

Eternal Doctrine

THE UR-QUAN MASTERS SERIES

Groombridge Log
Eternal Doctrine

ETERNAL DOCTRINE

Tommi Salminen

Based on the universe of
STAR CONTROL
By Fred Ford and Paul Reiche III

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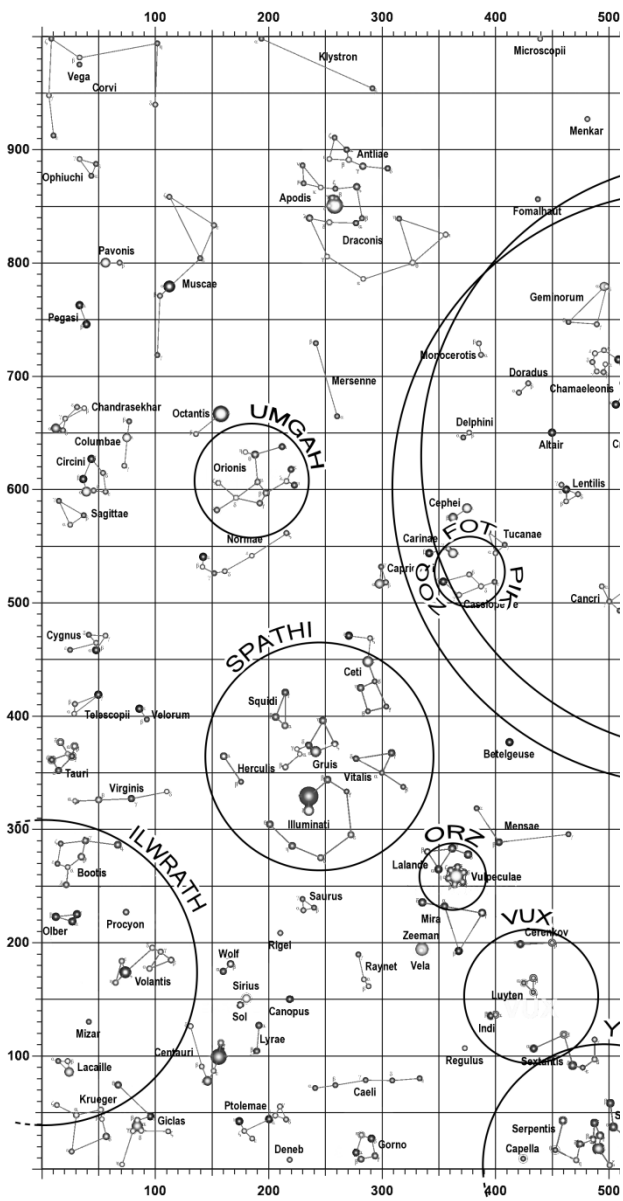
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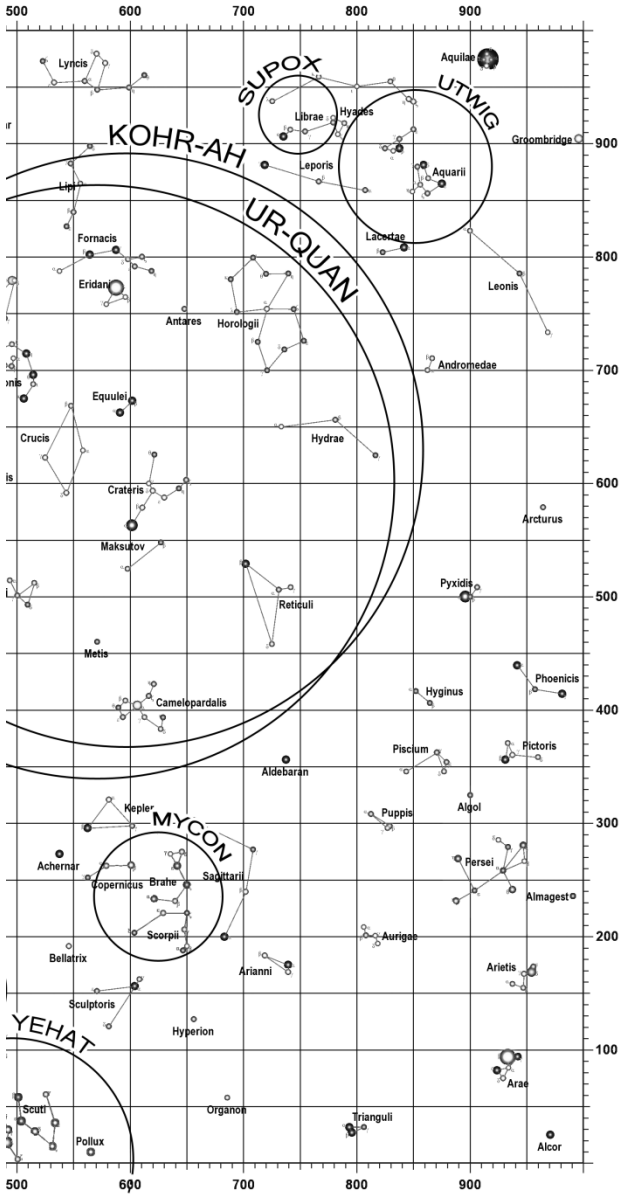
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The map on the previous pages details the spatial relationship between the stars in our known region of the galaxy. The spheres of influence were updated by Gennadi Samusenko on August 11th 2155. The positions are based on hyperspace coordinates, which may be unsettling to some students of true space astronomy. Defined long ago by Chenjesu stargazers, the constellations are now accepted by all races of the old alliance as the standard.

Due to the great difficulty in pronouncing the Chenjesu language, each race has translated the names into their own tongue. When it came time for Earth to adopt this system, the United Nations decided to use traditional astrological designations, assigned at random. This has caused some confusion, but it is considered preferable to the suggested alternative: using the names of past politicians.

CHAPTER 1

GATHERING THOUGHTS

August 5th 2155, Sol, 175.2 : 145.0

The monitors showed absolutely nothing where there had been an asteroid the size of a Shofixti Scout vessel just seconds ago.

“I guess we could call the test a success,” Zelnick proudly summed it up.

“But where did it go?” Dujardin wondered, still checking the radar. “Could it really have been pulverized entirely?”

If you really wanted to, you could see a slowly expanding ring-shaped cloud of dust at the center of the Hellbore Cannon’s firing sector.

“McNeil, how’s our combat batteries?” Zelnick asked.

“We’re at about 20 %,” the weapons officer replied, “but they’re charging a lot faster than before. We can still use the point-defense laser system with full power.”

“We’ll test that next,” Zelnick said and then ordered Samusenko to steer the ship inside a cluster of smaller asteroids.

There were several laser turrets mounted on the point-defense module. They should be able to fire in all cardinal directions simultaneously. Zelnick asked McNeil to try to hit all nearby asteroids as quickly as possible.

“It should be all about selecting the targets,” McNeil explained as he tapped his console rapidly.

Indeed he wouldn't have to actually aim the shots, unlike with the main weapon. The laser turrets would automatically follow their selected targets and, not surprisingly, they wouldn't have to lead their targets.

"Here we go," he declared and pressed the fire button.

Several laser beams immediately hit their targets with surgical precision and quickly moved on to the following targets. In just a few seconds there were only a handful of asteroids in one piece left in that cluster. And then the firing came to a halt.

"That's it, the batteries are dry," McNeil reported.

"Impressive," Zelnick said, sounding very pleased with his ship.

"*Impressive,*" Captain Wu commented over the radio.

"*Scary,*" Captain Fwiffo added.

Their Orz companions had no comments.

In addition to the Vindicator, their current fleet now consisted of Wu's Seraph, Fwiffo's Star Runner and two Orz Nemeses named **Flamenco** and **Fox**, supposedly captained by individuals referred to as **Heavy** and **Wet**. Trent and his crew were also aboard the Vindicator, along with the captains and crew for all the Zoq-Fot-Pik Stingers left behind at Gamma Circini. It made things a bit cramped in the crew module, but it was bearable since they knew that it was only temporary – their plan was to fly straight to Gamma Circini after finishing their business at Procyon.

Gruber was in a bad mood on the morning of the day when they were supposed to enter the vortex leading to Procyon. He was walking slightly faster than usual as people often do in that state of mind. If there had been trash cans nearby, he would have thought about kicking them, but still probably refrained from actually doing it. That thought made him proud of his composure.

Why the bad mood, he asked himself. It was only the time of his monthly meeting with the psychologist. He had always considered it a reasonable protocol for every crew member to talk with a psychologist regularly. The catastrophe of the first manned mission to Mars had proven the importance of taking care of mental health on a long-duration space mission.

Still, there were some who thoroughly despised the protocol*, but Gruber was pretty sure he wasn't one of them. He had never felt that he'd want to hide anything. And Eduardo Vargas was a particularly likeable psychologist.

Gruber soon reached Vargas' door. He was about five minutes early, but knocked anyway. Soon he heard footsteps approaching the door and then it was opened.

"Ah, Adam," Vargas greeted him on a first-name basis as psychologists always seem to do. "Do come in."

Gruber nodded in a polite way, stepped inside and took a seat in a designated chair as he had done four times before already. Unlike the chairs everywhere else, this one was really comfortable.

"How are you feeling?" Vargas asked as he also sat down.

Gruber decided that he should make the most of this conversation and gave an honest answer.

"I feel irritated."

His answer appeared to surprise Vargas and to Gruber's observation it seemed like a positive surprise. This annoyed him.

"What irritates you?" Vargas asked.

Gruber was feeling extremely uncomfortable already.

"I'm not sure," he said, "but I think it's this meeting."

* for example those with the intention to kill the entire crew

Vargas laughed a little, indicating that he wasn't offended. He gave an understanding smile, although he obviously didn't yet understand.

"Is this the first time our meeting bothers you?" he asked.

Gruber re-checked his mind and then confirmed that this was indeed the case.

"What has changed since the last time?" Vargas continued his inquiry.

This, in Gruber's opinion, was the problem with psychologists. They never told you anything, only asked questions. Of course a lot of things had changed. Their last meeting was after they had left the Supox homeworld. After that they had narrowly escaped destruction in the encounter with the Kohr-Ah, but there had been some casualties. Also, they might have met the Precursors, but forgotten all about it. Also, they'd seen and heard all kinds of disturbing things and the victory over the Ur-Quan – and more importantly over the Kohr-Ah – was nowhere in sight.

Gruber found himself thinking in Hayes' annoying listing-of-bulletins voice. He tried to shake it off. The listed points were just all the ridiculously big things. There were so many smaller things on his mind that he couldn't make a list of them.

"I don't know," he finally admitted, meaning that all that had happened shouldn't have affected his mental state regarding the psychologist meeting. "I was hoping you could tell me."

Vargas smiled at him again. He really seemed like a positive type.

"Who are you thinking about?" Vargas then asked.

This sudden question caught Gruber by surprise and he panicked a little. Was he thinking about someone in particular? Probably not, but now, after a question like that, he would inevitably think of someone. He checked who it

was, hoping that there was nothing too embarrassing about it...

He first saw Lydia, doing her own things somewhere in the background as she always did. Then there was Zelnick and the lone Orz trooper in the hangar, Lily as she looked in the academy, great, then a row of officers: Samusenko, Dujardin, Iwasaki and... *grandpa? What the hell are you doing here?*

"Lydia," he then answered truthfully, forcing his mind to return to reality.

Vargas was prepared.

"What has changed between you and Lydia since our last meeting?" he asked.

"She's not here," Gruber said. "She's at the starbase."

After saying that Gruber started to realize himself that it was indeed Lydia's absence that bothered him. But why? They weren't that close. Did he want them to be? He had to admit that there was some kind of a connection between them, though. Now that Vargas had found the problem so quickly, which was commendable, maybe he could find out something else about Gruber as well.

"Would you like her to be here?" Vargas asked as was expected.

How uncool, Gruber thought of his answer to come.

"Yes."

And he was supposed to be a steady old man.

"Why isn't she here?" Vargas continued on the path with only one possible outcome.

Gruber sighed.

"Because I wanted her to stay at the starbase," he answered. "She wanted to stay on board and Captain Zelnick would have allowed it, but I said that this isn't the right place for her."

"And why do you think you said that?" Vargas asked.

“Because it’s the truth,” Gruber explained. “We do dangerous things here and this is not her war. I wanted her to live as normal a life as she could under these circumstances.”

Vargas had gotten to the bottom of it and they both knew it.

“So,” Vargas began, “the pieces fit together rather well, don’t they?”

It took Gruber a second to understand what Vargas meant.

“You’re right,” Gruber agreed. “I have no regrets.”

Vargas kept on smiling – the bastard.

“You should call her,” he suggested.

Gruber had to disagree right off the bat.

“Are you saying I should use the ansible for private communications? Captain Zelnick would never approve—”

He then had to stop in mid-sentence. He looked at Vargas who was looking right back at him, clearly thinking exactly what he was thinking.

“Ok, so the captain **would** authorize it,” Gruber continued. “But it would make me look pretty damn stupid.”

“That would be a change,” Vargas sniped. “Who would think badly of it?”

Gruber was running out of arguments, although it wasn’t an argument, but he still felt like he was losing. He decided to take the path of least resistance for a change.

“Alright,” he agreed. “I guess it would be okay for me to check how she’s doing.”

“I’m sure you’ll feel better,” Vargas assured him and then checked: “Is there anything else on your mind?”

“Can’t think of anything,” Gruber answered without thinking, which meant that apparently there wasn’t anything.

“What do you think about our current mission?” Vargas asked, moving on to another topic.

Gruber was finally able to relax a little.

“I’m really anxious to see the Chenjesu,” he explained. “While I have my doubts as to whether we will actually be able to contact them, we have every reason to try.”

“And what happens if we succeed?” Vargas asked.

Gruber gave it some thought.

“Then we’ll have a talk with them,” he said to buy himself some time.

Then he admitted to himself that he had very high hopes and expectations on how much the Chenjesu could actually help them. He had to say this out loud and continued.

“The Chenjesu are under a slave shield, but I still believe that they can tell us what we should do.”

“You’re looking for guidance,” Vargas pointed out. “What do you think about Captain Zelnick?”

Again Gruber panicked a little. He checked his mind, wanting to make sure that there were no doubts about his loyalty to Zelnick. He soon found out that he had nothing but respect for the man.

