyote snapped dogmatically. ‘Always pay attention.’

Rebecca’s ship twisted aside, feinting from one side to another. Coyote’s ship stayed right behind, still firing. More lasers hit Rebecca’s shields. Derik could see the rear shields were weakening. He pulled his ship aside, up and out of the asteroid field.

‘And where are you going?’ Udian demanded, breaking his radio silence.

‘Watching the show,’ Derik retorted. ‘Getting myself a ring-side seat. This should be good; bring any nachos?’

Udian didn’t deign to give an answer but he likewise pulled his ship out of the belt and positioned the *Hammer* alongside the *Persistence*.

Rebecca had triggered the *Spectre*’s strange lensing drive and blasted off into the depths of the belt.

‘Back off!’ her voice sounded over the wide-band. ‘I’m in the better ship. You’ll lose this, old man.’

Coyote’s Cobra was floating just outside the asteroid belt.

‘Chiquita, we can do this the easy way or the hard way...’ Coyote replied lazily.

‘Oh yeah?’ Rebecca’s voice spat back. ‘I’m guessing the easy way is for me to just get myself a lobotomy and blindly accept your crazy-ass leadership?’

‘Something like that...’

‘I’ve got a better idea. Put your credits where your mouth is, old man. Let’s see just how good *Elite* is.’

Coyote didn’t answer for a moment. ‘We’re wasting time...’

‘Backing down again?’ Rebecca fired back straightaway. ‘First your principles, now your combat reputation. I’m not following someone who doesn’t even respect themselves.’

Derik triggered a private narrow-band comm channel to Udian.

‘Ouch!’ he said, with a snigger. ‘She’s a feisty little number, pushing *that* button!’

‘This is puerile,’ Udian replied, indifferently. ‘Coyote should ignore her. Perhaps she’ll go away.’

‘Nah... this was brewing one way or another since he dissed her old ship back at ‘nislá.’ Derik replied with a grin of anticipation. ‘Game on.’

‘What do you suggest?’ Coyote said on the wideband, after another long pause. His voice sounded tight and strained.

‘First to score a hull strike takes the lead,’ Rebecca said. ‘Just you and me. No cloaks, no missiles.’

‘And you’ll follow me if I prevail?’ Coyote queried. ‘No questions asked?’

‘If that happens I’ll even sew up that hole I made in your hat, oldtimer,’ Rebecca chuckled.

‘Very well...’ Coyote replied and then raised his voice to address Udian and Derik.

‘Gentlemen, if you’ll excuse me for a moment.’

‘Do what you gotta do,’ Derik called back.

Udian re-activated the private channel.

‘This is unacceptable,’ The machine rumbled. ‘Don’t tell me you’re prepared to follow that unstable woman if she manages to win this ridiculous charade?’

‘Won’t happen,’ Derik replied, confidently.

‘He’s outgunned three to one, in an older and less manoeuvrable ship.’ Udian pointed out.

‘Despite her lamentable lack of discipline the woman shows a reasonable degree of skill in combat.’

‘Fifty credits says Coyote will whip her ass,’ Derik replied.

‘I’ll take that,’ Udian replied. ‘Why?’

‘Because he’s *Elite* and she ain’t,’ Derik said with surety.

‘I’ve more faith in technology than a dubious kill rating.’

Coyote’s Cobra cautiously nudged its way into the asteroid field.

Rebecca could see Udian’s and Derik’s ships on the edge of the scanner clearly since they were beyond the confines of the asteroid belt. Coyote’s ship had been briefly visible but she’d lost the scanner trace the moment he’d entered the belt. It was simply too dense for the scanners to penetrate.

Visual flight rules only, until you get a clear view...

The asteroids rolled around her, a tumbling maelstrom of shifting occasional safety.

Come to mummy, you smug ‘goid.

Rebecca knew she couldn't afford to underestimate Coyote's skill. She'd seen him fly in the Tionisla Orbital Graveyard and he clearly knew his ships. The exact specification of his precious *Dark Star* wasn't clear, other than it was heavily tweaked. Still, it should be no match for the *Spectre*. One sustained hard hit with the three military lasers would be all she needed. She could out-turn him and out-run him.

I've taken down plenty of Elite pilots. He'll just be the next.

Coyote was having similar thoughts himself. He'd reviewed the specification of the *Spectre* in some detail. Almost half as fast again as the *Dark Star* in a straight line, with sharper turning circle. For all the woman's bluster she was no shrinking violet. In a head-to-head slugging match he was seriously outclassed. Her flying style might lack subtlety but it was no less effective for that. He'd seen what she could do at Tionisla.

I underestimated her first time around. Can't afford to do that again...

His only chance depended on guile. Taking her off-guard; tricking her into making a mistake. That was going to take some doing. She was no one's fool.

He checked the scanner. There was no sign of the *Spectre*. That was no real surprise. She'd be hugging close to one of the asteroids.

The question is, which one...?

The *Dark Star* nosed carefully forwards.

Derik and Udian were watching from outside the belt, with a clear view of the positions of both ships from their secure vantage point. The difference in styles was clearly evident. Rebecca was sticking close to the outside of the belt, making quick dashes between the bigger rocks, clearly hoping to catch a glimpse of Coyote. She hardly paused before moving on, coming to an abrupt halt, then spinning round to check and recheck her viewpoints each time.

Coyote, by comparison, was moving exceedingly slowly through the dense centre of the belt, looking for a point from where he could gain a good visual of as much of the area as possible. He only moved at a snail's pace, whenever a passing rock allowed him a shadow to flit through.

Both ships, unseen to each other, were beginning to converge on one side of the belt.

'Watch and learn...' Derik muttered.

‘...how a modern ship completely owns that antique,’ Udian finished for him.

Rebecca spied a flicker of cyan, the reflection of an exhaust plume. She squinted. It had only been the briefest of flashes but it was unmistakable. She quickly zeroed in on the location, before stopping and looking around her.

There it is again!

She was cautious now, drifting slowly forwards. The belt was extremely dense here, it was going to be difficult to get a clear shot.

The *Dark Star* momentarily appeared between the tumbling debris. She could see the familiar triangular panels of the top hull. The shape of a Mk3 Cobra was unmistakable.

She fired.

Coyote sensed rather than saw the incoming fire.

Damn, she's quick!

Asteroids were fractured as they exploded around him. He ran for cover, triggering the injectors as multiple lasers flashed around him. The *Dark Star* curled around rocks as they were blasted apart mere tens of feet from him. A single blow glanced off the shields. A rock in front of him disintegrated under the murderous firepower, debris bouncing off his shields.

She won't have to hit me, she can just stone me to death! That ship sure packs a punch...

He managed to escape and pause within the shadow of one of the bigger rocks, stopping to consider his next move.

Rebecca had heated up the forward lasers to two thirds of their rated tolerance in one series of blasts. Having three lasers was all very well but that generated a lot of heat. She'd have to be more circumspect in future.

It had been satisfying though. Coyote had clearly been taken by surprise by the ferocious attack. Rebecca had cried out with glee as the *Dark Star* was peppered with fire. She continued firing, trying to draw a bead on the jinking Cobra as it ran for cover amidst a rain of fracturing cascading rock. It wasn't precision shooting but it sure as hell was fun.

First blood to me....

‘Only a matter of time,’ Udian said comfortably. ‘She’ll get him next time. His shields are half gone already.’

‘Coyote knows the score,’ Derik replied, sounding a little less certain. ‘Just give him some time...’

Udian turned his attention back to the scanner. Rebecca’s ship, more by luck than judgement, had ended up behind Coyote again and was slowly catching him up. She seemed to have seen him.

‘Care to make that a hundred credits?’ Udian intoned.

Rebecca scooted around the outskirts of the collection of rocks into which the *Dark Star* had dived. She circled it a number of times but there was no sign of Coyote’s ship.

Where’s he gone?

There was a brief flicker on the scanner, something metallic. Not a rock. Rebecca caught sight of the faint flow of twin cyan exhaust plumes. It was the *Dark Star*, slowly moving behind one of the asteroids. As she watched the Cobra disappeared behind the massive rocky bulk. Coyote was flying really close to the surface, making his ship almost invisible. She was above and behind.

Got you. Just take your time girl...

She gently yawed the *Spectre* around, bringing the prow of her ship to face the position the *Dark Star* would occupy when it cleared the far side of the asteroid. Her finger tightened around the fire control.

3... 2... 1...

She pressed the firing stud. The three powerful military lasers of the *Spectre* flashed out with devastating force, impaling the object that emerged from the shadow of the asteroid.

Yes!

A cargo canister was impaled by the triple beams, exploding into pieces a moment later.

No!

Laser fire hammered into her rear shields.

Frak!

‘Fourth rule of smuggling,’ Coyote said over the narrow-band. ‘Always watch your six.’

Rebecca made a dash for cover behind the nearby asteroid and yawed her ship around, firing. Coyote was waiting for the manoeuvre and performed a similar sideslip. Rebecca’s laser fire went wide without striking the *Dark Star*. The surface of the asteroid shattered as lasers raked across it. Both ships spun around each other, the *Spectre* gaining on the *Dark Star* due to its superior speed and turning circle.

Rebecca managed to score a hit before the *Dark Star* yawed to one side, coming to an abrupt halt. Rebecca was forced to swerve aside as Coyote lit up his injectors and then flipped over abruptly, triggering his lasers again. The fire was repulsed by the shields on the *Spectre*.

Rebecca wrestled the *Spectre* back behind the *Dark Star*. The triple lasers fired as Coyote dived towards the asteroid. Its surface loomed in front of them alarmingly. Rebecca fired again. The *Dark Star* rotated, only a single beam hit on the portside flank. The lasers cut out.

Warning! Forward lasers overheated.

The other beams struck the asteroid again, throwing up a shower of dust and rock particles. Visibility dropped to zero for a moment. When it cleared the *Dark Star* was nowhere to be seen.

‘Fifth rule of smuggling,’ Coyote said. ‘Elite combateers always have a trick you don’t know.’

Rebecca stared at the rear view. Coyote’s ship was somehow behind her again, despite what she’d tried, despite the capabilities of the *Spectre*. Next moment her rear shields collapsed under a further burst of fire.

But how did he manage that...?

‘You’re dead, señorita.’

A single laser shot blistered across the unprotected hull, burning a scorch mark near to the cockpit. Rebecca jumped in shock as sparks flashed across her field of view.

‘For frak’s sake!’ Rebecca shouted, flinching as the *Spectre* bucked.

‘Sixth rule of smuggling,’ Coyote said, his voice soft and slow. ‘Your leader is always right... If you think your leader is wrong, refer to rule six... comprende?’

Laser fire flashed around the *Spectre*, without hitting it. It was clear the shots were now

deliberately going wide.

Rebecca shut down her engines and punched the console in frustration.

The *Dark Star* slowed and then proceeded forward, gently nosing out of the asteroid field and resuming a course for the sun.

‘What did I tell you,’ Derik said smugly on the private comm to Udian. ‘Textbook stuff.’

‘An impressive, if unnecessary, display,’ Udian replied.

‘Pay up and shut up,’ Derik cackled in return.

Coyote voice came over the wideband transmission, matter of fact, as if nothing had happened. ‘All ships, course for the sun, por favor.’

Derik triggered his narrowband comms on a private channel to Coyote.

‘Just so I can make sure I get these down, exactly how many of these rules of smuggling are there?’

Coyote answered back immediately. ‘When I’ve made them all up, I’ll let you know, mi amigo...’

Derik howled with laughter and leant back in his chair, punching up the autopilot.

Hesperus scuttled up the boarding plank of his decrepit Python freighter on all fours. He jumped into the grav-tube up to the living quarters. All was quiet aboard. Proceeding through the galley he found the crew slumped over the dining table. The detritus of a bout of heavy drinking was evidenced by a collection of mismatched tumblers and the stink of cheap alcohol and sweaty bodies.

‘Action stations people!’

There was a muffled groan and a large, pointed and blue-horned lizard-like face peered at him out of a single eye.

‘Prak off you walking flea-pit!’

‘Rus, fire up the engines. D’Vlin ready the environmental. Stepan, to the nav console. Let’s go! We’ve got a course needs plotting!’

There was a low moan from the floor under the table. A ruffled mound of fur started an attempt to get to its feet.

‘What?’ the mound said blearily.

‘Stepan! Move!’

‘Sore sore thorax...’ said a third voice. It was revealed to be a rather fat and elongated insect. ‘Drink bad bad bad. Need new skin...’

‘Guys! This is for real, we’ve got work to do.’

‘What have you concocted this time, Hesperus?’ the lizard said, managing to raise its head and opening a second eye. It squinted at Hesperus, seeing two of him.

‘I’ve got us a job.’

‘Really?’ said Stepan, trying to brush his fur into something vaguely resembling tidy.

‘Of course he hasn’t,’ Rus answered, shaking his blue-tinged head. ‘He’s stolen something and we need to make a quick getaway.’

‘I have not!’ Hesperus stood posed, looking affronted. ‘I’d never do something like that.’

‘Other than last time,’ Stepan said under his breath, as if reminding Hesperus.

‘Well, ok.’

‘And the time before that,’ Stepan prompted.

‘Yes, true but...’

‘Time before before before!’ D’Vlin commented, waving his antennae about drunkenly before slipping off the table to lie helplessly on his back, waving his jointed legs in the air.

‘That one didn’t count!’ Hesperus snapped. ‘Anyway, this is an honest fee-paying passenger.’

Rus rolled his eyes. ‘So we’re transporting someone else who’s stolen something and they need to make a quick get away.’

‘No, no, no!’ Hesperus waved his paws around. ‘We’re chill-laxed, we just need to get the ship running. Here, you can start with this.’

Hesperus tossed the motivator to Rus, who caught it and looked at it in surprise.

‘This is new,’ the lizard was amazed, turning the motivator around in his claws as if it were a gemstone.

‘You feeling alright boss?’ Stepan queried, looking concerned.

‘Never better,’ Hesperus said. ‘Ready for that course?’

‘Aye sir! Where are we going?’

‘Nothing too challenging. Just towards Ermaso...’

The three crew-members stopped moving and stared at him. D’Vlin flipped himself over.

‘What?’ Hesperus demanded.

‘Frak frak frak!’ D’Vlin snapped.

‘I know you’re an utterly self-obsessed moronic idiot with nary a brain cell to call your own.’
Rus began, ‘But even you must have heard about the war.’

‘War? Which war?’

‘Thargoids, nasty bug-eyed monsters with a habit of killing anything that moves? Rumours that planets, stations and cargoes are being blitzed out of existence? Ring any sirens?’

‘Oh *that* war...’ Hesperus was dismissive. ‘They won’t be worried about little old us. Anyway, we’re just nipping in and nipping out. What could go wrong?’

Rus held his head in his claws. ‘Might as well just laser myself now...’

‘Listen, guys...’ Hesperus said, pleading with them. ‘It’s a job, it’s paying well. We can handle ourselves. We’ve got a good ship...’

Rus fell off his chair laughing.

‘Alright you bunch of slobs!’ Hesperus screeched. ‘You want to be stuck here, mucking out the ventilation shafts for the next six months? Your choice. You can get off now. You’re fired!’

The crew looked around at each other.

‘You better be right about this one, Hesperus,’ Rus growled.

‘When have I ever let you down?’ Hesperus opened his paws in a gesture of supplication.

‘Long long long list?’ D’Vlin cackled.

Coyote had cautiously guided them across the lower quadrant of the chart, through unfamiliar systems off the beaten track. Rebecca was only vaguely au fait with them. At Rateeder they had refueled as usual but Coyote had told them to remain in deep space while he made a stop at the station. It was obvious that two Caducei and the new Vampire would raise eyebrows in any docking ports but the Cobra could blend in easily. Coyote had returned after four hours, his ship reappearing

amongst them as the cloaking device deactivated.

‘Welcome back boss.’ Derik called.

‘Anything to report?’ Coyote asked.

‘Nothing much,’ the lizard replied. ‘Rebecca got bored and started shooting asteroids...’

‘I was calibrating the targeting scanners! Bet you enjoyed some R and R, downed a few Evil Juices while we sat out here wasting time...’

Derik cut across her ‘...other than that it was quiet. You?’

‘War is not going well,’ Coyote replied with measured tones. ‘Thargoids took Erlasa and Larais. Apparently Galcop and GalNavy forces are making a stand at Onrira and Aesbion.’

Rebecca felt her heart jump at the mention of Jim’s homeworld. She’d only been there a couple of times, a hugely high-tech world, with its astonishingly huge Torus station, over ten kilometres in diameter.

‘The Thargoids remain on target to appropriate Lave within the time they’ve allotted,’ Udian interjected. He’d been almost totally silent during the trip so far. No one had complained.

‘We’d better get going then...’ Coyote said. ‘Rebecca, make the jump to Anxebiza, por favor.’

Rebecca checked her astrogation console.

Now what is he playing at? We should be going to Digebiti!

‘Don’t you mean Digebiti?’ she queried.

‘No I mean Anxebiza,’ Coyote confirmed.

‘Don’t tell me, your stupid sixth rule.’

‘Got it in one...’

The jump to Anxebiza went without incident but on arrival Coyote didn’t direct them towards the sun. He immediately asked them to reassemble for another jump.

‘What happened to the first rule of smuggling?’ Rebecca demanded. Nobody answered her.

‘Udian...’ Coyote said. ‘Make the jump to Digebiti, por favor.’

‘Digebiti! But we could have gone direct...’ Rebecca spluttered on the wideband.

‘Rule six,’ Derik cackled, as Udian’s ship disappeared, leaving a bright blue wormhole. They all followed the set course and within minutes had arrived in the Digebiti system.

As they returned to normal space they found hundreds of ships clustered around the inbound witch-space marker. Many were damaged, showing the evidence of a recent fire-fight.

Woah.... What's happened here?

The wideband crackled on.

‘You guys just in from Rateeder?’ a grizzled voice demanded

‘No,’ Coyote returned on their behalf. ‘We came in from Anxebiza.’

‘Smart move. Thargoids are raiding the witch-space link between here and Rateeder. Randomius knows why.’

‘Just as well we didn’t travel direct from Rateeder,’ Coyote said, with a faint hint of amusement in his voice.

‘Lucky break. I wouldn’t head back that way.’ The grizzled voice dropped the link.

‘How did you know?’ Rebecca asked, surprise and growing respect evident in her voice.

‘Oh you know, whilst I was downing the Evil Juices in the bar on Rateeder...’ Coyote returned. ‘I may have overheard something in my drunken stupor...’

‘A little bit of a coincidence, don’t you think?’ Derik interjected. ‘Thargoids raiding hereabouts?’

‘It’s no coincidence,’ Udian retorted. ‘The Thargoids are looking for us. They’ve clearly plotted our most likely route.’

‘Time to move on then...’ Coyote said.

‘How’s your soup?’ Rus demanded of the passenger, raising his voice over the drone of the engines. The old Python was full of creaks, rattles and groans. Jim could have sworn it felt as if the ship had a permanent list to port due to badly aligned internal gravity plates.

‘It’s good,’ Jim managed, struggling to swallow the thin oily liquid. ‘Good, really.’

The lizard looked at him and then stared at the oddly dressed bird-creature sitting across the table from him. ‘Mine tastes like Stepan’s underwear. We eating the same stuff, Gasazck?’

‘Erqk,’ the bird replied.

‘That’s what you always say,’ Rus replied. ‘What the frak does that mean anyway? Erqk?’

‘Hot goat soup,’ Stepan said with relish, sitting down next to Jim. ‘Makes a change!’

‘From what?’ Rus demanded. ‘Cold goat soup? Lukewarm goat soup?’

Hesperus entered the galley from the general direction of the cockpit, closely followed by D’Vlin, who immediately jumped onto the table, knocking cutlery and plates flying.

‘Do you mind?’ Rus roared. ‘It might taste like frak but it’s my frak!’

‘Jump to Inleus is going well. Should be on station in four hours,’ Hesperus said. ‘Ahead of time, ahead of schedule... right on budget.’

‘Ship ok ok,’ D’Vlin added.

‘That’s...good.’ Jim managed, choking down another slug of soup, trying to ignore the slurps coming from Stepan’s direction.

‘So what is it you do?’ Hesperus asked. ‘If you don’t mind me asking of course, curiosity fells the feline and all that...’

‘I’m a professor,’ Jim replied. ‘I lecture on astrophysics.’

‘Bookworm.’ Rus added for clarity.

‘Where you go?’ D’Vlin said, one of his antennae turning to regard Jim.

‘Core central, Ermaso,’ Jim replied quickly. ‘Family reunion.’

‘Woman trouble more like,’ Rus said. ‘You humans are so bad at hiding your emotions. Not worth it buddy. I reckon D’Vlin’s got it right; be a hermaphrodite. You can be your own best friend.’

‘Sex sex sex!’ D’Vlin chuckled.

‘You picked a great time, hope the bugs don’t mess it up for you!’

‘Who knows what they’ll do next,’ Jim muttered. ‘They’re acting strange at the moment. Spouting strange words and phrases when they attack.’

‘I heard that,’ Stepan acknowledged. ‘Weirder than usual anyway. Some strange language no one recognises.’

‘Erqk,’ Gasazck said again. Everyone looked at him but he ventured no further comment.

‘I just hope to avoid them,’ Jim added. ‘No telling what they’ll do.’

‘Kicking the living shit out of Galcop would be my guess,’ Rus replied, finishing his soup.

Jim raised his eyebrows. ‘Let’s hope not.’

Rus shrugged. 'Had it coming for decades.'

Jim frowned. 'What do you mean, had it coming?'

'Not exactly witch-space science is it? You keep a species locked out of the mainstream, force them into deep space and prevent them access to any resources, stands to reason they're gonna get pissed after a while.'

'Thargoids invaded our space, they weren't forced out,' Jim replied.

Rus laughed. 'That's what it says in your books does it? No wonder we're screwed.'

Jim frowned. 'What are you talking about? Thargoids are everyone's enemy. Kill or be killed. Every pilot gets trained from day one. They've been attacking us for centuries!'

'And it never occurred to Galcop to ask why? Funny that.'

'Thargoids are crazy... ' Jim replied.

'Thargoids are as sane as anyone else,' Rus replied with a growl. 'You take what's theirs; they fight to get it back.'

'What's theirs? They came from space, they didn't have anything,' Jim countered. 'Thargoids invaded our space, mercilessly destroying anything in their path.'

Rus scowled. 'I tell you what I think. The Thargoids didn't just appear in space, they had a homeworld. Galcop took it, they want it back. '

'Erqk,' Gasazck interjected again.

Jim stared at the lizard, astonished that he seemed to be defending the invaders. 'That's nonsense. There is no Thargoid homeworld! They're just voracious killers and always have been! Taking whatever they want and discarding the rest. They're still doing it, murdering innocent civilians along the way. Look at the rumours about the Formidine rift losses. Hundreds of ships! You're wrong.'

'Wrong am I?' Rus snapped, getting up from the table and staring Jim down. 'Not everyone was spaced in those attacks. Why do you think that was?'

The big lizard left the room, heading back down to the rear of the ship, to continue nursing the engines. Jim watched him go.

'Don't mind him,' Hesperus said. 'Rus has a chip on his shoulder about Galcop as big as an Anaconda on steroids...'

D'VLin looked surprisingly subdued.

'Lizard right right,' he said in a whisper and also vacated the table.

Jim pushed the goat soup aside and got to his feet as well.

'I need to catch up on some research,' he said.

'Can I have your soup?' Stepan said eagerly.

Ermaso was a nasty little anarchic planet with a poor agricultural economy. It was in a dead-end location and not really on a route to anywhere in particular. There were plenty of alternative destinations nearby that were far more salubrious. As a result few traders made a stop in the system and those that did made sure they had the requisite *iron ass*; a ship with enough firepower and defences to hold its own against all comers.

Chromatic light flickered out in the depths of space and a witch-space wormhole exit suddenly appeared, briefly shimmered and then faded away. Four imposing ships drove forward rapidly. A classic Mk3 Cobra in the lead, flanked by two intimidating Caducei and trailed by a dark and mysterious snub-nosed vessel with a strange green glow emanating from it.

'All secure from jump. Form up.' Coyote's voice echoed across the narrowband, encrypted and at close range.

The four ships adopted a close formation and accelerated forwards into the darkness.

'Here are the co-ordinates,' Udian's voice rumbled across the channel.

Rebecca's console plotted the destination. It was beyond the main inhabited planet in the system, out towards the gas giant that orbited three times further away.

Long way out. No one will spot us out there.

'Spread out to engage Torus,' Coyote said. 'I'll go first, then Derik, Udian and Rebecca.'

'I thought it was ladies first.' Rebecca snapped.

'You see any ladies, just let me know,' Coyote responded straightaway.

Derik winced on hearing the comment.

Ouch! You've taught her the lesson Coyote, no need to twist the knife...

Coyote's injectors flared, driving the Cobra swiftly out of sight. As it disappeared from the

scanner Derik followed suit.

‘Asshole,’ Rebecca muttered to herself.

She waited until Udian’s ship had likewise disappeared and then engaged the Torus drive on her ship. It swept forward into the void, floating on a wave of gravimetric distortion, surfing forward by bending space around it.

The gas giant was typical of its type; a huge ball of gas with turbulent marble-like surface patterning. Huge terrestrial-planet-sized storms of swirling methane whirled across it, dwarfing the approaching ships. It grew slowly in the viewer on account of its astonishing size. Rebecca could see the gravity shear already affecting the course of her ship and she applied a little yaw in order to compensate.

Nothing else appeared on the scanner, they were millions of kilometres away from the main space lanes between Ermaso and the jump-point. The chance of meeting anything else out here was virtually zero. Rebecca sat back and watched the instruments. Minutes ticked by as the ships fled like wraiths through the darkness.

With time to stop and think she triggered the wide-band channel and requested a link, hoping to check to see if she had any messages. To her surprise the channel opened straightaway.

There was a message waiting.

Jim...

She flicked it up, biting her lip.

Rebecca,

Struggled to get a ship out of Teanrebi. Everyone is running from the war. Got passage on some old wreck of a Python with a half insane crew. Progress slow, food worse, currently at Inleus. No clues yet on the Thargoid messages – sorry. I’m working on it. Not sure if I’ll be able to get to Ermaso on time.

I’ve no idea how to say what I really want to say – don’t even know if you’ll read this. I’ve got to try I guess. I know you hate me. I hate me. I so regret what’s happened – how things turned out. It’s my fault. I guess it’s too late to put right but please, please look after yourself. Stay safe.

Call me as soon as you can.

Jim.

Rebecca blinked tears away and touched the screen in front of her, gently swiping her fingers across the display.

She typed a message back. There were things she wanted to say but the words wouldn't come, so she kept it brief, unable to keep the bitterness away.

Let me know if you figure out the Thargoid message. I need to know why they're after me. We're already at Ermaso, next obvious rendezvous point is Anxeonis. I'm travelling with some other combateers; Coyote's the leader, with Derik and Udian. I've attached their ship idents to this message along with my ship details.

Touched by the sudden concern but safe isn't really an option for me, is it? Call you when I can. R.

The gas giant continued to loom in front of her, one of the huge cyclonic storms growing swiftly as they closed in. It was a deep red colour, composed of gasses swept up from deep inside the planet. Before long the vast mass of the planet hung in space like an infinite wall of swirling colour. She felt uncomfortably reminded of the insignificance of her own existence.

Mass Locked. Hyperspeed aborted.

The *Spectre* slowed and she caught up with the three other ships. Udian's Caduceus was now in the lead.

'Nothing here,' Derik was saying. Rebecca looked at her scanner; he was right, there was nothing else in range, no ships and no stations. It was hardly surprising given they were in low orbit around a gas giant.

'You didn't expect it to be easy to find, did you?' Udian rumbled back. 'Follow me.'

Udian's ship turned directly down with respect to the swirling gas below them and accelerated away. The other ships followed cautiously.

Inside the atmosphere?

The astrogation scanner crackled and began to lose resolution as wisps of red gas began to stream past the cockpit windows. Visibility dropped swiftly as they descended. Rebecca cancelled the altitude warning indicator as it began to flash insistently.

Suddenly the *Spectre* was wrenched to one side, the shock almost jolting Rebecca from her pilot's chair. She wrestled the ship back on course and pulled the harness straps tighter. Ahead she saw Derik's and Coyote's ships also adjusting course.

‘Frakking hell!’ The lizard’s tones sounded across the narrowband.

‘Make sure you’re secured,’ Udian announced. ‘It can get a little rough in here.’

‘You could have warned us!’

‘I just did.’

They were almost flying blind now. Rebecca could no longer see Udian’s ship and was hanging onto the exhaust glow of Derik’s vessel. They executed a slow bank to starboard and then continued descending.

Warning! Exterior hull pressure 2MPa and rising.

The *Spectre* trembled as the density and pressure of the gas around them continued to climb. It got quickly dimmer as light was filtered out from above.

‘How much further, Udian?’ Coyote’s voice queried.

‘We keep going.’

Warning! Exterior hull pressure 5MPa and rising.

It was getting increasingly difficult to keep the ships on course. None of the vessels were really equipped for operating in an aerodynamic environment. Rebecca and Coyote had the worst of it, neither of their ships being streamlined in any fashion. Rebecca found herself continually having to reduce forward power whilst managing pitch, roll and yaw to keep the *Spectre* flying in something vaguely approaching a straight line.

Again a blast of turbulence hit them, scattering the ships and forcing them to regroup.

Warning! Exterior hull pressure 25 MPa and rising.

Rebecca could see her grip on the flight controls was tight, her knuckles showing white through clenched hands. It felt claustrophobic; she was blind and helpless, surrounded by forces which could crush her in an instant, creeping forward cautiously. It was far cry from the freedom of space travel.

Warning! Exterior hull pressure 50 MPa and rising. Hull rating is 100 MPa.

Lightning flickered in the darkness, briefly illuminating the gas in which they were travelling. Rebecca got a brief glimpse of something away in the distance. A vague silhouette of something huge, a large foreboding horizontal mass with tall spikes jutting vertically from it both upwards and downwards. Before she could register any details it faded into the gloom again.

Warning! Exterior hull pressure 75 MPa and rising. Abort descent!

‘My ship is starting to complain,’ Derik announced irritably, the stress evident in his clipped voice. ‘Somebody might have warned me this trip was going to be dangerous...’