“I didn’t mean that the captain wouldn’t know what he’s doing,” Gruber corrected. “There’s nobody I’d rather have as my captain right now. What I meant was that the alliance needs counselling.”

“Of course,” Vargas replied, making it evident that there was never any intention to question Gruber’s loyalty. “And what do you think about fighting our enemy?”

He sure knew what questions were the most difficult ones, Gruber thought. The Ur-Quan they had met outside Alpha Eridani had given an impressive speech. Gruber knew that listening to the enemy too much always carried the danger of starting to see things their way, which would be troublesome, since in a war you should always be fighting for the good against the bad. But even though he had known to be cautious, the speech had gotten to him. He now considered the Kohr-Ah their main enemy and he felt, curse

him, sympathy towards the Ur-Quan. He told all of this to Vargas.

“I see,” Vargas commented. “You’re not the only one. There are some who believe that the Ur-Quan really are defending us from a greater evil.”

“Exactly,” Gruber agreed, “and it bothers me.”

Vargas took a deep breath.

“There has seldom been any ultimate evil in history,” Vargas pointed out. “All the terrible deeds have been terrible only because we think they have. Yet there always are some who disagree with those who are right, eh?”

Gruber wondered whether he got Vargas’ point, but he did agree with what he was saying. *There always is the One Truth and some **barbarians** who disagree with it. Then, after a few decades, it might turn out that the **barbarians** were right. Of course that isn’t the Ultimate Truth either and thus the circle goes on and on. But how did this relate to the Ur-Quan? Are we now the **barbarians** and the Ur-Quan are actually doing the right thing? No. Enslaving an entire species could never be right. Although, the Ur-Quan did say that they did that for our own good – to keep us from destroying ourselves and also to keep anyone else from destroying us. So... what? Are the Ur-Quan some galactic fairy godmothers who travel across the galaxy saving everyone? Do they consider themselves as such?* No, Gruber refused to believe that.

“The Spathi believe in Ultimate Evil,” Gruber remarked to avoid the actual subject.

His evasion worked.

“Ha-ha, indeed” Vargas laughed. “We surely have met a lot of alien species and learned a lot in the process. What are your thoughts about our new friends and enemies?”

Gruber’s first thoughts were of the suspicious Spathi delegation at the starbase.

“I don’t trust the Spathi,” he put it simply. “They are clearly up to something.”

“What about Captain Fwiffo?” Vargas immediately specified.

Fwiffo was a special case. He was the one who attacked the unarmed shuttle back on Pluto and killed nearly the entire landing team. Fwiffo was the enemy at that time. Although he had proven his worth several times since then, there still were some who hadn’t forgiven him.

“I trust Fwiffo,” Gruber answered. “He is as cowardly as the rest, but it is in his own interests to stay on our good side. I think of him as an important ally.”

“That’s what I’ve heard, yes,” Vargas agreed. “I haven’t had a chance to talk with him much, but he seems like he really is on our side. What about the other races?”

Gruber thought of the similarities between the Arilou and the Orz.

“Actually the Zoq-Fot-Pik are our only allies who I trust completely,” he explained. “Sadly, they also seem to be the weakest. The Arilou and the Orz, on the other hand, are the opposite. The Orz are very powerful, but they pretty much come and go as they please. We can’t even communicate with them adequately. I’m not sure they really know – or care – what kind of an alliance they have joined and what is expected of them.”

He didn’t like being this negative, but he couldn’t help being himself.

“The Arilou are not that different,” he continued. “I don’t question their commitment towards our well-being, but when push comes to shove, I don’t think we can trust them to be **physically** by our side. They seem to live in a world of their own and seem to know a lot more about the Orz than they’re telling us.”

Vargas obviously didn't want to press the matter. Instead, as Gruber observed, their time was nearly up. These monthly check-ups weren't too lengthy.

"I can see you have a lot on your mind," Vargas concluded. "What do you think about your mental condition?"

This was the part where it would be embarrassing to give the wrong answer.

"I see no problem in doing my job," Gruber summed it up.

Vargas smiled.

"I agree," he said. "This concludes our meeting. As usual, I'll notify you about the next check-up in a few weeks."

Gruber stood up and was heading for the door when Vargas spoke again.

"These are very interesting times, you know. We're meeting new species and learning about their fascinating cultures."

Gruber grinned at him.

"I'm sure Captain Zelnick's diplomacy will continue to intrigue you."

"We can only hope," Vargas agreed and then Gruber shut the door behind him.

There were still a few hours before they'd reach Procyon. There was nothing for Gruber to do so he went to the common room to pass time. He had gotten used to finding Lydia there either teaching or learning something strange. It had begun to amuse him.

This time, though, he only found Gennadi Samusenko, the navigation officer, fiddling with a portable console. Gruber motioned for him to carry on. He then sat down at the same table, opposite Samusenko.

"You came here at a good time," Samusenko said.

"I did?" Gruber replied.

“I just finished updating the star map,” Samusenko continued. “I used all information we have accumulated of the movements of other races and re-drew some spheres of influence.”

Gruber took the console from Samusenko and studied the map. There were some things that immediately caught his attention.

“The Ur-Quan and the Kohr-Ah sure have large areas,” he commented. “Of course that is as I feared and expected. But there’s something else here... The Ilwrath.”

He trusted that Samusenko would explain his rather radical view of their new territory.

“I know,” Samusenko said, “but that’s how it seems to be. Their fleets aren’t just doing remote patrol. They really have moved their entire armada away from home. There can’t be too many ships guarding Alpha Tauri at present.”

This was indeed an interesting view. With the current forces of the Alliance, they might have a chance to strike a killing blow at the Ilwrath.

“So you haven’t shown this to the captain yet?” Gruber checked.

“No,” Samusenko answered, “you’re the first one who’s seen this.”

They entered Procyon according to their flight plan. There seemed to be no ships in the system. They set their course towards the second planet, which was the homeworld of the Chenjesu, and then used the ansible to contact the starbase.

They used video feed instead of the usual text messages since they had important business to take care of. They wanted to inform Hayes that they might have a chance to make a joint effort against the Ilwrath at Alpha Tauri, if they could quickly rally Spathi, Orz and Zoq-Fot-Pik forces.

Gruber also hoped to check on Lydia after all official business had been taken care of.

Hayes answered the ansible.

“Good to see you, are you at Procyon?”

“Yes,” Zelnick replied, “and we have important news. Check this out.”

They sent the updated star map to the starbase.

“Very well,” Hayes acknowledged the transfer. *“But before we proceed, there’s something you need to know.”*

The way Hayes said it made it sound extremely ominous. He took a short pause to make sure he had Zelnick’s full attention and then continued.

“We have a major situation here. Soon after you left, all Spathi individuals suddenly vanished from this starbase, taking their ships with them. At least so far nothing has been reported stolen, but we have no idea where they all went and why. Is Captain Fwiffo still with you?”

So much for the sneak attack on the Ilwrath, Gruber thought. Dujardin checked the radar and reported that the Star Runner was still with them. Zelnick ordered Katja to call Fwiffo, whose face soon appeared on the communications screen. Zelnick informed Hayes that Fwiffo was indeed with them and then started to question him.

“Fwiffo, what the hell are your people doing?” Zelnick demanded in a very angry and accusing tone.

“Yikes!” Fwiffo screamed in terror. *“I know nothing! I’m innocent, PLEASE BELIEVE ME!”*

“You have to know SOMETHING!” Zelnick pressed him, although the ansible message hadn’t been relayed to Fwiffo yet.

“I SWEAR!” Fwiffo desperately said while trembling and searching for cover.

Zelnick looked at the Spathi as if impatiently waiting for a confession. Fwiffo had no choice but to continue talking.

“What has happened?” he asked, sounding awfully sincere.

Zelnick cut him some slack.

“Your people have disappeared from the starbase,” he put it simply.

“Phew,” Fwiffo sighed in relief. *“I really don’t know anything about that. I thought this was about copying the slave shield technology.”*

“Huh? What?”

Fwiffo seemed to realize he had blurted out more than he would have had to. He slumped a little and was forced to continue.

“‘Forever encased under an impenetrable shield’ is the ultimate goal of the Spathi civilization,” he explained. *“Our delegation studied the slave shield over Earth for the purpose of creating one over our own home planet.”*

All the pieces suddenly fitted together.

“Were you planning on deserting the Alliance once you had the shield?” Zelnick asked.

“Er...” Fwiffo hesitated. *“I honestly don’t know. The higher-ups don’t really tell that kind of stuff to the likes of me.”*

Zelnick told Hayes what Fwiffo had said.

“Should we visit Epsilon Gruis on the way?” Zelnick then asked.

The Spathi homeworld was at Epsilon Gruis. It was somewhat off their planned course, but very close to Alpha Illuminati where they were planning to buy fuel on their return trip.

“Concentrate on your current objective with the Chenjesu for now,” Hayes suggested. *“When you’re done with that, we’ll get back to this subject.”*

They agreed that this was the right course of action as getting in contact with the Chenjesu was their top priority.

Then they cut the ansible link since the video feed drained a terrible amount of energy.

Zelnick tapped his fingers on the arm rest of his chair. Fwiffo was still waiting on one screen, looking like he was on the verge of bursting into tears.

“Fwiffo?” Zelnick addressed him.

“Yes?” Fwiffo answered in an apologetic tone.

“I forgive you,” Zelnick said.

CHAPTER 2

THE PROCESS

August 11th 2155, Procyon, 074.2 : 226.8

It appears that the Spathi have gloriously deserted our cause. They are probably racing towards their home planet right now, hoping to get the shield up before we arrive to yell at them. And that is exactly what I suspect we are going to do.

Losing one member from the Alliance at this stage is a big set-back. But thinking about it rationally, it hasn't been in vain. If we hadn't intervened, the Spathi would still be sided with the Hierarchy. So the outcome here is the same as if we'd wiped them out completely.

A weapon that might or might not fire when activated is no weapon at all. Likewise, an ally that might or might not stand by your side on the battlefield is no ally at all.

I remember when we gave Fwiffo shore leave the last time we were at Spathiwa. He returned to us of his own free will, so he is someone we can trust. He is a coward, yes, but a trustworthy coward.

Personally I think that we could leave the Spathi alone and let them run away if they want to. However, I fear that the Alliance Command Council (meaning Hayes and Zelnick) disagree and want us to stop the Spathi and forcefully drag them to participate in this war.

The Vindicator reached the orbit of the second planet and the ridiculously powerful hyperwave transmitter the Spathi

had delivered was ready to transmit a message through the slave shield. The Chenjesu could send equally strong hyperwave signals naturally so it was safe to assume that they could make a connection. When the crew at the starbase had examined the new transmitter, they had sent some messages down to Earth, but there had been no way to know whether anyone was listening.

There were some stupid, but at the same time understandable assumptions that talking with the Chenjesu would somehow solve all their problems. And what was more, they could be some super-Chenjesu now, if they were really somehow merging with the Mmrnmhrm as Thomas Rigby had deduced after their last visit to Procyon.

Zelnick had tidied himself up somewhat and was looking like a real captain for a change. There was no point, though, since they probably would just send simple messages and no video feed. Gruber didn't have much advice to give him, since the Chenjesu were known to be very easy to talk to. There was no danger of accidentally offending them and they always went straight to the point. There were no records of the Chenjesu ever making a joke.

They had agreed that their greeting message would be short and end with a question. There was no point in planning any farther ahead since everything would depend on the possible reply.

"Here goes," Zelnick said as he pressed the send button.

Gruber looked over the captain's shoulder and saw that the message he had written was exactly the one they had agreed on:

[Hello, we are humans representing The New Alliance of Free Stars. Can anyone hear us?]

There had been some discussion on whether they should use the word 'hear', but they eventually decided that it was pointless to fret over details that would probably be lost in the translation anyway.

Just a few seconds later the console notified them of an incoming message.

“That was fast,” Zelnick remarked and opened the message:

“We can hear you. We do not understand how you have penetrated the slave shield or why. Explain this intrusion.”

Zelnick turned to Gruber for counsel.

“We should confirm that they really are the Chenjesu,” Gruber advised.

Zelnick agreed and produced the message.

[Are you the Chenjesu?]

The reply was as fast as if they were talking face to face.

“Yes, we are the Chenjesu. We are also the Mmrnmhrm. What do you want?”

“We want their advice, right?” Zelnick checked with Gruber.

“Right,” Gruber replied. “We need all the help they can provide us.”

Zelnick took a while to think about what to type. Composing the message took him a few minutes.

[We need your help in our struggle against the Ur-Quan. We visited your starbase and found the Mmrnmhrm relay. We decrypted the data assuming it was meant for us and therefore we know of your synthesis scheme. Can you help us in any way?]

This time there was a longer wait before the reply arrived.

“Though your ship’s design is unfamiliar to us, we understand that you are of human origin and so we will share with you all the information we have. However, we cannot provide any more assistance while our synthetic hybridization process is incomplete.”

So far the conversation was going very well in Gruber’s opinion. The Chenjesu were alive and co-operative and they might have some good insight on how to defeat the

Ur-Quan. At least they should be able to explain what happened at the end of the war. How did the Ur-Quan win so suddenly?

[How long is the process going to take?] Zelnick asked.

The response was imminent.

“The process will take approximately 35 of your Earth years. This extended duration is necessary because our synthesis mechanisms are dependent exclusively on the light of our sun for energy.”

“We should ask them about penetrating the slave shield,” Gruber suggested.

Zelnick considered it a good idea and he relayed the question down to the surface. Gruber leaned towards the back of the captain’s chair a little. Lifting the slave shield from Earth would be huge. As the Chenjesu (and the Mmrmhrm) replied, he began reading the message very excitedly.

“We cannot crack the shield until the hybridization process is complete. We are also unable to give the required technology to you.”

Zelnick turned to Gruber again.

“How could we give them more power? You know, to speed things up a bit... Could we build some giant mirrors here in the orbit? Or a giant light bulb? Drag the planet closer to the star?”

Gruber thought that Zelnick had a commendable way of thinking.

“All of those ideas could work if done on the right scale,” he commented. “We need to ask the Chenjesu – and the Mmrmhrm – for details.

Zelnick got to it. Maybe the hybridization subjects had to think about it, since the reply took about a minute.