‘You’ve been keeping her in space too long, Derik,’ Udian replied easily. ‘She needs to feel a little pressure every once in a while, else she forgets.’

‘You call this a little pressure?’ the lizard retorted immediately.

Rebecca cancelled the pressure alarm as it honked through the cabin. A strange tinkling sound echoed through the ship; the sound of the hull contracting under pressure. It sounded wrong; an unfamiliar and threatening noise on a ship designed to travel in the vacuum of space.

‘Maintain altitude,’ Udian said softly. ‘Almost there. Prepare for landing.’

Landing?

Abruptly the gas around them burst into a glowing miasma. Ahead they could see a vast installation, floating in the clouds, holding station using mammoth exhaust jets in the depths of the atmosphere. It had to be a couple of kilometres square, a sinister dark metallic platform bristling with antennae, access ports and pressure domes. Enormously powerful beams of light now illuminated the gas around it. In the centre they could see a landing field covered by a huge access port. As they watched the opening widened like a diaphragm, enormous curving arcs of metal sliding aside to reveal a landing deck. It looked decidedly narrow from above. Faint navigation lights marked out the edges of the bay, slowly flashing red in the gloom.

‘Follow me in one at a time,’ Udian instructed. ‘Watch out for lateral gusting. The atmospheric can be entertaining.’

‘Entertaining...’ Derik replied. ‘Nice. What next? A vaudeville dancing troupe?’

‘Don’t be tempted to activate your targeting computers by the way,’ Udian added conversationally. ‘You’ll find that will be a mistake.’

Rebecca could dimly make out a large number of defensive turrets on the surface of the platform. Traditional weaponry by the look of it. Not dangerous in small numbers but the combined effect of multiple bursts and zero manoeuvrability would make short work of a vessel caught above.

Somebody has a lot of secrets to keep...

Udian’s ship cautiously made its way down, extending its landing gear as it approached the docking entrance. Rebecca watched as it wobbled slightly as it passed the threshold and then settled

down on the 'ground'.

Derik was next, clearly finding it difficult to navigate his ship through the swirling gas. Rebecca estimated the wind speed at close to two hundred kilometres an hour. Udian was right though, the shear across the surface was the problem, causing gusts and eddies close to the surface of the platform. Derik's ship swung around in a complete circle and he had to approach twice before he managed to glide into the entrance. His Caduceus came close to clipping the side wall and landed unsteadily on its undercarriage before straightening and powering down.

'I am *not* doing that again!' the lizard's aggrieved tones sounded from the narrow-comms.

'Coyote?' Rebecca asked.

'Ladies first,' the smug tones came back straightaway.

'Coward,' she fired back.

She could imagine the dark grey eyes and the infuriating grin on his face.

Rebecca nosed her ship down gently, adjusting lateral thrust as she began to drift away from the landing zone.

'Wish me luck. Here goes nothing.'

'Watch that shear,' Derik's voice advised. 'It's extremely... entertaining!'

Rebecca approached into the general direction of the oncoming wind. This made the yaw and drift less of a problem but increased the difficulty of maintaining pitch as the *Spectre* struggled with the adverse aerodynamic effects of its shape. It had a tendency to pitch upwards in the gusts, forcing Rebecca to compensate in the opposite direction. Too much and there was a risk of tumbling.

Slowly she wrestled the ship lower, keeping it as steady as she could. She was approaching at a relative rate of only a few kilometres per hour.

Warning! Exterior hull pressure 100 MPa and rising. Tolerances violated! Abort descent!

The landing stage was close now, the entrance beginning to rise up around her.

Almost there. Let's hope they built a safety factor into the hull!

A shudder ran through the ship and she was abruptly drifting off to one side. The walls of the entrance bay tilted around her. She spun the ship on yaw thrusters trying to compensate, finding herself drifting back across the bay.

'Frak!'

The *Spectre* tilted, caught by a gust which threatened to roll the ship end over end. Rebecca gave it a burst of power and wrestled it back into the headwind. A horrible creaking sound echoed through the ship as the hull desperately fought to fend off the external pressure.

Lowering the undercarriage she nosed her vessel down again. It rocked unsteadily as she passed the threshold and dropped into the less turbulent atmosphere in the bay.

She touched down with a huge sense of relief. She was drenched in sweat, her hands trembling as she released the controls.

‘Nice and smooth,’ Derik’s voice called. ‘Enjoy that did you?’

‘I could do that all day...’ she managed, wiping her forehead. She heard the lizard cackle.

Rebecca shutdown the engines and secured her ship.

‘All clear,’ she said, with a sigh of relief. ‘Come on in, old man. We’ve done all the hard work for you.’

She could see the flashing navigation lights of Coyote’s Cobra blinking half a kilometre above the landing pad. The Cobra was already bucking in the wind shear.

‘Comprende.’ His voice was tense.

The Cobra was an older ship design. A jack-of-all-trades vessel, its stability systems were not orientated with a view to landing in such conditions. Coyote decided that Rebecca’s idea of flying into the wind was the best approach and teased the *Dark Star* in the same general direction. He could see Rebecca had taxied her vessel out of the obvious landing spot to give him enough space to approach with a little more ease.

Warning! Exterior hull pressure 100 MPa and rising. Tolerances violated!

‘Tell me something I don’t know,’ he muttered, watching the range indicator cautiously.

The Cobra continued to buck and twist but he managed to keep it close to the straight approach he was aiming for. The landing bay grew slowly in the viewer, the other three ships reassuringly close by.

‘Hurry it up.’ Rebecca’s impatient voice crackled across the narrow-band.

Coyote backed the power down a little and lowered the undercarriage, waiting for the indicator lights to flicker green to show it had locked in position. Two green lights came on and then a third flickered on after a brief pause. Coyote frowned for a moment.

That shouldn't have happened...

The pressurised tinkling sound crackled through the ship.

The Cobra bobbed in a slight gust as he approached the landing bay. The ship rolled to port. Coyote compensated. A faint snapping sound echoed through the ship.

Warning! Hull breach!

Warning! Hull breach!

Coyote could see the warning indicator showing a problem with the starboard undercarriage housing. Something had failed. A screeching hiss told him that poisonous gas was forcing its way into the *Dark Star's* lower hull.

'I've got a problem here,' he called out, grabbing a Remlok from the bulkhead and strapping it over his face.

The hull auto-sealing systems were trying to block the leak but they'd been designed to keep breathable air in, not high pressure poisonous gas out. The internal seals came down a moment later but the damage indicators showed that the cargo bay and forward 'tween hulls area was already being breached. Anything in there was going to be subject to the external pressure within minutes and there were critical components that wouldn't take kindly to that kind of treatment.

He stabbed at the alert commands trying to cancel the alarm sounds but they refused to be silenced. He swung the Cobra around and boosted the ship towards the landing bay.

'You've lost the starboard landing strut!' Rebecca called out, her voice high with alarm. 'Watch it or you'll roll when you hit the ground!'

'Just getting on the ground will do me,' Coyote snapped back. 'Hold tight everyone; this isn't going to be pretty.'

Warning! Life support mechanism damaged!

Warning! Inimical atmosphere detected!

The instruments flickered as the gas forced its way further into the damaged ship.

Warning! Internal pressure seals : failure imminent!

The Cobra bucked in the crosswind. Coyote tried to stabilise only to find the lateral thrusters weren't responding, their fuel lines already compacted by the incoming pressure surging through the lower deck systems. The Cobra cannoned into the bay wall amidst a shower of sparks as its shields

discharged.

Warning! Shields offline!

Warning! ECM System damaged!

Warning! Hull integrity failing!

The Cobra shuddered drunkenly, nosing downwards as it rebounded. Coyote triggered the engines and the *Dark Star* blasted forward and slammed into the floor of the bay with eye watering violence. More sparks flew as the Cobra screeched across the metallic floor of the bay, canting over on its starboard side as the remains of the undercarriage on that side collapsed.

Warning! Primary power bus damaged! Switching to auxiliary supply!

‘He’s in!’ Rebecca yelled. ‘Close the frakkin’ doors! Quick!’

The impact had half stunned Coyote. His vision blurred and he struggled to retain control. A wave of pain washed over him, stabbing out from his neck. He tried to turn the *Dark Star* but the controls no longer responded. The ship slid across the bay floor, yawing to one side as the remains of the undercarriage dug in, dragging a huge scar across the bay. It narrowly missed Rebecca’s *Spectre* and ground to a halt just short of the bay wall.

Warning! Internal pressure seals failing!

‘You ok?’ He vaguely heard Rebecca’s voice trying to get his attention. ‘Frak! Hurry it up with the doors!’

Coyote felt a sudden weight start descending on him. The Remlok could keep him breathing but there was nothing it could do against the incoming pressure. He tried to respond but the rising pressure prevented him uttering a sound.

This wasn’t quite how I saw it all ending...

He tried and failed to draw a breath, his vision began to tunnel in around him. He saw the pressure doors above him start to close, slowly narrowing the space above him and blocking out the dismal atmosphere of the gas-giant. Then everything faded out.

Chapter Six

Udian moved swiftly down the dark corridors that composed the inside of the platform. He was consumed with an inhuman alacrity. Had he still possessed a human body he'd have been running at breakneck speed, panting at intervals before continuing on at whatever pace he could manage. As it was, his shielded maglev system had merged seamlessly with the purpose-built corridor tracks running throughout the entirety of his station. His metal body hummed gently, maintaining speed without complaint, without pause.

The urgency was no less, however. Things aboard the *Catechism* were not as he had anticipated.

Udian had staff aboard the *Catechism* supervising the provisioning of the bio-weapons. Without informing the rest of the combaters, he'd been attempting to contact them since they'd arrived in the Ermaso system but there had been no response. The *Catechism* was normally arrayed in a high orbit around Ermaso 2, drawing power from the enormous static discharges generated by the gas giant's overwhelming magnetic field. Submerging itself deep in the gas giant's atmosphere was an extreme defensive technique.

The *Catechism* had been attacked; boarded. It took little imagination to determine who might have been behind that. What concerned Udian far more was how they'd found about the platform and its location – and how they'd got inside.

He slowed as he approached the navigation and defence facilities that lined the outer edge of the *Catechism*. His worst fears were confirmed as he approached the main control deck. The doors were forced, twisted and melted. Bodies were strewn across the corridor, some in a state of complete dismemberment. Some of the faces were still recognisable but most were not. All shared a look of extreme agony frozen on their pale dead flesh, mouths locked in terrifying rictus grins. Blood coated the floor and walls. None were left alive. Udian could detect only residual body heat.

Closer inspection indicated the indiscriminate destruction of some kind of explosive projectile weapon. The scientists aboard the *Catechism* had been slaughtered and not long before. Perhaps a day or so.

Udian cautiously moved onto the deck. Immediately a green laser flickered across him, swiftly scanning his form.

'Identify,' a soft female voice sounded.

‘Shulth, Udian Foraga,’ he replied, a sense of relief washing over him. The internal systems were intact.

Which means...

Around him were more bodies, sliced, cauterised, neatly eviscerated. They weren’t human remains. Udian allowed himself a moment of satisfaction on having the foresight to place automated defensive systems within the *Catechism* as a secondary defence against incursion.

‘Identity verified.’

He accessed the on board systems, reviewing the logged events without reacting.

Frustrating.

He keyed the core-comm system, using a personalised security code. A small screen illuminated nearby.

Udian’s optical receptors registered the face of Garew Ward.

‘Progress?’ Garew snapped.

‘We’ve arrived,’ Udian replied slowly. ‘But *Catechism* has been breached.’

Garew looked dismayed.

‘Already? How?’

‘That’s rather academic at this point,’ Udian replied. His left fine manipulator arm fluidly retrieved a piece of diced flesh from the floor. It was coated in a hard, slick and armoured exoskeleton, inside green ichor and swiftly decomposing muscle and fat glistened obscenely. He waved it at the core-comm receiver before dropping it carelessly on the floor.

‘Frak...’ Garew replied, having seen the decapitated remains of the Thargoid warrior.

‘The lab appears to be intact,’ Udian continued. ‘However it appears that the final tests were not conducted before my scientists were summarily dismembered.’

‘Then we don’t know if the bio-packs are efficacious?’ Garew looked alarmed.

‘We do not.’

‘Then you’d better establish that as a priority.’

‘I concur,’ Udian acknowledged. ‘It may require...’

‘Do whatever it takes. Use the woman.’

‘Plan B?’ Udian prompted.

‘Don’t screw this up,’ Garew snapped back.

‘Your cadence is unacceptable,’ Udian bristled.

Garew’s eyes narrowed. ‘Just get those weapons to Beenri. You know what’s at stake. Call me when you’re back en route.’

Udian shut the core-comm down and thought for a moment, weighing possibilities.

Mind made up, he strode quickly from the control deck, his metallic limbs crushing the discarded parts of a Thargoid warrior to pulp.

By the time the outer aperture had closed and the whoosh of the air recycling pumps had started Rebecca had made it outside her own ship, a Remlok strapped over her face. The pressure was still too high but it was bearable and oxygen was flooding into the bay, the poisonous red gas of the outside atmosphere being quickly dispelled. Rebecca staggered down the gangplank of the *Spectre* only to see Udian leaving his own ship and heading towards the interior airlock door.

‘Hey! Udian, we need to... where the frak are you going?’

She watched in astonishment as the machine creature stepped into the airlock and the doors closed behind him, totally ignoring the crashed and buckled *Dark Star* in the corner of the bay.

Son of a ‘goid!

Rebecca ran over to the Cobra as fast as she could, feeling the atmosphere stinging her exposed skin. The gas was acidic, fortunately its potency was being reduced by the huge hangar pumps. She quickly looked under the hull but with the collapsed undercarriage there was no way to access the inside of the ship via the cargo bay. She ran around the flank of the Cobra’s left wing pod to see if she could gain access from the rear hatches, running full pelt into Derik, who’d clearly had the same idea. He wasn’t wearing a Remlok, his reptilian ancestry enabling him to filter the toxic atmosphere.

‘Rear hatch!’ Rebecca yelled, gasping for breath.

‘After you sister,’ Derik replied. ‘Where’s Udian?’

‘He’s gone.’

‘Gone? Gone where?’

‘Inside! He didn’t stop to help, the ‘stard. There doesn’t seem to be anyone else here!’

Derik punched at the Cobra’s rear hatch control. Fortunately the door opened immediately. Rebecca followed the big lizard inside.

‘We’ll deal with him later,’ Derik said. ‘Let’s get Coyote.’

Red lights flickered inside the Cobra’s cramped rear access ports. They ignored the grav-tube to the lower deck and made their way towards the cockpit. The internal door before them was still closed. Derik punched the controls again but this time the door refused to move.

‘Sealed,’ Derik snapped, looking at the door closely. ‘Locked from the other side I guess. We’re not going in that way. You ever flown a Cobra?’

‘Years ago.’ Rebecca acknowledged. ‘We can’t blast it, it’s five centimetre duralium. Laser will bounce around in here like a trumble in a vege farm.’

‘Any other ideas?’ Derik said, looking around the compact space.

‘Floor panels,’ Rebecca snapped, dropping to her feet. ‘There should be a conduit which runs above the cargo bay from the laser coolant panels to the rear of the ship, you can reach the cockpit from there, assuming it’s intact.’

Derik helped her to pull up the corrugated grav-plating from the bottom of the corridor. It took them precious minutes to lever the heavy tiles out of the way. Rebecca peered down and then jumped into the recessed area below, with Derik peering down over her. She crawled forward and looked at the access panel in front of her. It had a manual override which she pulled. It was stuck, she battered at it but was unable to move it.

‘Let me try,’ Derik said, lifting her effortlessly out of the pit and grabbing the handle. Swift cranks by his powerful muscular arms had it freed and open in a moment. Derik squinted into the darkness beyond.

‘Not good,’ he grimaced.

Rebecca joined him, assessing the situation. The small conduit was clearly buckled itself, with the floor having half risen up halfway down its length, the distance between the roof and the floor being measured in centimetres.

‘Pressure leakage from the cargo bay must have buckled it,’ Derik sighed. ‘That’s not going too...’

‘I can do it,’ Rebecca announced.

‘Are you mad? It’s too narrow,’ the lizard hissed. He was at least twice as big as her in most directions.

‘How else are we going to get him out?’ she replied. She looked back in the conduit; measuring, calculating.

‘You’ll get stuck!’

‘I need some decom grease,’ she announced after a moment.

‘Say what?’ Derik looked at her in bewilderment.

‘Decom grease, for flesh-borne parasites...’

‘I know what it is!’ Derik roared. ‘What the frak do you need it for now?’

Rebecca pulled off her Remlok and started pulling off her tatty blue spacer’s outfit.

‘I’m thin but I’m not that thin,’ she snapped. ‘Find some! Hurry!’

Derik growled and shook his head, jumping back up to the corridor above, flicking his tail angrily.

‘First it’s entertaining, then it’s a dance troupe, now it’s a frakking simian strip show. This mission just gets better...’ He rifled through the medical supplies in the nearby cabinets. Coyote’s collections of exotic pharmaceuticals were strewn around the floor until Derik found what he was looking for.

‘Here!’ he yelled back. ‘This do?’

He jumped back down to be confronted by Rebecca’s pale naked body. She grabbed the tub of grease unselfconsciously.

‘Perfect. Help me with this.’ She opened the tub and began smearing herself with the thick unpleasant grease.

‘Oh joy...’ Derik growled, dipping his claws into the gunk. ‘Just when you think it can’t get worse...’

‘Bet you do this all the time,’ Rebecca said with a coquettish wink.

‘If you think the sight of some hairless monkey covered in foul-smelling grease extracted from the backside of some randomius-forsaken creature turns me on, you clearly don’t know me very well.’

Esei better not find out about this or I’m going back to Tionisla in a body-bag!

It didn't take long to plaster her body in the slimy sludge. Rebecca dropped to her knees and crawled into the conduit, flattening herself against the floor, her body blocking out the light from the other end.

'How is it?' Derik called.

'It stinks!'

'You think you've got problems. You're not the one with the sensitive olfactory glands!' the lizard shot back.

Rebecca wriggled herself forward into the narrowest part of the conduit, feeling the cold metal against her shoulders, breasts and elbows. It chilled her, goose-bumps forming all over her skin.

She managed to inch forward, sucking her breath in to get her ribcage over the threshold of the upward dent in the floor. She flailed around trying to get a purchase on something ahead of her in order to pull herself through. She could hardly breathe in that position, she had to find something. She couldn't turn her head enough to see clearly what was ahead of her. She gasped in the confined space, claustrophobia and panic beginning to rise around her.

Derik could see she wasn't moving.

'What's up?'

'I can't pull myself through,' Rebecca cried, struggling again.

'This is no good,' Derik announced. 'I'm going to pull you back.'

'No!' Rebecca's fingers touched something but her greasy fingers slipped off it once, twice... a third time. 'There's something... I can almost reach it!'

She stretched herself, straining her back and arm as far as it would reach; cramp began to spasm in her muscles. Her fingers closed over something hard and she clasped it, pulling herself forward. Sharp edges and torn metal in the floor sliced into her skin as she pulled her hips across the threshold. She cried out in pain.

'Rebecca? Rebecca!' The lizard shouted from the other side as her legs disappeared through the narrow aperture. He could just make out Rebecca's slim form silhouetted against the faint illumination from the other end of the conduit. He could see she was nursing her stomach, her breath visible in short sharp puffs of moisture in the darkness.

'It's alright.' She gasped, catching her breath.

‘You sure?’ the lizard’s voice echoed from the other end of the conduit.

‘Let’s just say I’m glad I’m not male,’ she managed. She looked around her and pushed up on the panel above her head, heaving against it. Derik could see she was already tired, her muscles straining and her arms trembling as she tried to move the heavy flooring out of the way.

With a cracking sound it came free and she managed to shove it aside, falling back to the ground inside the conduit.

‘Go girl!’ Derik enthused.

Rebecca pulled herself up into the *Dark Star*’s cockpit on her hands and knees, raising her head to look around her.

Coyote was slumped in the pilot’s chair. He was strapped in place, a Remlok mask locked over his face. The instrumentation was flickering off and on, indicating the lower hull damage. She coughed, some of the poisonous atmosphere remained. She staggered to her feet and weaved across to the chair, turning it towards her. Coyote was unconscious.

She pulled the Remlok from his face. His skin was pale, drawn and covered in a thin film of cold sweat. He wasn’t breathing. She fumbled with the restraining harnesses and managed to pull him out of the chair and onto the floor, pulling his jumpsuit apart and pressing an ear to his chest.

No heartbeat! The damn Remlok has failed!

Basic emergency training told her what to do. She straddled him and began rhythmically pumping his chest trying to restart his heart and then switched to mouth to mouth resuscitation, forcing air into his lungs.

Come on you arrogant ‘stard...

Her arms were already burning with fatigue as she tried to keep up the motion on his ribcage. She stopped to breath for him again, cramp making her arms tremble.

Coyote remained motionless; his skin cold, damp and pale.

Fight it you son of a ‘goid! Come on, please....

She continued methodically, switching from breathing to pumping his chest. There was no response. Tears began to form in her eyes and her efforts became increasingly more desperate. She tried breathing for him again and then moved back to pump his ribcage again.

Come on you stupid old man, please come back!

Cramp seized up her arms and she was forced to stop, gasping for breath herself, sobs wracking her body.

No!

She sat up, crying in despair, her hands balling into fists, fingernails digging into her palms.

‘Damn you, Coyote!’

She pounded on his chest in sheer frustration, oblivious to anything else, before collapsing with exhaustion across him.

She heard a thump, a short gasp and then a long wheezing breath. She looked up.

Coyote heaved a deep breath and then another.

‘Oh frak! Thank Randomius...’ Rebecca gasped, managing to prop herself up on her hands. ‘Can you hear me?’

Coyote’s eyes opened, looking blank for a moment before focussing in on her.

‘Not one of my better landings then,’ he managed to croak. He took in her face, smeared with the dark slimy grease and then his gaze travelled down her body in surprise.

‘Or maybe I died and went to heaven after all...’ he chuckled.

Rebecca slapped him across the face. ‘Stard!’

He glared at her. ‘I wish you’d stop doing that...’

She clambered off and he managed to crawl to his knees, favouring a wrenched neck and shoulder. Rebecca activated the sealed bridge door and managed to open it. Derik was standing behind it, looking grim but slightly comical with a tub of grease in one claw and Rebecca’s small jumpsuit in the other. His face brightened as he saw them both, showing his gleaming white teeth.

‘Frak. You did it!’ he exclaimed.

Coyote caught sight of the corridor beyond the big reptilian. Hull plates and medical supplies were scattered everywhere.

‘Look at the mess you two made of my ship!’

‘You wait till you see the mess *you* made of your ship,’ Derik fired back, twisting his head to one side in amusement.

‘Not counting the mess you made of me,’ Rebecca said, pawing ineffectively at the smelly

sludge coating her skin.

They laughed nervously, tension easing for a moment, exchanging a meaningful look.

‘Listen,’ Coyote said softly to Rebecca, holding out his hand, his eyes locked on hers.

‘Thanks. I mean it... truce?’

She glared him for a moment, ignoring his outstretched hand.

‘Oh for frak’s sake! Shake his hand you obstinate bitch!’ Derik snapped. ‘What does he have to do? Wave a bloody white flag?’

Rebecca let out a deep sigh and smiled faintly. She took both Coyote’s hand and Derik’s claw. ‘Couldn’t have done it without muscles here. Team effort.’

‘Thank frak for that,’ Derik said. ‘What a team. I’m gonna be in therapy for years after this mission and you guys are getting the bill!’

Something about Rus’s words had riled Jim. Thargoids were insane, attacking without warning, without provocation, ripping and destroying anything in their path. Everyone agreed on this. It was standard training for new pilots. Either run or fight. Thargoids gave no mercy. They ambushed ships in witch-space, attacked convoys and occasionally even attacked stations. The GalNavy had been defending the core systems for decades from these vicious invaders.

But why?

It seemed an obvious question. The answer was simple – that’s what Thargoids did. They attacked on sight. They had no agenda, they just wanted you dead. To ask why or to have a moment’s hesitation was a fast ticket to ending up spaced.

A Thargoid homeworld, a preposterous notion. How could that have been hidden all these years? Crazy conspiracy theories!

In the small cabin that had been set aside for him on the *Dubious Profit*, Jim accessed the core-comm system and began assessing data.

‘Give me a list of vessels reported attacked by Thargoids in the last week,’ he requested.

The holofac display showed a total of over a hundred vessels. Jim scanned the list looking for any commonalities. Nothing obvious jumped out at him.

‘Group into convoys.’

The images of the ships moved around, organising themselves.

‘Delete any convoys where all ships were destroyed and list remaining ships.’

Almost all of the ships disappeared but a handful remained. The holofac flashed up the details.

Ant Hill, Cradle, Furball, Honey Pot, Howling Moon, Lily Pond, Ocean’s Blue, Preen, Wet Lake.

Jim scanned the list again, seeing nothing immediately out of place.

‘Give me the registries of each ship, Captain and crew.’

Ant Hill – Registered : Riredi. Type : Boa 2, Captain : Ik’Arg’De, Crew : Insectoid

Cradle – Registered : Zarace. Type : Anaconda, Captain : Simoney, Crew : Feline

Furball – Registered : Zarace. Type : Cobra Rapier, Captain : Tagli, Crew : Feline

Honey Pot – Registered : Riredi. Type : Bulk Hauler, Captain : Var’Shi’Dem, Crew : Insectoid

Howling Moon – Registered : Oresri. Type : Wolf Mk2, Captain : Baskerville, Crew : Canine

Lily Pond – Registered : Teorge. Type : Moray, Captain : Gimlet, Crew : Amphibian

Ocean’s Blue – Registered : Onisqu. Type : Moray, Captain : Finfear, Crew : Cetacean

Preen – Registered : Zarace. Type : Emerald Cruiser, Captain : Fashtalli, Crew : Feline

Wet Lake – Registered : Aesbion. Type : Needle Dart, Captain : Rargerat, Crew : Amphibian

Jim looked down the list quickly, his mouth dropping open as realisation dawned.

Coyote, Derik and Rebecca found an accommodation zone just inside the main airlock from the bay. Coyote had spent an hour in the medi-bay getting fixed up for a dislocated shoulder and the after-effects of almost suffocating. Rebecca had gone for a shower. She hadn’t been able to find any ship-style jumpsuits and had settled for pinching some of the previous occupant’s clothes. They were rather more flattering than the anonymous flight suit she had been wearing.

‘Going somewhere nice?’ Coyote asked, looking her up and down appraisingly as she emerged. She was dressed in a sleeveless black blouse and matching trousers. It flattered her, and gave her a demure, vulnerable look.

‘I was hoping you’d show me a good time.’ She twirled on the spot and batted her eyelashes at him before laughing at the raised eyebrow she got in return.

You’re too short and thin for my tastes little one. I can see you charming your way out of all sorts of trouble. But you’re not fooling me. I’m not underestimating you again, so you can quit with those games already...

Derik wrinkled his nostrils approvingly.

‘You both smell better, thank frak. For monkeys, anyway.’

‘Thanks lizard-breath,’ Rebecca replied. ‘Maybe you should get some cool mints to go with that cold blood of yours, sun-basker.’

‘I’ll have you know,’ Derik began rather haughtily, ‘I am a warm-blood.’ He turned and glared fiercely at Rebecca. ‘And there’s nothing more insulting to a Draconoid than being labelled a sun-basker.’

He bared his teeth and hissed at her.

‘I know.’ Rebecca grinned, and pouted at him.

Derik stuck out his tongue at her. Coyote chuckled.

‘I got the mechs working on your ship,’ Derik said, with a nod to Coyote. ‘Should have it patched up enough to fly soon enough but you’ll have to take it easy. The lower hull is blown, not to mention the internal equipment damage. We’ll need to stopover somewhere to get proper repairs.’

Coyote nodded. ‘She’s seen worse.’

‘Bizarre though,’ the Lizard continued. ‘This is some kind of self-contained facility, it looks like it’s crammed full of stuff. Did you see the armour and weapons on the way in? This place is built to survive a siege.’

‘But nobody here,’ Coyote mused. ‘No staff, no guards. No one.’

‘You seen Udian?’ Rebecca snapped.

‘No,’ Derik growled. ‘And when I do...’

The doors to the accommodation zone snapped open and Udian’s metal form entered.

‘You’ll what?’ Udian’s voice rumbled.

‘Ask where the frak you thought you were going!’ Derik replied, angrily.

‘I had to attend to the immediate priorities,’ Udian responded easily, completely unconcerned. ‘We need to move. Follow me.’

‘We’re not going anywhere until you explain where the frak you went!’

‘I had to attend to priorities,’ Udian repeated. ‘Now, follow...’

‘We had a man down!’ Rebecca cried out. ‘You abandoned us, you cowardly stinking pile of goid!’

Udian’s optical sensors turned on her. Rebecca shivered, wondering how she appeared to the creature within that ugly metal shell.

‘My current physiology prevents me from accessing vessels in the traditional manner. With the Cobra’s cargo bay inaccessible there was nothing I could do to assist.’

‘Coyote could have died!’ Rebecca screeched.

‘Which would have been regrettable, I’m relieved to see he’s intact,’ Udian acknowledged with a brief inclination of his torso in Coyote’s direction. ‘That does not change the facts. If Coyote was to be saved, Derik and you would have to have performed a rescue without me.’

‘We should be working as team!’ Derik growled back.

‘We were,’ Udian returned. ‘To apply more people to a task than is necessary, purely due to misguided sentiment, is both inefficient and dangerous.’

‘No it frakkin’ isn’t!’ Rebecca snapped.

Coyote stepped into the fray. ‘Perhaps if you explain what this place is and what you were doing...?’

‘There isn’t time,’ Udian’s voice grew in volume. ‘We need to move.’

‘You need to fill us in,’ Derik said. ‘I’m not working in a vacuum. Bad for the skin.’

Udian looked at him for a moment. ‘If we can discuss without the hysterics, perhaps I can quickly explain...’

‘Why you...’ Rebecca began. Coyote caught hold of her arm.

‘Easy...’

Rebecca contented herself with a glare. Udian was unaffected.