“What you describe is theoretically possible, but it would pose a great danger to us. The process must be executed as

planned or it may fail catastrophically. We could be destroyed. We ask that you do not take this chance."

A shame, Gruber thought. But respecting this wish of the Chenjesu was a given. He was sure that Zelnick felt the same way. The captain was already typing the next message.

[What happened at the end of the war? Why was the Alliance defeated so completely?]

The following answer was exhaustive.

Even from the Chenjesu's point of view, the Alliance had stood their ground remarkably well. The efforts of the humans got special thanks, although Gruber wondered if the Chenjesu were just being polite. But then again, they were known never to waste words so Gruber let a slight sense of pride slip into his mind.

Indeed the balance of power had begun to shift in the favor of the Alliance at the beginning of 2134. The Hierarchy concentrated its forces on Rigel and the pressure on the Indi-Mira line decreased. This suited the Alliance since Rigel was heavily fortified and losing that system seemed unlikely. The Alliance Command Council's plan was that the Chenjesu and the Mmrrnmhrm would keep the Hierarchy busy near Rigel while the Yehat led a counter-offensive, pushing from Mira to Eta Vulpeculae to conquer the Androsynth home system.

The plan seemed to work well and the combined Alliance forces got a foothold in the outskirts of Eta Vulpeculae. But that was when everything started going downhill.

Reinforcements were urgently requested at Rigel and the offensive at the Vulpeculae cluster had to be aborted. Gruber had known that the offensive was aborted, but he hadn't known why. He also hadn't known what exactly it was that caused the seemingly impenetrable defense of Rigel to crumble.

According to the Chenjesu, the Hierarchy had brought an overwhelming new weapon into play. At first the defenders of Rigel had detected nothing more than bright flashes from ten times their own weapon range, but soon their ships had begun dropping like flies. When they realized what was happening, approximately 20 percent of their forces had already been destroyed. It was evident that they were going to lose the system, but instead of retreating they took shelter behind the planets in an attempt to force the unknown weapon into sight. They knew that if the Hierarchy was going to conquer the system, they had to come closer. That was also when the urgent request for reinforcements was sent out.

However, the Ur-Quan were not stupid. As soon as the defending ships were out of sight, they put their attack on hold. They knew that they had a large portion of the Alliance forces pinned down, so they took their time in the siege. Meanwhile, as the Chenjesu soon found out, this new super-weapon was headed for Procyon, accompanied by a large task force of Ur-Quan Dreadnoughts.

The defense of Procyon didn't stand a chance. After the Chenjesu forces were defeated at their home, they finally saw what the super-weapon was.

It was a huge starship – an unstoppable battle platform which the Chenjesu assumed to be of Precursor origin. It had weapons and defensive systems that made it invulnerable to all Chenjesu technologies. The Ur-Quan called it the Sa-Matra, meaning 'great trophy'.

The Chenjesu had no choices beyond submission and devastation. Together with the Mmrnmhrm they requested to be enslaved on the Chenjesu homeworld, which seemed to be fine with the Ur-Quan.

They sent one last message to the rest of the Alliance, suggesting that everyone should surrender and accept their roles as slaves until such a time as they found a way to deal

with the Sa-Matra. They didn't know whether anyone had received their message. Gruber was not aware of it, so he assumed that humans hadn't received it.

The Chenjesu didn't know what had happened at Rigel after their surrender, but Zelnick's description of the wreckages found there were congruent with their expectations.

"There's one thing that's bugging me about all this," Zelnick said and then started typing.

[Why did the Ur-Quan fight the Alliance for so long without using the Sa-Matra?]

Gruber was also thinking about the same thing.

"*It remains a mystery to us as well,*" the Chenjesu answered.

"So..." Zelnick began talking to himself, "even if we wiped out the entire Ur-Quan armada, there would still be an unstoppable super-weapon to deal with."

He then typed to the Chenjesu again.

[Do you have any ideas on how we can deal with the Sa-Matra?]

There was a long pause, followed by a sudden and surprising reply.

"*Please don't.*"

After a few minutes the message was followed by an explanation.

"As soon as the Ur-Quan had left this system, we began the hybridization process for a single purpose: to make us more powerful. When the process is complete, we will crack the slave shield and emerge from our chrysalis like a winged insect unleashed from its cocoon. We will then be ready and*

* The translation computer pointed out that the actual metaphor the Chenjesu used would not have delivered the intended meaning. Therefore the computer chose a similar parable from the world of carbon-based life forms.

capable to single-handedly deal with the Ur-Quan, their battle thralls and their dreaded Sa-Matra. Even with your Precursor ship, you have no chance against the Sa-Matra. Therefore we ask that you be patient and let us handle the matter to avoid needlessly losing lives."

The Chenjesu didn't seem to know, however, that they couldn't wait for 35 years. If they did that, the Kohr-Ah would most likely win their war against the Ur-Quan and then kill all sentient life in the galaxy, including humans and Chenjesu.

Zelnick then said aloud exactly what Gruber had thought and then explained it to the Chenjesu. The Vindicator was now the only hope they had and therefore they had better come up with some kind of a plan.

"The only way we can imagine you destroying the Sa-Matra," the Chenjesu then began, *"is by detonating a huge matter-antimatter bomb adjacent to the battle platform. However, we lack the necessary technology to create such a device and therefore cannot tell you how to make one yourselves. The Sa-Matra is also sure to be heavily guarded. We suspect that even with the full might of the old alliance, you couldn't get close enough to the Sa-Matra to use the bomb. You need to create some kind of a diversion."*

"Hey!" Zelnick suddenly exclaimed. "Remember those depressed guys, the friends of the plant-creatures far towards the galactic core?"

"The Utwig," Gruber said.

Zelnick then typed a message to the Chenjesu.

[We happen to know of such device. There is supposed to be an ancient Precursor planeteeering tool over a thousand hyperspace units towards the core.]

"If I remember correctly," Gruber recalled, "the depressed Utwig individual said that they were considering going to the second moon of the sixth planet of Zeta Hyades

to end their existence. I'd bet my grandmother that if they really have such a bomb, they're keeping it there."

"You really would?" Zelnick sincerely asked.

"It was just a figure of speech, sir," Gruber explained, "but I would. Although both of my grandmothers were already dead before I was born."

"I think that—" Zelnick began, but Gruber was saved by a reply from the Chenjesu.

"We have heard the same rumors that a non-hostile alien race far towards the galactic core is in the possession of a Precursor planeteeering tool. We cannot confirm these rumors. However, it is the only clue we know of and therefore you should pursue it."

"Rumors?" Zelnick wondered. "What are they talking about?"

He asked the Chenjesu themselves that very question.

"That is all we know. We cannot pin-point the source of the rumors."

It was strange. Had they stumbled upon the source of the rumor by accident before hearing the rumor itself? Zelnick then explained to the Chenjesu that they hadn't heard any rumors, but the Utwig themselves told them that they had such a device – and also that they were told exactly on which planet the device was supposed to be.

"This is good," the Chenjesu replied. *"Securing that device must be your first priority. If you succeed in acquiring the device, we ask that you give us as much data as you have on it. We will provide you with assistance in whatever way we can."*

The Chenjesu really had a way of making objectives clear. Now they knew what their actual ultimate goal was and also their first step in getting there.

Gruber checked the star map. Zeta Hyades was pretty damn far – 1052 hyperspace units from Procyon, and that was the short route through the battleground of the Ur-Quan

and the Kohr-Ah. They couldn't just stop by there on their way to someplace else and ask nicely if they could have the device. Maybe if they could fix the Ultron they would have leverage in negotiations. Gruber then suggested that Zelnick would ask the Chenjesu about the Ultron and the Druuge who had supposedly sold it to the Utwig. Zelnick agreed and typed in the question. Katja sent the Chenjesu information on the Ultron.

"We are pleased with your way of thinking," the Chenjesu commended. "A diplomatic solution is preferred. Indeed if you can find a way to fix their important device, you can ask for the planeteeing tool in return. Unfortunately this Ultron is not familiar to us. The data you sent makes it obvious that it is of Precursor origin, but we cannot say more. Perhaps the key to fixing it lies with other Precursor artifacts.

The Druuge is a familiar race to us only by reputation. They are supposedly ruthless traders who seek to exploit every chance of ripping off the ones they are trading with. We know that their main trade world is at Zeta Persei. That would be a good place to start your search for parts that could fix the Ultron."

Hearing the Chenjesu suggest the same thing they had thought of themselves made Gruber feel confident and proud. He was discussing their next topic of conversation when the Chenjesu sent a new message:

"Since we are in the middle of the hybridization process, your presence here is a painful intrusion. We will provide you with advice whenever you need it, but we request that you do not ask unnecessary questions."

"Oh shit," Zelnick said with panic in his voice. "Should we leave them alone for now?"

Gruber agreed that they didn't have anything specific to ask right now so Zelnick quickly typed a farewell message.

[Sorry and thanks! That's enough advice for now. We'll come back to you later. Goodbye for now.]

"Phew," Zelnick then said and slumped to his chair. "For some reason this conversation was exhausting. How did it go?"

"I think it went fine, sir," Gruber replied. "Although hearing about the Sa-Matra was bad news, it would have been a lot worse to find out about it on the battlefield. Now we know what we must do."

Zelnick began recapping their new objectives.

"We need to get the bomb or whatever from the Utwig and also come up with some kind of a diversion so we get the chance to use the bomb against the so-called Sa-Matra. And to get the bomb, we'll probably need to fix the Ultron, which is not necessarily possible."

"That would be ideal, yes," Gruber agreed. "At first we need to know where the Sa-Matra is, how heavily it is guarded, and what kind of a device the bomb is – namely, can we just put it in the cargo hold and fly to the starbase with it. And also, just in case we can't fix the Ultron, we should find out where exactly the bomb is and how it is guarded."

Zelnick seemed surprised in a comical way.

"Mr. Gruber, are you suggesting we should steal the bomb?" he asked.

"Didn't you yourself say," Gruber began, "that if you plan to save the world, you have to push a few old ladies down the stairs?"

"Ouch, nice comeback," Zelnick admitted. "We should talk things over with Hayes. I don't think we'll be flying to the Hyades constellation on this trip."

"Agreed," Gruber said. "And speaking of Hayes, we should get in contact with him and tell him what we learned here. We were also supposed to talk about what to do with the Spathi."

“Right,” Zelnick agreed. “Katja, please contact the starbase.”

CHAPTER 3

ULTIMATE RETREAT

August 20th 2155, Epsilon Gruis, 241.6 : 368.7

As I suspected, Zelnick and Hayes wanted us to intercept the Spathi delegation before they reached Spathiwa. If we had left a day earlier, we could have caught up with them in hyperspace. Now we were only able to see their spoor enter the vortex to Epsilon Gruis.

The Vindicator's warp into Epsilon Gruis was unlucky. Spathiwa was currently at the other side of the system, almost 10 hours away. Zelnick contacted Captain Wu of the Seraph.

"Sorry, Wu," he said, "but we're going to have to push forward without you for a while."

In hyperspace the Vindicator could drag along several other ships in its massive warp field, but in true space all of the ships had to use their own engines. Even though the difference in speed between an Earthling Cruiser and the Vindicator was smaller in true space, it would still take over a day for the Seraph to reach Spathiwa from their current location. The true space speeds of Spathi Eluders and Orz Nemeses were almost equal to the Vindicator's so those ships could tag along.

"Understood," Wu replied, "*the Seraph will follow you at her own steady pace.*"

Several hours later they could see Spathiwa. It looked a lot different than last time, mainly because there wasn't a

layer of Eluders in orbit. In fact, there wasn't a single ship in sight.

Zelnick asked Katja to try to make contact with the high council, or anyone who would answer the call. Their open request was answered almost instantly. The video feed showed a number of important looking Spathi individuals, who seemed rather busy. Nobody paid any attention at first, but then someone noticed the link was up.

“What the—” the perceptive creature exclaimed. *“Turn it off! Don't answer them!”*

And then the communication link was terminated. Katja tried to call them again, but got no response.

The Vindicator approached Spathiwa from the direction of its moon. They very soon understood that the moon had been abandoned. It was evident that the Spathi had taken everyone and everything with them and relocated to the face of Spathiwa with great haste.

“Do you think we could land on the planet with this ship?” Zelnick asked.

Of course there had been no need to test if the Vindicator was capable of entering an atmosphere. The ship's manual also didn't mention it, but that was because the manual was written by Otto Steinbach just a few months earlier.

“Are you planning on flying through the front doors of the high council and giving them a whacking?” Gruber asked.

“Not a whacking,” Zelnick clarified, “just a painful smack on the head.”

The Vindicator soon reached the orbit around Spathiwa. Zelnick and Gruber were discussing some details about a landing party when suddenly, without warning, the light on the bridge turned slightly red. Gruber knew right away what had happened and he, together with everyone on the bridge, looked out the window.

A slave shield was cast over Spathiwa. The planet had resembled Earth very much before and now the resemblance was updated.

“That’s it, then,” Zelnick summed it up. “We missed it. Barely, but still, we missed it.”

Gruber considered the options.

“On the bright side,” he pointed out, “our landing team could have been down there right now.”

Zelnick nodded in agreement. He then noticed that Katja was still trying to contact the high council.

“I think you can stop doing that now,” he told her. “Contact Fwiffo instead.”

Soon Fwiffo’s sad face appeared on the screen.

“Would you prefer to be on the other side of the shield now?” Zelnick asked.

“*Yes I would,*” Fwiffo honestly answered. “*Ahh, my sweet Snelopy... I hope she waits for me.*”

“I hope so too,” Zelnick comforted him and closed the link.

“Captain,” Katja said to get Zelnick’s attention. “Did the Spathi get their ansible already? If they did, we could try to contact them with it.

Indeed they could do that. An ansible receiver could only be linked to one transmitter, but all the ansibles they were planning on giving to other races would be linked to the one on the starbase. So they could simply call the starbase’s ansible and use it as a relay to call the one at Spathiwa – if there was one.

They agreed to try that. Of course, there was nothing they could really achieve, apart from venting their anger. Zelnick was already writing down some snappy insults.

They called the starbase without video feed. It was the time of Hayes’ sleep cycle so they expected Leonov to answer, as he did.

“Leonov here, it’s good to see you’re still alive. How’s it going?”

Zelnick gave him a report and asked if the Spathi took their ansible with them.