‘As you’ve doubtless surmised this is a heavily armed and defended research station,’ Udian

explained. 'This is my base of operations, home if you wish. I call it *Catechism*. A purpose-built and self-contained platform. I found my research required secrecy and this was the result. The Ermasians allowed me to position it out here around Ermaso 2 for a consideration.'

'You mean you bribed them and they turned a blind eye,' Derik said.

'Whatever you say. *Catechism* held over a hundred scientists dedicated to the task of researching bio-weapons to eradicate the Thargoid menace.'

'Held?' Coyote said. 'Past tense?'

'My reason for alacrity,' Udian replied. '*Catechism* is normally in a high orbit, not hidden in the depths of the atmosphere like this. This position is reserved for extreme situations. A defensive posture.'

'It's been attacked?' Derik asked.

'And boarded,' Udian confirmed. 'Enough reason for grave concern. I considered *Catechism* impregnable. It appears I was wrong.'

'By who...?' Rebecca asked before realising. 'Thargoids?'

'All staff aboard have been slaughtered, quite brutally,' Udian reported emotionlessly. 'I managed to get to the control deck. The logs indicate an attack only a few hours ago. A large number of Thargoid vessels were destroyed but some penetrated the defences, cut into the outer hull and boarded *Catechism*. Given this knowledge, my first priority was to establish whether the bio-weapons had been appropriated.'

'And have they?' Coyote asked.

'No. The lab in which they reside is still secure. Fortunately *Catechism* also has internal defences which proved sufficient. The Thargoids weren't able to access the lab, so they've retreated.'

'Retreated?' Derik cried in alarm. 'They're still alive?'

'They could be,' Udian acknowledged calmly. 'There are no ships in the vicinity but unfortunately the internal sensors are inoperative, so there is no way to tell for certain if any of them remain aboard.'

'Frak!'

'So...,' Udian enjoyed the dismayed expression on their faces. 'We don't have much time and your requirement for tedious explanation has wasted much of it. We need to get the bio-weapons

aboard our ships and get out of here before they notice we're here. I assume you're ready to follow me now?'

'There are enough samples for sixteen weapons,' Udian said, as they cautiously turned a junction and walked down the corridors within the *Catechism*. 'We need to retrieve them and retrofit them into the naval missiles aboard our ships.'

'Sounds straight-forward enough,' Derik growled, feeling constrained by the dimly lit corridors. His head was only a few centimetres short of the ceiling.

'That's the easy part,' Udian replied. 'Getting the samples back to the ships will be more interesting.'

'How so?' Rebecca asked.

'The Thargs couldn't get into the lab,' Coyote answered for her. 'So if they're still about they'll wait until we've retrieved the samples and then pounce.'

Udian stopped by a door and one of his metal appendages interfaced with a control panel.

'Wait a minute then!' Rebecca said in alarm. 'Let's have a plan before we go in for frak's sake!'

'This is the plan,' Udian replied. The door slid open, revealing a room crammed with firearms. There were racks upon racks of rifles, shotguns and portable projectile weapons. Most were unsavoury, all were illegal.

'Hmmm,' Derik mumbled, looking around appraisingly. 'Nice hobby you've got here.'

'Choose wisely,' Udian said. 'Your life may depend upon it.'

'Do we really need these?' Rebecca asked, lifting a large-bore assault rifle from one of the racks and finding it rather heavier than she expected.

'Have you ever encountered a Thargoid in the flesh?' Udian replied, moving further into the armoury.

'No,' she replied, putting the rifle back and finding another, lighter version. 'Been in plenty of dust-ups with other bugs though, not much to them. Couple of punches, squish. Easy.'

'Think of a seven-foot praying mantis,' Udian replied easily. 'Bio-mechanical armour, speed and agility like a feline. They have a semi-redundant nervous system which allows them to act in

concert with their companions even if you destroy the higher brain functions. We also think they have a degree of telepathy, though that's never been proved.'

'So you blow their heads off and they keep coming,' Derik sighed. 'Great.'

'Add to that a complete lack of fear, no instinct for self-preservation coupled with strength about three times that of the average human and you've got them pegged. Their blood can be corrosive too, if you don't have the proper enhancements or natural resistance, of course.' Udian tapped his metallic chest with a manipulator. 'Humanoid flesh is particularly susceptible I'm afraid.'

Coyote and Rebecca exchanged a worried look. Rebecca put back the smaller weapon and grabbed the original assault rifle.

'Thargoids tend to eschew hand-held weaponry too,' Udian commented, offhand. 'They seem to prefer things up close and personal. They attack on sight. They have naturally barbed limbs and each hand contains a claw honed for both slicing and stabbing. I've seen many antagonists die watching a Thargoid ripping their intestines out.'

'Frak.' Rebecca's face had gone ashen.

I bet he's grinning inside there, the metal bastard! He's enjoying this.

'Did I mention some of them spit acid?' Udian added lightly. 'They don't care for oxygen, ammonia is their natural atmosphere, so they might be a little impeded here. It won't make a great deal of difference.'

Derik was looking at the various items in the armoury.

'Too low tech for me,' he grumbled. 'This lot belongs in a museum. I'll stick with my Mk4 if it's all the same to you.' The big lizard patted the bulky weapon strapped to his side.

Udian turned momentarily. 'Ah, yes. The Lance and Ferman Widowmaker. And you have the audacity to call my choice of weapons antique...'

'She's old but she packs a serious punch...' Derik fired back.

'I'll enjoy the expression on your face when you use it on a Thargoid,' Udian replied. 'Briefly that is...'

'What you talking about, metal butt?' Derik roared.

'Thargoid armour is almost impervious to energy or plasma based weapons. That's why they walk all over Galcop forces during invasions. I recommend low-tech kinetic weapons. Messy but

effective... and aim for the thorax, not the head.'

Now Derik and Rebecca exchanged a worried look.

'No school like the old school,' Derik said, smoothly re-arranging his features into a grin, grabbing the biggest twin-bore high calibre repeating rifle he could find and slinging an ammunition belt over his shoulder.

'So what's the plan?' Rebecca demanded, changing the subject.

'Coyote and Derik will return to guard the ships,' Udian replied quickly. 'You and I are going into the lab to retrieve the samples.'

'Why her?' Coyote said immediately, who'd been helping himself to a shotgun.

'Yeah, why me?' Rebecca asked, looking alarmed. 'Not that I'm scared or anything...'

'You're best equipped for this,' Udian replied.

Derik growled. 'Whilst I have growing respect for the little lady, she's not exactly a commando. Better I go with you. I've done this before.'

Udian turned his attention to the lizard. 'Unless I'm much mistaken you don't have a personal shield generator. She does. She'll also be able to get in and out of the lab quicker than anyone else. The access is deliberately very restrictive.'

Rebecca's hand instinctively went to the small device she had strapped to her belt.

Coyote shook his head. 'The Thargoids are trying to hunt her down. We still don't know why. Better we stick together.'

'I'll ensure she is protected,' Udian rumbled.

'I feel so reassured,' Rebecca said. 'Don't worry about me. Makes sense to cover our escape route and no Thargoid is gonna take me alive.'

She hoisted her rifle. It looked far too big for her petite frame.

'Let's get this over with.'

The four combateers had retraced their steps back to the junction. When they arrived they paused. Udian stomped off in one direction, heading deeper into the *Catechism*.

'Watch your back,' Coyote advised. Rebecca nodded and headed after the hulking machine.

Coyote and Derik headed back towards the launch bay.

Rebecca's light footsteps counterpointed the hum of Udian's corridor-spanning frame as they made their way cautiously along.

'If they are still aboard how are we going to know?' Rebecca whispered.

'Assume they are and be prepared,' Udian replied, softly. 'We have the visual advantage. Thargoids have compound eyes, they're not as sensitive as ours. My own optics have infrared receptors. We'll know.'

Udian's ocular sensors turned and scanned behind them and then returned to face forwards once more.

'You've fought the bugs before,' Rebecca commented.

'For longer than you've been alive, little woman,' Udian replied dismissively. 'They have been a thorn in my side for many decades.'

'Did they do this to you?' Rebecca tapped the metal casing that formed the exterior of his body.

'Indirectly. A battle over Tibecia, 3146. A significant altercation in many ways.'

'Didn't one of the stations get boarded and destroyed?' Rebecca said, remembering the incident and how it had been reported on the Chronicle.

'Yes. A link in a long chain.'

'And you're still fighting them,' Rebecca said shrewdly.

Udian paused and looked at her. 'My family is owed a debt by these creatures. By destroying my cherished creations the Thargoids have made themselves my enemy. They have made me their Nemesis.'

'So all that stuff about sterilising planets in the war zones is true? You've got quite a rep.'

Udian regarded the woman closely, contemptuous of her relative youth and apparent naivety. He slowed to a stop.

'Little woman,' he said disparagingly, 'I have been personally responsible for the deaths of millions of their warriors. I've destroyed their abominable hatcheries, the birthing pods they infect attacked worlds with. I've watched as their larvae were extinguished in their billions in the righteous glare of detonation. My body has been slick with their eviscerated gore, I have waded knee deep in

their collective blood. I've seen the way they infect the charts, always taking what they deem is theirs without thought of consequence. They are vermin and I aim to eradicate them. I am a mass-murderer. I have committed atrocities and I intend to continue.'

Rebecca swallowed. 'I've killed a few people in my time. I'll be Elite one day.'

Udian chuckled. 'Elite? Shooting down your foes at range in a ship? That's just a game, little woman. A kill count and a *Right On, Commander?* You know nothing of death.'

'I've killed up close,' Rebecca said defensively.

'Did you enjoy it?'

Rebecca unconsciously rubbed her free hand against her clothes, her mind casting back to a furious face glaring at her; a hand wrenching her ankle; a knife in her hand. A sharp impact, contact with flesh, hot blood splashing up her outstretched arm, across her face.

Rot in hell!

An expression of surprise, dismay and fear as the light faded from the eyes... death she had dealt.

Udian straightened, satisfied with her subdued expression. 'That's the difference. You're a killer by necessity. I kill them because I enjoy it. They deserve death. Before this is over, you may share that view.'

Rebecca looked at him uncertainly. 'I doubt it.'

'We'll see. Keep moving,' Udian instructed, proceeding down the corridor again. 'Time is tight.'

Rebecca hurried to keep up. They reached a set of double doors which barred their way. Rebecca could see they were secured with retinal sensors and guarded by laser scanners. The doors themselves were blast-proofed. Typically the sort of strength you'd find on the outside of a space-faring vessel, rather than the inside. The doors were discoloured by obvious attempts to force an entry, the marks of incendiaries and lasers. Little real damage had been suffered though.

'You took your security seriously,' Rebecca acknowledged. 'No wonder they couldn't get in.'

'This laboratory is a facility within a facility,' Udian replied. 'Even if the outer station was destroyed, the laboratory is capable of functioning on its own. I ensured complete redundancy in its design.'

He moved forward. The laser scanners instantly detected his presence and flashed across his form.

‘Shulth, Udian Foraga.’

‘Identity confirmed,’ a disembodied female voice replied.

‘Additional security,’ Udian intoned. ‘Scan my companion and add her profile to the data-set. One-time access to the laboratory.’

The lasers flashed across Rebecca.

‘Subject: Human Female. Age: 39 standard years. Articulate identity for vocal confirmation.’

Rebecca looked at Udian. He inclined his torso slightly.

‘Rebecca Weston,’ she said, uncertainly.

‘Voice print confirmed. Access granted.’

The doors to the laboratory slid open with a powerful whirr.

Udian looked down at Rebecca.

‘Now, this is where you come in. The bio-samples are located in a sealed genetic hazard isolation core at the far end of the lab marked ‘Gen-X’. Access is rather restricted, so your stunted stature will serve us well.’

‘Tough being a ghoul in a jar, is it?’ she shot back.

Udian ignored her. ‘The samples are contained within sealed cryogenic lockers. You’ll be able to locate them by their code labels; 0608/2309. We need sixteen of them but bring some spares just in case. You need to extract them and place them in a portable coolant chamber.’

‘Where’s the chamber?’ Rebecca said, looking into the dimly lit lab.

‘There are several,’ Udian said. ‘You’ll find them next to the lockers.’

Rebecca hoisted her weapon. ‘And what are you going to be doing?’

‘I’ll guard the entrance,’ Udian said. The intimidating chain guns emerged again as parts of his carapace folded back. He hoisted the two incendiary launchers in two of his manipulators. ‘If the Thargoids are out there, this is the only way in.’

‘You really think there are some aboard?’

‘Yes. I really think there are some aboard. Activate your shield as a precaution. Now go. I’ll

inform the others.’

Rebecca did as she was told and moved swiftly into the lab. Udian stood in the entrance, weapons ready, facing back into the corridor, his infra-red vision continuing to scan for anything that moved.

The lab was huge. Rebecca could see a vast array of complex research machinery; gamma-ray microscopes, witch-space particulate confiners, high speed genetic re-sequencers. There were far more that she didn’t recognise. Clearly money was no object for Shulth Industries. Everything was lit by a dim sterile blue glow. The walls were fitted with compartment after compartment. Some were obviously sample containers with racks of small flasks and jars, others had frosted glass, their contents obscured.

In between her and the core were a series of desks and workstations. She negotiated her way around them and arrived at set of transparent panels with a number of bio-hazard labels. At her touch the panels slid aside with a faint hiss, allowing access down a narrow tube into the core of the lab. She crouched down and crawled through, pushing her rifle ahead of her, entering the core.

It was a simple curved room lined with lockers. There was only one way in or out, the way she had entered. Rebecca scanned the lockers, looking for the markers Udian had indicated.

She found the ‘Gen-X’ moniker half along the row and prodded the touch-sensitive controls after placing her rifle on the floor nearby. The locker door folded back on itself and a cloud of cold condensation drifted out.

‘Access granted, Rebecca Weston,’ the female voice said gently from the locker cabinet.

Inside were cubed pouches of neatly stacked dark green material about ten centimetres on a side. Rebecca peered at them inquisitively for a moment.

Doesn't look like much...

She grabbed a pair of gloves from the locker and located one of the cooling chambers, activating it. Instantly the interior was cooled and the chamber bobbed up on antigravity balancers. Rebecca carefully pulled a pouch out of the locker and placed it in the chamber, checking the numerical code label as she did so.

0608/2309. Easy enough...

She continued loading the samples. She counted twenty of them, carefully placing them in the cooling chamber.

At the entrance, Udian engaged his narrowband proximity transmitter.

‘Coyote, Derik?’

‘We’re here,’ the lizard’s voice came back. ‘All quiet. You?’

‘We’re into the lab. No interference so far. Will advise when we’re on our way back. If they’re going to strike – that will be the time.’

‘Copy that.’

Udian closed down the communication. His ocular sensors spun around one hundred and eighty degrees. He could see Rebecca had loaded the samples and was pushing the chamber back through the narrow tube from the isolation core. It was time.

Time to provision Garew’s Plan ‘B’.

‘Computer,’ he intoned. ‘Release locks on compartment fourteen.’

The female voice replied immediately. ‘Compartment fourteen contains a live specimen of species 9583. Please confirm.’

‘Confirmed,’ Udian said, emotionlessly. ‘Seal the lab doors.’

Rebecca emerged from the core and the transparent panels clicked into place behind her. Relieved at being able to stand up again, she took a moment to look around at the core behind her.

There were hundreds of different samples in there. They couldn’t have all been for Thargoid bio-weapons... I wonder what else he’s got in there... probably better not to think about it.

She turned her attention to the chamber. Despite the anti-gravity facility it was still difficult to move around; it was heavy and unwieldy. She placed her rifle on a nearby work-surface and proceeded to push the chamber towards the exit.

She heard a hiss. She turned to see one of the lab’s compartments across from her start unsealing itself. It looked like some kind of suspended animation device. The stench of ammonia reached her nose. Lights within the compartment flickered from the dim blue to a bright green. The door cracked open and more gas flooded out, covering the floor in a heavy rolling mist.

Something inside the compartment moved. Rebecca could make out a dim shadowy shape; skeletal, tall. Not human.

‘Frak!’

She grabbed the cooling chamber and began to pull it towards the lab entrance. She looked up just in time to see the external lab doors slide together with a resounding clang.

Udian activated the wall monitor and surveyed the interior of the lab. Much of the view was obscured by the cloud of evaporating ammonia but he could see enough for his purposes. The little woman had sprinted towards the lab doors, only to find them closed. She was now retreating back towards the rear of the lab, to where she'd stupidly left her rifle.

Oh dear. It appears a Thargoid has got loose in the laboratory. How unfortunate.

Rebecca had no idea why the lab doors had suddenly closed. She hesitated for a moment, wondering whether to make a dash for the intercom at the door or retreat back for her weapon which was lying on the work-surface near the entrance to the core. After a moment she decided to head back.

The ammonia mist began to lift, the shadow grew in definition, darkening and solidifying. Rebecca gasped in fear as she saw a dark green ovoid head emerged from the cloud. She just had time to recognise two short antennae and dimly glowing compound eyes before the creature launched itself towards her with inhuman speed.

She threw herself to one side as the creature came past, a blur of green body and outstretched limbs. She caught sight of razor-sharp serrated barbs on the backs of its arms and legs as it came past, twisting in the air, a claw attempting to impale her. It missed by centimetres.

Rebecca ran.

She jumped onto the work-surface, grabbed the assault rifle, trying to bring it to bear. She'd underestimated the slippery surface of the worktop, slipped and fell heavily in a heap on the other side. She looked up to see the creature's head appear on the other side of the worktop.

A chill ran through her as the Thargoid slowly rose up in front of her. It was almost motionless, its body slowly tensing, its first set of limbs adopting a formidable praying position as it leant across. Its head was immobile, the eyes vacant as it regarded her. The antennae were still, only the pair of mandibles twitched involuntarily. Rebecca's eyes took in the sharp claws, barbs and sheen of the dark green chitin that composed its exoskeleton. The dim light of the lab flickered across it menacingly.

What the Thargoid saw as it looked at her she didn't know but it paused for a brief moment. Rebecca swept the rifle around and fired.

The noise in the confined space was terrifyingly loud. Explosive gases vented from the casing as bullets flashed out of the muzzle. The recoil almost pulled the rifle out of her hands. She'd never fired such a brutal weapon before, she screamed in surprise and horror. Her aim was useless.

The Thargoid moved instinctively, quicker than Rebecca could see. The shots went wide, blasting small holes in the lab walls, showering them both in sparks. Next moment, the rifle was wrenched painfully from her hands and crushed in a vice-like grip. Then a Thargoid claw was jammed towards her face. She flinched but the blow didn't land.

The Thargoid emitted a strange clicking sound and tried again; swinging a second and third limb towards her, in a swift and surgical slicing action. Both were stopped just short of her.

My shield...

The Thargoid was clearly bemused, unable to understand how it couldn't reach her. It went wild with fury, raining a blizzard of blows in her direction. It achieved nothing but a reverse reaction, knocking itself back over the work-surface. Rebecca backed up quickly, running for the lab doors.

She punched the intercom.

'Udian, help! Open the frakkin' doors!'

There was no response. She turned to see the Thargoid recovering on the far side of the room. She looked down at her belt. She had no real idea how Zerz's shield generator worked or how long it would last under such conditions. It stood to reason it had a limited power supply. She'd never had cause to use it for prolonged periods of time.

The Thargoid stood up and began stalking towards her.

Rebecca's message came in. Jim scanned it briefly, before pocketing the comm-tab again. He had nothing to update her about either.

She's saying nothing. Guess that's all I deserve.

Jim emerged from his quarters, only to see the big lizard marching down the corridor. Jim managed to intercept him, catching his arm. The lizard ignored him and attempted to walk past down the narrow hexagonal corridor, pulling away.

'Hey. I need to talk to you,' Jim demanded.

The lizard kept walking. 'I'm busy.'

Jim turned and followed him, narrowly avoiding braining himself on an exposed power conduit. 'I checked out what you said, I get it now. I need to ask you something.'

Rus glared at him. 'No you don't. You're the Prof, you know everything.'

Jim held up his hands. 'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend.'

'Not very open to new data are you? Aren't you scientists supposed to be all objective, without colouring your conclusions with presuppositions based on a faulty premise?'

Jim blinked in surprise at the lizard's sudden loquaciousness.

Rus growled. 'Humans. All the same, you think because you were first with the opposable thumbs that makes you the masters of the universe.'

Jim took a breath. 'The Thargoids are only attacking Galcop registered vessels, aren't they?'

'Top of the class. Almost exclusively crewed by you simians.'

'Why?'

'Why?' Rus cackled. 'You figure it out, prof!'

'They perceive humans as a threat? They object to human political structures? They don't like mammals? Could be anything. They've been attacking us for centuries.'

'You, buddy,' Rus said. 'Not us. Thargoids have no beef with the rest of the galaxy. Now what would make humans the only species to be singled out for that special honour? Tell me that.'

Jim frowned. 'You're implying humanity is to blame for this?'

Rus rolled his eyes. 'Wow, you're pretty quick for a monkey.'

'But they're the aggressors!'

Rus regarded him for a moment. 'You sure? Humans are pretty good at picking fights with people in my experience.'

'All the historical information going back centuries indicates...'

'Which is written by whom?' Rus interrupted.

Jim stopped short. 'Well. The Galactic Co-operative principally but it's been edited by thousands of different individuals...'

'And you trust Galcop do you? Never been stitched up by them? Never been twisted around and bent out of shape? Government bond holder perhaps? Hmmm?'

Jim stopped, Rebecca's image coming into his head. The Q-Bomb, Raxxla...

Rus grinned. 'Just seen beyond the end of your useless little snub nose, eh?'

'Let's just say you've got my attention.'

'Listen, human. What you think you know about history was written by humans for humans. If you want to find out what really happened you need to go to someone else.'

'What did happen?'

'Don't look at me, I'm no histo-buff. I'm in this for the money. I don't care one way or the other as long as I'm kept in slugs and Evil Juice.'

'Then...'

'You need to get some independent data my friend. Something written by those who don't need to maintain the status quo.'

'You sound like you know the very place.'

'Ever heard of the Ordimean library?'

Jim shook his head.

'Hardly any humans have. Not on your official reading list so to speak. Gasazck will tell you, it's his planet. You'll find some alternative histories there. Behave yourself and you might get an audience with the great bird himself. He'll set you straight...'

Udian watched the events unfold with amused detachment. The woman was singularly stupid. She'd missed the obvious solution and was now on the wrong side of the lab. The portable shield generator was confounding the Thargoid for the time being but clearly it couldn't do so for ever. Having lost her weapon the woman had simply panicked and run for the doors, hoping for rescue. Useless. He'd have to intervene to ensure the desired outcome.

He flicked on the intercom.

'Rebecca!'

On the monitor, he saw her face turn in surprise and relief.

'Udian! Open the damn doors!'

'I can't,' he lied calmly. 'They're jammed. The Thargoids have injected some kind of modular

virus. I'm working on it. Just kill it.'

'How?'' she yelled back, her face etched with fear. Udian could see the Thargoid advancing towards her again.

'The packs, woman! Use one of the bio-weapons...'

Rebecca whirled. The Thargoid was between her and the anti-grav chamber.

Frak! Stupid girl! Why didn't I think of that?

The Thargoid came on, marching on its hind legs, more circumspect now. It cautiously approached her, still making its horrendous clicking noise. She backed away towards the side, hoping to circle around it. The Thargoid clearly sensed she was trying to outmanoeuvre it and moved to cut her off.

That's not going to work.

Rebecca looked around her, her eyes casting around for anything she could use as a weapon. There was nothing but the simple tools and utensils on the work-surfaces. Styluses, pads, note takers. She grabbed them all and began hurling them at the Thargoid. They bounced off its hard exterior and it swatted them aside. It shook its head and advanced on her.

'Come on you stinking insect! Come get me!' she yelled, grabbing more equipment and throwing it at the enraged creature.

The Thargoid charged at her, its limbs swinging, outstretched. Again, Rebecca underestimated the speed it could move at and was knocked to the floor as it cannoned into her, bouncing off her shield and being thrown against the far wall.

She got to her knees and scuttled away as fast as she could. The Thargoid sprang after her. Rebecca abruptly dived under one of the work-surfaces, a space too small for the Thargoid to follow her. Confounded, it retreated and proceeded to climb over to attack her from the other side. It was unable to get to her and paced around the outside, scratching at the surface impotently. It was trying to work out how to get in at her, forcing its claws into the confined space, ripping and bashing with fearsome strength. It was only a matter of time before it managed to get hold of her.

In that brief moment of respite Rebecca noticed an orange glow around her. Looking around she could see it emanated from her belt. The small shield generator had illuminated a small indicator light marked 'Power'.

Oh no...

She looked around her, hunting for anything she could use as a weapon. There was nothing to hand. She was going to have to get to the chamber somehow.

A Thargoid limb punched through the side of the work surface, catching in the panel gap. Rebecca saw the creature had got itself stuck as a result. She rolled out of the other side. The Thargoid looked up and tried to yank its limb back out, crashing and banging against the metallic panel in fury.

Rebecca backed up quickly, managing to get to the chamber. She flipped it open and grabbed one of the bio-packs from inside. It was freezing cold, feeling slightly squishy in her hand.

Next moment she found herself flying through the air. The Thargoid had arrived behind her, anchored itself again the wall and dealt her a fierce backhanded swipe. Braced, the Thargoid hadn't received the impact. Rebecca's shield prevented the blow from harming her but transferred the momentum to her, throwing her across the room.

She landed on her back, the bio-pack still clutched in her hand.

The Thargoid stomped towards her. Before she could move out of the way its hind leg came down on her. For a moment her shield held and then it dissipated. The Thargoid's foot came down on her chest, knocking the breath out of her and pinning her to the floor. Its claws dug through her blouse, shredding the thin material before cutting into her skin. She cried out in pain.

The Thargoid bent closer, its mandibles quivering with anticipation and glee, pulling back a forelimb for a slicing strike across her neck. Rebecca tried to draw breath. She brought her own arm up, bashing the bio-pack against the Thargoid's leg.

The bio-pack stayed firm, unbroken. The Thargoid paused, emitting a strange sound, a mixture of clicks and groans. Its antennae vibrated rapidly, almost as if it was communicating with something.

Rebecca hit it again, still the bio-pack refused to break. The Thargoid shifted position, dramatically increasing the pressure on her. She cried out involuntarily, feeling one rib crack and then another. She almost dropped the bio-pack as a burning pain suffused her chest.

'RAAGAAZZZAA...' the Thargoid hissed, in apparent surprise.

The Thargoid suddenly backed off, releasing the pressure on her. Rebecca immediately brought her hand up again with the last of her strength, raking the bio-pack against the grain of the serrated edge of the Thargoid's leg. The bio-pack popped, splashing the leg with chilling green goo. Some of it splashed across her hand. It was ice-cold to the touch.

Harsh acrid smoke instantly began billowing from the Thargoid's leg. The Thargoid howled and stepped back, allowing Rebecca to breathe again.

She rolled aside, looking back as the Thargoid collapsed, its leg already vaporised. The goo was rapidly disintegrating its body. It thrashed around in agony as it was eaten alive, emitting a horrid high-pitched keening wail. Rebecca caught its stare as it looked at her in apoplexy. She quickly looked at the splash of goo on her hand. As she watched it bubbled, seeped into her skin and disappeared.

It's gone!

'RAAGAAZZZAAAA!' The Thargoid screeched, writhing in agony, interrupting her thoughts.

Abruptly it shifted again, aiming a blow at her face. Rebecca flinched to one side and then screamed as fresh pain burnt into her. The Thargoid's front claw had impaled her, just below her right collar-bone, pinning her to the wall.

She desperately tried to pull away as the goo made short work of the rest of the creature. Bracing herself, she yanked the claw out of her shoulder with a sharp cry and managed to kick the remnants away in horror.

Within seconds it dissolved into vapour, leaving nothing but an acrid stench.

Rebecca collapsed on her side, gasping for breath, her heart hammering. Pain was burning through her chest where the Thargoid had stood on her, blood flowing from the wound in her shoulder. She tried to get to her feet but tears came to her eyes as the shock, fear and pain overwhelmed her. Her sobs were short lived; a green mist obscured her vision and she passed out, lying prone on the floor.

Chapter Seven

The doors to the lab rolled back immediately and Udian strode purposefully into the room, surveying the damage within. He ignored the unconscious woman on the floor and examined the anti-grav chamber. Nineteen of the bio-packs remained. That would be sufficient. He sealed the chamber and secured it behind him, only then turning his attention to Rebecca.

A quick scan with his inbuilt medical sensors indicated the woman had not suffered excessive injury. It also showed him a number of other positive readings from her bio-scan.

Excellent. Just as Garew requested...

With another manipulator he hoisted Rebecca's body aboard his carapace and proceeded out of the lab, activating his narrow-band transmitter.

'Derik?'

'Here. What's taking so long?' the lizard's voice snapped back

'Complications. There was a Thargoid in the lab. Rebecca's down. We're on our way back.'

'Frak! We're coming down...'

'No. Stay where you are. They'll want to cut us off from the ships. I'm moving now. Be prepared.'

Coyote and Derik exchanged a grim look. Both of them adopted a ready stance, standing tensely in the hangar bay, weapons drawn, both continuing to scan the various doors, portals, hatchways and access grilles that opened into the bay.

'See anything?' Derik said, under his breath.

'Nothing...' Coyote replied, equally quietly.

'You will tell me if you do see something?' Derik fired back.

'You'll be the first to know, mi amigo,' Coyote returned.

Both of them heard the sounds of weapons fire at the same time. It was coming from the main airlock that led inside the *Catechism*, the direction from which they expected Rebecca and Udian to arrive.

Udian had almost made it to the main airlock when he caught sight of infra-red heat signatures in the dim corridor ahead of him. He could distinguish several creatures, they were unmistakably Thargoids. He could hear their excited chittering as they sensed his approach.

His external sensors detected the faint electromagnetic signature of scanning beams.

One of the Thargoids stepped forward, a limb outstretched. A short yelp of fear and surprise from behind him told him that Rebecca had regained consciousness.

‘Can you function?’ he inquired, lowering her to the floor.

She managed to stay on her feet, steadying herself against the wall with her good arm, gasping for breath and cradling her chest with the other. Her right arm felt as if it was on fire, the pain was intense.

‘Not sure...’ she managed, weakly.

‘OOODDDEEEAANN SHHHUUULTH, NO KIILLLL EYE...’ the Thargoid’s voice was deep, yet coarse, rough and haunting. ‘SHEEE ISSS RAAGAAZZZAAA...’

Rebecca looked up in astonishment, squinting into the gloom at the Thargoid.

‘What...?’ she rasped, stepping out from behind Udian.

‘Stay behind me!’ Udian roared.

They really do want her! Why?

‘No wait...!’ Rebecca called.

The Thargoid took another step forward on seeing her. ‘RAAGAAZZZAA...’

Udian didn’t hesitate. The chain guns atop his carapace burst forth upon his mental command, shredding his interlocutor into oblivion. Thargoid warriors sprinted towards him and were cut down mercilessly, their bodies obliterated in the hail of bullets, their strangled screams drowned out by the fierce droning roar of the chain guns. The flicker of the muzzle flashes lit up the corridor like a strobe light; a tangled mass of limbs, bodies and heads in a moving maelstrom of flash-frozen frames and terrifying noise.

Warning! Ammunition 25% depleted.

Udian advanced, the Thargoids continuing their suicidal attack. One got close enough to take a swipe at him, a claw scratching his carapace. Rebecca desperately huddled behind his massive

body, trying to wrap her good arm around her head to shield her ears from the overwhelming hammering violence. Spent shells showered around her like hot heavy rain.

Warning! Ammunition 50% depleted.

More Thargoids crowded the corridor ahead, trampling forward over the broken bodies of their companions, desperate to bring down the mechanical horror that advanced upon them. Once again they were cut down, ripped into pieces by the devastating firepower that poured down mercilessly on them.

Warning! Ammunition 75% depleted.

Udian stepped through the mangled remains of the first Thargoid warriors, the chain guns continuing to blaze away in the darkness. Uncounted Thargoids fell but still more continued to replace them, swarming in from either side. They were trying to block his route to the airlock by sheer force of numbers.

Warning! Ammunition depleted!

The roar of the chain guns ended abruptly. The spinning muzzles slowing and clicking to a halt. Udian hoisted the incendiary launchers in his forward manipulators as the Thargoids resumed their charge.

Udian triggered the launchers without a pause. Twin charges shot forth, exploding a scarce twenty metres in front of him. Rebecca howled in pain as the deafening explosion blasted back down the corridor and blew her off her feet to lie stunned on the floor. Smoke billowed past. She heard ringing in her ears before she passed out again.

The corridor was abruptly quiet. Udian waited as the clouds of heat slowly dissipated and his infra-red sensors became useful again. The route to the airlock door was clear. He stepped forward through the torched wreckage of the insectoid bodies...

Wait...

Bodies moved ahead of him.

Still more?

His receptors noticed a handful of heat signatures, rapidly joined by more. He switched back to his natural light sensors. The remaining Thargoids grouped together and regarded him for a moment before slowly advancing towards him through the smoke, the only sound the clicking of their mandibles in unison. There were still dozens of them between him and the airlock into the

hangar. They raised their front limbs in anticipation of the coming kill.

Udian clicked on the narrow-band comms.

‘Gentlemen, I regret to inform you I may have underestimated the numerical superiority of my opponents. I suggest you evacuate while you still can.’

The Thargoids leapt.

It had taken Jim half an hour to persuade the strange bird-like creature to even speak to him. Apparently the bird been most offended by Jim’s less than enthusiastic reaction to his soup. Jim hadn’t realised that Gasazck was the cook aboard the *Dubious Profit*. He’d eventually managed to corral D’Vlin into helping him. The necessary formal apology had taken another half an hour; a ridiculous series of bows, turns and gestures guided by an insect who didn’t have the faintest appreciation of the nuances of human speech for the benefit of a bird who didn’t appear to speak the language at all.

Jim had eventually managed to convey that he was interested in the Ordimean library, whereupon Gasazck became much more animated and friendly.

‘You want to go Ordima?’ Hesperus growled. ‘It’s not really on our itinerary. A long way off in point of fact. We’d have to re-plot our course, take on extra fuel, not to mention the dangerous systems we’d have to traverse.’

Jim nodded patiently. Ordima was virtually on the same route to Ermaso. In fact, only a slight variation from the original course was required. Clearly the unscrupulous feline was hedging for more cash. Jim really didn’t care.

‘I appreciate the difficulty,’ Jim said, playing along. ‘Quite unreasonable of me. Nevertheless...’

The grey-furred feline regarded him with a huff. ‘Another five thousand credits.’

‘I can offer you two.’

‘Four.’

‘Three’.

‘Done. Why do you want to go there anyway? It’s a bit of dump. Low tech level and more of...’ Hesperus began whispering under his breath and nodded towards Gasazck. ‘...his type. Utterly

bonkers, the lot of them. Mark my words.'

'I need to check something out,' Jim acknowledged.

I hope I'm not being led up a fake witch-space tunnel though!

'Screw you Udian! We're coming!' Derik snapped back into the intercom. There was nothing but static by return. Coyote and he raced across the bay to the airlock door.

'On three...' Coyote said as Derik readied his weapon.

'Just open the damn door!' Derik snapped. Coyote hit the opening circuit and the airlock door slid back with a high-speed whoosh.

For a moment both of the combateers stared in dismay. Immediately in front of them was a phalanx of huge insectoid warriors...

...with their backs turned!

'Surprise!' Derik yelled, before letting loose indiscriminately with his twin-bore rifle. The rearmost Thargoids turned just as they were cut down. He fired again, killing a couple of Thargoids and wounding others. The exploding shells were particularly effective, shredding the Thargoids instantly and splashing their innards up and into the corridor behind.

Coyote had stepped back as the door snapped open, taking a moment to assess the situation before choosing his target. At least thirty of the creatures, stalking into the corridor, backs turned.

Aim for the thorax, not the head...

He fired, scoring precision hits, reloading and moving to the next target in a formulaic methodical manner. Each shot brought down a Thargoid.

The Thargoids turned, the unexpected assault catching them off-guard. But the element of surprise didn't last long. The Thargoids flooded back into the bay in an angry swarm.

Coyote backed up quickly, continuing to fire, still bringing down a Thargoid with every shot but there always seemed to be another to take its place. One got close enough to swipe at him with an outstretched claw. He parried the blow with his shotgun, impressed and dismayed at the creature's strength. He managed to push the Thargoid aside and shot it before the next one came at him. A vicious-looking limb swung at him. He dodged but pain in his side told him he hadn't got away with the move completely.

Reload...

Derik had surrounded himself with the twitching corpses of tens of the warriors but had already run out of ammunition. He turned to using his twin-bore rifle as a cudgel, his draconoid strength overpowering the Thargoids. He was alternately braining and decapitating them as they came at him with huge powerful sweeps of his arms but suffering cuts and slashes from their outstretched claws and barbs. He too was forced to back up as the Thargoids pushed on against them.

More shots rang out. More Thargoids fell.

Coyote and Derik found themselves back to back, a ring of Thargoids slowly encircling them. Coyote fired, taking one of them down and then his shotgun clicked on to an empty chamber.

‘Frak...’ he dropped the shotgun and pulled out his own holstered weapon.

Six shots isn't going to make enough difference...

Derik had likewise pulled out his bulky antique plasma weapon.

‘If you’ve got one of those last speeches ready...’ Derik said, looking around at the slaving insects, baring his teeth. ‘Now’s the time.’

‘Been an honour serving with you and all that...’ Coyote replied. They circled around each other, they were surrounded, there was no away out.

‘Frakkin’ hell!’ Derik growled. ‘Can’t you do better than that? Dying on a cliché, marvellous!’

‘Do I look like an edible poet to you?’ Coyote said, looking and failing to see a way out.

‘Come get some, bugs!’ Derik roared, brandishing his Mk4.

The Thargoids raised their front limbs and closed on them. Derik and Coyote braced themselves. Coyote’s gun fired twice before it was dashed away. The sound of the plasma gun discharging echoed off the walls of the bay. In the turmoil of slashing claws, flailing arms and fierce blows they both went down.

Hesperus led Jim back up to the bridge.

‘You sure about this?’

‘No but let’s do it anyway,’ Jim replied.

‘Your choice.’ The big cat shrugged, climbing up towards the cockpit. ‘We’ll make the course

change immediately. Stepan! Scrub the course, we're going to Ordima, not Ermaso.'

'No problem boss,' came the enthusiastic response from the cockpit of the *Dubious Profit*.

'Ordima is safer and much less hassle to get to and as a bonus we won't use as much fuel!'

Hesperus hesitated at the entrance of the cockpit and then sheepishly looked back at Jim. Jim contented himself with a raised eyebrow. Hesperus turned back to the cockpit.

'Stepan?'

'Yes, boss?'

'Shut the frak up!'

Coyote saw the nearest Thargoid about to impale him with an outstretched limb when it was abruptly ripped from its socket by sweeping metallic arm. The Thargoid turned in bewilderment and surprise which was sharply cut off when its face was shattered by a further blow. Coyote found himself wrenched to his feet by the arm, lifted clean out of the battle and thrown across the bay. He landed heavily but clear of the Thargoids.

'Udian!'

Derik emerged from the remaining warriors, oozing blood from a dozen cuts, still defiantly holding his twin-bore rifle and the Mk4. The twin-bore looked decidedly second-hand, bent and dented. He looked just as surprised to see Udian. He crushed two Thargoid's heads together as he came forward.

The metallic creature's shell was battered, twisted and dented in many places. Some of its manipulators had been wrenched clear off, one of the three struts that served as legs was buckled and was being dragged along, with some kind of hydraulic fluid leaking from an actuator. The sliding cover that shielded the tank in which the remains of Udian's body resided had been ripped clear and the tank inside had a fine splintering of cracks across it.

Coyote rolled and grabbed his pistol, levelling it at a Thargoid threatening to impale Derik from behind. Two more shots blew it to smithereens. Derik looked around in surprise and winked his thanks.

Nothing stopped Udian, he waded through the remaining Thargoids, stamping, crushing, smashing and destroying in a whirling tornado of dimly gleaming metallic death.

The last Thargoid made a furious dash at Udian but it was caught in the merciless

manipulators. Udian regarded it callously, slowly throttling it.

‘Die knowing who did this to you,’ he growled. The Thargoid spat and the acid saliva smoked against Udian’s metal carapace.

Udian closed his metal fist and the Thargoid jerked involuntarily before succumbing. He dropped the remains unceremoniously to the floor.

He turned to regard Derik and Coyote.

‘I thought I told you both to evacuate. I had the situation under control.’

Derik looked around at the carnage surrounding them. ‘I’d hate to see what happens when things get out of hand.’

‘You must retrieve the bio-packs,’ Udian instructed them. ‘We must load them aboard the Caducei and depart immediately. There may still be Thargoids aboard. Seal the airlock!’

‘Where’s Rebecca?’ Coyote demanded, ignoring him.

Udian turned slightly and paused. ‘What’s left of her is back in the corridor. The bio packs are our immediate priority...’

‘Screw you!’ Coyote said with a glare, cutting across him, struggling to his feet and limping towards the airlock door.

Derik spat blood and wiped his nose, looking at the gore-covered machine.

‘You’re a real shit sometimes, you know that?’ Derik trudged heavily after Coyote. Udian straightened and waited until they had both moved out of earshot.

‘You have no conception,’ Udian chuckled to himself.

The Python landed in the twilight zone of Ordima. It was a curious planet, orbiting very close to its parent star, a dim and fiery red dwarf. The planet was tidally locked, always presenting the same side towards the sun. Much of the planet was a burning desert and the opposite side was a perpetual frozen wasteland.

The red dwarf hung low on the horizon, casting a vague, red warmth across the surface as the Python touched down. Long shadows reached up, seeming to suck the Python unwillingly onto the surface. The hull of the *Dubious Profit* gleamed ruddily in the gloom on the landing pad. Only a handful of other ships were present and most looked pretty beaten up and rundown. Ordima was a

long way off the beaten track.

‘We’ll wait twenty-four hours,’ Hesperus had informed him. ‘If you still want to get to Ermaso, you’d better be back by then.’

Gasazck accompanied Jim down the gangplank and onto the surface. Jim immediately noticed the thin air and low gravity. Perfect for the bird-like creatures, not so great for humans. He caught his breath.

‘Erqk!’ Gasazck instructed generically. Jim held up his hands to indicate he didn’t understand. Gasazck flapped his wings and a feather dropped to the floor.

‘Erqk!’

Jim picked up the feather and looked at it, shining iridescently in the warm glow of the dying sun.

Gasazck indicated a curious structure about half a kilometre away. It had the look of a temple, with a tall spire atop a dome, jutting heavenwards. At the top was a landing stage, clearly designed for those who could fly up to it. Jim could see a number of the bird-like creatures flying to and from the rest of the small city that was the main space port on Ordima.

‘How am I supposed to get up there?’ Jim demanded.

Next moment he was jerked off his feet and swung roughly up into the air. For a moment he struggled in complete bewilderment; watching, terrified, as the ground fell away from him with dizzying speed. Two tough talons had him grasped firmly around the shoulders and the thudding beat of outstretched wings wafted through the air around him. He looked up to see that Gasazck had picked him up and was dragging him through the air towards the spire.

Below him the city was revealed. It was an impossibly thin structure, the low gravity allowing the construction of what most Galcop citizens would consider ridiculously flimsy and precarious buildings. Many took the form of nests or rooms built in artificial trees, suspended far above the ground. There were no roads and no obvious transport system. Everyone was flying between the various residences, ships and offices. Jim caught sight of a few other humanoids being carried by willing birds but there were also a number floating around in various kinds of anti-gravity harness.

The spire was close now. Gasazck dropped a wing and they side-slipped down towards it, banking around it to lose speed. As they dropped, Gasazck back-flapped his wings and expertly brought them to a halt just above the jutting platform. The talons unclenched and a moment later the

bird was perched beside him.

‘Erqk.’

‘Erqk indeed!’

Jim nodded in relief. Gasazck gestured with his wing towards the spire. It was more a sort of fabric canopy with six regularly placed arched entrances. Inside this was a sweeping spiral staircase that gently led down into the interior of the building. A couple of other birds were looking at him suspiciously. There were no other humans present. Jim looked around but there were no signs. Nothing advertised a library or indicated what the building was for. Clearly you already had to know it was here.

Jim indicated the stairway. Gasazck nodded.

‘Thanks for the lift,’ he said.

‘My pleasure,’ Gasazck replied with a rich and melodious voice. ‘Watch your manners and don’t forget your feather.’

Gasazck lifted off with a flap of his wings and disappeared over the edge of the platform, heading back towards the landing pads. Jim stared after him in amazement.

‘Well, I’ll be...’

Jim turned his attention back to the canopy and walked under it. The spiral staircase was widely spaced and led gently down into the gloom. The walls were lit by faint red beacons. The two other birds regarded him warily, unblinking but made no move to prevent his entrance. Jim began walking down the stairs.

It seemed to take an age to reach the bottom. Jim had lost count of how many times he’d rotated around. By a rough calculation he’d figured out that he’d gone below ground level after about five minutes of walking.

What is the point of having the building below ground with the entrance half-way up to the clouds? Guess it makes sense to the birds...

As he descended the stairs began to widen and straighten out. The narrow confines of the stairway opened out into a hall. It was still dimly lit, with illumination that mimicked the glow of the red dwarf outside. The floor and the walls seemed to have been carved directly out of the planet’s rock but every available space was hung with murals, tapestries and paintings, mostly of non-humanoid creatures. Jim didn’t recognise any of them.

Ahead was a barred gate, reaching from the floor to the ceiling. It stretched the width of the hall. With a shock Jim realised it was made of gold; closely placed parallel bars of glinting yellow metal. It must have been worth a fortune. In front of the gate two more birds stood, aloof and unmoving. Jim cautiously approached.

As one, both birds extended their wings and raised a talon at him. Jim could see they were metal tipped, sharpened with serrated edges. There was no mistaking the usage they could be put to if desired.

‘State your business human.’

‘I wish to visit the library,’ Jim replied, looking from one to the other.

The two birds briefly chattered to each other.

‘For what reason?’

‘I need to research something and I believe the answer may be here.’

More tweeting and chattering.

‘And do you have a pass?’

‘A pass?’ Jim replied, confused.

‘You must be sponsored by a local,’ the first bird said, tapping its talon on the floor impatiently.

‘Gasazck said...’ Jim began and then remembered the feather. He held it up. ‘Will this do?’

The two birds exchanged a look of surprise. ‘It will serve.’ Jim wondered if he detected a hint of disparagement. ‘Wait here.’

The bird ventured inside the library. Jim briefly caught sight of endless corridors of shelves stacked with boxes, folders and binders before the gate closed again.

Surely not actual books...

Minutes passed. Jim paced around at the gate, waiting impatiently. The remaining guard ignored him, standing motionless.

This had better be worth it...

The gate clicked open and the guard returned; was that a look of astonishment on its face?

‘You may proceed,’ the bird said slowly and severely. ‘Be aware that theft, defacement,

abridging and excessive noise is immediately punishable by death.’

Jim stopped and stared at the bird. ‘Punishable by death?’

‘I know. Far too lenient,’ the bird muttered, shaking its head. ‘Standards have slipped in recent years. We used to be able to disembowel offenders while they were still alive. Some viewed this as unattractive for tourists. Ridiculous.’

Jim blinked in surprise.

‘The head librarian will see you momentarily. Patience is a virtue.’

Jim was ushered through the gate and then stood on the inside. The hall widened out even further, expanding into a cavern. It was filled with an ungainly looking collection of shelves, bookcases and crates suspended by ropes and unsteady looking ladders. Jim looked up and gasped. The structures continued up out of sight and to his right and left. Clearly you had to have wings to access it. Each shelf was festooned with books, folders, bundles of paper tied up with string, boxes upon boxes, all labelled in a haphazard fashion. There must have been millions of documents.

All on paper? Original copies? Surely not...

Jim looked about for a core-comm screen, hoping to find some kind of index or catalogue but there was nothing in evidence at all. Ahead there was a single tatty old desk that bore the marks of talons, its surface scratched and dented. Jim walked forward.

The desk held a number of stacked books. Jim peered at one. It appeared to be the genuine article. He touched it, feeling the rough leather bound exterior of the enormous volume. It had to be a quarter of a metre square, with hundreds of sheets of material inside, probably holding hundreds of thousands of words.

So inefficient though... how can you possibly find anything? You can't search...

There was a thump from behind him. Jim turned and stepped back in surprise. A huge avian had landed behind him. It towered over him, being at least seven feet tall. It was a glossy black, its feathers dimly shining in the faint red light. Its head was slightly lowered as both its dark yellow eyes regarded him, blinking rapidly.

‘I...’ Jim began.

Abruptly the bird extended its wings. Jim was knocked back partly in surprise and partly by the gust of wind that resulted.

‘Do not interrupt the solace of the library!’ The bird said severely. Its voice was deep and

sonorous but not loud. 'Observe first, study and only then, act.'

'Who are you?'

The bird looked up in surprise.

'I am the nest maintainer, the guardian of all that shines, the master of the inquirers of wisdom and the servant of all who seek knowledge.'

'Good,' Jim replied. 'I am seeking knowledge. Where do we start? I don't have much time.'

'Time is a fire in which we all burn,' the bird replied, nodding sagely.

'I'm looking for a translation,' Jim continued. 'I can offer...'

'Beware of Greeks bearing gifts...' The bird interrupted obscurely, looking slightly aggrieved.

'What?' Jim said, bewildered.

'We do not require gifts,' the bird said, ruffling its feathers and looking aside. 'One would hope to converse with an enlightened individual at some point in one's career... alas...'

'I can pay. I can transfer credits...'

The wings extended violently again and the bird took a step forward aggressively. 'Do not sully me with your fiat currency! We deal with the real, not the ephemeral. Here you will find the reality of existence, not the token highlights.' The bird regarded him with disgust. 'It is not to be reduced to the squalor of purchase.'

'Then...'

'Why do you seek this knowledge?' The bird's stare was beady, icy, intense. 'Consider your answer carefully.'

Jim paused. 'People are in danger. I believe the translation holds a vital clue to their safety.'

The bird retreated slightly, appearing to relax.

'Then perhaps we can help you after all. Your name, human?'

'Jim. Jim McKenna.'

'A horrendous shortening,' the bird shook its head. 'You should not be ashamed of your real name. James of the clan Kenna.'

Jim ignored the correction. 'How may I be permitted to refer to you?'

The bird look pleased. 'So you do have a modicum of manners after all.' The wings folded

away neatly with a swift ruffle. ‘As a human you would be incapable of pronouncing my real name and you are clearly ill-equipped to understand its etymology...’

‘Of course,’ Jim replied obsequiously.

The bird preened for a moment. ‘The nearest pleasing sound as rendered in your speech will make little sense to you but you may call me Daaaddeeehooggee. That will serve for now.’

Jim blinked in surprise.

Daddyhoggy? What kind of a name is that?

Coyote found Rebecca’s crumpled form about a third of the way down the corridor. She was covered in soot, ash and debris from the battle, her clothing was singed and blackened. Around her lay the shattered remains of dozens of Thargoids. The stench of the entrails almost made Coyote gag.

‘Frak.’

‘How is she?’ Derik inquired, coming up behind him.

Rebecca didn’t look in a good way. Coyote could see a large bloodstain from the area of her shoulder, and more streaks of blood across her chest. Her breathing was faint and raspy. Her right arm was twisted at an unnatural angle.

‘Still alive,’ Coyote muttered, gently pushing aside her blouse to check the wounds. ‘We shouldn’t have allowed her to go with that metal piece of mierda...’

‘I doubt you could have stopped her,’ Derik replied with a growl. ‘Let’s get her patched up and then find out what the frak is going on. Here, let me. Medi-comp on her ship’s probably the best bet.’

The big lizard effortlessly picked up Rebecca’s petite form with surprising gentleness, she looked like a child in his big muscular arms. Coyote looked up and saw the bio-chamber, still floating against the walls of the corridor. It was likewise blackened but appeared otherwise undamaged.

‘Guess that’s why we came here,’ he said, grabbing hold of it and lugging it behind him.

Derik stomped back up the corridor, kicking aside the Thargoid detritus.

‘Udian said there was a Thargoid in the lab,’ Coyote mused, following him. ‘How did it get in there?’

‘I don’t know,’ Derik growled. ‘But we’ll get some answers, even if I have to prise it out of that tin can with a hull welder.’

As they returned to the bay, Udian locked and sealed the airlock behind them, securing the docking area from the rest of the *Catechism*. Derik placed Rebecca’s unconscious body into the automated care facilities aboard the *Spectre*. It immediately activated and set to work. Coyote and Derik noted the diagnosis with dismay. As well as several lacerations and one deep stab-wound, Rebecca had two broken ribs, a fractured collarbone and a dislocated shoulder. By sheer luck she’d managed to avoid damage to any major arteries or a punctured lung, otherwise she might have already bled to death or suffocated.

It was all within the medi-comp’s ability to repair. Satisfied she was being cared for and after patching up their own wounds, the pair moved back down to the cargo bay where Udian was also undergoing ‘repairs’.

The big machine-creature was immobile, a series of autonomous repair-bots working on his damaged third strut-leg. Coyote and Derik could see that the plexi-glass tank in which the remains of his body resided had already been repaired. As they entered the bots finished the task of replacing the sliding metallic cover that protected his innards. It slid smoothly into place, obscuring the unearthly contents of the tank.

Udian’s ocular receptors flipped up and regarded them.

‘Am I to presume you’ve attended to our frail companion’s immediate needs?’ his deep voice intoned.

‘She’s going to make it...’ Coyote acknowledged.

‘No thanks to you,’ Derik growled.

Udian twisted slightly, in order to regard the lizard.

‘No thanks to me?’ he echoed. ‘I think you’ll find I saved her life on no less than three occasions within the last twenty minutes. And both of yours as well. Of course, effusive gratitude is unnecessary...’

‘Why was the Thargoid in the lab?’ Coyote demanded, ignoring Udian’s comments.

‘What purpose it had in mind, I cannot tell,’ Udian replied, easily. ‘Thargoid warriors are not known for their loquaciousness. There was no opportunity to interrogate it before the woman terminated it.’

Derik looked at Coyote and then strode forward. ‘Did you know it was in there before you went in?’

Udian looked down at the lizard. ‘There was always a danger the lab could have been breached. The sensors indicated it had not. I deemed it reasonable to proceed. I was wrong.’

‘What else are you going to be wrong about?’ Derik yelled.

‘I think it’s rather unreasonable of you to expect me to predict all dangers in advance,’ Udian replied calmly. ‘That would require a degree of clairvoyance somewhat beyond my capabilities...’

‘Listen, you piece of metal trash!’ Derik growled, punching the metal carapace impotently. The impact resulted in nothing but a dull thud echoing through the cargo bay. ‘I think you knew there was a ‘goid in there and I think you sent her in there in full knowledge of that fact!’

Udian straightened slightly.

‘And what would my motivation be for deliberately endangering one of our team for no reason?’

Coyote’s eyes narrowed and he tilted his head to one side as he regarded the metal machine.

‘I don’t know!’ Derik snapped, infuriated, futilely gesturing at Udian. ‘You tell me!’

‘I cannot,’ Udian replied. ‘Because there is no such reason. I was not aware of the Thargoid until it was too late. I thought the lab was safe enough.’

‘Safe enough!’ Derik’s teeth gleamed. ‘She almost got ripped apart by that...’

‘She had the advantage of her diminutive size and her shield generator, both of which served her well,’ Udian rattled off quickly. ‘I prevented the Thargoids from killing her. She survived their subsequent interception. We have the bio-packs. The mission remains viable. We can still proceed.’

Derik fumed on the spot for a moment. ‘This stinks, Udian. This stinks worse than Tibecia. I haven’t forgotten!’

He stomped out angrily, shaking his head. Udian watched him go without reacting.

Coyote raised his head once Derik had exited, waiting until the lizard was out of earshot.

‘You’re quite the hero...’ he said. Udian looked across at him, without responding.

‘...You rescue Rebecca, fight your way through a horde of Thargoid warriors and then hand our asses back to us too. Not bad for a day’s work.’

‘We’re supposed to be acting as a team,’ Udian replied, more cautiously. ‘This is the

behaviour expected, as I understand it, from Derik and the woman. Loyalty, I believe it is called. I did what was necessary.'

'You don't seem fond of Rebecca,' Coyote observed, noting Udian's derogatory tone.

'I am not fond of her at all,' Udian replied. 'So far she has been more of a liability than an asset on this mission. Her attitude is cavalier and erratic, her skills of dubious value. Retrieving the bio-packs has been the first useful contribution she has made and even that required my intervention.'

'She rescued me,' Coyote countered.

'Indeed. Perhaps you should pay more attention to ship maintenance in the future.'

'There was nothing wrong with my ship...' Coyote fired back, before realising he was being distracted from his course of questioning.

'I beg to differ,' Udian replied smugly.

Damn, he can dissemble with the best...

Coyote smiled wryly. 'One observation, if I may.'

Udian recoiled slightly. 'As you wish.'

'You mentioned Thargoids always attack on sight...' Coyote mused.

'I did.'

'Interesting that Rebecca managed to get all the way into the lab, retrieve the samples and start heading back before the Thargoid attacked. Why was that, do you think?'

The big machine paused briefly before answering. Coyote raised his head, moving his eyes out of the shadow of his sombrero.

'Yes,' Udian replied, his intonation flat and unrevealing. 'That is interesting. I suggest you ask her.'

Jim glared at the huge bird in frustration. He'd given the two short phrases Rebecca had recorded from the Thargoids to the tall avian, hoping to quickly determine what they meant. Daddyhoggy had listened to them over and over again for a number of long minutes, before clearing a desk and writing them down on a large sheet of paper with a stylus clenched in his talons. After this he started lecturing on ancient modes of speech and how they were far more sophisticated than the

standard common language now in use on the aligned worlds.

VULGATE! DUO, QUINDECIM, NOVEM!

RAGAZZA! DUX DUCIS, INCOLUMITAS!

‘I need a translation, not a lecture on the nominative and accusative modes of historical linguistics!’ Jim interrupted after a moment.

Daddyhoggy ruffled his feathers and turned a beady eye on Jim. ‘Your lack of patience does not become you. If you don’t understand the context and establish the tense with appropriate clarity, the meaning of the phrase will be lost. Act on a mis-translation and you will ensure that you act even more inappropriately than you already do.’

‘You know the language?’ Jim asked in surprise.

‘I know of the language,’ Daddyhoggy clarified. ‘All enlightened people do.’

Jim stared at him.

‘And?’

Daddyhoggy looked around. ‘Precisely what clarification are you seeking?’

‘Answer the frakkin question!’ Jim snapped in frustration.

Daddyhoggy straightened. ‘There is no need to resort to inappropriate profanity.’

‘Then just answer the question!’

‘I did,’ the bird replied, nonplussed.

‘No you didn’t!’

‘You asked whether I knew the language. I replied that I knew of it.’

‘That’s not what I meant!’ Jim fumed.

The bird straightened and flapped its wings. ‘My impatient friend. I can hardly be expected to know what you meant. Clarity of communication is all. I suggest you phrase your questions with a little more care.’

Jim clenched his fists and took a deep breath, gesturing to the paper. ‘Which language is represented by these words?’

‘An ancient one,’ Daddyhoggy announced sonorously. ‘Pre-dating the diaspora by many centuries. This is representative of a form of communication long lost. It comes from a time before

much of what we currently accept as historical had even occurred. An Old-Earth language.'

'Old-Earth?' Jim echoed. 'One of the original languages prevalent during the colonisation?'

Daddyhoggy shook his head. 'Something more antique. This language was already a distant memory by that point. A period before this part of the galaxy was visited. Before space flight was even a reality. Before the concept of the universe was even grasped. The language of an ancient empire on Old-Earth, even before industrialisation.'

'But that's thousands of years ago!'

'Three to four thousand years ago, with apologies for a lamentable lack of accuracy,' Daddyhoggy acknowledged. 'We sometimes call it the mother-tongue. A formative root from which current languages can trace their ancestry. It is called Latin and it hails from a civilisation that was known as the Roman Empire. An early failed attempt to unify Old-Earth under a common law of state from its previous feudal existence. A time of reasonable enlightenment that finally crumpled under its own hubris.'

'What would the Thargoids be doing using a language that pre-dates space travel?'