“As far as we know they took it. What exactly are you planning to a—“

The message ended mid-sentence in a strange way. Zelnick spread his hands in an obvious “What is this?” posture. The link seemed to be still active. Suddenly a picture appeared on the ansible screen as the visual link was activated from the other end. They could see Leonov struggling with someone or something. For a split-second, and not longer, the scene seemed serious.

“—ld you we don’t need—“

“—just a quick hello!”

The first voice was Leonov’s and the second one was Lydia’s. They were obviously battling over the control of the ansible. It looked like Leonov’s authority didn’t amount to much. Zelnick decided to observe for a while as Lydia managed to squirm herself to the front.

“Hello Captain!” she joyfully said. *“It is nice to see you.”*

Leonov tried to get a grasp of Lydia, but failed. Gruber wasn’t too surprised. He knew very well that teen-age girls could be extremely tough opponents in wrestling. They often possessed incalculable flexibility, allowing them to wriggle and twist themselves out of almost any holds and joint locks.

“Hello to you too,” Zelnick greeted Lydia. “You’re not inconveniencing Mr. Leonov, are you?”

Meanwhile Leonov had given up taking back his position by force. His voice could still be heard from the background, but Lydia seemed to ignore him.

Leonov: *“Lydia, my dear, I have an important duty here.”*

“Not at all,” Lydia reassured, *“we were just talking about you before you called.”*

“Really?” Zelnick humored her. “Was it about my good looks?”

Lydia laughed at the thought, a bit too much in Gruber’s opinion.

“Not this time, no,” she finally said.

Leonov: *“We’re wasting energy.”*

“So how’s it going, coming up with a plan to distract the Ur-Quan?”

Apparently they had to assume that Lydia knew everything they had reported via the ansible.

“We’re not really there yet,” Zelnick patiently explained. “First we need to find the Sa-Matra and see how it’s guarded.”

Leonov: *“Bitte... lassen... Wichtig...”*

It looked like Zelnick didn’t mind Lydia’s intrusion. Gruber noticed that Leonov had learned some random German words, although the only outcome of using them was that Lydia shooed him off.

“You should consider mind control,” Lydia suggested, most likely being serious. *“By the way, is your old First Officer there?”*

So he was now the ‘old First Officer’, Gruber reflected, hoping that Zelnick wouldn’t start using the term. At the same time he was glad that Lydia cared enough to ask about him. Zelnick motioned for him to enter the picture.

“How are you?” Gruber asked Lydia.

“This place is a lot more fun than your ship,” she summed up the inconvenient truth. *“I have been helping in many things. I think my English is a lot better now, but I still teach German to others.”*

Gruber was glad to hear she was enjoying herself.

“We all appreciate your hard efforts,” he said. “Don’t give Leonov and the others too much trouble, alright?”

“Of course not!” Lydia replied as if the insinuation was preposterous. *“I politely asked to use the ansible.”*

“I like the way she thinks,” Zelnick remarked from a position where the transmitter might or might not intercept his speech. “First you ask nicely and if you don’t get what you want, you take it by force. I think that should be the way of the Alliance.”

Judging by Lydia’s widening smile, she probably heard Zelnick’s comment. Then Zelnick took the stage again.

“It has been nice talking to you, Lydia, but we still have some important business with Mr. Leonov. Could you let him back to the transmitter?”

“*Okay, bye-bye, take care!*” she happily said and very literally **let** Leonov re-enter the field of view.

Leonov waited for a while like an obedient dog for Lydia to step back before talking.

“*Sorry about that,*” he finally apologized when he deemed it safe. “*She’s a nice girl, but can be pretty stubborn at times.*”

Gruber completely agreed, but most importantly he was just happy that Lydia was making friends.

“*So what was it that you needed?*” Leonov asked.

Zelnick explained that they needed him to relay their ansible link to the Spathi. It took Leonov a while since such a task had never been done before, but, according to him, it was pretty straightforward. He also pointed out that it would double the ansible’s energy consumption at the starbase, which neither Gruber nor Zelnick had considered. For that reason they agreed to not use the video link unless absolutely necessary.

“*Alright, it’s ready,*” Leonov reported. “*If you want to talk to me, start your message with the word ‘Leonov’. Otherwise your messages are relayed as they are.*”

Zelnick typed in the first message.

[Are you planning on coming outside the slave shield any time soon to continue fulfilling your promise to us?]

They waited for a response.

...

After 15 minutes Zelnick ran out of patience.

“There’s no reason for us to stay here, is there?” he asked Gruber. “We can just rendezvous with the Seraph and get ready to warp out. The starbase can notify us if the Spathi answer our message.”

“Exactly,” Gruber agreed.

They had calculated a location from where they could warp to hyperspace with the Seraph as fast as possible. They still had a few hours before reaching it.

Gruber, Zelnick, Samusenko and Katja passed the time in the canteen, telling stories about their lives before Earth was slave shielded. All the good stories had already been heard a long time ago though. Samusenko ended the story-telling by declaring that he’d go to his quarters to play the role-playing game he always seemed to be playing. Soon afterwards Katja stood up and left the room without a word. In such a situation one should never ask a lady where she’s going. Gruber and Zelnick were alone together again, not counting the others in the canteen that weren’t really with them.

“So...” Zelnick began with an ominously long pause. “How’s it going with you and that woman at the starbase?”

The captain obviously had waited for the others to leave before broaching the subject. Gruber was surprised that Zelnick knew enough about the matter to care.

“Like a normal adult relationship,” Gruber put it simply. “Are you familiar with the concept?”

Gruber immediately regretted saying that. His intention was to be funny, not offensive. Now he once again had to hope that the captain would take his joke the right way.

“Ha-ha, not even a little,” Zelnick fortunately laughed.

Gruber decided to be open and honest to patch up his previous remark.

“But in all seriousness,” he continued, “It’s nothing serious.”

Zelnick looked like he understood.

“In that case,” the captain began, “you could instead tell me about your adventures with women when you were around my age.”

Talking about ancient history was a more comfortable topic for Gruber.

“There was only that one relationship worth mentioning,” he explained. “And you know the basic stuff about that already. When it comes to women, you can fool around all you want, but when you find the catch of your life time, you have to focus on her alone...”

Zelnick seemed to be in his thoughts.

“Are you thinking about Commander Talana?” Gruber checked.

“Always,” Zelnick absent-mindedly replied.

“She would be a catch, I give you that,” Gruber agreed. “But are you really sure that you’ve set reachable goals for yourself? You remember the basic rules of goal setting*, right?”

“Are you saying that I’m not good enough for her?” Zelnick asked.

“What?” Gruber was taken by surprise. “No! I... Er...”

* Psychology contained countless controversial theories until the late 21st century, when some basic functionalities of the human mind were agreed upon. One of these undisputed behavior models included certain criteria for optimally defined goals. Thinking of it as a running contest:

- One needs to know exactly where the finish line is.
- One needs to know exactly where one is oneself.
- One must be able to reach the finish line.
- One must be able to reach the finish line before others.
- There needs to be an exact time limit.

Zelnick was waiting for Gruber to continue with an aggressive and hostile patience that can only be achieved in certain circumstances. Gruber tapped his fingers on the table for a while before giving his final answer:

“I have no further comment on that matter.”

Zelnick seemed to take the answer as a white flag of truce and moved on.

“So, were you good enough for your academy sweetheart?” Zelnick asked.

“Probably not,” Gruber replied, “but luckily for me, she didn’t seem to mind.”

“So how did you hook up with someone like her?” Zelnick asked.

Gruber felt a bit insulted.

“What are you implying by ‘someone like her?’” he asked in turn.

Zelnick seemed to give it a little thought.

“Someone too good for you,” he said.

Now Gruber gave it serious thought.

“I don’t think she was out of my league,” he said. “I’d say we were in the same league, but she was at the top and I was at the bottom.”

Zelnick scratched his head in a way that made Gruber want to explain it better.

“It’s like...” Gruber began. “She was in line for a place in a higher league and I was struggling to stay in that particular league. So she was in promotion games and I was in relegation games.”

Zelnick looked like he didn’t understand what Gruber was saying anymore.

“I don’t understand what you’re saying anymore,” he said and confirmed Gruber’s assumption.

Gruber took a deep breath, during which he realized that Zelnick probably had little experience with relegation games.

“The bottom line is what she herself said,” Gruber explained. “According to her, you just have to make the best of the cards that are dealt to you... Although now that I think about it, that doesn’t make me sound very good, does it?”

“I understand that principle,” Zelnick agreed. “I’ve heard my mother say that sometimes with a little wink towards my father.”

“And you didn’t have that many cards on Unzervalt, right?” Gruber said.

Zelnick laughed at the thought.

“You’ve got that right!” he said. “Under normal circumstances my father couldn’t get a woman like my mother in a million years.”

“I can see your mother is a true utilitarian,” Gruber remarked.

“Now you lost me again,” Zelnick confessed. “But that sounds convincing.”

Gruber decided to push the limit of the conversation.

“You haven’t seen how a normal human society works,” he began, “but do you know that extremely attractive women can often be seen with surprisingly nondescript men? With Talana, you could be one of those men.”

“I see,” Zelnick replied with a small dash of hostility. “Is being the captain of the flagship of a galactic alliance not ‘descript’ enough?”

“Take it as a compliment,” Gruber suggested. “And also as a joke.”

“If we’re telling jokes,” Zelnick began, “I can tell you one I heard recently. Do you want to hear it?”

“Probably not as much as you want to tell it,” Gruber replied, “but go ahead.”

Zelnick put his hands into his own joke-telling position.

“An Ilwrath, a Mycon and a Vux jump off a bridge and race to the ground. Who wins?”

Gruber was surprised that he hadn't heard this one so he motioned for Zelnick to give the answer.

"The Alliance," Zelnick delivered.

Gruber smiled a little.

"Not bad," he commended. "Should I go next?"

Zelnick gave him the go-ahead and now Gruber leaned forward to deliver his favorite joke.

"So, a man entered a shuttle and saw a catholic nun sitting there. She was very good looking so the man approached her and suggested that—"

"I've heard this one," Zelnick interrupted. "Sorry."

It was disappointing, but also surprising to Gruber. That joke had been the crown jewel of his joke-collection for decades, ever since Lily told it to him the last time they saw each other. He had never before encountered someone who had already heard it – a fact he shared with Zelnick.

"Where did you hear that?" he then asked.

"From my mother," Zelnick answered.

Gruber took a few seconds to put some things together. Then a cold drop of sweat emerged on his forehead and he put the things together again.

"What's the name of your mother?" he asked to confirm or discard his suspicions.

"Huh? Lily," Zelnick replied.

Now the coffin needed only one more nail.

"And her last name?" Gruber pushed the matter.

"Well, *duh*," Zelnick said annoyingly like a teenager. "It's obviously Zelnick."

Now it was Gruber's turn to be aggressively patient.

"Is there a chance that's your father's original last name," he asked. "And then your mother took it after they got together?"

"Oh, right," Zelnick realized. He then seemed to be thinking really hard of something.

“I think that,” he continued after a while, “I have heard the name Roberts in this context. Why do you ask?”

“And she gave you the name Robert,” Gruber said. “How appropriate.”

He looked at Zelnick directly in the eyes while asking the final question:

“Do you know who else is named Lily Roberts, who was also recruited to Star Control some 30 years ago to do highly classified research, who also seems to say a lot of the same stuff as your mother and with whom, now that I think about it, your face shares some similarities?”

“What are you talking about?” Zelnick asked slightly annoyed.

Gruber leaned back.

“I’m talking about that ‘academy sweetheart’ of mine,” he answered.

Gruber could see from Zelnick’s face how he processed the information and managed to connect the dots.

“Oh, crap,” Zelnick finally said to indicate that he had understood.

“Tell me about it,” Gruber agreed.

“You’re not my real dad are you?” Zelnick asked.

For some reason that question hit a nerve.

“No!” Gruber shouted a bit too loud and too angrily, which caught the attention of other people in the room. “You were born on Unzervalt in 2135 if I’m not mistaken. The last time I saw Lily was in 2122.”

Zelnick was obviously relieved.

“I see,” he said. “It’s a small universe, isn’t it?”

Just then their communicators beeped at the same time. The bridge notified them that the Spathi had responded to their ansible message.

“Let’s continue this some other time,” Zelnick suggested and they both left the canteen and went to the bridge.

Dear Hunams,

How are you? We are fine. However can we thank you for letting us study your planet Earth's slave shield?

Admittedly, it took us some time to replicate the technology ourselves, but we are simply delighted with the results!

Yessiree, we sure love the idea of putting an impenetrable shield around our planet! Now all those evil monsters that were just about to attack won't be able to eat us – thanks!

I guess this means we won't be participating in the war against the Ur-Quan anymore – sorry!

I'm sure we'll never ever talk with you again, so goodbye and thanks again!

“I'm sure they're right,” Zelnick commented after he had finished reading the message.

“Are we not going to send them all those insults you came up with, captain?” Gruber clarified.

“No, let's just move on,” Zelnick decided. “Mr. Samusenko, set course for Alpha Illuminati.”

They were going to buy fuel from the Melnorme at Alpha Illuminati, which was a super-giant star very close to their current location. Then, if no other pressing emergencies arose, they could finally go to retrieve the Tobermoon and the Zoq-Fot-Pik Stingers from Gamma Circini.

CHAPTER 4

GALACTIC GARBAGE DUMPS

September 6th 2155, Gamma Circini, 043.7 : 627.0

My captain is the son of a woman I almost married. I don't know yet how to handle that information so for now I've decided to ignore it. The captain himself seems to take it with humor and I can only wish I could do the same.

That was still all Gruber had to say about the matter. He had made the mistake of not telling Vargas about it during their last session a few days earlier. Now he had to wait another month for the next scheduled meeting, because he was uncomfortable with going to a psychologist on his own initiative. And he knew that only idiots kept secrets from their psychologists.

He decided to write a new log entry about more recent and important matters.

We managed to reach the site where Trent and the Zoq-Fot-Pik captains had hidden the Tobermoon and the four Stinger vessels. Our primary task force has become quite powerful already. In addition to the Vindicator and its new Hellbore Cannon, we have two Earthling Cruisers, two Orz Nemeses, four Zoq-Fot-Pik Stingers and one Spathi Eluder. It almost makes you hope for a battle...

...Almost.

Once again Gruber's writing was interrupted by a message from Zelnick. Apparently they had received a new ansible message from the starbase and Zelnick relayed the text to Gruber's communicator.

According to the message, Captain Halleck and the Amateras had returned from Delta Gorno. Just like the Melnorme had said, they were able to find a sole survivor of the Shofixti civilization there.

The lone individual was an old warrior named Tanaka, who was orbiting his late homeworld in a barely functional ship. He had been unwilling to co-operate at first, but after some "debate" he had agreed to accompany the Amateras back to the starbase. The return trip had taken longer than expected because Tanaka was unwilling to leave the cockpit of his ship and its hyperdrive wasn't fully functional. The hyperdrive of the Amateras wasn't powerful enough to drag the Shofixti Scout vessel along as the Vindicator did with all its escorts.

At the time of composing the message, Captain Tanaka was sulking on the starbase and, according to the medical staff, if the Shofixti race was going to be resurrected, females would have to be acquired with haste. The command council was already thinking about a diplomatic mission to Alpha Cerenkov to discuss the Shofixti maidens with the legendary Vux Admiral Zex, who supposedly had them in his menagerie.

Soon after reading the message through, Gruber received another notification from Zelnick. This time the captain requested his presence on the bridge, so Gruber went there without delay.

On the bridge Gruber found out that the starbase had called them with video feed and that Lydia was once again their spokesperson.

“You should hear what she has to say,” Zelnick said to Gruber and then asked Lydia to explain again what she had told him just now.

“Hi Adam!” she immediately greeted him. *“Matthewson and I found out something interesting from that Precursor stuff you wrote in your log.”*

Gruber was interested to hear what it was, but he was also interested in knowing why Lydia looked like using the ansible was a part of her everyday routines. He asked the first thing first.

“Remember that set of 10 coordinates that supposedly point at the so called rainbow worlds? We found out that the Precursors had a special purpose for those planets. Wanna hear what it was?”

“Yes,” Gruber put it simply.

“They are garbage dumps! Or actually, we’re not that sure about the garbage part, but they did dump something there – or maybe even dumped the planets themselves! Anyway, because of the dumping, there is strong radiation on the surface. And some people here told me that that must be the reason why they look so colorful. That’s pretty cool, right? You should go check out the planets and see if you can find something interesting! You’re pretty close to one now, right?”

True enough, one of the 10 coordinates pointed to Beta Pegasi, which was a bit over 100 units away and right next to Alpha Pavonis where the Arilou said they could find a crash-landed Ur-Quan Dreadnought.

“We’d love to do that,” Gruber said, “but we lack the necessary radiation shielding. Thanks for the information, though.”

<<You’re welcome!>> she answered in German.

Now it was time to ask about the second thing.

“Why are you the one telling us this? Is Commander Hayes alright with it?”

“Hayes is there right now,” Zelnick whispered to Gruber.

“It’s just me and Matthewson who really understand this,” Lydia explained. *“And he didn’t want to come.”*

A fair point, Gruber thought.

“Lydia, once again you’ve been very helpful,” he commended her.

“Yay!” she rejoiced. *“That’s all I had. Can I talk to Captain Zelnick again?”*

Gruber stepped aside and Zelnick took the stage.

“Yes?” he politely asked.

Without warning, Lydia blew a kiss to Zelnick, waved with a girlish smile and closed the link.

Everyone on the bridge waited for a second or two before looking at the captain. There were some grins. Zelnick was still standing and remained speechless for a while until he said to everyone:

“What I have can’t be taught.”

Most of the operators laughed. Gruber, on the other hand, felt the same uneasiness a father does when he doesn’t like his daughter’s new boyfriend. He also wondered where Lydia had learned the concept of blowing a kiss. It was hard to imagine the Androsynth doing that, although he wasn’t quite sure why. He wanted to move on with business as he had just remembered something important.

“Sir, didn’t the Spathi mention that they had translated some old Precursor texts?” he reminded the captain. “If I’m not mistaken, they said that according to the texts the Precursors had built 10 waste disposal sites somewhere in this region. I think it’s safe to assume that the information is correct, now that we have another source for it.”

“Now that you mention it,” Zelnick remembered, “They really did say that.”

“And we both know what that means,” Gruber began.

Zelnick nodded and then continued the thought:

“Digging through trash.”

Six days later they were getting near the orbit of the first planet in the Beta Pegasi system. Just as the coordinate set promised, it was a rainbow world. And just like last time, the view was spectacular. As they'd expected, the radiation levels were so high that landing was out of the question.

This time Dujardin checked the surface more closely with the telescope. However, even after several hours of observing, she had found nothing out of the ordinary. The planet seemed like an ordinary rock, except for the pretty colors. If they hoped to learn anything, they would have to land. And if they were to send a shuttle down there now, the people inside would probably fry from the radiation before even reaching the surface.

"So where do we get some hardcore radiation shielding?" Zelnick asked everyone on the bridge.

"I wouldn't be surprised if the Melnorme had some for sale," Gruber suggested. "Now that we can sell them these coordinates, we could also buy some crucial information from them."

"Like the location of the Sa-Matra," Zelnick said. "And some means to deal with it."

"And while we're on the topic," Gruber continued, "they could tell us if there is a way to fix the Ultron."

"Right," Zelnick agreed, "and maybe they know where the Syreen starships are stashed."

"Good thinking," Gruber commended the captain. "Although it seemed like they wouldn't join our cause even if they had their ships. We'd need to convince them that the fight is necessary and I don't see how we could do that."

"Maybe the all-knowing Melnorme would know that as well," Zelnick wistfully speculated. "I'm sure Commander Talana would like to—"

He stopped mid-sentence and thought for a while.

“—have a platonic conversation with me then,” he finished the thought.

“Let’s just leave it at that,” Gruber suggested.

Two days later the Vindicator and its escort ships entered Alpha Pavonis, which was a green giant star. If there really was a somewhat intact Ur-Quan Dreadnought on the surface of the seventh planet, they could learn a great deal by inspecting it closely. And the real reason for going through the wreckage was the warp pod, which the Arilou said was still intact. If the Arilou lived up to their promise, they would use it to construct a ‘portal spawner’ for the Vindicator. With it they could jump to quasispace from anywhere in hyperspace.

The crew of the Vindicator had very little experience of the so called quasispace where the Arilou seemed to hang around. They themselves had entered quasispace by accident when a naturally occurring vortex sucked them in at coordinates 043.8 : 637.3. Quasispace was filled with portals back to hyperspace, but they had had no means of figuring out where exactly they led – that is, no means except entering the portals. They knew only that one particular vortex led to a location near Groombridge at the edge of the charted area of hyperspace.

The seventh planet in the system was pretty close to the location where they had warped in and it took only two hours to reach it. However, they soon found out that there was another one of those red probes orbiting the planet. As the probe also took notice of the Vindicator, it dashed towards them at full speed. It seemed to move in true space even faster than the Vindicator. The bright side of the encounter was that they could probably put the Hellbore Cannon to its first real test. When the probe was close

enough for communications, it sent the already familiar message:

“We are not hostile and seek to establish friendly relations with your species.”

“Well, we got some info out of them the last time as well,” Zelnick said. He then addressed the probe formally: “This is the flagship Vindicator of The New Alliance of Free Stars. Please hold your fire. Can we just talk for a while?”

There was an immediate response again.

“We wish to learn more about you. Please transmit data.”

“Oh?” Zelnick said in surprise. “Well I guess we could exchange some information. What kind of—“

“Sir,” Katja interrupted him, “they’ve terminated communications again.”

“How unpredictable,” Zelnick sarcastically said. “McNeil, let’s see how the Hellbore Cannon works.”

“Yes sir!” McNeil joyfully replied and started taking aim.

The probe was coming at them with full speed well within the firing sector. Zelnick ordered the other captains to wait for a while.

“Here we go,” McNeil said and pulled the trigger.

There was a bright flash and a blast of energy was shot into the direction of the probe.

A few seconds later one could ask “What probe? I don’t see a probe anywhere. If there was a probe, where’s its wreckage?”

Luckily they had tested the Hellbore Cannon on an asteroid back at Sol so they were somewhat prepared for the total destruction in front of them.

“Now I’m REALLY glad I’m on your side,” Fwiffo summed it all up.

“I don’t think there will be anything to salvage,” Gruber pointed out.

“Crap,” Zelnick said as he understood that they had just lost valuable wreckage. “Well, now we know how much firepower we have. And I have but one comment: I like it!”

“*Agreed,*” Trent commented.

“*You can say that again,*” Wu also commented.

“*Your *dance* is *colorful*,*” one of the Orz captains added.

“*Whoo-wee,*” the blue one from the Dip-Por-Pak trio said. “*I ain’t never seen anyone as mean as you in a fight!*”

“Let’s not get too carried away,” Gruber calmed everyone down. “The next time we encounter a probe, we could leave its neutralization to the other ships.”

Soon they were ready to take a closer look at the planet. Dujardin did the basic scans and the data was displayed for everyone to see. Although the planet was far from the star, the surface temperature was over 400 degrees centigrade. It didn’t come as a surprise, since the star was a giant and thus much hotter than for example Sol. What did surprise them though was that, according to the biological scan, there was life down there. It was even more surprising since there was almost no atmosphere, just a thin mixture of unbreathable gases.

The energy scan revealed the crashed Dreadnought on rough, elevated terrain near the equator. Even with optimal atmospheric conditions reaching the crash site would be difficult.

“How are we supposed to land there?” Zelnick justifiably asked. “And by ‘there’ I mean the entire planet. The shuttle can’t handle that kind of heat for an extended duration, not to mention the people inside.”

“Captain,” Dujardin said to get Zelnick’s attention.

“Yes, Danielle, go ahead and say it if you have a suggestion,” Zelnick prompted her.

“No, sir, it’s not that,” she replied. “It’s just that there’s another one of those probes approaching us. Look.”

She showed the incoming probe on the tactical display. It had appeared from behind the planet and they had just a few minutes to prepare themselves.

“Trent, take care of it,” Zelnick ordered.

“*Will do, sir,*” Trent replied and quickly ordered the other ships to move to an appropriate formation.

“It’s hailing us,” Katja reported.

“Patch them through,” Zelnick decided. “We might as well listen to their last words again.”

The probe’s message didn’t come as a surprise:

“We are not hostile and seek to establish friendly relations with your species.”

Zelnick didn’t seem to be interested in reasoning with the probe anymore.

“Just how many of you are there?” he asked.

The probe gave a detailed answer:

“Replication status: eight replications. Next replication 85 percent complete. Estimated replications since departure from point of origin: 583 replications. Estimated replications projected one year from this date: 14 784 replications. Estimated replications projected five years from this date: 45 786 412 replications.”

“Eh? Excuse me, what?” Zelnick replied.

“Sir, they cut the transmission again,” Katja reported.

“Try to contact them again,” Zelnick ordered.

Katja tried that for a while, but it was no good. The probe didn’t respond.

“*It’s getting dangerously close, sir,*” Trent pointed out. “*Shall we open fire?*”

“Go ahead,” Zelnick said.

For a few seconds there was a lot of firing and then the probe was in pieces – and this time the pieces were bigger than grains of sand.

“Get the salvage team to do their thing,” Zelnick said to Gruber.

A few hours later they were discussing the possible surface operation in the Vindicator’s conference room. Dujardin had pointed out that the surface was insanely hot only in the daytime. In the night the temperature decreased all the way to -200 degrees centigrade. And on this planet night lasted for nearly 30 hours.

“So we can step out of the shuttle after dark,” Zelnick clarified the idea. “What about the life-forms down there? Are they a threat?”

They all turned to Dujardin for answers.

“Unfortunately we don’t know that yet,” she explained. “The biological scan picks up lots of life-forms, but we haven’t been able to see any with the telescope. Thermal imaging obviously does us no good when the temperature is that high. From where we’re standing, the planet looks just like an ordinary rock. The landing team will just have to see for themselves.”

“See?” Zelnick grabbed the word. “They won’t be able to see anything down there at night time.”

Dujardin seemed to regret her choice of words, but didn’t say anything.

“How’s the gravity?” Thomas Rigby asked. He was the squad leader of the landing team.

“It’s pretty much the same as on Luna,” Dujardin answered. Then she looked at Zelnick, who obviously wasn’t familiar with the characteristics of Earth’s moon and continued: “It’s about 0.17 g – that is – roughly 0.2 times the gravity we have here.”

The captain gave her an approving look.

“Jane, how’s the landing site?” Zelnick asked Jenkins, the shuttle pilot, calling her by first name as he always did with women.

“Not good,” she replied. “We’ll have to touch down several kilometers away.”

She put a map of the crash site and its surroundings on a screen. She then pointed at one location on the map.

“Here you can see the wreckage,” she explained. “If the ship had crashed uncontrollably, there would be nothing for us to investigate. I’d say the ship still had some power left in its engines to soften the fall. Some parts of the hull might even have stayed pressurized.”

“I think that’s a safe assumption,” Gruber pointed out, “since the Arilou said that the Ur-Quan’s ‘talking pet’ had survived the crash.”

“Right,” Jenkins agreed. She then pointed at another location on the map. “Here is the closest place where we can land the shuttle. That’s five kilometers away in a beeline. We might be able to drop the team off directly at the site without landing, but we’ll still have to look more deeply into that possibility.”

Rigby didn’t seem too happy about this mission.

“So we would jump off the shuttle in pitch black onto unknown terrain,” he began. “And what’s more, one wrong step and you fall down a steep slope. And if we succeed in getting there, we would have to identify the warp pod and detach it in less than 30 hours, again, in pitch black.”

“You don’t have to worry about the warp pod,” Zelnick said. “Skeates will go down there with you and First Officer Gruber will oversee the mission.”

Dougal Skeates was an all-around handyman who could repair, dismantle and put together anything. Gruber, on the other hand, had superior overall knowledge of alien races and their cultures.

“And if you run out of time,” Zelnick continued, “you can just come back here and continue on the next night.”

“Getting back into the shuttle without landing is pretty much out of the question,” Jenkins pointed out. “At least with the cargo. We have to be prepared to hike all the way.”

“Five kilometers on rough terrain in pitch black, times two,” Rigby once again reminded everyone, which seemed to annoy Zelnick.

“If you’re so afraid of the dark,” Zelnick began, “we can turn on the external lights of the Vindicator so you can look up to the sky and wave to us whenever you feel scared.”