Daddyhoggy looked pained. 'That is what we seek to determine. Speculating without facts is futile. Do not waste your energy asking questions that can not hope to be even approached at this stage.'

Jim impatiently tapped the words with his finger. 'Can you just answer me a simple question?'

Daddyhoggy removed Jim's hand from the paper with the tip of his wing. 'As long as you're not expecting me to reply with crass simplifications and erroneous brevity, I will do my best.'

Jim glared. 'Is that a yes or a no?'

Daddyhoggy thought for a moment. 'It is a yes.'

'Good.' Jim replied. 'Here's the question...'

'Oh.' Daddyhoggy sighed heavily. 'I thought that was it.'

Jim pointed to the paper again and spoke with as much clarity as he could muster. 'Can you read this?'

Daddyhoggy looked back at the paper, examining it closely once again.

'No. I cannot.'

Coyote ducked back inside the *Spectre*, joining Derik at the medi-comp station in the rear living quarters of the new vessel.

‘How’s she doing?’ Coyote asked.

The big lizard was peering at the medi-comp readouts with apparent confusion. Rebecca’s unconscious body was laid out neatly on the bio-bed, her features now composed and serene. The equipment had cleaned her up and was apparently trying to heal the wound in her shoulder. It had stopped though, about two-thirds of the way through its programme.

‘Come on you miserable piece of technical crapola!’ Derik hissed, prodding the controls with an outstretched claw.

‘That good...’ Coyote murmured. ‘Don’t tell me you broke it?’

Derik turned and glared. ‘You make it work then.’

Coyote chuckled and took a look at the medi-comp programme. It had stalled at the composite resonance scanning phase. He looked at the diagnostic.

Error. Resonance imaging reports no target found. Please specify target.

Coyote grinned.

‘You forgot to point it at her,’ he said, and began the sequence of refocusing the targeting scanners.

‘Oh really,’ Derik said, arms folded. ‘Silly me, why didn’t I think of that...’

Coyote shot him a look. The sequence initiated but the medi-comp didn’t restart. After a moment, it buzzed faintly.

Error. Resonance imaging reports no target found. Please specify target.

Coyote frowned.

‘You checked the diagnostics?’

The lizard eyeballed him by return and put on a dopey voice. ‘I’m just the stupid sunbasker remember? Me no understand clever human flashy lighty stuff... Yes, of course I checked the frakkin’ diagnostics!’

Coyote pulled up the diagnostic check anyway. Nothing was reporting an error. He activated the voice-comm circuit.

‘Resonance display, manual mode.’

The medi-comp’s monitors above them blazed into life. They could see a live scan of the bio-bed upon which Rebecca was still unconscious. Coyote and Derik stared at it.

It was empty.

They looked back at Rebecca, whole, alive; her chest rising and falling as her breath came in and out.

‘Visible light display,’ Coyote said. The viewer flickered and Rebecca’s body appeared, just as they could see it behind them.

Coyote and Derik exchanged a look.

‘Thermal infra-red,’ Coyote said.

The image changed, Rebecca’s body became a glowing object, reflecting the parts of her body emitting the most heat.

‘Ultra-violet.’

Another image, with the emphasis on her exposed skin.

‘Resonance display,’ Coyote said.

The image faded, Rebecca’s body disappeared.

‘Scanner must be busted...’ Derik said. ‘Funny how the diagnostics check out though.’

Coyote shook his head and turned towards Rebecca. He slid his hand across her forehead, resting his palm on her cool skin.

‘Frak!’ Derik jumped back.

On the viewer both of them could clearly see Coyote’s hand, the bones, tendons and blood vessels, picked up by the scanner. Rebecca still wasn’t there.

Target acquired. Unable to apply selected operation to current target. Please reset.

Coyote pulled his hand back, the scanner went blank.

Target lost.

Derik pressed the cancel button. The viewer was blank again.

‘Ok, I’m officially freaked out now,’ he snapped. ‘What the frak does this mean? Is she some kind of ghost?’

He slowly reached out and gingerly prodded Rebecca's arm. It felt reassuringly solid.

Coyote rubbed his beard. 'It means the resonance scanner can't see her. Why the hell that would be I can't imagine. Maybe Udian would know.'

'It's not her shield thing is it?' Derik said, his eye widening.

Coyote gestured to the side of the medi-comp. Rebecca's strange little device was stored carefully on a shelf, it was clearly not active.

'We'll have to patch her up ourselves if the medi-comp won't work. You any good as a medic?'

'On humans?' Derik hissed. 'I know which bits to stab in a fight, that any good?'

Coyote rolled his eyes and set to work. His experience of triage in military engagements far from the luxury of falling back on medi-comp support served him well. Fortunately there were sufficient hand-held med-tools to hand.

'You were right about one thing...' Coyote said softly, as he began to bind up Rebecca's injuries with the dermal regenerators.

'And what's that?'

'She is holding out on us...'

'No frak,' the lizard replied.

'She's going to need painkillers,' Coyote instructed. 'Standard pack, there, second shelf.'

Derik grabbed the packs and flung them to Coyote before clicking on the narrowband comm-link.

'Udian?'

'I'm busy,' came the laconic response.

'Get your metal ass up here. We've got a problem.'

'Specify.'

'This woman of ours is a frakkin' ghost.'

There was a pause on the other end of the comm-link.

'Have you been imbibing something narcotic?' Udian replied.

'I'm serious. Coyote's sorting her out.'

‘Why aren’t you using the medi-comp?’

‘We would if we could, we aren’t stupid!’ Derik snapped back.

‘Despite the copious evidence to the contrary...’ Udian intoned with a sigh.

‘Listen! The medi-comp won’t operate because it says she ain’t here,’ Derik snapped.

‘In what manner?’ Udian rumbled back.

Coyote leant forward into the comm-link’s range. ‘The resonance scan can’t see her but it works fine on us. The girl’s invisible.’

Again there was a pause.

‘Interesting. This may explain something. I will be there momentarily.’ Udian closed the connection from the other end.

Derik and Coyote exchanged a look before returning to the task in hand. Coyote had almost finished by the time a heavy series of thuds and the hiss of his mechanical actuators announced Udian’s arrival.

‘Show me,’ he said, without preamble.

Derik flipped on the medi-comp viewer, Udian examined it closely. It remained blank until Derik stuck his head in the way and gestured rudely at Udian.

‘Fascinating. Your puerile display notwithstanding,’ Udian said dryly. ‘It appears you have discovered her secret.’

‘What secret?’ Derik asked.

‘Whatever it was that caused Garew to add her to what I reluctantly refer to as our team,’ the machine replied.

‘You know what’s up with her?’ Coyote queried.

‘I have a suspicion. It may also explain why the Thargoids recognised her.’

‘What are you talking about?’ Derik ground out.

Udian sighed. ‘I’m assuming you’ve already forgotten how her ship was scanned by the Thargoids in our first altercation. How they diverted their attack?’

Coyote nodded. ‘I remember. They sacrificed themselves to punch a message out. Just sat there and let me destroy them.’

‘Indeed,’ Udian acknowledged. ‘This must be why.’

‘But what does it mean?’ Derik hissed angrily.

‘Resonance scanning works by determining quantum phase variations at the sub-atomic level. Simple technology,’ Udian began. ‘An anatomical image is derived by comparing the deltas between the states at various interlock frequencies and thus building up an image. If she is invisible to the scanner, it implies her sub-atomic constituents are in some unusual quantum state.’

Derik blinked and looked at Coyote.

‘Did that make any sense to you?’

‘Understood every word...’ Coyote said, with a wry grin.

‘Ok. I’ll ask again,’ Derik said slowly, punching out each word slowly. ‘What-does-it-mean?’

Udian increased his height slightly and looked down on the pair. Coyote and Derik looked up expectantly.

‘It means our little woman is not quite in our universe.’

‘What?’ Derik and Coyote’s exclamations were in unison.

‘Clearly she has some unusual properties and the Thargoids consider this of value,’ Udian mused. ‘They recognised this in space and here in the station as well.’

‘When?’ Coyote snapped, frowning.

‘During the attack in the corridor,’ Udian replied. ‘They once again referred to her by the strange phrase they used before. ‘Ragazza dux ducis incolumitas.’ I should not have survived the altercation, as I advised both of you. Fortunately the Thargoids saw me only as an obstacle, not a target.’

‘They were after her?’ Coyote asked.

‘Yes. You asked me why I considered her a liability. This is why; they want her for something. Something so important it’s overriding everything else.’

‘What is so special about her?’

‘That is a question for which I do not have an answer. She appears conspicuously unremarkable to me,’ Udian’s ocular receptors glowed brightly. ‘I suggest we ask her for the truth.’

‘And if she doesn’t tell us?’

Udian turned slightly. 'If you two do not have the stomach for such a task, leave the coercion to me.'

'You aren't going to hurt her,' Coyote said, his voice dropping in warning.

'Am I not?' Udian replied with faint amusement.

'No way. Over my dead body,' Derik added, standing between Udian and the bio-bed.

'Do not mistake my gratitude for past glories as an inhibitor. This information is mission-critical and needs to be appraised,' Udian continued calmly, leaning over the lizard.

Coyote held up a hand. 'Let's try just asking her first, shall we?'

'No?' Jim yelled in annoyance. 'Then I've wasted my time. I should have known better than to expect that I'd gain anything from this...'

'SILENCE!' The bird roared, its wings extending again in anger. Jim flinched as the avian's enormous wingspan served its purpose in intimidating him.

'That's more acceptable,' Daddyhoggy intoned. 'You asked for a ridiculously oversimplified response and you got precisely what you deserved. Had you bothered to apply for an appropriate answer I would have responded differently.'

'And what would that answer have been, pray tell?' Jim said, still seething.

The bird's beak opened slightly, in a manner which Jim slowly began to recognise as an avian grin.

'Ah. In that case my answer would have been... No.'

'That's the same as the short answer...!'

'No... not yet.'

There was a mischievous gleam in Daddyhoggy's eye.

'This language has not been used for millennia. There is no one who can directly translate it short of some of the more esoteric linguistic historians and we don't have any of them present. The key is in the approach. This is a root language. We need to find the path back from where we are now, to an equivalent in the past.'

'How do we do that?' Jim asked, his interest piqued.

‘Take this word,’ Daddyhoggy gestured to the paper. ‘Duo. Perhaps some similar modern words would provide a clue. In your language, we have dual, meaning twin. Double, meaning two of a kind. Many Old-Earth languages have a similar concept; Deux and Dos are representations of the quantities of two.’

‘Numbers,’ Jim breathed. ‘What about Quindecim and Novem? The same?’

‘What does Quindecim suggest?’ Daddyhoggy inquired.

‘Quintuple. Decimal!’ Jim said, with growing excitement.

‘Which is?’ Daddyhoggy prompted

‘A quintuple is a star system of five stars. Decimal is clearly ten. So, fifteen?’

‘Which brings us to Novem.’

‘November? The name of a month using the Old-Earth calendar. The eleventh month!’

Daddyhoggy’s beak opened slightly. ‘Excellent. Though, we must be careful of assumptions. You are correct in ascertaining the etymology. Unfortunately the calendar in use at the time of this language was slightly different. Fortunately I’m familiar with it.’

‘Which means?’

‘November was the ninth month according to the Roman calendar, not the eleventh.’

Jim looked back at the words ‘So - Two, fifteen, nine. Could that be a date? Twenty-one fifty-nine?’

‘I suspect not,’ Daddyhoggy replied. ‘Firstly it is too late. Primitive space flight was already available in the twenty second century. Secondly these are individual numbers. There would have been more appropriate ways to indicate powers of ten.’

‘So what does Vulgate mean? Vulgar? That’s not a number.’

‘I believe the numerics are a reference to the first word. An index if you will, some kind of classification. What we have here is a more elusive beast, I believe we are searching for a proper noun. A person or an event perhaps.’

‘So how do we find it?’

‘How does one find anything?’ Daddyhoggy replied with his avian grin. ‘We must search and research, my dear fellow. Let the quest begin!’

Chapter Eight

Rebecca stirred, immediately conscious of pain in her shoulder and a horrible stiffness in her chest. She tried to sit up but her vision blurred and swam in front of her.

‘Lay still,’ a voice said. ‘You took quite a pounding.’

‘Coyote?’ she managed to croak.

She saw the heavily bearded face and sombrero lean across her, then she spotted Derik’s reptilian head appear from the other side.

‘How you doing?’ he said, baring his teeth in a draconoid greeting.

‘Hurts,’ she said, woozily. ‘Where am I? The Thargs...’

‘Safe for now,’ Coyote reassured her. ‘You’re on board the *Spectre*. Pain will go in a while.’

‘And time for some explanations,’ Udian said, severely.

Rebecca looked up fearfully, managing to focus her eyes on the intimidating machine.

‘What?’

‘No more secrets,’ Coyote added softly. ‘Time to level with us.’

‘About what?’

‘About why the Thargoids are after you.’

‘I can’t,’ Rebecca said, her face going pale.

‘You can,’ Udian rumbled heavily. ‘And you will. One way or the other.’

‘We mustn’t talk about this!’ Rebecca said in alarm. ‘I can’t... Garew will know...’

Udian regarded her steadily. ‘Garew can’t find you here,’ he informed her. ‘The *Catechism* employs a variety of sophisticated screening devices. Rest assured, the nanobots are helpless all the time we remain aboard. Unfortunately the equipment that renders them so is not portable.’

‘So he can’t eavesdrop on us?’ Coyote asked.

‘No,’ Udian replied. ‘The nanobots will be quiescent whilst we remain here. A dampening field that covers the complex.’

Derik grinned. ‘In that case. Garew, you’re a...’ he descended into a variety of profanities that even had Coyote raising an eyebrow in appreciation.

Udian leaned forward. 'Now. Perhaps you can explain why the Thargoids committed suicide and expended all of their resources attempting to reach you, despite being offered the opportunity to deal with me once and for all.'

'I don't know,' Rebecca replied, her voice subdued. 'I really don't know why they're coming after me.'

'You must know something,' Derik insisted. 'Whatever it is, don't you think we deserve to know by now?'

'We know how they're tracking you,' Coyote said.

Rebecca looked up in surprise. 'How?'

Coyote gestured to the medi-comp. 'You're invisible.'

'What?' Rebecca looked totally bemused.

'To the resonance scan anyway. Udian can explain,' Coyote continued.

Rebecca looked at the big machine. Udian turned slightly.

'The subatomic particles that compose your body are out of phase with matter that originates in this universe,' Udian said impatiently. 'That's utterly impossible by any process I am aware of. Why is that?'

Rebecca looked back at the three of them. They stared back, expectantly.

She shook her head. 'You won't believe me.'

'Try us,' Coyote encouraged her. 'We've all seen some pretty strange frak in our time.'

'Most of it in the last couple of days and covered in grease,' Derik cackled.

'Tell us,' Udian rumbled. 'Time is short.'

Rebecca took a deep breath. 'Eleven years ago. The mission to stop Zerz? It wasn't quite so straightforward. I was commissioned by the Dark Wheel.'

Coyote blinked and looked across at Derik. The lizard was silent, no wise-crack came.

'The Dark Wheel?' Derik echoed.

'The Dark Wheel was being accused of killing Galcop senior personnel,' Rebecca said.

'I remember this,' Coyote said. 'A number of assassinations on the news channels. The Chronicle did a big feature on it, trying to panic everyone. But it all fizzled out in the end...'

‘The whole thing was a fabrication,’ Rebecca continued. ‘In reality Zerz was behind it all, not the Dark Wheel. He faked his own death to cover his tracks. He’d managed to get hold of a top secret document. It was unique, outside of Galcop control. For the President’s and Military Chief of Staff’s eyes only. The highest level of security possible.’

Udian leaned forward.

‘And what was in this document?’ he demanded.

‘The secret,’ Rebecca said.

‘To what?’ Derik demanded, equally fascinated.

Rebecca looked up forlornly at them. ‘The technical know-how to create the plasma accelerator. It’s not a trivial piece of technology. All attempts to create one have ended in failure.’

‘Indeed,’ Udian acknowledged. ‘Rather spectacular failures. One attempt destroyed an entire Coriolis station along with a sizeable chunk of a moon.’

‘The scientist I was working with, Jim McKenna... we were sent to retrieve it. By the time we apprehended Zerz he’d already created a prototype. We fought him and were nearly destroyed. The radiation from the accelerator almost killed us, it had serious flaws. Zerz eventually died from the side-effects. He literally disintegrated in front of us. Jim was only just able to determine what was happening in time to stop the same thing happening to us. The accelerator that Zerz was using was unstable; it gave off some weird form of energy that disrupted organic matter over a period of time.’

‘And yet the Thargoids are using it?’

Rebecca nodded. ‘They’ve probably already discovered its effects. I’m guessing that’s why they want me. They won’t be able to continue the offensive without it. You saw our altercation with Zerz was captured in his ship’s vid-log – that’s how they know.’

‘I don’t get it.’ Derik complained.

‘Jim came up with a solution to the radiation problem,’ Rebecca continued. ‘He talked about quantum states and frak like that, I don’t understand it but it sounds about right. The Thargoids want that information.’

‘Does Garew know this?’ Coyote interjected.

Rebecca shook her head. ‘He tried to torture it out of me but no... he didn’t get it.’

Coyote frowned. 'Tortured! When?'

'Back at Tionisla, before we launched. The nanobots...' Rebecca winced as she remembered. 'He nearly killed me...'

Derik started to swear again. 'Another one to add to the list when we finally get our hands on him!'

'This is encouraging,' Udian said. 'It implies Garew doesn't have all the information either. If he did, Rebecca would have been locked up or killed the moment he had the opportunity. But how can you be so sure you didn't reveal the details under the torture? Galcop methods are most effective.'

Rebecca grinned. 'Because I don't actually know. Jim and I ensured the details were hex-edited out of our memories. It will only unlock after a period of time. I don't even know when. We must have worked something out beforehand...'

'Smart thinking,' Udian nodded with approval.

'So the Thargoids...' Coyote began.

'Want you...' Udian finished for him, looking over at Rebecca. 'Because they've figured out that you can give them a working accelerator.'

Rebecca slumped back on the bio-bed, tears coming to her eyes. 'I guess. With that weapon the Thargoids can completely wipe us out, there is no known defence. Unless we stop them, we're all going to die. Don't let them get me...'

She sobbed, turning away from them.

'It still doesn't explain the attack on Lave...' Udian began.

'That's enough for now,' Coyote said sternly to the others. 'Let her get some rest.'

Udian and Derik filed out. Coyote turned as if to follow them and then looked back.

'Quite a ride,' he said.

'Yeah,' Rebecca replied, wiping at her eyes and looking deflated. 'Listen, thanks for sticking up for me.'

'You've had a tough time...' Coyote replied. 'Big secret to be carrying around.'

Rebecca nodded. 'Sorry for disrespecting you and everything. You've got us this far.'

'I could have been a little more diplomatic about your old ship.'

‘I’m not usually like that...’ Rebecca looked away from Coyote’s grinning face. ‘Well, I guess I am usually like that. But I am sorry, honestly.’

Coyote regarded her for a moment. ‘Apology accepted. I’ll let you off fixing up my hat.’

He looked at the small torn hole in his sombrero. Rebecca smiled.

‘So, just out of interest, how did you get behind me in that fight?’

Coyote grinned. ‘Old school moves. Retro-thrusters. Hardly anyone bothers with them nowadays but they occasionally come in handy.’

Rebecca pondered that for a moment. ‘Hmmm. Might have to check those out.’

‘So tell me...’ he said, looking at her with his intense grey eyes after a thoughtful pause. ‘Just who is Rebecca Weston?’

She looked up in surprise.

‘What do you mean?’

Coyote smiled. ‘You’re pretty much the mystery woman. What do you do when you’re not slaughtering Thargoids, shooting up ships or hex-editing your brain?’

Rebecca shrugged. ‘Trading I guess. Bounty hunting, the odd mission here or there.’

‘Ah... Lone wolf... or have you got folks looking out for you someplace?’

Rebecca shook her head.

‘No one?’ Coyote prompted.

‘Lost my mum when I was a kid. The rest of my family was shot down back in ‘38,’ Rebecca replied quickly.

‘You must have someone...’

‘I did,’ Rebecca looked up, her eyes moist. ‘But not now... he... well he doesn’t know what he wants.’

Ah... so that’s it...

‘The scientist you mentioned? Where is he now?’ Coyote prompted, gently.

‘He was over on the east-side. He’s on his way across now. He’s trying to figure out the Thargoid message. If anyone can do it, it’s him. Real smart.’

‘And yet he can’t make up his mind about you?’ Coyote said.

Rebecca shook her head. 'We were close once. That whole business, we were in it together. Took us long enough to be honest with each other. He says he couldn't cope with the life I lead.'

'Doesn't know what he's missing,' Coyote said, lightly.

Rebecca looked up at him. 'Huh?'

Coyote grinned. 'I mean, all your positive traits - that anti-authority attitude of yours, slapping people in the face, shooting folks for fun. The gung-ho, kill-fest, fly-like-a-banshee thing you've got going on. Just what are you trying to prove, girl?'

Rebecca smiled faintly and shook her head. 'Maybe I should have settled down, hung up the flight-suit. He was always telling me I was taking too many risks. We had so many arguments over that, he never understood...'

'It's tough out here. Makes you tough. Relationships are complications,' Coyote acknowledged. 'Gotta be hard to find a middle road.'

Rebecca's eyes narrowed. 'What are you saying?'

'Just interested in what you want... ' Coyote said. 'You're Deadly. That's a long way along the road. Do you still want to be Elite?'

'Yes,' Rebecca said, her eyes bright. 'I deserve it. I've always known I could be an Elite combatteer.'

'You sure?' Coyote queried.

'Why? Don't you think I can?' she snapped back, looking at him intently. 'That little fight of ours doesn't count! I'll get you next time.'

Coyote held up his hands to fend her off. 'Woah Tiger. That's not what I'm asking. Could you give this up?' He gestured vaguely around them. 'Freedom of space flight, running the risks, fighting your corner? Looking to be Elite. Do you love that more than anything else? Elite is a lonely place, Rebecca. No space for relationships. You can't afford to care too much...'

'I don't care...' Rebecca stopped, as her voice trembled.

Coyote inclined his head. 'Yeah and I've got a fat trumble you're buying from a mangy feline.'

Rebecca seethed for a moment. Coyote saw her hands clench and unclench.

She is so tightly wound up! Like a Torus drive in a mass-lock...

‘It won’t work... it didn’t work!’

‘You can’t live in his world, he can’t live in yours. What’s the solution?’

‘I don’t know!’

‘Does he still love you?’

Rebecca looked away uncomfortably. ‘Maybe... I don’t know.’

‘You still love him?’ Coyote’s eyes twinkled in the shadow under his sombrero.

She glared at him and then looked away without answering.

Coyote leant closer, his voice dropping to a whisper, ‘You nearly got spaced today, maybe more than once. I’ve seen you in action. You’ve got talent, you’ve got nerve and you’ve got the skills...’

‘But?’ Rebecca prompted. ‘I can hear it coming, where’s the ‘but’?’

Coyote leant back again.

‘You know what your problem is?’ he said.

‘I’ve got a hold full, anything specific?’ Rebecca demanded, glaring at him.

‘You don’t know when to back off,’ Coyote fired back, a touch more aggressively. ‘That’s why I beat you back at Biramabi. And if you don’t figure that one out, you’re going to end up as a fine dust in orbit around some forgotten star someday.’

‘I don’t need this lecture right now...’ Rebecca interrupted angrily.

Coyote let her have it. ‘And I’ll lay good credits on that’s why this guy of yours dumped you...’

‘Frak you!’ Rebecca snarled.

Coyote continued, undeflected. ‘A guy like that one you’re talking about, he’ll want to keep you safe. If he can’t... because you keep putting yourself in the firing line... what’s a guy to do?’

Rebecca stared at Coyote, her face crashing from anger to confusion and despair. He saw her bite her bottom lip, her eyes downcast.

‘The last thing he said to me was to stay safe.’

‘And you’ve got yourself into the most dangerous place you could be. Again, by all accounts. Real caring of you. Can’t blame him for not being able to handle it.’

Rebecca lapsed into silence.

‘You need to decide what it is you want,’ Coyote advised, slowly getting to his feet. ‘You can be Elite if you want, you can have your man. Not sure you can have both. Better for all of us if you make up your mind.’

He left a silent and pensive woman, staring at the bulkhead, deep in thought.

Rebecca picked up her comm-tab and stared at it for a long time, twisting it around in her hands. After a while her expression hardened. She stood up, having made some kind of decision.

She took a deep breath.

Four hours of fruitless searching had revealed nothing. Daddyhoggy’s library taxonomy bore no resemblance to anything Jim had encountered before. It wasn’t organised alphabetically, numerically or even chronologically. Daddyhoggy termed it ‘Eclectic Efficiency’; Jim viewed it as almost totally and utterly random.

It was also frustratingly slow. There was no assistance. You had to physically locate the book in a huge lexicon, which itself was broken down into volumes and hence into issues. The library was divided into nooks, roosts and nests, in a peculiar semi-hierarchical branching structure that clearly made sense to those with avian roots but left Jim’s head spinning.

Once you had a location the task was just beginning. You had to physically find the book, retrieve it and then work your way through tomes of various ages, some of which were in poor condition or written in the same obscure language as the peculiar Thargoid utterings.

Once Jim had put a book back in the wrong place after missing a tenuous ‘twig’ in the lexicon. Daddyhoggy nearly expired on the spot.

Jim had also been hampered by Daddyhoggy’s insistence that only one book was handled at a time. When Jim complained the big bird simply looked at him with horror.

‘I refuse to be party to any endeavour which causes violence to be imposed upon these revered texts.’ He’d announced.

Jim spluttered back ‘What?’ for the umpteenth time, bewildered once more.

‘We must accept the books in the manner for which they were intended, giving them space to express themselves to us.’

‘We’ve been searching for hours!’ Jim shouted back. ‘And we’ve nothing to show for it!’

‘Not so,’ Daddyhoggy said, ruffling his feathers. ‘We have eliminated a large number of places from our search with remarkable success.’

‘But...’

‘Consider carefully. We cannot find this item as an event or an individual. Yet we have a number associated with it. We’ve found numerous references...’

‘All circular,’ Jim complained. ‘They all assume the reader is familiar with whatever a Vulgate is. But we’re no closer to working out what it is!’

‘Then we must adjust our mode of thinking,’ Daddyhoggy said.

‘And how do we do that?’

‘With a modicum of patience my dear fellow! Along with a certain amount of lateral thinking. You’ve given me a clue...’

Jim regarded Daddyhoggy for a moment.

‘And?’ he demanded after a few moments silence.

Daddyhoggy sighed. ‘I should have requested more than a modicum, clearly...’

Jim flopped down in a chair dejectedly.

‘This item,’ Daddyhoggy began, ‘must have been sufficiently well known for these authors to expect their readers to be completely familiar with it. Given we are dealing with a pre-technological civilisation in our current frame of reference, what can we infer from the nature of the audience we are considering?’

Jim blinked. ‘They were writers, could be anything...’

‘But...’ Daddyhoggy replied. ‘These are not just writers, these are historians, chroniclers. Men of renown for the time. We see them referring to each other, elevating and quoting each other with reverence and respect... a most worthy approach.’

‘They were quoting each other’s works,’ Jim said, leaning forward. ‘They were familiar with the books of the time. Books written by their peers!’

Daddyhoggy and Jim looked at each other and spoke simultaneously.

‘It’s a book! We’re looking for a book!’

Daddyhoggy flapped his wings in excitement.

‘Rather fortunate we’re in a library, I would say!’

Once Udian’s leg had been repaired he began supervising the re-arming of the naval missiles aboard the four ships. Coyote had been engaged in repairing as much of the damage to the *Dark Star* as was possible during the time available. It was a traditional vessel, not a bio-ship and didn’t benefit from the remarkable recuperative powers of the more modern ships. By the time Udian had finished loading the ordnance, the *Dark Star* was at least flightworthy, even if it wasn’t back to full strength.

Coyote looked across at Udian as he completed the checks on the *Spectre*. Udian had taken more time over the enigmatic ship. Coyote could see he had been examining the Thargoid-derived drive unit for some considerable time, using some kind of portable scanning equipment on it.

‘Problems?’ Coyote asked.

‘No,’ Udian replied, without acknowledging Coyote in any other fashion. ‘I had some concerns over the interaction between the drive unit and the bio-weapons. The woman might not appreciate having her ship disassociated around her if one of the bio-weapons decides she is a target.’

‘The Thargoid drive?’

Udian nodded. ‘Its signature is very similar to a Thargoid vessel. I thought it best to make it an exception to the targeting protocols.’

Coyote rubbed his chin.

Make sense. I just don’t trust you, my metal amigo. Then again, I don’t trust our little señorita either...

Coyote’s primary concern had been the hull breach on the *Dark Star*. He could live without some of the other equipment until they could reach a station for more comprehensive repairs. He couldn’t afford for the hull to cave in during the way back out. He rested a hand against the cold hard exterior of his ship.

Hold together old friend, don’t listen to that metal monster...

Derik came down the cargo ramp of the *Spectre*, a frail-looking Rebecca holding the lizard’s big arm for support. Coyote turned with a faint smile.

‘Hey, good to see you back in one piece. Mostly.’

‘Mostly Harmless, I think you mean.’ Derik said, with a grin. Rebecca wrinkled her nose at him.

Rebecca stared around the cargo bay, taking in the smashed and scattered corpses of the Thargoids.

‘You boys always leave such a mess.’

‘You should see my pad back on Tionisla after a party,’ Derik said. ‘This is nothing.’

‘You got the bio-packs?’ she asked.

‘Already loaded,’ Coyote replied. ‘Almost ready to go. Four apiece. Everyone gets to play.’

Udian turned and swiftly crossed the bay. ‘We must leave immediately. There may still be Thargoids aboard. They won’t take long to find their way in here. *Catechism* cannot be left to fall into their hands.’

‘What’s the plan then?’ Derik asked.

‘We leave and I trigger the self-destruct,’ Udian replied.

Rebecca let go of Derik and stood up straight.

‘Thanks for saving me,’ she said, looking at the big machine.

‘Thanks are unnecessary.’ Udian replied dismissively.

‘I mean it,’ Rebecca said. ‘Thank you...’

‘You misunderstand,’ Udian said. ‘My actions were motivated by the need to retrieve the bio-packs, not to preserve your existence. I would have acted no differently had you not been there.’

Rebecca blinked but continued. ‘You believed me to...’

‘Indeed,’ Udian replied. ‘It was fortunate for you that you told the truth. Had you failed to do so, I would have extracted that information from you despite the objections of our companions.’

‘That’s what you think...’ Derik said, in a low voice.

‘Charmed I’m sure,’ Rebecca’s eyes narrowed. ‘You still protected me in the corridor.’

‘For my own benefit,’ Udian responded. ‘I needed a clear firing solution. Do not mistake pragmatism for sentiment. Board your ships, I will set the destruct countdown.’

He strode off, leaving Rebecca nonplussed, staring after the departing machine.

‘Ignore him,’ Derik advised. ‘He’s just pissed that he couldn’t do everything himself.’

‘He did save me,’ Rebecca said, softly.

‘I wouldn’t count on it,’ Coyote grumbled. ‘He serves himself, the rest of us are just along for the ride...’

‘No,’ Rebecca answered. ‘You don’t understand.’

All of them turned as a thud echoed through the cargo bay, something was on the other side of the airlock door they had fought their way through.

‘Get aboard now!’ Udian roared from a control panel at the side of the bay. ‘No more delays!’

Coyote, Derik and Rebecca sprinted back towards their ships.

Rebecca jumped into the *Spectre*’s pilot’s chair and buckled in, firing up the engines and avionics. The familiar astrogation console lit up immediately. She grabbed the control stick with her good hand. On the viewer she could see Coyote’s and Derik’s ships likewise readying for departure.

‘Self-destruct enabled in one minute,’ a computerised voice announced. Rebecca saw Udian sprint back and board his own vessel; the *Hammer* powering up a few moments afterwards. All four ships lifted off the bay floor and retracted their landing gear.

‘All set?’ Rebecca asked.

‘Good to go,’ Derik called back

‘Claro. Green across the board...’ Coyote responded.

‘Self-destruct enabled in 50 seconds.’

Rebecca looked up at the overhead bay doors. They were still closed.

‘Udian?’ Coyote prompted. There was no response from the machine creature.

‘Self-destruct enabled in 40 seconds.’

‘Udian! Open the frakkin’ doors!’ Derik shouted. ‘What you playing at?’

The *Hammer* abruptly powered down again, settling back down on the bay floor.

‘What the frak are you doing?’ Rebecca demanded.

‘The bay doors are jammed,’ Udian’s voice responded. ‘The Thargoids must have intercepted the command codes.’

‘Then cancel the self-destruct!’ Rebecca cried.

‘Irreversible.’ Udian replied.

‘Oh joy!’ Derik’s voice yelled across the wide-band. ‘You don’t think it might have been a really great idea to have checked we could get out *before* triggering the big bang? Do I always have to be the brains around here?’

Daddyhoggy fluttered down from one of the ‘nests’ high up in the rafters of the library. He settled down on the floor, making a big show of smoothing his feathers back into place.

‘Well?’ Jim demanded.

‘Sad news.’

‘Sad?’ Jim asked.

‘The book is out on loan.’

‘What!’

Daddyhoggy nodded. ‘Yes. Worse, it’s overdue. I will have to start drawing up the paperwork for a fine immediately.’

‘Forget that!’ Jim fired back. ‘Haven’t you got a copy?’

‘A copy?’ Daddyhoggy blinked in surprise. ‘Why would I want I copy when I have an original?’

Jim stared in exasperation. ‘So we could maybe... read it now?’

‘Oh, that’s not necessary.’

‘Yes it is!’

‘No it’s not. It’s a common book, you may even have heard of it. A religious tome, going by many names. Deuterocanon, Antilegomena, Apocrypha, Torah. But its common name is Bible.’

‘Bible?’ Jim echoed in surprise. ‘That’s a creation myth account isn’t it?’

‘I believe so. Rather popular in the time frame we’re discussing, in fact its adherents didn’t fade out until well into the twenty-second century as you measure time. It’s effectively a collection of books, a library in miniature. Each one is divided into chapters and verses. A rather unimaginative classification system but there it is.’

‘And why would the Thargoids be quoting this ‘Bible’?’

‘Perhaps our numbers will give us the answer,’ Daddyhoggy replied. ‘Here, I have a modern translation to talon.’

The big bird dropped a small book onto the desk. Jim picked it up. It was bound in some kind of leather, with an engraving of a ornate cross on its cover. The text was translated into standard Galcop encoding.

‘Two, fifteen, nine,’ Jim muttered. ‘You said chapters and verses. We’ve got three numbers. Book two I guess?’

‘Let’s see,’ Daddyhoggy replied.

Jim thumbed carefully through to the contents page. It was divided into two sections, conveniently entitled ‘Old’ and ‘New’. The second book was listed as ‘Exodus’.

It didn’t take long to find the fifteenth chapter and the ninth verse.

Jim read it.

Frak!

‘Self-destruct enabled in 30 seconds.’

Rebecca saw Udian emerge from the *Hammer* and move swiftly back to the controls along the hangar wall, rapidly keying in commands into the interface unit. Even from her position she could see red lights flashing in response to his actions.

He can’t open the doors!

‘Self-destruct enabled in 20 seconds.’

‘Can we laser the doors?’ Rebecca demanded.

‘No. Internal shields,’ Udian replied quickly. ‘Standby.’

‘What about missiles?’

‘No!’ Udian snapped, uncharacteristically. ‘You’ll trigger the defensive mechanisms. Standby!’

‘Self-destructed enabled in 10 seconds,’ the computerised voice echoed over the wide-band. ‘Beginning final sequence.’

‘There!’ Udian left the control panel and sprinted back towards his ship. ‘Maximum thrust

once you're out. *Catechism* has four individual nuclear mines. Alacrity is called for.'

Overhead the bay doors cracked open. The four ships were jolted by the sudden inrush of the gas giant's high pressure atmosphere.

'Ladies first,' Coyote called.

'Thanks sweetie.'

Rebecca fired up the engines and accelerated the *Spectre* up and out of the bay, closely followed by Derik and Coyote. Rebecca could see Udian's ship was still on the ground, yet to launch.

Warning! Exterior hull pressure 100 MPa! Tolerances violated!

'Self-destruct enabled. Beginning detonation sequence,' the computerised voice announced its final message across the comm channels.

As the *Catechism* receded behind her Rebecca saw flickers of light snap out in the darkness. Tendrils of energy began to flash across the hull of the huge facility, crackling and twisting across it. The *Catechism* seemed to tense, as if trying to hold itself together despite the raging energy forcing its way through its innards.

Udian's ship launched, blasting up through the bay just as the first detonation surfaced through the hull of the *Catechism*. Rebecca saw the *Hammer* silhouetted against the bright glare. It looked alarmingly small and fragile against the bulk of the stricken *Catechism*.

'Udian...'

In a split second the viewer whited out, rapidly trying to scale down the glare of the explosion. The blast wave passed through the superheated gas of the atmosphere, violently shaking the three remaining ships as they tried to flee. It was followed by the terrifying expanding sphere of the combined explosion, a wave of energy incinerating anything in its path.

'Oh frak,' Derik commented needlessly, watching the blast front closing on them rapidly.

The atmosphere was still too dense to risk firing the injectors. The halo of the explosion grew behind them, moving swiftly outwards through the atmosphere.

'Shields to full,' Coyote snapped. 'This won't be gentle...'

The glowing halo caught the three ships, blasting them out of control and shaking them fiercely. Rebecca held on for dear life as the inertia spun the *Spectre* around. She tried to wrestle the ship back onto something resembling a course but it was impossible. The turbulence was unreal. She

closed her eyes, screwing them up tightly as she endured the twisting and spinning movement that threatened to rip her ship apart.

The turbulence abated and she opened her eyes. She saw stars, the atmosphere of the gas giant receding behind her. The *Spectre* steadied and flew straight.

Survived!

She let out a yell of elation and then checked the damage indicators. Shields were half gone but still intact and recharging. There was no other damage.

‘Coyote? Derik?’

‘All present and correct,’ Coyote responded.

‘Singed my tail but I think I’m ok,’ the lizard’s voice came back straightaway.

Rebecca turned her attention to the rear viewer. The light of the explosion was still blistering through the clouds of the gas giant but each successive flicker was fainter and fainter.

‘Udian?’

Coyote was checking his astrogation scanner, looking for any sign of the other Caduceus. The scanner was still clouded with static from the explosion. He zoomed it in and out, looking for any tell-tale signs.

Nothing...

‘Where is he?’ Rebecca said, her voice high with alarm.

‘Looks like he didn’t make it,’ Derik said slowly.

‘But we can’t make the run on Beenri with only three-quarters of the weapons...’

‘Hold it,’ Coyote snapped, studying the scanner. The static was clearing. The scanner pinged. A ship ahead of them.

Coyote switched from the rear view to the forward one.

The wide-band crackled.

‘Apologies for being out of formation,’ Udian’s voice rumbled. ‘The resultant acceleration was a little on the fierce side.’

Well, I’ll be...

‘Udian, how the frak did you survive that?’ Derik exclaimed.

‘A simple diversion of the ship’s entire power output into the rear shields and hull integrity system,’ the deep voice intoned. ‘I fear I may have overloaded a number of bio-pathways aboard. It may be sometime before the *Hammer* forgives me.’

‘I hate to admit it but I’m actually pleased to see you,’ Rebecca said, her voice brighter than it had been since they’d arrived.

‘Indeed,’ Udian returned. ‘It is gratifying to see we all survived that altercation.’

‘Blow me a kiss, Udian,’ Derik mocked. ‘And I’ll give your metal ass a polish.’

‘I’ll decline your generous offer if it’s all the same to you,’ the deep voice rumbled back with amusement.

‘Back to the script folks...’ Coyote called time on their reunion. ‘Derik, jump to Geinona, por favor.’

‘Coming right up, boss.’

Coyote leant back in his seat.

Wonders will never cease. First time we actually operated as a team. And all it took was a few near-death experiences and a brace of nuclear bombs!

Jim re-read the entry from the ancient book.

The enemy boasted, ‘I will pursue, I will overtake them. I will divide the spoils; I will gorge myself on them. I will draw my sword and my hand will destroy them.’

Daddyhoggy looked through the text as well.

‘They don’t mince their words, do they?’ Jim breathed. ‘They mean to eradicate us.’

Daddyhoggy looked at him beadily.

‘Oh dear. I thought we’d begun to understand the imperative tense.’

Jim raised his eyebrows. ‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Granted,’ Daddyhoggy returned obsequiously.

‘What are you talking about?’ Jim demanded, changing tack.

Daddyhoggy fluffed up his feathers. ‘You’re interpreting this as a threat. That the Thargoids intend to pursue, overtake and destroy...’

‘That’s what it says!’

‘No, it does not,’ Daddyhoggy said slowly.

‘Yes it...’ Jim stopped, aware he was dealing with a fearsome intellectual.

‘Quite finished?’ Daddyhoggy said, waiting patiently.

Jim bit down on his frustration again. ‘Go on.’

‘It is not a threat,’ Daddyhoggy replied, after a moment. ‘It is a reminder.’

Jim frowned. ‘A reminder? Of what?’

‘Read it again.’

Jim scanned the text.

‘You’re saying the Thargoids aren’t *the enemy*? Then who is?’

Daddyhoggy straightened. ‘Oh, that’s quite obvious. *And the enemy boasted*? It’s you.’

‘Me?’ Jim replied, outraged.

‘Oh, the deficiencies of this basic mode of speech,’ Daddyhoggy lamented. ‘You in the expansive encompassing plural, not the specific singular.’

Jim continued to stare. ‘You mean us? Humans?’

‘Yes,’ Daddyhoggy replied. ‘The meaning is quite clear.’

‘But that’s ridiculous,’ Jim replied. ‘They’re attacking us!’

‘Indeed they are,’ Daddyhoggy acknowledged. ‘But this is not a boast from their perspective. This is a reminder of why they are attacking you. You are the enemy. You are the ones boasting.’

Jim shook his head.

‘You seem surprised by this,’ Daddyhoggy observed.

‘Of course I’m surprised!’ Jim shot back. ‘You’re telling me this is revenge on us! That the Thargoids are claiming we intended to destroy them!’

‘A fair summary,’ Daddyhoggy nodded.

‘But that’s not true.’

Daddyhoggy recoiled in surprise. ‘Yes it is.’

Jim shook his head. ‘The Thargoids are an aggressive species bent on our destruction...’

Daddyhoggy regarded him. 'I'm afraid to inform you that your history is rather, how shall we put it, selective.'

'You'd better tell me your version,' Jim replied, cautiously.

'I can do better than that,' Daddyhoggy replied. 'I can tell you the truth. If you're willing to hear it.'

The four ships arrived in the Diedar system. Coyote immediately flipped his Cobra over and dived away from the space lane which ran towards the planet.

'Key Torus drives,' he announced, 'We're going on a little tour to a smuggler's paradise. I think we deserve a little R and R after all that...'

All three ships neatly lined up and triggered their drives in sequence, Rebecca bringing up the rear. She watched the planet and the sun slowly roll away in the side viewers. They were heading into deep space, there was nothing out here.

What's he got in his devious mind this time?

Rebecca stretched her shoulder. It was still stiff from the injury that the Thargoid had dealt her, but the Health Extreme nanobots were doing their usual efficient job. Another day or so and it would be just another memory.

Long minutes passed. The flickers of light in the darkness that marked their movement through the void, minute debris disintegrating against their shields, began to thin out as they moved away from the most travelled parts of the system. No ships crossed their path.

Coyote abruptly came to a stop, turned and then accelerated off again. They had to re-key their Torus drives each time. The process was repeated a number of times.

Wild goose chase?

The planet was still receding slowly, now little more than a small crescent in the rear view, even the sun was beginning to noticeably shrink. They were a long way out.

Ahead Rebecca could just make out the reflections of the other three ships faintly sparkling in the distance in front of her. Just above them, something else was slowly coming into view.

Bigger than a ship, must be a station of some kind.

The object was pulsating slightly, as if changing shape. As they approached Rebecca could

see it was spinning. At least, part of it was.

Mass locked. Hyperspeed aborted.

There was a brief feeling of deceleration as they returned to normal flight. Rebecca's *Spectre* formed up behind the two *Caducei*. The *Dark Star* was moving forward slowly.

In front of them all was a station, with a spinning central carousel. It looked distinctly second-hand, with patched hull panels and a large black stain across part of the external hull where something had hit and splattered long ago. There were no navigation lights or in fact any lights of any kind. It looked deserted.

A Transhab station. Haven't seen one of those for years. Thought they'd all be decom'd.

'You always bring us to the best places,' Derik announced.

Coyote ignored him, gently coasting the *Dark Star* towards the darkened landing bay. Rebecca heard the click of narrow-band comms initiating.

'Como estas, Sanctuary.'

'Estoy muy bien, Coyote! Look what the cat dragged in. Got some company I see. You in trouble again, amigo?'

'Need a place to lie low for five,' Coyote replied. 'These... these are my friends. You can trust them.'

'Really?'

'Well, no. But they're sound. Permission to come aboard?'

'Usual rules apply...'

'Usual rules.'

Coyote redirected the comms to the other ships. 'Follow me in, one at a time. Try not to act suspicious.'

'What are the usual rules?' Udian demanded.

'You'll need to have your nav console purged so this location remains secret. Nobody knows how to get here unless they've already been. Consider it a smugglers' privilege.'

The ships lined up for the approach. Powerful spotlights lit up on the station, focusing on the four ships. As each docked the lights were extinguished and the station disappeared back into the darkness of space.

Rebecca stepped off the landing ramp of her ship looking around her in surprise. The landing gantries were strewn with debris, bits of ships, drive units, fuel scoop convertors, cargo bay extensions, shield generators and all sorts of associated junk from ships both large and small. Around the bay were large numbers of ships, all broken down, some half dismantled. She even saw an ancient Cobra Mk1, half collapsed on corroding landing legs. There was no sign of life.

A breaker's yard? Nice choice of hideaway, where's the R and R?

The floor was covered with discarded conduits, bolts, ripped and torn sections of hull plating. Here and there were puddles of grease, leaked coolant or other even less salubrious fluids. Rebecca daintily side-stepped them, trying to stay clear. Everything was grimy, covered in grease. Even the air felt polluted, with a strong whiff of unidentified fumes. The dim illumination showed the air was full of dust.

Derik, Udian and Coyote had already reached the end of the gantry.

'Charming decor.' Rebecca commented.

Coyote smiled slightly.

'It's a frakkin rat hole,' Derik said in dismay. 'Thought you said this was a smuggler's paradise.'

Coyote gestured around him. 'You've got scenery, you've got history, you've got raw materials – what's not to like? Follow me.'

Coyote led them to the inner airlock, keying in an access code that he kept hidden from their view. The doors to the airlock opened and bright light spilled out.

The airlock seemed to be in much better repair than the external bay. They filed in. It was a tight fit with Udian's large metallic body. Rebecca found herself wedged uncomfortably in the corner. The outer door closed. The airlock rotated. They felt a gravity adjustment taking place.

The inner door opened. A blast of noise hit them.

Rebecca blinked in surprise.

The inside of the station was arrayed in front of her. Red plush pile carpets covering a cascading arc of stairs with gilt-edged handrails led down into a courtyard decorated with fountains. A huge chandelier hung overhead, dominating the space and providing glittering illumination. Everywhere she could see were bars, gaming and gambling tables, dining facilities. Huge tubes containing bubbling liquid and aquatic creatures decorated the walls, along with a collection of fine

art, statues and glass artefacts. The structural pillars of the station were covered in dark mahogany and carved with intricate detail.

There were hundreds of people inside, milling around, appearing to be having a good time. None of them looked up or appeared to see anything unusual in their arrival. They looked like ordinary spacers, pilots, travellers and traders. They all appeared to be having a great time.

Rebecca looked around. Udian was unmoved as usual, Derik looking around almost salivating with delight. Coyote was looking back with a wry grin on his face.

‘Best kept secret in the galaxy,’ he said, smugly. ‘Welcome to Sanctuary. We’ll refuel here, prep our next move. Take some time out.’

‘Wow,’ Rebecca replied.

‘Yeah. Most people say that,’ Coyote grinned. ‘Try not to overindulge. Easy to do.’

‘Coyote? That you?’ a voice from the crowd shouted.

A man emerged. Tall, dark and handsome with a strong physique. His hair was black and he sported a neatly trimmed goatee beard that counterpointed his darkly tanned face. He was dressed in a lightweight tunic with golden embroidery and matching slacks, his fingers adorned with large golden rings.

Coyote turned to greet the newcomer.

‘Jaenus?’

‘What you doin’ here, old man?’ Jaenus said, jumping up the stairs towards them. ‘Sullyin’ my pad with your old-school fashion sense? Still wearing that tatty old headpiece I see...’

‘I never change, you know that,’ Coyote replied with a grin.

‘More’s the pity.’ Jaenus replied. ‘This your crew?’

‘We’re travelling together,’ Coyote answered, obliquely.

‘You guys fallen in with this old pirate?’ Jaenus demanded, looking around at them. He seemed completely unfazed by either Derik or Udian.

‘Times are tough,’ Derik quipped, shaking his hand.

‘This is Derik,’ Coyote said. ‘Best bounty hunter in the business, so he says.’

‘Don’t you know it,’ Derik fired back.

Jaenus grinned and looked at the big machine standing behind him.

‘I’m guessing Udian Shulth,’ Jaenus said. ‘Wow, this is a privilege...’

Derik rolled his eyes. ‘Again... I don’t get it...’

‘I’ll dispense with the pleasantries if it’s all the same to you,’ Udian replied, coolly. ‘My needs are simple, refuelling and repairs. If I may be excused?’

Coyote inclined his head slightly. ‘We’ve got five hours, then we need to be back at work.’

Udian didn’t wait for a response but proceeded to march away, making for what appeared to be a maintenance zone on the far side of the interior of the station.

Jaenus pulled a face at them, as if asking if everything was ok.

‘Don’t be offended,’ Derik said, laughing. ‘Not ripping you to pieces on first sight is actually pretty much his biggest compliment.’

Jaenus shrugged and then turned to Rebecca, his eyes widening in appreciation at the sight of her. She smiled by return.

‘And who do we have here?’ he asked, looking from Coyote to Rebecca and back again. ‘You didn’t tell me you were bringing such an enchanting woman with you...’

‘This is Rebecca,’ Coyote said, eyeing the pair of them. Rebecca was coyly looking up at Jaenus, clearly rather impressed. She offered her hand. Jaenus took it, giving it a quick kiss.

‘She’s...’

‘Available,’ Rebecca said, interrupting. ‘Care to show me around?’

Jaenus’ grin widened, putting an arm around her, steering her away. He winked at Coyote over his shoulder. Coyote rolled his eyes.

‘Is she safe with him?’ Derik said, looking after the departing couple.

‘Define safe,’ Coyote replied.

‘You trust him?’ Derik said, looking at him with his good eye.

‘Oh, I trust him ok,’ Coyote said, wryly.

‘So she’s not going to get stabbed or held hostage or nothing,’ Derik looked mildly concerned.

‘Not stabbed,’ Coyote acknowledged. ‘She might get nailed though.’

Derik burst out laughing. 'Say what?'

'Jaenus is an inveterate womaniser,' Coyote said, with a wry grin.

Derik managed to regain a degree of composure. 'And you know this how exactly?'

Coyote looked across the hall appraisingly, seeking out the welcome sight of the main bars not too far away. 'Oh... a couple of reasons. One, I've never seen him with the same girl twice...'

'And two?'

Coyote grinned. 'I taught him everything he knows. Care for a drink?'

'What do you know of Old-Earth?' Daddyhoggy inquired, once Jim had composed himself again.

'In what context?'

'In terms of when humanity left the cradle of its birth and ventured out into the stars.' The avian replied.

'Depends where you take it from. If you mean the generation ships, sometime in the twenty-second century.'

'We can safely discount those,' Daddyhoggy said. 'Most remain still in transit. A tragic experiment with far-reaching consequences. It's not directly applicable to our immediate problem.'

'The discovery of the Thru-space drive technology then,' Jim replied. 'Witch-space, wormholes, the whole chart navigation. Mid twenty-third Century.'

'Excellent,' Daddyhoggy seemed pleased. 'At least we can start in right place. What next?'

'Humanity spread out, terraforming planets where necessary, colonising others. First it was Chart one, then with the discovery of galactic hyperspace routes, the rest of the charts.'

'So far, so accurate,' Daddyhoggy said. 'And what did mankind discover on those planets when he arrived?'

'Depends,' Jim replied. 'Some planets were inhabited. Others were not.'

'Ah,' Daddyhoggy said, with a knowing nod. 'That is where the fiction begins.'

'You're going to claim they were all inhabited and mankind forced them off? That's nonsense.'

Daddyhoggy shook his head. 'Quite the reverse in fact. As mankind spread out amongst the stars they discovered... nothing. There was no life. Mankind was unique, so it seemed. No aliens were found at all.'

'That's impossible,' Jim countered. 'They're all around us. You, for example!'

Daddyhoggy's wings fluttered out and he looked angrily at Jim, clearly offended.

'I am not an alien!'

Jim was complete bemused. 'But...'

'My ancestors flew in the ancient skies of Old-Earth, as did those of all of the avians across the charts.'

'What?'

'The same can be said of all the felines, the canines, rodents and amphibians.'

Jim was shaking his head but Daddyhoggy continued undaunted.

'The twenty-fourth century was the start of many things. A genetic breeding programme or a failed experiment,' the big bird intoned. 'Humanity's legacy, for good or for ill, was to bless or curse the native species of Earth with consciousness and enhanced intelligence, so as to ease the loneliness of the void. For many decades it worked. Animal and human societies coexisted in harmony. Colonisation proceeded apace. Each species adopting planets as they found them suitable. Until the schism, until the purists.'

'The purists?'

'Those who disagreed with genetic modification in its many forms. Perhaps they might have had a case in the beginning. Some of the early genetic modifications were most unstable. But their eventual persecution knew no bounds. Once intelligence had been granted, it could not be taken away. A violation of rights. But that didn't stop them. They subverted other opinions and spread their propaganda. A coup for governmental control. Ultimately it meant war.'

'War?' Jim echoed. 'There was no war!'

'The early years of the twenty-fifth century were times of terror if you weren't human. The authorities on Old-Earth declared all intelligent creatures other than themselves unclean and began their programme of... cleansing,' Daddyhoggy said with distaste. 'It came to a head at Diso. A few humans fought alongside the other species, a group that would eventually become the Far Colonies Alliance. Finally, after decades of fighting and trillions of deaths on both sides a compromise was

agreed. The Far Colony worlds would be ostracised from the worlds under the purist control, worlds that now form the Federation and the Empire. All the genetically modified species would submit to regressive gene therapy to tame predatory and violent tendencies. It took years but it was finally agreed. Further genetic modifications were declared illegal, even cloning was banned. Each planet was given over to its now native inhabitants, with the Far Colony Alliance forming an administration divorced from the Federation, a cooperative between the isolated planets formed, on a galactic scale.'

'Galcop.'

'Yes,' Daddyhoggy mused. 'Galcop.'

'But that doesn't explain...'

'The Thargoids?' Daddyhoggy said with a nod.

'Surely they're not from Earth?'

'An insect, just like all the others. I think their genesis was a species known as the Praying Mantis, which they still resemble by all accounts. Yes, they were from Earth too.'

'And their hostility?'

'They refused to accept the compromise. Of all the species they insisted on remaining who they were. As such they are the most intelligent, most aggressive of all the outcomes of that one experiment seven hundred years ago. Attempts were made to reason with them and later subdue them. All were ineffective. The Thargoids stole what technology they could and fled. Disappearing into the darkness but vowing to return.'

'But why...'

'Do they attack?' Daddyhoggy continued. 'For Galcop to remain in existence it was a condition of the Old-Earth administration that all animal species be subject to the compromise. Galcop had little choice but to attempt to subdue them. Within a short time Galcop, driven by desperation, committed similar atrocities to those perpetrated by their ancestors from Old-Earth. The Thargoids were declared a threat, targeted and relentlessly pursued. That phrase they're quoting, from this book. These words were used to justify their extinction. They were declared enemies of Galcop. Enemies of humanity. A menace to be exterminated. Propaganda and brainwashing ensured they were vilified within a generation. Naturally they fought back. They invested much time in their technology and they continued enhancing their genetics to such a point they far outpaced the capabilities of their progenitors.'

‘They became a serious threat,’ Jim whispered.

‘The Thargoids were beginning to win. Their reproductive cycles faster, their technology better. Their warriors indefatigable, genetically engineered to have no fear. Galcop was desperate, seeking anything they could use. Finally the seals on forbidden technology were broken and a bio-weapon was deployed on the Thargoid homeworld. It was utterly destroyed. It was assumed that with no base the Thargoids would be swiftly defeated.’

‘But they turned to guerrilla tactics,’ Jim volunteered. ‘Striking from hiding, taking what they needed to survive and then moving on. Ever since...’

‘Indeed.’

‘But why now, why the heightened attacks? By report they’re heading for Lave, throwing every resource at Chart One to the exclusion of everything else.’

‘Lave is Galcop’s centre of power.’

Jim shook his head. ‘For all its faults, Galcop remains decentralised. Lave is significant but destroying it will not end Galcop any more than the destruction of their homeworld stopped them!’

‘Then they have another reason for their actions,’ Daddyhoggy replied. ‘The second part of your message perhaps?’

Rebecca stretched, languidly rolling onto her side, pulling the bed covers up around her. She curled up in a foetal position, looking idly at the star-spangled view out of the apartment windows as her body cooled.

Nice to feel like a woman again...

She continued to ponder the view in silence. Jaenus had already gone, making some irrelevant excuses. Rebecca hadn’t bothered to listen properly. It hardly mattered; she knew what the arrangement was. He’d been a talented lover, rather too well practised for her taste but a welcome diversion.

Never thought I’d be a cradle-snatcher. He must have been nearly ten years younger than me!

She’d surprised herself, truth be told. Maybe it was finally cutting the ties with her old dreams and longings. She’d given herself permission to let go, to be herself.

Coyote was right, it’s easier. No ties, no compromise, no broken promises.

The stars were silent, unmoving, devoid of the friendly twinkle she experienced when she had been planet-side on rare occasions. She fancied they almost looked stern, disapproving. She felt her stomach clench.

So why do I feel guilty? This is what I want! No responsibility!

She threw the bedclothes off and stood up. She stumbled on something and noticed her comm-tab clattering across the tiles. She picked it up and put it on the side; she'd switched it off a little earlier on.

I didn't want him interrupting anything!

She walked over to the bathroom to distract herself. She was delighted to find a real bath. Jaenus' pad was well equipped.

She ran herself a bath complete with excessive bubbles and lowered herself gently into it, luxuriating in the feel of water against her skin. She couldn't remember the last time she'd had a proper bath, somehow they never seemed to make it as essential equipment aboard ship. The water was cossetting, warm and indulgent. She leant back, only then noticing that the ceiling was mirrored. She caught sight of herself.

Her brown eyes were as distinctive as ever and she looked as young as she ever had. The red welt where the Thargoid had impaled her shoulder was an obvious mark of the dangerous life she led but even that was fading.

But I am getting older. Even if I don't look it, I feel it...

Images of laser fights, tough battles and narrow escapes flashed across her mind. Living on the edge couldn't help but be a strain. It was only going to get worse and it was never going to stop.

What am I doing?

She sank into the bath, submerging herself, her hair floating up around her like a veil.

Chapter Nine

RAGAZZA! DUX DUCIS, INCOLUMITAS!

Daddyhoggy reviewed the words again.

‘Perhaps if you told me the context,’ he instructed.

Jim told him about the Thargoid attack at Tionisla. How the Thargoids deliberately diverted their attack to pursue Rebecca’s ship, chanting the obscure phrase at the same time.

‘Curious,’ Daddyhoggy acknowledged. ‘Was it her or her ship they were after?’

‘Her ship was just an old heavy fighter. More than ten years, nothing they should have been interested in,’ Jim said. ‘They were scanning deliberately, it must be her.’

‘And what can you tell me about your friend?’ Daddyhoggy said, with a gleam in his eyes.

More than I care to...