Some of the people in the room dared to laugh a little.

“Actually, that’s not a bad idea,” Gruber said. “We could use the Vindicator like people on Earth used Polaris a long time ago.”

“What’s that?” Zelnick asked.

“It’s a star in Earth’s sky,” Gruber explained. “Its declination is over 89 degrees so it’s almost directly over the North Pole.”

“I see,” Zelnick said. “So if you move in the direction of the star, you’re always moving north.”

Gruber wondered why he was surprised that Zelnick had understood.

“Right,” he replied. “Even though we have all these fancy gadgets, there’s always need for a backup plan – in case technology fails.”

“Well then,” Zelnick began to wrap things up, “if that is all, you should start preparing your team right away. There’s only about three hours of daytime left at the crash site.”

Gruber and Rigby soon briefed the rest of the landing team in the hangar.

“I’m not too eager to jump off the shuttle,” Hawthorne declared and many of the others nodded in agreement.

“How are we going to find the crash site after we land?” Robinson asked.

“We use a beacon,” Rigby explained. “Before landing we fly over the site and, even if we don’t jump off ourselves, we’ll drop the beacon there. It will also give us a distance measurement.”

This seemed like a good idea in Gruber’s opinion. The beacon cast a tall pillar of light which could not be missed in complete darkness.

“What about the route from the shuttle to the crash site?” Belov asked. “It will probably take us a long time to find a safe route and we also need to find our way back. Should we mark our trail somehow?”

There was a general agreement.

“I remember reading this kind of a story once,” Witherspoon began, “about some people who were about to enter a forest and were afraid they couldn’t find their way back again. Just like us now, right? So anyway, what they did was, they left a trail of bread crumbs as they walked. Get it? They then followed that trail on their way back.”

“I assume the forest wasn’t pitch black,” Below pointed out. “And would we have enough bread?”

“We could use flares or break lights instead of bread,” Witherspoon defended her idea.

“I don’t think we have enough break lights for that,” Hawthorne shot the idea down. “And flares wouldn’t last long enough.”

Hawthorne was of course right, Gruber thought. But the idea was good. They just needed to get creative.

“Hey, I also remember a story like this,” Robinson said. “It was about entering a maze or a labyrinth of some kind. The guy had a ball of yarn which he unrolled as he went. It’s the same thing, right? He was able to follow the thread on his way back.”

“Not bad,” Below commended Robinson. “I still think that would be difficult in pitch black. If the thread were illuminated, then I’d be sold.”

There was a pause, which Skeates soon ended.

“We have that,” he said. “Illuminated thread, I mean. Kilometers of it.”

There were several faces that were waiting for an explanation.

“The thread of life,” Skeates continued.

It looked like some of them didn’t know what Skeates meant, but Gruber knew, and he immediately recognized the brilliance of the idea.

The *thread of life* or *life thread* was a nickname for the wire attached to maintenance workers when they went outside a ship. It was made of carbon nanotubes so it was extremely thin, lightweight and strong. And because it was so thin that you could barely see it, lights were attached to it for safety.

Gruber wasn’t sure if the Vindicator had any reels of the thread, but several kilometers of it should be a part of every Cruiser’s equipment. He called Captain Wu of the Seraph immediately, but as it turned out, the Seraph didn’t have any. Apparently, with the objective of saving valuable materials in mind, the construction crew had left out much of the less mandatory equipment when the Seraph had been built.

Gruber then called Captain Trent of the Tobermoon. At least Tobermoon had been built before the current shortage of materials so they should have the thread. And they did. Gruber requested that they sent over all the thread they had. He then returned to the landing team and informed them that this particular problem was under control.

“So what about the warp pod?” Belov asked. “How are we supposed to transport something like that back to the shuttle?”

“We’ll have to decide that when we’re there,” Skeates answered. “We don’t know the size of the pod yet. In any case, because of the low gravity, we can carry quite massive loads with some effort.”

“And one more thing,” Rigby said. “The suits should have enough oxygen for about 20 hours, so everyone needs to carry an extra tank. With such low gravity that shouldn’t be a problem either.”

It seemed like all questions had been asked, so Gruber announced their schedule:

“The sun will set on the crash site in two hours. Our weatherman assumed that the temperature will then drop rapidly, reaching zero centigrade in two to three hours. That’s when we need to be in position and start the mission. We will then have approximately 27 hours to do our job and be back on the shuttle again. Anyone or anything left outside when the sun comes up will be left behind.”

The mission would also require an extended duration of rough labor without a chance to eat. The suit only had a one liter water bottle.

“This will be a long and difficult mission,” Gruber continued. “Be sure to eat up and relieve yourselves. Also check that your water bottle is filled and that your diapers are clean. We will leave at 23:40.”

CHAPTER 5

PITCH BLACK

September 15th 2155, Alpha Pavonis, 056.2 : 800.0

It's been a while since the last time I wore a space suit. And this time I'll have to make myself comfortable, since I'll be using it for nearly 30 hours. That's a lot longer than at the final exam at the academy.

Investigating a somewhat intact wreck of an Ur-Quan Dreadnought is a huge opportunity for us. It's a shame we can't take the entire wreck with us back to Sol. We must be extra careful in documenting everything we do. It would be embarrassing if Dr. Chu and his pals were to ask about a seemingly minor detail we missed, which of course would be crucial to their research, and then we would have to fly back here to check it out.

...

To tell the truth, I'm actually a bit tense. Although you can't tell from typed text if the writer's hands were shaking, anyone reading this will now know that mine were.

Gruber was in his quarters and just about to finish an energy bar. He was looking at his space suit and chewing away the last piece. Energy bars had come a long way, he thought. He really liked the American chocolate chip cookie flavored one and would eat them every day if it weren't for their 2000+ calories.

It was time to put on the suit. There were only a few standard sizes, but they seemed to fit everyone well enough. Gruber used the second to largest size.

He stripped down. You wore nothing underneath this suit type. There was a very simple and effective cleaning system so you didn't have to worry about the smell of sweat. The only required maintenance was that the diaper part had to be changed in case an emergency had taken place. It was not uncommon and nothing to be ashamed of. Everyone knew how an unfamiliar gravity and unfamiliar natural light affected the stomach. The only real problem was if your lunch came out of your body from the top instead of from the bottom. It was especially unpleasant in zero gravity.

The suit seemed to fit him perfectly. He checked the helmet by putting it on. He then checked that he could get the cyanide capsule out if needed. Everything seemed to be in order so he took off the helmet for the time being and made his way to the hangar.

All equipment they were going to take with them was laid out outside the shuttle. There were several reels of life thread, extra oxygen tanks, hand-held flares, break lights, hand guns, lots of tools, one flare gun, one beacon and a hastily crafted contraption for carrying the warp pod. They would never carry this much equipment in Earth-like conditions. Still, it seemed to Gruber that something was missing, although he couldn't quite put his finger on what it was.

"I bet anyone 100 bucks we're going to need this," Gruber heard Belov's voice from behind him. He turned around and saw Belov holding a coil of rope.

That was it, Gruber thought. You always needed rope in difficult situations. You never know in advance what the need would be, but it would definitely come.

The time was 23:36 and everyone was present. All equipment was on board and the crew entered the shuttle. Gruber took a seat next to Rigby and Skeates sat beside

Gruber. When everyone had taken their seats, Gruber gave Rigby the go-ahead and Rigby in turn notified Jenkins that they could take off.

The sun had already set on their landing zone and the surface temperature was rapidly decreasing. Gruber had the weather info projected onto the visor of his helmet and Dujardin was constantly updating it.

Then the bumpy part started. The atmosphere was a lot thinner than on their last surface mission, so the bumps weren't really that bad this time, but the extra oxygen tanks still rattled a little. There's nothing quite like the sound of high-pressure gas containers bumping into each other.

Gruber took notice of how little empty space there was left in the shuttle. It was hard to imagine the warp pod fitting inside even without all their stuff, not to mention with it. In any case their job was to bring the pod to the landing site and worry about transportation later.

The bumps got less and less intense and finally disappeared altogether. The ride was then smooth and pleasant as they had slowed down to an approaching speed at conventional airplane altitude. Gruber looked out the window but, not surprisingly, didn't see anything. It was indeed dark outside.

They had scouted and mapped their landing path beforehand, but Jenkins still had to play it safe since she couldn't see anything outside the cone of the head light.

"We're getting near the crash site," Jenkins announced through the speakers.

The surface temperature at the landing zone was now +50 degrees and still decreasing rapidly. Rigby and Belov got up from their seats and got ready to drop off the beacon.

"Alright, I can see the wreckage," Jenkins reported. *"There's no room to hover safely above the site in these conditions. Lower the ramp and see if you can get a view of the target."*

Belov pushed a button and the ramp started to move. Immediately after it had opened an inch, a strong wind hit the inside of the shuttle. Belov and Rigby had to struggle to hang on. Indeed jumping off the ship didn't seem like a safe course of action. Gruber saw a glimpse of something as the shuttle's search lights moved over the planet's surface.

"Are we above the site?" Rigby asked Jenkins over the radio.

"Almost," Jenkins replied. *"You should see the wreckage right about... now."*

As she said that, Gruber could also see something green amidst the darkness – the hull of the Dreadnought.

"I'll make a flyover now," Jenkins said. *"Get ready to drop the beacon."*

Gruber could see the lights moving over the site, which was getting closer. Belov and Rigby would have to drop the beacon in a few seconds...

Gruber couldn't see the ground from where he was sitting anymore, but Belov and Rigby probably could. They pushed the beacon over the edge of the ramp with their feet and watched it drop. Soon Gruber could see a pillar of light and Belov and Rigby doing a high-five. Then Belov closed the ramp again and it got quiet once more.

"We nailed it," Rigby declared over the radio.

After several minutes the shuttle touched down. Gruber checked the temperature and it was +3. Their timing was perfect. He checked his timer and told everybody to do the same. They all confirmed that they had exactly 27 hours and 44 minutes until sunrise.

"Let's go stretch our legs," Gruber said, indicating that the ramp should be lowered.

"Witherspoon, Belov, Ahmed, Cuvelier, secure the perimeter," Rigby ordered and the four of them took positions in front of the ramp.

The ramp was lowered and the first crew members hastily stepped outside holding their guns. Soon they disappeared into the darkness and only the cones of their helmet lights could be seen.

"We're good," Witherspoon reported, which was the cue for everyone else to step outside the shuttle.

It was dark. The helmet lights weren't very powerful so they couldn't see anything further than about 20 meters. The shuttle's head lights showed a bit more terrain, but not towards their target. Gruber looked around. In one direction there was a notable pillar of light rising towards the sky. It was impossible to estimate the distance with naked eye, but the beacon's signal indicated it was 5311 meters. They had a long trek ahead of themselves.

Gruber tried to get familiar with the gravity. He jumped as high as he could and landed a few seconds later. The suit hampered his movement only slightly. The ground was solid, but not too hard. He tried to run and found it easier than aboard the Vindicator.

He then took notice of the air, if you could call it that. It seemed to be filled with some sort of particles. It wasn't sand or dust – that he was sure of. Was it something organic? There was supposed to be life there, so maybe the whole planet was covered in airborne plankton of sorts.

"Listen up, everyone," he suddenly heard Zelnick's voice over the radio. The captain sounded serious. *"We're suddenly picking up lots of heat sources appearing all around you in the thermal image. There was nothing before you landed."*

Gruber grasped the handle of his gun. He could see others moving in a similar fashion.

"Are they moving towards us?" Rigby asked.

"No," Zelnick replied. *"They seem to be stationary."*

Gruber was standing near Rigby and noticed him taking out the flare gun.

"I'm firing a flare!" Rigby notified everyone and then pulled the trigger.

A small ball of light was shot towards the sky. After a few seconds the ball lit up extremely brightly, illuminating the entire area.

It was difficult to tell from all the shadows and sudden change in lightning, but Gruber thought he saw movement in every direction during the first second of light. There were several voices on the radio at the same time, all asking if others saw what they saw.

"That flare did something," Zelnick said. *"All the heat signatures disappeared near your location. It happened exactly when the flare was lit."*

Now everyone who had a gun was pointing it in a random direction away from the shuttle. There was a moment of silence and stillness.

Soon it became evident that nothing was going to be seen moving around any time soon. Gruber took a look at the terrain between them and the pillar of light. It looked unwelcoming. There were lots of shadows on the ground that gave the impression of chasms. They would have to tread carefully.

"Alright, people, we're on a tight schedule here," Rigby said after a while of observing. *"Let's get moving, but keep your eyes open. Robinson and Kilgore, take the... thing for carrying the warp pod. Skeates, start unreeling the life thread. Witherspoon and Ahmed, you have point. Shoji, you stay here with Jenkins. The rest of you, take the tools."*

Clear-cut orders, just what they needed, Gruber thought. He also thought about how that thought would sound when spoken aloud and noticed how it would mysteriously relay unintended sarcasm.

He grabbed some tool boxes from the shuttle. Skeates was tying the other end of the life thread to the landing skids.

“Captain, can you hear me?” Rigby checked over the radio again. *“Please continue to keep us informed on what you see from up there.”*

“Sure thing,” Zelnick replied. *“The thermal image actually looks pretty interesting. The heat signatures have indeed disappeared only from a circular area around you – or more precisely – from an area around the flare. I bet they come back when the flare goes out, so keep your guard up.”*

The flare would stay up in the sky about an hour in Earth-like conditions. It was difficult to say how long it would last here. It felt a lot safer now with the lights on, but they didn’t have enough flare gun rounds to have one in the sky all the time. They would have to use their few flares only when in need, like, for example, if a light-sensitive alien horde was attacking them.

Gruber saw two people getting ahead of others. Presumably Ahmed and Witherspoon had taken their places as point lookouts. Others were walking in a single line behind them, keeping some 20 meters of distance. Gruber took a random place in the line and found himself walking behind Belov.

It was quiet. The air was so thin that you could barely hear anything other than radio conversations and your own breathing. And when you listen to your own breathing for a while, you become all too aware of it and then you have to do it manually.

They were moving at a decent pace. Robinson and Kilgore seemed to have no trouble carrying the large contraption and there hadn’t been much in the way of hills yet. Gruber estimated that if all went this smoothly, they could reach the crash site in just two hours.