‘She’s a fighter, a bounty hunter, probably one of the best pilots in the charts,’ Jim said with a sigh. ‘She’s special.’

‘That doesn’t sound that remarkable,’ Daddyhoggy replied. ‘There must be more to her than that.’

‘I’m not sure...’

Daddyhoggy leant back. ‘My good friend, if you don’t reveal the truth, how can I possibly help you?’

Jim thought about it for a moment, ‘It’s only a theory so far and you won’t believe me anyway.’

Daddyhoggy grinned his avian grin. ‘I am an avian librarian. Not only does my designation have a pleasant rhyme, such a combination is famously hard to ruffle and renowned for its credulity.’

Jim told Daddyhoggy what had happened to Rebecca and him a decade before. The clandestine search for Zerz, the lonely planet of Oresrati, the battle, the chase and the technology behind the deadly plasma accelerator.

Daddyhoggy thought for a long moment, staring intently at Jim as if trying to peer into his mind.

‘Well?’ Jim prompted after almost a minute had gone past.

‘Well,’ Daddyhoggy returned. ‘If what you are saying is true, that would be reason enough for the Thargoids to take an interest in her... or you for that matter. Which brings us back to the next phrase.’

Jim blinked. Daddyhoggy was completely unfazed, as if stories of high adventure were commonplace.

‘Any clues?’ Jim prompted, recovering from his astonishment.

‘Several,’ Daddyhoggy replied. ‘Now we have the language and a context, it should merely be a case of matching the words. Let’s start with ‘Ragazza’. If we select an original book with an equivalent modern translation we may be able to find a match.’

Jim took a deep breath. ‘Let’s get started.’

Coyote and Derik were on their fifth Evil Juice when Rebecca joined them at the bar.

‘Hey Princess,’ Derik called, waving to her and already looking a little worse for wear. ‘How’s my favourite murderous-space-damsel-in-distress?’

Rebecca raised an eyebrow but didn’t deign to respond to him.

‘Lizard can’t take his drink I see,’ she said.

‘It’s that cold blood. Gets clogged up easily,’ Coyote replied with a wink.

‘I am not cold-blooded...’ Derik roared, tottering on his bar stool. ‘Isss jusst rumours. No truuuuth in it whatsoever.’

‘Somebody gonna buy me a drink?’ Rebecca asked.

Coyote gestured to the bar and a waiter came over.

‘Whatever the little lady wants,’ he said.

‘Evil Juice?’ the waiter prompted, looking at the evidence surrounding Derik and Coyote.

Rebecca grimaced and shook her head. ‘Something a little more subtle. Any Anlian Gin in the house?’

‘Anlian Gin. I’ll have to see,’ the waiter shuffled away and then promptly returned with a glass of transparent liquid. It was smoking slightly.

‘You’re supposed to serve it in plastic,’ Rebecca said. ‘It eats glass.’

The waiter looked nonplussed. ‘I... er.’

Rebecca downed it in a single gulp, licking her lips.

‘Bit rough,’ she said after a moment, spitting the last bit onto the floor.

Coyote grinned. ‘Didn’t see you as a connoisseur.’

‘There’s a lot you don’t know about me,’ she returned. ‘Better make it a couple of these Evil Juices then. Gotta catch up with my compadres here.’

‘Another round,’ Coyote, waved at the waiter, who scuttled off once again.

‘Having a good time?’ Coyote prompted. Rebecca ignored him.

‘Yeah,’ Derik said loudly, grabbing an Evil Juice off the table. ‘How was Jaenus? Did you have great sex...?’

Rebecca’s eyes widened in surprise and shock. The buzz of conversation around them stopped abruptly. The entire population of the bar looked around at them.

‘Moving swiftly on,’ Coyote said loudly.

Derik look aggrieved, ‘What? Just asking. Did I miss something about monkey reproductive rituals?’

‘Derik!’ Coyote hissed. ‘Shut the frak up...’

Derik looked confused. ‘What’s the problem? She was in heat wasn’t she...?’

Coyote grabbed the lizard’s tongue and pulled his head around with it. Rebecca looked as if she was about to murder him.

‘Listen, gecko-features, just drop it, ok?’ Coyote said softly. ‘Or I’ll drop it for you, comprende?’

Derik made a muffled sound which might have been acquiescence. Coyote let him go, turning back to Rebecca.

‘Sorry about that. He’s pissed as a newt.’

Derik growled angrily. ‘I am not a frakkin’ newt! Pissed on the other hand... ha ha!’

Coyote rolled his eyes.

‘Anyway. I want you to know our next move. Udian will already know about this, having

been there before.’ He began, looking more seriously at the pair of them. ‘Our next move takes us to Anxeonis.’

‘And into the Tortuga Expanse,’ Rebecca said. ‘I’ve heard of it. Sounds like fun.’

‘You’re talkin’ about the Knife Edge,’ Derik said, taking a further slug of his Evil Juice.

‘Right,’ Coyote said. ‘The Expanse is bad enough but we’ve got to negotiate the way in.’

Their conversation stopped as the waiter returned, dishing out more drinks. Rebecca took one and took a sip.

‘So what’s the big deal with the Knife Edge?’ Rebecca asked.

‘The Knife Edge is the jump to Anxeonis from Xequerin. It’s pretty much the only way in or out of the region. It’s a natural choke point, crawling with Galcop ships on the one side and a potent mix of bounty hunters and pirates on the other. Access is heavily monitored.’

‘What’s the other route?’ Rebecca asked after the waiter had left them again.

‘We could go via the Teraed Region,’ Coyote said, ‘But that would take us almost an extra week. We can’t afford the time.’

Rebecca nodded. ‘So?’

‘The Galcop presence shouldn’t be a problem,’ Coyote continued. ‘They’re going to be more interested in checking stuff coming back out of the Expanse rather than stopping anyone crazy enough to be going in. The main problem will be getting your ship past them.’

Rebecca sat back on her bar-stool. ‘I’ll just stay here then, not a problem.’

‘Yeah, we know why that is...’ Derik laughed.

‘Shut up, lizard-breath.’

Coyote shook his head. ‘We’ll need the firepower. Xequerin isn’t exactly friendly and Anxeonis is worse. The Galcop contingent isn’t above a little bribery either. Four tough-looking ships entering the Expanse will raise eyebrows and get the comms lines buzzing regardless of how stealthy we are. We can expect a very warm reception on the other side.’

‘Can’t we just make another jump straight away?’ Rebecca asked. ‘Oh no, that breaks the first rule of smuggling doesn’t it.’

Coyote shot her a look. ‘I’d make an exception this time but it’s not an option. The Xequerin transit authorities require each ship to make an individual jump across the Knife Edge unless they’re

towing freight. Each ship is individually scanned. No multiple jumps, that's why you never see the bigger convoys going that way. They can't take their escorts unless they've all got witch-space drives. The next jump from Anxeonis is further than we'll have fuel for and there aren't any refuelling stations. We'll need to fight our way to the sun. Be ready for that.'

'But Galcop will take one look at my ship and impound it!' Rebecca said. 'No way I can sneak through with a Thargoid-style thruspace drive. The ship is brand new. I'm assuming I can't use a cloak.'

'They've got scanners for that anyhow,' Derik said, with a gulp.

'Quite right.' Coyote said with a grin. 'So you can't go through with a new ship, so you're going through in an old one.'

'Huh?'

Coyote smiled. 'Why do you think we came to a breaker's yard?'

Rebecca nodded. 'Ok, I get it. Clever.'

'Well I don't,' Derik said, taking another drink and looking at them with his head rocking from side to side. 'Frak... will you two sit still?'

The big lizard leant back and fell off his stool.

'I think you've had enough, mi amigo,' Coyote said, trying to pull the lizard off the floor. Rebecca helped on the other side. Derik was far too heavy for even both of them to carry but they managed to wrestle him across to a nearby couch that seemed ideal for the purpose. Several other individuals were sprawled out in a similar fashion. Huge rumbling snores came from the big lizard long before they managed to finish moving him.

'Sorry about that,' Coyote said, as they both settled back at the bar.

'It's ok,' Rebecca said softly. 'He's not the only one who's making a fool of themselves.'

Coyote looked at her for a moment. 'So how come he gets off so lightly?'

Rebecca looked up with a frown. 'What?'

'If that had been me you'd have been over the table slapping me into next week,' Coyote said, rubbing his jaw as if he had a bruise.

Rebecca smiled. 'Yeah. Maybe. I know where I am with him. Derik's an easy mark, black and white. You're different. You see stuff. That makes me nervous.'

Coyote propped up his sombrero. 'There could be a compliment in there somewhere, though I'm not sure. Might have to go digging.'

Rebecca looked away, pensive again.

'I thought about what you said,' she said softly. 'Back on Ermaso.'

'So I saw,' Coyote said with faint amusement.

Rebecca had the good grace to blush a little. 'I made the wrong call again. As always.'

'Trying to get him out of your system,' Coyote said.

Rebecca nodded. 'Something like that.'

'Did it work?'

Rebecca didn't respond. She was biting her lip. Coyote took another deep quaff of his Evil Juice and studied her for a moment.

Rebecca sighed and then looked back at him with a frown.

'And where do you fit into all this?' she demanded.

'Me?' Coyote replied innocently.

'Yeah,' Rebecca said. 'Mister I know everything and never make a wrong call. Do you know how frakkin' irritating you are?'

Coyote grinned, lit a colita and puffed a smoke-ring at her.

'I've made plenty of wrong calls, little one. Plenty.'

'But you can see stuff coming,' Rebecca said. 'It's like you've got some kind of sixth sense. All these places you know, the way across the chart. What to say and when. I've been through here more than once and never even heard the slightest whisper of anything out here.'

Coyote smiled at her enigmatically. 'I've been around, little one. I've lost count of the missions I've flown. Been around the eight countless times. Seen a lot I wish I hadn't seen. Lived with the regrets for many a long year...'

Rebecca frowned. 'So how old are you?'

'That's for me to know and you to guess. You're older than you look too.'

'I've had treatment.'

'So you have...' Coyote smiled back.

‘Ok. Keep your secrets, old man!’ Rebecca huffed.

‘We better get our pet newt sobered up,’ Coyote said. ‘We need to move on and there’s work to be done. Still a chance for you to earn that Elite status regardless. Anxeonis could be interesting...’

An hour of searching had accumulated a large pile of books. Daddyhoggy was searching through them methodically, whereas Jim was skimming them quickly, hoping to chance on the words.

‘Found it!’ He yelled in delight, peering closely at the book in his hand. *Annals of Pliny*. ‘Ragazza’.

‘Congratulations,’ Daddyhoggy crowed. ‘And the translation?’

Jim was already scanning the modern copy, quickly flicking through the unfamiliar paper pages.

‘Here... bit further down, extract from... this must be it...’ He looked up. ‘It means ‘young woman’. Young woman!’

‘That seems to match up with your friend,’ Daddyhoggy acknowledged. ‘Good.’

‘This is still taking too long!’ Jim said in frustration. ‘It could take us ages to find all the words this way...’

‘But I’ve already found the others,’ Daddyhoggy replied in surprise.

‘What?’ Jim cried, aghast once more.

‘I was waiting to discover the final word,’ Daddyhoggy replied innocently. ‘We should treat them as a complete phrase, naturally.’

Jim closed his eyes, counted to ten and then opened them again.

‘Naturally,’ Jim said weakly. ‘So?’

‘The nearest direct translation for ‘Dux Ducis’ would appear to be leader, guide, commander or perhaps someone in a position of authority or knowledge.’

‘And ‘Incolumitas’?’

‘That is absolutely certain. Its definition is unarguable and precise,’ Daddyhoggy straightened. ‘It means a place of safety.’

Jim frowned, trying to place the words in context. 'Young woman, leader, safety. Makes no sense. Rebecca's not a leader of anything and as for safety... we'll she's the last person you'd pick for that!'

'You're forgetting your weapon,' Daddyhoggy prompted.

Jim nodded. 'The accelerator. A huge strategic advantage...'

'More than that,' Daddyhoggy said, stretching out a wing. 'Now apply the translated words.'

Jim thought quickly. 'Leader, guide, commander... I don't understand.'

'Tense, man! Passive in this case and not a possessive!'

Jim glared. 'Can we stop with the lecturing... wait... She's not the leader... she will lead them!'

'Ah... ' Daddyhoggy looked smugly satisfied. His beak opened in delight. 'The moment of elucidation!'

'But that's ridiculous.' Jim countered. 'She won't side with them. She's on our side...'

'Are you sure which side you're on?' Daddyhoggy asked, 'Given the knowledge you have recently acquired?'

'Rebecca's a fighter. She wouldn't work with them.'

'Perhaps they'll coerce her?'

Jim nodded. 'They want her because they think she will...'

'Take them to a place of safety,' Daddyhoggy finished.

'But how?' Jim asked aloud.

'You're the one who knows her,' Daddyhoggy replied. 'You must have an appreciation of what she is capable of.'

Jim's thoughts were racing.

A place of safety. A place? Surely not... Lave too, it all makes sense!

Jim grabbed his comm-link and hammered out a message.

Rebecca, I know why the Thargoids are after you. Call me now!

He waited a moment for the transmission confirmed message to return, surprised it was taking so long. The core-comm network used a tachyon transmission system, it was virtually

instantaneous.

*Transmission acknowledgement failed. Core-Comm apologies for any inconvenience caused.
Please try again later.*

Jim frowned and swore. Daddyhoggy looked over to him. ‘An issue with your technology?’

Core-comm problem or is she just refusing my calls now?

‘Can’t confirm the message got there,’ Jim snapped, trying again. He got the same response. ‘Damn! No telling what the Thargoids will do if they do catch her.’

He placed the comm-link on the desk and began typing feverishly at the small screen.

‘What are you doing?’

‘Trying to trace the hops,’ Jim said. ‘Rebecca might have got the message but not be able to reply. If so I can trace where she is, close enough to get a system lock at least.’

‘And what are you going to do when you’ve found that?’

Jim smiled wickedly.

‘We are going to find her.’

The big bird looked at him, aghast.

‘I most certainly am not!’

‘Very well,’ Jim returned. ‘I’ll inform Galcop of this collection of material and suggest they send a team of researchers to holofac your collection and disseminate the contents around the charts.’

Daddyhoggy squawked in alarm, his wings extending and flapping. ‘You wouldn’t dare! But that’s intolerable! Who would care for the books?’

‘Once the content was recorded they’d probably chuck them,’ Jim replied off-handedly. ‘It’s only the information that counts, surely? Rather a waste of space all this paper.’

‘These books are invaluable historical tomes!’ Daddyhoggy cried. ‘They must be preserved!’

‘A museum perhaps,’ Jim mused. ‘Charge entrances fees, run tours for schools. All those young minds to feed...’

‘You’re a Visigoth! A Barbarian!’

‘Sticky fingerprints everywhere. I guess we’d run the risk of the odd page being lost here and there...’

‘This is extortion! Blackmail!’

‘Ah... the moment of elucidation,’ Jim said, grinning.

Daddyhoggy glared at him. ‘After all my help, this is how you repay me?’

‘You refused my payment, remember? I need your help and I’m betting you want to see how this ends. Am I right?’

Daddyhoggy ruffled his feathers with a sigh. ‘I’ll admit to a modicum of curiosity, nothing more.’

‘That’ll do me,’ Jim said. ‘Let’s go.’

‘Where are we going?’

Jim examined the output of his trace. ‘She was heading to Beenri via Ermaso. Trace shows the transmission got as far as Diedar. I’m guessing that’s where she is. Twenty-odd light years. Let’s hope we can catch her before the Thargoids do.’

‘You have a ship, I presume?’

Jim thought about the *Dubious Profit*.

‘Kind of,’ he said with a grimace.

Udian had moved into the maintenance area and replenished the various supplies his inorganic body parts required. The task was completed within an hour. He immediately proceeded to the transmitter array and booked a transmission slot, secreting himself back in his ship with a relay to the station’s systems.

He encrypted the channel a number of times and then played an inconsequential ‘ship’s chatter’ feed over the top, embedding his own conversation in a low bandwidth diagnostic channel within the main feed.

The viewer crackled on with a blurry picture, lacking definition.

‘Garew here. Ah... Udian. I was wondering where you’d got to.’

‘We’ve arrived at Diedar. The rest of the team have insisted on a recuperative pause. It was necessary to indulge their fragile physiologies.’

‘We still have time,’ Garew acknowledged. ‘Is everything ready?’

‘Both plans are ready for execution,’ Udian rumbled by return. ‘Do you have up-to-date intelligence?’

Garew nodded. ‘Thargoids have been allowed into the immediate area. They should be able to detect the *Spectre*’s unique engine signature without difficulty as you cross the Knife Edge. We’ll let them do the rest.’

‘You are sure about this?’ Udian replied.

Garew’s eyes narrowed, suspiciously. ‘Why shouldn’t I be?’

Udian replied easily. ‘The Thargoids aren’t pursuing her for no reason. It stands to reason they hope to gain some advantage from her capture.’

‘Of course. I’m counting on it.’

‘Do you know what this putative advantage is?’

Garew shook his head. ‘It is of little consequence. By the time they capture her, we’ll be in a position to activate either plan. Either way they are doomed. Checkmate.’

He doesn’t know about the plasma accelerator issue. If he knew he’d never risk losing the woman and I’m damned if I’m going to tell him – he might remove that option entirely. Better we use that advantage immediately...

Udian sighed uncomfortably.

‘Please don’t tell me you are developing sympathy for that woman,’ Garew mocked.

‘Hardly,’ Udian replied. ‘I merely dislike ambiguity. I would prefer we activate Plan ‘B’ at our first opportunity.’

‘Why?’

‘I calculate a better chance of success,’ Udian replied smoothly.

‘Within a week the Thargoids will be gone,’ Garew stated. ‘One way or the other. Patience, my friend. The current plan is sound. Proceed with it as agreed. Or do I need to invoke my own contingency?’

‘You do not.’

‘Carry it out then, Udian. Your life’s ambition fulfilled. That’s what you want isn’t it?’

‘It is. Rest assured it will be done.’

Garew nodded and cut the comm-link.

Udian thought through the implications.

Garew be damned. I will activate Plan 'B' the moment it becomes viable. The woman is doomed anyway; she might as well have some significance to her end.

Udian pulled up the information on his companions once more. He re-evaluated the data in depth, studied their flight tactics, habits and strategies...

...looking for weaknesses.

Coyote's plan was well conceived but Rebecca found it rather distressing. During the course of a couple of days a series of extraneous cargo bay extensions had been magnetically bolted along the flanks of the *Spectre*, totally obscuring the original hull. The automechs did all the heavy lifting but Rebecca was forced to watch in dismay from the tatty docking bay observation windows.

'But the handling will be totally smirched!' she kept crying. 'I won't be able to see, let alone fly or fight. It looks like a frakkin' garbage scow.'

'Good,' Coyote said with an approving nod.

'I wouldn't be seen dead in that,' she replied.

'That's the plan,' Coyote replied, grinning. 'Believe it or not, I'm trying to keep you alive. I told you, we can't go through Xequerin with a top secret vessel.'

'What if they scan the engines?' Rebecca demanded.

'They won't,' Coyote said.

'Why not?'

'Because you won't be using them. The *Spectre* will be totally powered down, dead in space.' Coyote said. 'I'll be towing you.'

'What?' Rebecca exclaimed.

Derik joined them, having been previously lugged to the infirmary for a detox. 'Hey look at that! Where did that classy ship come from? Bet the owner is someone real cute...'

Rebecca gave him a look that was more vicious than the triple military lasers aboard the *Spectre*.

‘Wait... Not yours surely?’ Derik laughed, feigning astonishment. ‘Really? Wow! It’s almost as gorgeous as you are...’

‘Shut up lizard-breath! Not talking to you,’ Rebecca snapped.

‘A sexy ship for a sexy simian...’

Rebecca tried to slap him but the big lizard batted her away easily. ‘Ha. You won’t find me half asleep under a sombrero...’

‘...No,’ Coyote replied. ‘Just intoxicated under a table.’

‘Go back to the plan,’ Rebecca demanded before Derik could manage a retort.

‘The *Spectre* will be dead in space,’ Coyote said. ‘You’ll be in an enviro-suit. I’ll tow you through the jump. Once in witch-space you can restart the engines, power up and dump the disguise.’

‘In witch-space?’ Rebecca goggled back at him.

‘Yes, in witch-space,’ Coyote said, ‘I hear you want to be Elite, time to see if you’re up for it. You’ve got to be ready for combat on the other side otherwise...’

Derik laughed. ‘...you can kiss your sexy little ass good bye... ouch! Frak, woman!’

Coyote rolled his eyes at the pair of them as Rebecca gloated with satisfaction.

‘He’s right though.’

The airlock door hissed open and Udian’s metallic form emerged. He surveyed the apparent wreckage of the *Spectre* briefly before marching over to them.

‘This is your plan?’ he rumbled.

‘It is,’ Coyote replied.

‘You intend to tow the *Spectre* through the border patrols?’

Coyote nodded. ‘Engines off and powered down. It’ll read like a garbage scow. And my old ship won’t raise any eyebrows. You and Derik can go through separately.’

‘So... engines off,’ Udian mused thoughtfully. ‘Are you sure this is a good idea?’

Coyote frowned, looking around at Udian. ‘Why wouldn’t it be?’

Udian gave the distinct impression of being ill at ease. ‘What happens if we run into trouble on the other side of the jump?’

‘Rebecca will dump the disguise and power up mid-witch,’ Coyote replied, still studying the

enigmatic machine carefully.

‘You can do that?’ Udian turned to regard Rebecca, with surprise.

‘Piece of cake,’ Rebecca replied, deadpan. ‘Even a mere Deadly combatteer like me can manage that.’

‘Who’s going through first then?’ Derik demanded. ‘Blazing the trail and all that?’

Coyote studied Udian for a moment, his eyes narrowed. ‘I think Udian should go first.’

The machine straightened slightly, his ocular sensors glowing fiercely before subsiding.

‘Very well.’

Jim had brought Daddyhoggy aboard the *Dubious Profit* to shrieks of admiration and flappy displays of humility from Gasazck, bemused looks from Hesperus, Stepan and D’Vlin and a sigh of despondency from Rus.

‘More crazy passengers?’ he moaned, immediately stomping off towards the rear of the ship.

‘We need to get to Anxeonis as soon as possible. We need to rendezvous with these four ships,’ Jim said, running aboard and handing Hesperus his comm-tab. ‘Let’s get moving.’

‘Anxeonis! But that’s nearly in the Tortuga Expanse!’ Hesperus yelled in response. ‘No way! No one but pirates, criminals, bounty hunters and gangsters go there!’

‘We should be right at home then,’ Stepan muttered to D’Vlin. The insect nodded and bobbed with laughter.

‘That’s where I need to go...’ Jim continued.

‘But... it’s dangerous!’

‘Think of all that bounty you can pick up on route. A few well-placed kills. No one’s going to miss them...’

‘And the small matter of payment?’ Hesperus replied. ‘Apologies for bringing up such a mundane item at a time of crisis but...’

‘Name your price. But let’s move!’ Jim snapped.

Hesperus came up with a ridiculous fee off the top his head. ‘One hundred thou...’

‘Done,’ Jim said, grabbing Hesperus’ paw and shaking it vigorously. ‘Now get this bucket of

bolts up into the black!’

Stepan and D’Vlin looked at Hesperus expectantly.

Hesperus paused for a moment.

Can’t believe that’s the only time I’ve been able to name my price and I didn’t bid as high as I could! Frak! And double frak!

‘What are you two looking at?’ Hesperus snapped, gathering himself together. ‘You heard the man, witch-space! Ho!’

Stepan and D’Vlin scuttled away, heading for the bridge.

Hesperus turned to be confronted by the seven-foot-tall Daddyhoggy, who looked around disapprovingly at the interior of the *Dubious Profit*. Hesperus flinched back in surprise.

‘Wooah...’

‘So this is what the inside of a spaceship looks like, is it?’ Daddyhoggy muttered in a deep voice, eyeing the dirty stained walls of the cargo bay. ‘Not exactly salubrious, is it?’

‘Welcome aboard the *Dubious Profit*,’ Hesperus said uneasily. The bird stared back at him, unblinking. Hesperus recoiled slightly; the bird looked unimpressed but curiously expectant. ‘Have we met before?’

Daddyhoggy looked Hesperus up and down.

‘I sincerely hope not. I’d anticipate having better taste in travelling companions.’

The internal gravity of the *Dubious Profit* engaged with the squealing smoothness of an unlubricated industrial garbage compactor, throwing everyone abruptly to one side as the familiar list established itself. Engines whining and straining against Ordima’s gravity well, the *Dubious Profit* blasted up and away, orienting itself towards the lonely blackness of space.

The *Spectre* slowly inched out of the docking bay of the old Transhab station, carefully moving forward with limited power from its main drive. Rebecca was at the helm, cursing at what had been done to her ship. She felt exposed. With the cargo bays bolted across the ship she couldn’t fire any weapons and with more than twice the mass hanging off the ship’s framework her top speed and manoeuvrability were less than a quarter of normal. The shields were off too as they couldn’t be activated around the increased mass of the cargo bays.

No weapons, no shields and two communist systems to traverse. Wonderful. Might as well paint a big red target on the side and be done with it!

Ahead of her the *Dark Star* and *Persistence* were cruising slowly, with the *Hammer* bringing up the rear.

‘All set?’ Coyote called.

‘All here boss,’ Derik replied.

‘Confirmed,’ Udian’s acknowledged.

‘Rebecca?’ Coyote queried.

‘Well, I’m moving aren’t I?’ she snapped back. ‘That’s about all I can do.’

‘We’ll be looking out for you,’ Coyote assured her. ‘You’ve got three Elite combateers as escort.’

‘Yeah,’ Derik fired back. ‘What else do you want?’

‘Bug-eyed lizard liver for dinner,’ Rebecca returned.

‘Engaging jump to Esanbe,’ Coyote called. ‘Rebecca you follow me. Derik and Udian bring up the rear.’

With a flash of light and a slightly erratic curved trajectory, the *Dubious Profit* materialised in the Xequerin system. Righting itself, it oriented its course towards the planet, its main engines stuttering back up to full power.

From the bridge the planet spun recklessly on screen as Stepan managed the *Dubious Profit*’s tendency to roll when turning left. Ahead they could see vast arrays of ships parked across the space lanes. Massive queues of vessels were waiting to be inspected having emerged from the Tortuga Expanse. Smuggling was rife in such areas and the Galcop border control was strict. Vipers flitted back and forth amongst the various convoys. It looked like a delay of days to get the permits arranged and the clearance granted.

Fortunately we’re going in, not coming out...

Jim reasserted his grip on the grimy flight rail that ran around the perimeter of the bridge in order to steady himself, fighting down the waves of sickness threatening to overwhelm him.

Guess I was spoiled with Rebecca’s smooth flying...

Next to him Daddyhoggy appeared unmoved, regarding the activities of the bridge crew with detachment.

‘Now what?’ Hesperus demanded.

‘Wait a moment,’ Jim hedged. Pulling out his comm-tab, he tried resending his message again but it remained rejected. He began tracing the signal. When the result came back he frowned.

She’s not here. Esanbe? We’ve overtaken her, what’s taking her so long?

A tough no-nonsense voice issued from the speakers.

‘Python-class vessel *Dubious Profit*. Please state your intentions.’

Hesperus grabbed the comm-link.

‘You sure about this?’ he said, looking at Jim and Daddyhoggy.

‘No,’ Daddyhoggy replied. ‘It is a foolhardy venture with little probability of...’

‘He means yes. Get us to Anxeonis,’ Jim said.

We can’t hang about here and she isn’t far behind.

‘Python-class vessel *Dubious Profit*. State your intentions!’

Hesperus triggered the comms. ‘Galcop control this is *Dubious Profit*. Request immediate transfer to Anxeonis.’

There was a pause on the comms before the voice responded.

‘Python-class vessel *Dubious Profit*. Navigate to marker twenty-three gamma and hold for scanning.’

‘Scanning?’ Hesperus queried before remembering to keep his mouth shut.

‘Due to recent Thargoid incursions we have increased security checks for all key witch-space transit links. All vessels entering the Tortuga Expanse are scanned for contraband materials and other restricted cargoes.’

‘Acknowledged,’ Hesperus said weakly and shut off the comms. Stepan tweaked the *Dubious Profit*’s course towards the advertised nav marker.

‘What’s the problem?’ Jim demanded. ‘You’re not carrying any contraband cargo are you? I saw the hold, it’s empty!’

‘This is true,’ Hesperus lamented.

‘And nothing on the restricted list?’ Jim said, his eyes narrowing.

‘Define ‘restricted’,’ Hesperus said, slyly.

Daddyhoggy leant forward. ‘Adjective. Limited in extent, number, scope or action. Alternatively for limited circulation and not to be revealed to the public for reasons of interstellar security. Synonyms are limited, confined, narrow, finite and qualified.’

‘Clear?’ Jim asked, shooting Daddyhoggy a look.

‘Er...’ Hesperus began, in an attempt to clarify matters.

‘We’ve got certain items aboard...’ Stepan began.

‘...which, while not restricted in the traditional sense,’ Hesperus smoothly continued for him, ‘Might cause those with an overly zealous approach to the letter of the law to view us in a less than welcoming manner...’

‘What are you carrying?’ Jim demanded.

D’Vlin clicked and waved his antenna about. ‘Trumbles!’

‘Trumbles?’ Jim cried in dismay. ‘You’re carrying trumbles?’

‘Not carrying as such...’ Stepan said. ‘We sort of... lost one.’

‘Lost one?’ Daddyhoggy inquired.

‘Oh joy,’ Jim said. ‘Where?’

‘Somewhere in the ‘tween hulls crawlways.’ Stepan said, with a glum expression.

‘They’ll be everywhere!’ Jim said.

‘We know,’ Stepan acknowledged.

‘They? I fear you are confusing your plurals,’ Daddyhoggy interjected.

‘No we’re not,’ Hesperus said, shaking his head.

‘Perhaps you can enlighten me to the nature of these trumbles?’ Daddyhoggy asked.

‘Trust me, you don’t want to know,’ Jim said.

‘Cute and fluffy companions for the lonely space traveller,’ Hesperus said with a gleam in his eyes. ‘Perfect souvenirs for the long haul passenger. I can provide you with one if you wish, for a very reasonable fee...’