And then the flare went out. Everything was dark again. Unsurprisingly their pace dropped to about a half of what it had just been. Gruber saw the cones from everyone's helmet lights moving in all directions around them. Everybody was on the lookout for the aliens.

"They are coming back again," Zelnick announced. *"There are new heat signatures appearing all around you, some of them pretty close."*

Now the cones of light moved even faster. Gruber was also constantly checking over his shoulder. He also happened to look up to the sky and noticed that the stars weren't as visible as he'd thought they would be. It must be the particles in the air, he thought. Then he looked back and saw one particularly bright star in the sky, which was probably the Vindicator. If you walked towards it from the crash site, you would end up at the shuttle. Just like the Polaris, he thought.

"They are remarkably stationary," Zelnick commented. *"The heat signatures just appeared at certain locations and they haven't moved an inch afterwards. I'm sending you the locations of some of them right now."*

Gruber got a series of proximity coordinates projected on the screen of his helmet. None of them were close enough to look at with the helmet light, so he just focused on walking forward.

Three hours later he was still doing that, although now their destination was only a few hundred meters away. There had been uphill, downhill, crevices, ominous natural bridges over the crevices, cliffs and more than enough unpleasant ground. Gruber felt extremely tired and he dared to guess that he wasn't the only one. They just needed to reach the crash site and there they could rest for a while.

They were climbing what was presumably the last upward slope. Gruber looked back and saw the shuttle's

light in the distance. The life thread was clearly visible, snaking around the terrain, obediently following the path they had taken. The return trip would be a lot easier.

Finally they reached the top of the hill and saw the source of the pillar of light, the beacon. It illuminated some of the nearby area, including the wrecked Dreadnought.

Gruber had never before seen an Ur-Quan Dreadnought up close. Although this one was not in one piece, it was still a formidable sight. The ship wasn't as big as the Vindicator, but a lot bigger than an Earthling Cruiser. Gruber felt uneasiness, which could also be described as fear. Although he knew it was ridiculous, he toyed with the idea that a live Ur-Quan was still inside, in which case entering the wreck would be like entering a den of lions.

There had never been a chance to study the Ur-Quan physique. Gruber only knew that the Ur-Quan were carnivorous several-meter-long caterpillars.

"Skeates, how much thread we still got?" Rigby asked.

"Plenty," Skeates replied.

"Good," Rigby replied. *"Ahmed, take the reel from Skeates and circle the site with it."*

Ahmed had plenty of ground to cover. It was difficult to say exactly, but the wreckage looked like it covered an area about the size of an Olympic stadium.

Skeates, with his hands now empty, walked up to Gruber.

"What do you make of it, sir?" he asked.

"Nothing yet," Gruber replied. *"Let's go see if there's anyone home."*

A few hours later they had a pretty good idea of the ship's exterior. The part that appeared to be the bridge seemed sealed. Gruber and Skeates agreed that one mostly intact part in the shape of a cylinder had to be the warp pod. Skeates was already working on separating it from all other parts.

The pod was a bit bigger than they had hoped. It wouldn't fit in the shuttle with them. Gruber estimated that if the shuttle were empty, that is, if all the seats were taken off as well, then the pod might just barely fit inside.

The rest of the team were investigating the wreckage in their own way and Gruber was thinking about getting inside the bridge. They had brought special tools which could be used to breach the hull, but Skeates was currently using them, so Gruber decided to watch him work for a while.

"This piece of junk is going to slow us down a lot," Skeates pointed out as he was cutting through a metal beam attached to the pod, and Gruber had to agree.

It took many hours to cut the pod off completely in an organized fashion. Once it was done, Skeates helped Gruber burn a hole through the hull. Gruber immediately noticed that the ship was in decent condition from the inside and that searching through it would take time. If they wanted to get the warp pod to the landing site during this night, they couldn't wait. They had to split up.

They determined that four people were enough to carry the pod with the unnamable contraption they had brought with them. They agreed that eight people would be required so they could take turns carrying it. Gruber would stay with the wreckage as long as possible and try to learn anything he could. He would have plenty of time to search the inside of the ship. Witherspoon was the lucky person who was assigned to stay with him.

Gruber and Witherspoon watched the others slowly but surely start their unpleasant journey. They moved so slowly that Gruber wondered whether they would make it to the shuttle before the break of dawn, which would be in 15 hours and 19 minutes. For a very short moment Gruber was relieved that he didn't have to carry the pod.

After the carrying squad had left the crash site, Gruber and Witherspoon entered the wreckage through the hole in

the hull. Gruber lit a flare and immediately wished he hadn't. There were carcasses everywhere, all rotten and dried up. At first glance Gruber couldn't make out to which species they belonged. It was only evident that they weren't Ur-Quan.

Gruber had stacked up on break lights which he now used to get some light in the interior. He was still holding the flare which burned much more brightly than the break lights – so brightly that he had to constantly keep it outside his field of view or his eyes would have to take time to adjust to the darkness again. Or actually, he had learned a long time ago that in situations like this you should always keep your other eye closed. That way you would only lose your night vision in one eye.

“Sir, take a look at this,” Witherspoon suddenly called out to him. She was pointing her helmet light at a hole in the wall.

When Gruber got closer he noticed that the hole was actually a closet of some sort and that there was another body inside. Unlike the others, this one was much better preserved and they could without a doubt say that it was a Spathi. Gruber reported his finding to Captain Zelnick.

“Roger that,” Zelnick replied. *“Let’s not tell Fwiffo about it.”*

The late Spathi was holding on to something. It was too badly damaged to tell what it was, but the scene resembled a scared child squeezing a teddy bear. Of course the crew had to know that they were going to crash. Gruber experienced a brief feeling of sadness.

“It looks like the crew was made up of everything except the Ur-Quan,” Witherspoon commented.

Gruber turned around to face her, but to his surprise she had already moved to the other side of the room. She was now making a 3D model of the interior for the science division's convenience.

“There has to be an Ur-Quan carcass here somewhere,” Gruber assured himself out loud. It wouldn’t make any sense to fly a battleship without a native captain.

He climbed on a raised platform and tried to imagine the area in use. Where would the captain be? Looking around the room he made an observation that wasn’t obvious from lower elevation: All the bodies were leaning on walls towards the bow of the ship. It of course seemed logical, since there probably was quite a blow in the crash. At least humans would die instantly from a shock like that, but some aliens might be more robust.

Gruber noticed an important looking section at the front of the bridge. He wondered how he had missed it earlier, since the raised platform lead straight to it. If I was the captain of this ship, Gruber thought, that’s where I would be hiding.

As he approached, it looked more and more like there was nothing there. He entered the section, which could best be described as a chamber, and looked around. From there you could see outside, but also, in a surprisingly convenient way, the whole bridge. It was definitely the command chamber. But where was the commanding Ur-Quan? Gruber looked around one more time and then he looked up...

“Claire!” he called to Witherspoon over the radio as if shouting to another room.

“Yes?” she answered.

“I found the Ur-Quan.”

The chamber was shaped like a sphere and there was some kind of a perch near the ceiling. That was where the unmistakable carcass of the commanding Ur-Quan was.

“I had no idea they were this big,” Witherspoon commented.

Indeed the corpse seemed to be almost 10 meters in length. It was in such bad shape that it was difficult to

ascertain its diameter, but Gruber assumed it was near his height. He thought about the discomfort of meeting an Ur-Quan in a well-lit alley.*

“Would you, as a young individual, mind going up there to gather some samples?” he asked Witherspoon, who was 10 years younger than him.

Witherspoon seemed to contemplate her chances.

“How am I supposed to get up there?” she asked.

“Try jumping,” Gruber suggested. *“I think you could make it.”*

Indeed with such low gravity one might just reach the ledge, which was about four meters high. Witherspoon gave it a go, but came a bit short.

“I’ll boost you,” Gruber said and held out his hands.

Witherspoon laid her left foot on Gruber’s hands.

“Ready?” Gruber checked. *“One... two... THREE!”*

He pushed Witherspoon up with all the strength he had, which was a mistake in 0.17 g. The boost was much stronger than they had anticipated and Witherspoon overshot the ledge, hitting the ceiling. However, she managed to grab the ledge on her way down.

“Know your own strength, do you?” she commented once she had pulled herself up. She then took samples of the dried and decayed Ur-Quan flesh.

“That’s it, I’m coming down,” she soon said. *“I’m getting nervous being near this thing.”*

After hours of going through everything inside the wreck, Gruber and Witherspoon sat down outside to take a break. Gruber took a sip of water and noticed that his bottle was almost empty. He followed the life thread with his eyes and

* Less light is better in this case. Being eaten alive is a lot less unpleasant when you only feel it, not see it.

saw a few lights moving in the distance. It looked like the warp pod team had passed the half way mark.

“Captain, how does the thermal image look?” Gruber checked with Zelnick.

“The captain is resting, sir,” Samusenko’s voice replied. *“There have been no changes whatsoever in the heat signatures. They remain stationary all around the surface.”*

“Roger that,” Gruber replied.

“Claire, how’s the 3D model?” he then asked Witherspoon. He heard a sip and gulp sound over the radio and then a very clearly expressed *ahh*.

“It’s done,” she answered.

They had 9 hours and 54 minutes before sunrise. Leaving three hours for the hike back to the shuttle, they still had almost seven hours to investigate the wreck. Gruber’s suit gave a low oxygen warning and they both changed their tanks.

“Rigby, how’s it going with the pod?” Gruber then asked.

“Well, sir, it’s not exactly a walk in the park,” Rigby replied, sounding exhausted. *“We still have almost two kilometers to go, but at least the worst part is now behind us. What about you?”*

“Nothing new to report,” Gruber truthfully answered. *“We’ll stay here for another six or seven hours and then head back.”*

“Knock yourselves out.”

CHAPTER 6

THE DESCENT

September 16th 2155, Alpha Pavonis VII, 056.2 : 800.0

Six hours and 35 minutes later Gruber decided that it was time to wrap things up. In addition to their used oxygen tanks, Gruber was carrying a tool kit and Witherspoon a container of all the samples they had collected. They had used all their break lights and Gruber had one flare left. Gruber was exhausted from all the work, hunger, thirst and lack of sleep and had to assume that Witherspoon was too. They had well over three hours for the return trip, which should be more than enough regardless of their fatigue, since the life thread showed them the way. All they had to do was follow the light.

As they walked down the first slope, Gruber found himself breathing heavily. It had been ages since the last time he had been awake for so long. He had passed the point when he was no longer feeling sleepy, but not awake either. He had a strange sensation of not paying any attention to his surroundings. He didn't notice it, but he dozed off.

Gruber snapped back to consciousness after an unknown amount of time and checked his surroundings. He was still following the life thread and carrying the things he should be carrying. He was standing on an approximately three meter wide strip of rock with a chasm of unknown depth on both sides. He looked back and saw Witherspoon following him. He checked the time. It was one hour and 13 minutes until

sunrise. He had no memory between that moment and leaving the crash site. He looked towards the shuttle and estimated it was about a kilometer away.

Then he felt a bump on his back.

Witherspoon bumped into him, losing her balance and falling down on her back. There was a series of huffs and gasps on the radio before she spoke:

"Sorry sir, I wasn't paying attention."

Gruber extended his hand and helped her get back up.

"It's a good thing you didn't fall down there," Gruber said, pointing at the ravine.

Then he realized that since Witherspoon had just taken his hand, one of her hands had to be empty. And she had just been carrying something in both of her hands. Gruber checked her left hand and saw the empty oxygen tank there.

"Where's the container?" Gruber asked.

It took Witherspoon a few seconds to understand the question. Apparently she was at least as tired as Gruber was. She checked her empty hand and then looked around. Cold sweat emerged on Gruber's forehead. They both checked the ground around them, hopelessly hoping that the container hadn't fallen down the chasm. The few square meters around them were quickly checked.

"Oh crap," Witherspoon summed it up.

Gruber looked down the chasm on the right side of their route.

"Shit," Witherspoon continued. *"Shit!"*

For some reason a cursing woman sounded extremely uncool in Gruber's opinion. It was a sexist view, but he didn't believe in thought crimes. There were lots of other things like that, right? Like, how uncool would a man look wearing a skirt? Or a woman racer in the speed glider championships? Actually, there was Lucy Berger in 2123, but she was only slightly above average, although she did win two races in a row at the end of the season. Was she still

alive? Maybe. Was any of this relevant to the current situation? No.

Gruber snapped awake, cursed his lack of sleep and looked down the chasm again. With his helmet light he could see that it wasn't too deep – ten meters tops. He tried to get the container into the light cone and, to his big surprise, he succeeded. The container indeed was at the bottom of the pit. Gruber showed its location to Witherspoon.

"I'm so sorry, sir, I..." she began. *"I can go down there and throw it to you up here. I'm sure I can find a way to climb back up."*

Witherspoon wasn't thinking clearly either, although the container could indeed most likely be thrown all the way up. The walls of the ravine on the other hand looked unclimbable.

"We could use the life thread as rope," Gruber suggested, surprising himself with such a reasonable idea under the circumstances.

"And Belov brought a rope!" Witherspoon excitedly remembered.

Before Gruber could stop her, she had jumped down. Gruber estimated that with such low gravity she should be okay with dropping down from that height, but it wouldn't be pleasant. Fearing the worst, he watched her land. It wasn't pretty, but at least she quickly pulled herself up and reassured him she was okay.

"Next time wait until we actually have the rope," Gruber criticized her.

Witherspoon grabbed the container and got ready to throw it to Gruber.

"Ready?" she checked.

"Ready," Gruber replied.

Then she threw the container upwards – meaning directly upwards – and it landed back in her hands.

“Sorry,” she said and tried again.

This time the container hit the wall of the ravine two meters below Gruber. Witherspoon walked to the container and tried once more.

The third time was the charm, although the throw missed Gruber by several meters, but at least the container was now out of the pit.

“*Alright, lower the life thread now,*” Witherspoon said and Gruber got to it.

He grasped the thread and pulled it, but it felt like it was stuck. He pulled it again with force, but only got a few meters of it. With fear in his mind and adrenaline in his blood, he pulled with all his might until he was certain that he could get no more of the thread.

“*Rigby, do you copy?*” he asked.