‘Voracious little creatures which consume anything even vaguely organic,’ Jim countered. ‘With ridiculously overzealous libidos, they multiply until all resources are consumed and over-population ultimately kills them off...’

‘Sounds like human-kind to me,’ Daddyhoggy replied.

‘Worse,’ Jim said.

Daddyhoggy’s eyes widened. ‘That bad?’

‘Still, it might work to our advantage,’ Jim said. ‘The moment Galcop scanners spot a trumble infestation aboard they won’t be interested in a closer look. They won’t risk getting one of those things on their ships.’

The *Dubious Profit* coasted to a stop near the nav marker. Scanning beams raked the ship, flashing over the pock-marked hull and the corroded external lettering.

The crew and passengers held their breath.

The comms buzzed for attention. Hesperus clicked it on.

‘Python-class vessel *Dubious Profit*. Scan complete, you are clear to proceed to Anxeonis. Engage drives at your discretion.’

Everyone let out a collective sigh of relief. Stepan engaged the witch-space drive countdown.

‘Python-class vessel *Dubious Profit*...’

‘Yes?’ Hesperus responded, with a worried tone.

The voice was lowered now. ‘I recommend you give your vessel an extremely good clean before you come back this way.’

‘Copy that, Galcop...’

The *Dubious Profit* disappeared across the Knife Edge towards Anxeonis.

The quartet of ships materialised deep in the Esanbe system, emerging from witch-space and coasting to a halt in the darkness near the witch-point beacon. Coyote was scanning the space immediately around them. There were no other ships.

‘Let’s get ourselves out of harm’s way,’ he instructed. ‘Torus drive for five minutes at ninety degree negative pitch.’

The four ships dived away, triggering their drives in sequence. After several minutes they came to a halt and pulled back into formation again.

‘Time to power down,’ Coyote called.

‘Copy that,’ Rebecca acknowledged.

Here goes nothing...

She was already dressed in her enviro-suit, all she needed to do was to put the helmet on and she’d be completely enclosed in a self-contained life support system. That was just as well. Once the power aboard the *Spectre* was shut down everything would stop working. Engines, weapons, shields, navigation... and life support. They would be enough air in the ship to last her for several hours but the rapid temperature drop would be the main problem. The *Spectre*’s design ensured it could dissipate heat very efficiently given the prodigious heat penalty incurred by having three forward weapons.

And I hate the cold anyway.

She stored all the navigation settings and shutdown the Astrogation console. The familiar green ovoid of the scanner flickered and went out. Next came the main systems. The engines faded out with a whine of reducing power as the main power plants were set to standby. The shield generators were already off-line. Lasers and missile systems were next, followed by the supplementary navigation computers.

Outside the ship lights faded out. Even the pulsing navigation lights went out. The *Spectre* looked dead in space.

‘That’s it,’ Rebecca called. ‘Shutting down my transmitter now.’

‘Keep your comm-tab ready in case we need to contact you in a hurry but do not send any outbound messages once we’re in Xequerin,’ Coyote called. ‘And don’t activate anything until we’re in witch-space transit to Anxeonis. You’re not here, remember?’

‘I’m not a moron,’ Rebecca snapped.

‘Who said that?’ Coyote’s voice quipped back.

Rebecca pulled a face.

‘Cute. No bumps, you hear?’ she replied. ‘I’ll give you marks out of ten.’

‘Smooth as silk,’ Coyote assured her. It was far more than just worrying about a comfortable

ride. Without power the *Spectre* would have no inertial management system. If Coyote pulled a full-bore burn with his engines the *Spectre* might easily come apart. Even if it didn't, Rebecca would be little more than a dark stain on the rear bulkhead.

'We'll be with you all the way,' Derik added. 'Don't worry.'

'Thanks. You'd better be.'

Rebecca switched the transmitters off and then powered down the remaining systems. There was a brief pause and then the gravity plating lost its charge and she felt herself beginning to float in freefall. It felt awful, her brain telling her she was falling through space. She instinctively grabbed one of the emergency handholds dotted around the bridge, trying to quell the rising nausea. For a space traveller she had little enthusiasm for zero-gee.

Who ever said space travel was glamorous?

Ahead she could make out Coyote's Cobra arranging itself in front of her. A magnetic grapple snaked out from his ship, twisting and coiling towards her. It locked on somewhere below the bridge windows with a dull thud that echoed through the silent ship.

Rebecca waited a moment, expecting a message from her comm-tab. She frowned.

What's he waiting for?

The *Dark Star* floated in front of her. She saw its navigation lights flicker on and off as if trying to indicate something.

'Well?' she demanded at the bridge windows. 'You're supposed to message me!'

She looked back at the comm-tab. It was blank; empty.

Switched off! After the bath...

Hastily she prodded it and it glowed back into life, beeping immediately for attention.

Messages Pending. Receiving...

ID: Dark Star (Narrowband) : Tow looks good, you ready?

ID: Dark Star (Narrowband) : Wakey Wakey...

Rebecca quickly punched out a confirmation, shaking her head.

I'm losing it...

There was a soft jerk and she looked up to see the *Dark Star* slowly inching forwards,

applying a slowly incrementing amount of thrust from its main engines. The pair of Caducei were flanking him, one to port and one to starboard. The witch-space jump would be next.

The comm-tab beeped. Rebecca looked down with a puzzled frown.

Messages Pending. Receiving...

ID: Dubious Profit (CoreComm – Ordima): Rebecca, I know why the Thargoids are after you. Call me now! Jim.

ID: Dubious Profit (CoreComm – Xequerin): Rebecca, dammit woman! This is important! Where are you? Call me now! I'm en route to Anxeonis! Don't leave there without contacting me! Jim.

Rebecca banged her palm against her forehead.

Now he gets attentive!

She started typing but she was interrupted by a flash of chromatic light from outside. The transit to Xequerin had begun.

Too late.

And now I'm under complete radio silence!

The convoy appeared at Xequerin and slowly began to move in-system. Coyote's astrogation scanner was flooded with ship signatures. Hundreds of ships were queued up around the Galcop transit point. It appeared a lot of people were leaving the Tortuga Expanse. Getting out was problematic though, needing various permits and clearances from Galcop itself.

Good, it's busy. That should help...

Within seconds the comm-link was buzzing.

'Cobra-class vessel *Dark Star*. Please state your intentions.'

Coyote triggered the comm-link.

'*Dark Star* here. Requesting immediate jump to Anxeonis with tow and two escorts.'

'State your final destination *Dark Star*.'

'Empty holds bound for Xeenle,' Coyote replied easily. 'Bulk haul of radioactives from there to Biisza.'

Radioactives were the most plausible justification for hauling a garbage scow. Nobody wanted all that waste material aboard their own ship.

There was a brief pause.

‘Cobra-class vessel *Dark Star*. Navigate to marker forty-eight delta and hold for scanning with escorts.’

‘Copy that, Galcop.’

So far, so good.

Coyote nudged the *Dark Star* towards the indicated nav marker. On the forward viewer he could see the queue of ships waiting to go outbound towards the Tortuga Expanse. It was far shorter than the arrivals queue. With luck, it would only take a few minutes.

‘Gentlemen,’ he called over the narrowband. ‘Formation if you please. *Hammer* up front, *Persistence* behind.’

Let’s see if that metal creature complies...

Coyote watched as the *Hammer* assumed a position in front of the *Dark Star*. Coyote rubbed his beard thoughtfully. The *Persistence* took up a position behind and they closed in on the marker.

No complaints from Udian... maybe I’m just being paranoid.

‘Cobra-class vessel *Dark Star* and convoy. Commencing scan. Do not deviate from flight path.’

‘Acknowledged,’ Coyote said.

Rebecca saw the faint scanning beams flicker across the *Hammer* and then across the *Dark Star*. Next they flickered around the disguised *Spectre*. Light glimmered off the windows, abruptly banishing the darkness of the bridge. She crouched down away from it, instinctively hiding.

Coyote watched the scanning beams flicker back and forth across the *Spectre*.

‘Cobra-class vessel *Dark Star*. Identify your cargo hauler.’

Coyote licked his lips before responding.

‘Galcop. It’s a modified multi-facet cargo hauler based on an old Vampire chassis. Picked it

up in Atrabiin. It's for sale if you want it...'

The scanning beams flickered onwards to the *Persistence*. A minute had passed.

'Cobra-class vessel *Dark Star* and convoy. Scan complete, you are clear to proceed to Anxeonis. Proceed to witch-space point and transfer in sequence.'

Udian watched as the convoy slowly moved towards the jump-point. Coyote's plan was working; Udian would be in position to jump in less than thirty seconds. The wily contrabandista clearly knew that something was untoward and had placed Udian at the front in an attempt to mitigate whatever it was.

Unfortunately, that's simply not acceptable. Not if we're anticipating using plan 'B'.

Udian sent a command via the autonomic reflexes of the *Hammer*, recalling a file he'd assembled during the stopover on the *Catechism*. Once again he congratulated himself on having the foresight to build in some insurance in case of adversity such as this. The file appeared immediately and he applied it to the engine management computers.

The drives stuttered for a moment, both engines flickering uncertainly before returning to normal.

It should only take a few seconds...

Coyote continued to watch. Nothing seemed amiss. The plan was working. Scans of the *Spectre* had not penetrated it effectively and its state of total shutdown made it appear just like an old freight carrier. Galcop had bought his line. On the rear scanner, Derik's *Persistence* was holding station at a low speed and Udian's ship was doing likewise just in front.

Almost there...

There was a buzz on the astrogation console, for a moment the yellow blip that marked Udian's vessel changed colour to a flashing red and green before returning to yellow again. Coyote frowned, wondering if there was a glitch on the scanner.

Vipers came streaking in from the sides of the space-lane, their bright magenta flashers sequencing in the darkness. There were four of them, heading straight towards Coyote and the others.

Fly casual everyone, may mean nothing...

The narrow-band comms channel crackled.

‘Cadeceus-class vessel *Hammer of Sorrow*, abort witch-space transit and pull over. Shut down your drives immediately and standby for boarding.’

Frak!

‘Complying,’ Udian’s voice replied despondently.

Udian had no choice but to pull over. The four Vipers had already surrounded his ship. The *Hammer* coasted to a stop. Coyote gently pulled in the *Dark Star* behind the big bio-ship.

Immediately the narrow-band comms lit up again.

‘Cobra-class vessel *Dark Star*, proceed with witch-space transit.’

Coyote opened up a return channel. ‘Galcop, the *Hammer* is part of our escort. We can’t go into Anxeonis without...’

‘*Dark Star*, proceed with jump or your entire convoy will be impounded,’ came the immediate response.

Can’t push it, if they decide to board the Spectre...

Coyote heaved an exaggerated sigh for the purposes of theatre. ‘Copy that Galcop, death or glory. Death most likely. Out.’

The *Dark Star* moved out past the *Hammer*, the *Persistence* following behind the hidden *Spectre*.

Rebecca couldn’t hear the communication between the ships but she had seen the Vipers shoot across and watched as the *Hammer* pulled off to one side.

‘Oh frak, no... no... no...’ she breathed.

Then she felt the nudge as the *Dark Star* began moving again, leaving the *Hammer* behind.

What’s going on?

Udian had shut down his engines and relaxed as the Viper police ships continued to scan his vessel.

‘Are you looking for something in particular?’ he queried, watching the flickering scanning

beams trace patterns across the hull again.

‘Scanners picked up the signature of a Thargoid vessel,’ the answer came back.

‘Really?’ Udian feigned complete surprise. ‘But this isn’t a Thargoid vessel. It is a bio-ship, perhaps it generated a false ident? I’ll happily transmit an updated transponder meta-code if that will help.’

‘Hammer of Sorrow. Hold position.’

‘As you wish.’

Udian smiled inwardly.

Derik was likewise puzzled. He’d seen the blip on his own scanner and peered at it suspiciously. He’d listened to Coyote’s careful exchange of words with the Galcop police on the narrow-band comms.

He grimaced as the *Persistence* slowly moved past the stationary *Hammer*.

What are you playing at, Udian?

Udian’s ship and the four Vipers fell astern, shrinking on the rear view. Then the narrowband comms became active once again.

‘Cobra-class vessel *Dark Star*, you are cleared to jump to Anxeonis. Proceed immediately. Caduceus class vessel *Persistence of Memory*, stand by to jump when witch-space transit wormhole from previous jump has closed. Caduceus-class vessel *Hammer of Sorrow*, you are cleared to proceed to witch-space transit point.’

Derik let out a sigh as he saw Udian’s ship move slowly away from the Vipers and resume position behind him.

False alarm? Didn’t fancy going into Anxeonis without a full armada...

Coyote frowned, watching the astrogation scanner. Udian’s ship was falling back into the convoy but at the rear now, rather than at the front where Coyote had wanted him.

Can’t have just been a glitch, timing is too convenient. But why would he want to jump last? What’s he doing? What’s the angle? It’s not going to make that much of a difference. We’ll have this out on the other side...

Coyote had no more time to consider the possibilities. The automated countdown triggered and the *Dark Star* surged into witch-space along with the *Spectre*.

Rebecca watched the sequence from the bridge and felt the *Spectre* drop into witch-space at the same moment. This was it, the longest jump of them all. Across the Knife Edge. She'd never been this way before. There weren't many good reasons for entering the Tortuga Expanse.

A brief flash of light flickered across the darkened bridge monitors before the characteristic swirling patterns of witch-space formed in front of her.

We made it!

She flicked on the transmitter controls.

'Coyote, you there?'

Coyote's voice sounded over the narrow-band, distorted by the peculiar effects of the witch-space tunnel. 'I'm here,' his voice sounded grim.

'What happened back there?'

'Not sure... Maybe nothing...' Coyote's voice was low and pensive. 'Power up. I'm ready to drop the tow.'

'Copy that,' Rebecca acknowledged and began keying the auto-startup sequences. Within a few seconds the *Spectre* began humming back into life. The various status panels illuminated; shields, weapons, engines. All ok.

'All set,' she replied after a minute, as the life support made the cockpit habitable again. She unzipped the enviro-suit, glad to be able to breathe fresh air once more.

'Dropping tow,' Coyote called.

Rebecca saw the magnetic clamp detach and swiftly rewind itself back into the rear of Coyote's ship. With both ships quiescent during the transit, neither appeared to move relative to the other.

'Jettisoning cargo bays,' Rebecca said, switching off the magnetic clamps that held her disguise in place. After a handful of jolts she could begin to see the old extension modules float away from the *Spectre*, slowly being pushed away by the minute station-keeping thrusters used to manoeuvre them in normal space.

As she watched the cargo bays drifted towards the inner boundary of the witch-space tunnel.

As they came in contact they began to tumble and drift backwards behind the two ships. Before long they were lost to sight. Rebecca knew they'd eventually fall out of the tunnel and drop back into normal space somewhere along their route. Some future explorer might one day encounter them, wondering what could possibly have caused a bunch of cargo bay modules to end up in deep space.

'All clear,' she called.

'Good. Sit tight and be ready when we get to the other side,' Coyote's distorted voice returned.

Udian watched as the worm-hole from Derik's *Persistence* shrank, flickered and vanished.

'Cadeceus-class vessel *Hammer of Sorrow*, you are clear for witch-space jump. Acknowledge.'

Udian acknowledged the call and activated the jump computers. The countdown began. As it passed the last five seconds he activated the engine management computers again.

One more time, just to be sure they know where we are...

The engines on the *Hammer* stuttered again.

Udian saw the Vipers immediately turn and begin surging towards him. The Galcop police activated the narrowband comms channels...

'Cadeceus-class vessel *Hammer of Sorrow*, abort witch-space jump and stand...'

Space flickered, scintillated and the *Hammer* was gone.

Rebecca turned her attention back to the flight instruments. Ahead she could still see Coyote's Cobra. She'd never flown in such a close witch-space formation before. You had to be careful not to disrupt the wormhole with too much mass. Both ships were strictly following computerised guidance, effectively immobile as light years of space streamed past in a matter of minutes.

It's just witch-space. Try not to worry...

It had always entranced her. She remembered how she used to think of it as a magic place, lost between the worlds. Only when she was older did she understand about the monitoring satellites, branch lines, stop points and rescue stations dotted along the many channels at intervals of several billion kilometres to ensure witch-space transit remained reasonably secure and predictable.

Then there were the things that could go wrong. Atomic reorganisation and time travel. Both could really ruin your day.

It was a non-space, between. The gap that separated nothing from nothing.

They used to say it was haunted. Maybe that's why they call it 'witch'. My father used to say there were ghosts in here, shadows of people who went in and never came out...

A shadow passed over the cockpit of the *Spectre*.

Rebecca looked up, uncomprehending, jolted from her reverie.

Another ship?

For a moment she stared, terrified, the cold clutches of fear making her heart hammer violently.

The other vessel was so close it almost brushed against her own. It slowly moved a little further away, a hideous green and magenta sheen flickered across its external hull, almost as if it was alive. Rebecca turned to see the first angle of an octagonal form...

Witch-space ambush!

'There's a Tharg in the tube!' she yelled into the narrow-band. Sickening green light flickered around her and the *Spectre* lurched.

'RAGAZZA! DUX DUCIS INCOLUMITAS!'

Coyote heard Rebecca's cry and snapped on the rear viewer. Rebecca's *Spectre* was directly behind him. Above it, bold as brass, was a Thargoid warship, hovering barely a few metres above Rebecca's ship.

Where did that come from?

'Hold on!' he snapped into the narrow-band comms. He tried to abort the auto-pilot but his commands were rejected. He knew it was highly dangerous to attempt to navigate manually through a witch-space tunnel...

Warning! Disengaging autopilot during witch-space transit is not recommended. Please enter override code to confirm.

'Do it you damned machine...'

Warning! Code incorrect. Please enter override code to confirm.

Coyote stabbed in the codes. He was still wrestling with the controls when a blaze of green light washed over him. He looked up at the rear view.

The *Spectre* was rolling drunkenly, as if its stabilisation thrusters were firing. Coyote could see the Thargoid was emitting a beam of intense green light. The *Spectre* spun, putting Coyote in mind of a fly being wrapped a silk cocoon by a victorious spider.

Abruptly the witch-space tunnel shifted, bifurcating into two overlapping tunnels of light. The new one slowly began to arc away from the first as they continued to travel through it; his Cobra following the original and the *Spectre* and the Thargoid following the new one.

Rebecca's voice came faintly from the narrowband.

'Coyote! You need to listen to me. Contact Jim McKenna...'

'Rebecca?' Coyote fired back. 'I'm coming about, just...'

'No listen, there's no time! Raxxla!' she cried. 'Remember: Raxxla! Tell Jim, remember Raxxla, Coyote! I wouldn't have wished this on you. Raxxla!'

'Raxxla? What?' Coyote hammered into the narrowband. 'Rebecca! No!'

There was no further response. The second tunnel quickly shrank astern, before rapidly fading in the darkness of the non-void.

Coyote grasped the arms of his flight seat as the witch-space transit ended. The *Dark Star* reappeared in normal space.

Both the *Spectre* and the Thargoid vessel were gone.

Rebecca saw the tunnel change direction before she was abruptly dumped out into normal space prematurely. A quick glance at the advanced compass told her all she needed to know. She hadn't arrived at Anxeonis. This was interstellar space, somewhere between the start of her jump point and the destination.

The astrogation scanner confirmed her worst fears. There were at least ten Thargoid vessels in the vicinity. Most were the familiar warships but one had a much larger mass signature. A mothership.

She could see it on the viewer, hanging in the background some distance away. A large malevolent vessel, a huge green disk perhaps two or three kilometres in diameter.

She spun the *Spectre* around, triggering the gravity lensing drive. The *Spectre* shot forward, escaping the clutches of the Thargoid warship that had ambushed her in witch-space.

You're not taking me without a fight!

Ghostly fingers of light flickered around the cockpit, the familiar caress of scanning beams. Rebecca tried to evade but it was pointless.

'RAGAZZA! DUX DUCUS INCOLUMITAS!'

Is it me or do they actually sound gleeful?

Rebecca locked the witch-space coordinates onto Anxeonis, waited a moment for the astrogation computer to catch up and then triggered the jump.

Thank frak for the first rule of smuggling!

Green lasers splashed out towards her. She instinctively dodged, anticipating and reacting before the Thargoids could target her.

Witch-space in 15 seconds.

All of the warships swarmed in her direction but their fire seemed half-hearted, unconcerned.

She triggered the trinary forward weapons of the *Spectre* and the Thargoid before her dodged and fled, immediately breaking off its engagement.

Witch-space in 10 seconds....

She spun the *Spectre* around and picked another target. Minor hits were deflected by the shields on her ship. This new Thargoid did exactly the same thing, disengaging the moment she attacked. Rebecca didn't know how to counter the defensive tactics. Each Thargoid would withdraw, allowing another to slot in behind her.

Witch-space in 5 seconds...

She fired again, watching the laser temperature edge into the middle of the gauge. Another Thargoid retreated, letting another take its place. They were swapping in and out, clearly aware of the firepower possessed by the *Spectre*, each taking their own share of the weaponry blast, before allowing another to shoulder the burden while the earlier one recharged. All the while the *Spectre's* power was slowly being drained away.

Witch-space motors engaged.

Warning! Witch-space jump aborted! Gravity well detected. Unable to establish stable

wormhole.

Rebecca clenched her hands on the controls.

Jammed. Must be the mothership!

Rebecca turned and started to head in the opposite direction to the mothership, with a view to getting as far away from it as possible in the hope of still making a jump.

The Thargoids had other plans.

The moment they calculated her vector they immediately intercepted her, a wall of ships rising up in front of her flight path. Fierce green laser fire splashed across her shields, almost depleting them in a single strike. Rebecca was forced to turn away to starboard. The Thargoids swarmed along her port flank, peppering the hull with laser fire.

She tried again, reversing her course, trading laser fire and trying to punch through the wall of ships. It was to no avail. The Thargoids regrouped and reformed their formation, blocking her route and covering her flightpath with criss-crossing beams of deadly energy. She turned aside again, this time to port.

They aren't going to let me go.

'Ragazza, dux ducis incolumitas...' The proclamation came across the wide-band, different now. Subdued, almost thoughtful.

Rebecca fired angrily but the Thargoids dodged out of the way, refusing to engage directly, before turning and aligning themselves once again. Green lasers flickered across her shields, further draining the energy on board the *Spectre*.

It was only a matter of time.

Jim was standing on the bridge of the *Dubious Profit* when the ships emerged from witch-space. A familiar ship appeared, a rather battered looking Cobra Mk3. It had clearly seen some action.

Next came a sinister looking bio-ship. He'd not seen a Caduceus in real life before, it was an imposing vessel. He could tell from the reactions of Hesperus and Stepan that they were likewise intimidated. Some ships did that; the overwhelming impression of power, speed and barely restrained ferocity. Jim waited and a third ship arrived, another Caduceus, similar to the first.

‘Thargoids in the damn tube!’ a clipped voice snapped on the narrow-band. ‘What the frak is going on? Hang on, where’s...’

‘Aren’t there supposed to be four of them?’ Hesperus asked, counting off on his molybdenum coated claws.

‘Yes...’ Jim answered, his stomach tightening with dread. ‘Scan them. I need to confirm the IDs!’

Where’s Rebecca?

Hesperus jabbed the ident computer as Jim grabbed the narrowband comm-link. ‘Which one of you is Coyote?’

‘Jim McKenna? That you?’ a voice returned, with a curious lilting accent. The comm-link showed it was the Cobra, the *Dark Star*.

‘This is Jim, where’s Rebecca?’

‘Thargoids ambushed us in witch-space,’ came the alarming response. ‘Rebecca’s ship was intercepted. I’m plotting a return course to the point. Stand by and follow my co-ordinates for the jump!’

She knew they were after her...

‘No bug is kidnapping someone on my watch!’ the clipped voice returned. ‘I’ve got a reputation to maintain, let’s get ‘em!’

‘I’m not going interstellar!’ Hesperus exclaimed. ‘No one ever comes back from those...’

‘Who the frak is that?’ Coyote demanded. Jim could see one of the Caducei had flipped end over end, readying itself for a return jump. The other was not changing course, still coasting away from its inbound jump point.

Jim glared at Hesperus across the bridge. ‘His name’s Hesperus. He’s just readying the jump, aren’t you?’

‘Er... I... um... Thargoids?’ Hesperus flapped his paws around. Stepan sat at the nav-comp, looking terrified.

‘Danger money?’ Jim snapped angrily. ‘Whatever it takes, push the damn buttons!’

‘Danger money!’ Hesperus said, his eyes lighting up. ‘Make the jump Stepan! Let’s kick some Thargoid ass!’

‘Hold on...’ Coyote’s voice sounded across the narrowband. ‘Got inbound witch-space shear. Something is coming through. Hold position, be ready.’

Jim looked up at the viewer as chromatic light flashed out from a minute point, before rapidly expanding. A ship coalesced out of the glare.

Vampire Mk5 Prototype, Mass 195 Metric, Speed 0.0 LM, Call sign ‘Spectre’.

‘Yes!’ Jim exclaimed. ‘She made it! Thank Randomius...’

The *Spectre* drifted towards them, coasting to a gentle halt, sitting there indolently, its hull lights flashing purposefully.

‘Rebecca?’ Jim called. ‘Can you hear me? Maybe she’s injured. Get us in there – now!’

Scanning beams from the *Dark Star* flickered over the *Spectre*.

Coyote’s voice was heavy on the narrowband. ‘No... she’s not there. Escape pod’s been triggered...’

Jim looked up at the *Spectre* more closely. He could see the rearmost section of the cockpit was indeed missing.

‘Rebecca? Rebecca! No...’

The narrowband comms buzzed for attention.

Identity confirmed. Jim McKenna present. Beginning playback...

The narrowband comms flickered into life. Jim looked in surprise as Rebecca’s face appeared on the video transmission. For a moment hope surged through him, before he realised it was a recording.

‘... hope you get this message, Jim. Thargoids caught me in witch-space. Jump is jammed, I can’t get out. I’m going to eject and then set the *Spectre* to auto-jump once it’s clear. Jim, you must take this ship to Beenri with the other combateers! Names are Coyote, Derik and Udian... ship IDs are in the text I sent you. Jim, the weapons aboard can end this war. Do not come after me! The Thargoids must not get hold of these weapons or it’s all over, it’s our only chance. Get them to Beenri... Jim...’

Light flashed on the recording, the sound of lasers hitting the shields of the *Spectre*. Green flashes lit Rebecca’s face from the side. Jim saw her squint in the glare, trying to focus on what she was doing.

Jim could see Rebecca twisting and turning the *Spectre*, looking for an escape route. He saw her eyes narrow. She'd spotted what she needed. Stars wheeled in the background as she sought to gain enough space to make her move.

'Jim, speak to Coyote. You can trust him...' she 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, bracing and tapping the eject buttons. A bulkhead shot down abruptly 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 witch-space appeared and the video faded out abruptly.

Transmission complete. Replay?

Jim slowly reached out and touched the darkened screen.

They've got her...

To be continued...

'Finis' – The final part of the Oolite Saga, will be available in time for Christmas 2011 at

www.drewwagar.com

Author's Note

I'd put Mutabilis to bed in late 2008 and felt I'd left the whole Oolite fan-fic thing behind. There were a lot more fan-fiction writers popping up and they were producing quality stuff that I was looking enviously at. I felt the 'baton' had been firmly passed. I said in Mutabilis that I never intended there to be a sequel for Status Quo, and to be completely honest, I had no intention of writing a sequel to Mutabilis either until I read a thread on the forum asking 'wot are you writers up to?'.

In that thread a few contributors knocked some witty little segues together, crossing over various characters from various other fan-fic stories for a bit of fun. The idea of bringing together some of the best characters from the various stories and chucking them into an adventure together had huge appeal. I couldn't resist. Folks were happy with the idea, so I set to work.

It also gave me the opportunity to tie up rather a lot of loose ends in Mutabilis which I wasn't able to resolve due to time and length issues. What I rather grandly call the 'Oolite Saga' was never envisaged as a 'Saga' so each book has evolved from the previous one. Incursio and Finis have a stronger plan, but are 'slaves' to the earlier books in many ways.

The other side of the equation was the overall subject matter of this story. Status Quo's purpose was to introduce the reader to the Oolite universe, Mutabilis allowed me to explore part of the Elite mythos – 'Raxxla'. So what about Incursio? This time it's the Thargoids that get the treatment.

Why the Thargoids? Simple really. In the original game and in Oolite, the Thargoids are simply alien invaders. They attack without provocation or apparent reason. I assume they were put in the original game to add a bit of spice and Oolite has faithfully recreated them. From a writer's perspective they are a clichéd hack though. Big, bad, fearsome alien killing machines. Yawn. I can't help asking the obvious questions. Why are they like that? Where do they come from? What happened to them to make them so warlike? What is their ultimate fate? Needless to say, this forms the underpinnings of Incursio and Finis. I've worked out what I think motivates the Thargoids – hope you like it!

The plot came together surprisingly easily and I started writing. It was huge fun, but as it evolved it became clear that in order to give the various characters enough 'air time' the story was going to be considerably longer than the previous two books, more than twice in fact.

So I gave up on it being a Trilogy and I've turned it into a four part-er. If you've downloaded

this just after it's been published that's going to leave you on a cliff hanger for which I provide no apology whatsoever. The fourth part of this tale will be available late in 2011 – in time for Christmas. If you're reading this after 2011, then you can go straight on to 'Finis' and find out what happens next.

I said in the notes for Mutabilis that I'm not a great fan of sequels, as they're usually not as good as the original. According to my reviews, most people prefer Mutabilis to Status Quo – saying it's the better story. I'll have eventually provided three sequels by the time I'm done. I have a sneaking suspicion Incursio will turn out to be more popular than Mutabilis...

This all goes to show you shouldn't pay any attention to what I say, as I clearly have absolutely no idea what I'm talking about.

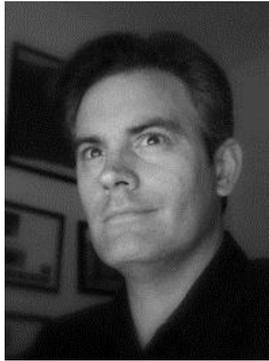
Enjoy... and of course... Right on, Commanders!

Drew. (June 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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