“*Where are you?*” Rigby answered. “*We only have an hour left.*”

“*Check my coordinates,*” Gruber said and sent his location to Rigby. “*We need Belov’s rope here as quickly as possible.*”

“*Ok, I’ll ask him,*” Rigby said and was silent on the radio for a while.

“*The rope is not here,*” he said. “*It was left at the crash site. Apparently Belov used it for something there. He said something about a bet, but I didn’t ask further. What’s your situation?*”

A terrible feeling of hopelessness hit Gruber.

“*Send someone here right away,*” he ordered Rigby. “*And try to find any kind of a substitute for the rope. We need to pull Witherspoon up from a 10-meter pit and the life thread is stuck.*”

“*I see,*” Rigby replied. “*It’s going to be tight. We might just barely have time to run to your location and back again. I’ll send someone over.*”

Gruber tried to estimate how far low the loose life thread would take him. There was a bit over 10 meters of extra, but since it was at the middle of the thread, it would go down only about five meters. He threw the extra thread down the ledge. It reached only about half way.

“Lower, I can’t reach it yet,” Witherspoon said.

“There is no more,” Gruber explained. *“It’s stuck. Is there any way you can get a hold of it?”*

Witherspoon tried to jump, but was nowhere near reaching it. Two more meters would make all the difference in the world. Then Gruber had an idea.

“Hold on for a second,” he told Witherspoon and grabbed the thread.

He started climbing down the wall of the crevice with the thread. It was surprisingly easy in low gravity. When he reached the end of the thread, he let one hand go and extended it downwards.

“Can you reach my hand?” he asked.

Witherspoon tried to jump again, but still fell some way short. Gruber put his other hand back on the thread and extended his legs.

“How about now? Can you reach my feet?”

Witherspoon tried once more. Gruber couldn’t see down from his position, but he felt a tap on his feet. Apparently Witherspoon was close, but couldn’t get a grip yet. She tried a few more times and finally managed to grab Gruber’s right foot.

“Now climb up,” he said, although there probably wasn’t any need to tell her that.

It seemed to go very well. Witherspoon was already up to his knees. She took a hold of Gruber’s waist and pulled herself up to his level. Then she grabbed Gruber’s right arm just above the shoulder...

...Gruber didn’t understand why it happened, but his right hand lost its grip. Witherspoon managed to stay on his

back, but the sudden jolt loosened Gruber's left hand's grip as well. The world paused for a second as he realized that he couldn't hold them both with just his left hand. It was slipping and slipping and...

...He was lying on the bottom of the pit on his back. Witherspoon had somehow gotten on top of him. He remembered there being a fall, which seemed to last for an eternity.

There seemed to be something off about the world – something dark. Witherspoon got up and Gruber could barely see her in the darkness.

"Uh-oh," she ominously began. *"Your helmet light is broken."*

Gruber confirmed that it was indeed the case. The only thing he could see was what Witherspoon's helmet light and the life thread illuminated. He then noticed that his back was aching. He tried to get up and eventually succeeded, but did so with great pain. He then saw the life thread hanging just barely out of reach, taunting them.

"Now what?" Witherspoon asked with a hint of panic in her voice.

Gruber tried to think for a while. As a positive side effect of everything that had happened during the past few minutes, he wasn't at all tired just now.

"I can boost you up," Gruber suggested. *"Just like we did inside the Dreadnought."*

"What about you?" Witherspoon asked.

"We'll figure something out once you're out of here," he said and put his hands in a boosting position.

Witherspoon stepped on his hands.

"One... two... THREE!"

There was an indescribable pain in Gruber's back as Witherspoon jumped. He fell on his back, which caused even more pain. As the pain faded enough for him to open his eyes he saw Witherspoon struggling to climb up the life

thread. He watched her in silence until she was out. Then Gruber saw a cone of light sweeping the bottom of the pit.

“*Sir, are you there?*” Witherspoon asked. “*I can’t see you... there you are! Are you alright?*”

Gruber was still lying on his back.

“*I think I’m broken,*” he said. “*There’s a terrible pain in my back.*”

“*Can you get up?*”

Gruber answered by trying. It was a very long answer, but in the end, a positive one. He was on his feet, but couldn’t stand straight, much less jump to the life thread.

“*There’s someone coming,*” Witherspoon reported from ground level. “*I can see lights moving in the distance. We’ll get you out of there.*”

Gruber wasn’t at all sure. He checked the time. There was 45 minutes to sunrise and they were some 30 minutes away from the shuttle. And he was sure that he couldn’t move very fast in his current condition. He started to look around for anything that could help.

“*Captain, do you read me?*” Gruber asked.

He had to wait about 10 seconds for an answer.

“*I’m here,*” Zelnick finally replied. “*I heard from Rigby that you have some sort of a problem. What’s the deal?*”

“*The problem just got a whole lot worse,*” Gruber explained. “*I’m stuck at the bottom of a 10 meter deep pit with no light and a significant pain in my back. I can’t get up on my own and I don’t think anyone else has the time to pull me up before sunrise either. So, if you have any ideas, I’m all ears.*”

Zelnick took his time answering.

“*We can see you,*” he finally replied. “*The ravine you’re in is pretty long, but I’m not seeing any gentler slopes anywhere. There also seems to be one of those stationary heat sources very close to you towards the... er... south. You’re not going to die down there, are you?*”

Gruber seriously considered the possibility.

"I don't want to, but I can't make any promises," he said.

He found himself already moving towards the heat signature. If he was going to die, he at least wanted to find out what these mysterious, elusive heat signatures were.

Now he was so far from the life thread that he was in almost total darkness. The faint light of his helmet display was still operational, enabling him to see a wall a split-second before bumping into it.

"Am I at the heat signature yet?" he asked Zelnick.

"You're right on top of it," Zelnick replied. *"What is it?"*

Then Gruber remembered his last flare. If the aliens were afraid of light, they would probably run as soon as he lit it, but he was so close that he might be able to catch a glimpse of them. He sharpened his senses and then lit the flare.

"Bwaah!" he blurted in fright.

"What is it?" Zelnick demanded.

"There's..." Gruber was at a loss of words. *"Something just... I'd say something big just retracted into the ground. There's a half a meter or so wide hole in the ground where it just was."*

He looked inside the hole, but couldn't see its bottom.

"Sir, Belov is here," he heard Witherspoon calling.

Gruber limped back to the life thread. There were two sources of light up on the ledge now.

"Sir, we have to go right now," Belov said. *"It took me 25 minutes to get here and we have... 31 minutes until sunrise. There's already light in the horizon."*

Gruber had to face the facts.

"I would never make it to the shuttle in 31 minutes, not like this," he put it simply.

"What should we do?" Witherspoon asked in a frantic voice.

Something suddenly struck Gruber. He was certain that he could never explain how the thought came to him, but he

had an idea. A long shot so out of the box that there was a chance it might actually work. He checked his oxygen level, which was 52 %. That would give him some ten hours. He could kill for an additional tank.

"I have an idea," he said. *"How much oxygen do you two have left?"*

"I have 55 %," Witherspoon replied.

"I restocked before I left, so I have 95 %," Belov replied in turn.

"Witherspoon, do you still have your empty oxygen tank somewhere within reach?" Gruber asked.

"Yes," she replied.

"Fill that tank up with the extra oxygen you two currently have," Gruber ordered. *"Then throw the tank down here and run to the shuttle."*

The lights disappeared from the ledge. It probably meant that the two were doing as told.

"Are we going to just leave you here?" Witherspoon asked. *"You'll fry the minute the sun comes up."*

"You will leave me," Gruber explained, *"but you'll come back next night, with rope, and rescue me then if my plan worked. I won't fry, at least not during the first minutes, since I'm down here, right? The sun won't shine here until midday."*

"But the heat," Belov began. Gruber could hear the sound of oxygen being moved from one tank to another. *"The temperature will still be hundreds of degrees, even down in that pit."*

Gruber saw the two lights emerge at the ledge again.

"Here's the tank," Witherspoon said. *"It's full."*

The tank was thrown down and Gruber let it hit the ground. The tank would definitely withstand the impact.

"Sir, what are you going to do?" Witherspoon asked in a tone that indicated it was her final question.

"I am going to burrow," Gruber replied.

“Good luck then, sir,” Belov wished him. *“We’ll come get you in 30 hours.”*

Then the lights disappeared from the ledge and Gruber felt more alone than he had ever done in his life. He checked the time again. It was 24 minutes to sunrise. Witherspoon and Belov would have to make haste. Gruber, on the other hand, had all the time in the world. He slowly limped to the spot where he had seen the creature retract into the ground.

He was still holding the flare. He sat down beside the hole and waited for the flare to go out. He looked up and saw the sky brighten. Morning’s here, he thought.

“Gruber, what are you doing?” he heard Zelnick’s voice ask. *“The surface temperature is already rapidly rising.”*

“I’m just chilling, sir,” Gruber replied. *“It’s been a rough night.”*

“And it’s going to be a long day as well,” Zelnick pointed out. *“I heard you were going to dig a hole or something.”*

The thought amused Gruber.

“Not me, sir,” he replied. *“I am going to take advantage of the native life of this unknown world.”*

“You’re a crazy old man,” Zelnick stated the obvious.

“I can’t help it,” Gruber defended himself.

His flare went out, but the sky was already bright enough to somewhat lighten the bottom of the pit. He took another look at the hole. It didn’t seem to go straight down. Instead, Gruber could see it curving at a depth of about two meters. He could definitely squeeze himself in.

“Witherspoon and Belov made it to the shuttle,” Zelnick informed Gruber.

The news made him happy. He checked his sunrise timer, which showed zero. He looked up at the sky. The air rippled at ground level.

“It’s already +50 degrees on the surface,” Zelnick reported.

Gruber saw the shuttle fly over him. Even though he was the only human on the face of Alpha Pavonis VII, everything seemed fine. He hooked up the full oxygen tank.

“Come get me in 30 hours,” Gruber reminded Zelnick.

“Have fun down there,” Zelnick replied, *“but don’t die. We still need you here.”*

Gruber enjoyed the compliment. Then he climbed down the hole.

It was cramped and dark after the first few meters. The hole bent and twisted in many directions. Gruber’s plan was to get as deep as possible. At some point he found himself climbing upwards legs first and that’s when he decided to stop. It was not a pleasant position to be in for 30 hours, but probably better than staying outside.

He tried to calm down to save oxygen. When he finally stopped trying, he calmed down. Just lying there in the darkness he finally had time to realize how hungry, thirsty and tired he was, and also, how much his back really ached. It was going to be a long 30 hours, he thought. Then he closed his eyes.

He woke up after an unknown amount of time. He didn’t feel the hunger anymore, only thirst. The pain in his back was still there, but he felt less sleepy. Maybe he had slept a while? He checked the time.

Indeed he had slept – for 14 hours. He felt a lot warmer than during the night. In fact, he was sweating. Of course, he realized, it was midday. The sun was shining straight into the hole. He then concentrated on every second. He was going to survive, even if it had to be one second at a time.

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He didn't count them all, but after about 57 000 seconds he suddenly realized that his plan might, after all, work. He had even managed to change the oxygen tank in the hole.

According to his timer, the sun had set. He was thirstier than he had ever been in his life, but he was alive. Now he had to wait two more hours for the temperature to cool down enough.

A bit over one hour later he suddenly felt something touch his feet. Whatever the thing that dug this hole was, Gruber thought, it was coming up now, and he was in its way.

The creature didn't seem to mind, though. It just went onwards, pushing Gruber ahead of him. It was still too early to get out, but Gruber had no choice in the matter. He felt the temperature rise as he ascended and just before it got unbearable, he surfaced.

He was too weak to move a muscle. He just felt the urge to talk to somebody.

"Captain, are you there?" he asked over the radio.

"Gruber!" he heard Zelnick's voice. *"You really are crazy!"*

"Please come get me, sir."

And then he passed out.

CHAPTER 7

COUNSEL

Unknown date, hopefully September 2155

Unknown location, hopefully somewhere near Alpha Pavonis

For some reason there were beetles everywhere. Gruber observed their movements for a while and soon came to the conclusion that they were in the middle of a battle.

pow

Something solid hit Gruber on the back of his head. He turned around and saw one of the beetles holding a wooden paddle.

crash

Something hit him on the head again and, judging from the sound it made, it was made of glass and broke on impact. He turned around again and saw an annoyingly grinning beetle holding a broken bottle.

He stepped on something wet – or rather – he found himself standing in a puddle. Then it all became clear to him. He was standing in a puddle in the middle of a bottle-paddle beetle battle. It made sense, it really did.

Something touched his feet underwater and then one of the beetles spoke:

“Is he supposed to look so dry?”

Another voice then echoed in the sky:

“It was a close call, but he’ll live.”

Now there were no more beetles, only bright light.

“His eyes are open,” the first voice said.

The light dimmed slightly and suddenly Gruber could sense gravity. He was lying on his back.

“Adam, can you hear me?” the second voice asked.

The correct answer was yes, but Gruber couldn’t find the strength to say it.

“Blink once if you can hear me,” the voice continued.

He tried to blink and succeeded. He noticed that he was now able to take note of his surroundings. He was in a brightly lit room and there were two people standing next to him. One was wearing something red and the other one something white.

“Nothing to worry about,” the one in white clothing said. “He’ll recover fully in a few days.”

It surprised Gruber how much effort it took him to keep his eyes open.

“I doubt he’ll be able to talk today,” the same person continued. “I’ll let you know when you can have a chat.”

The person in red clothing left the room. Gruber saw no reason anymore to resist the urge to close his eyes. As he did so, he decided to take a little nap.

It felt that he had been lying there for ages, but still there had been no feeling of boredom. There was a memory of several lights, sounds and liquids. He had noticed different people coming and going, but only one of them had examined him. At some point he had realized that he was in the infirmary of the Vindicator and that Senior Medical Officer Karan Mehul had been taking care of him.

A sudden sense of consciousness flowed through Gruber. Mehul was standing next to him, facing the other way. Before Gruber could stop himself, he groaned and grunted to get the doctor’s attention.

“Ah, you’re finally **fully** awake,” Mehul said and turned around.

He then leaned over Gruber, pointed something bright at Gruber’s left eye and asked him to look up. Gruber complied and the request was followed by orders to look down, left,

right and straight forward. The sequence was repeated for the other eye as well.

“Now open your mouth,” Mehul said, holding something flat right in front of Gruber’s mouth.

Gruber wanted to comply, but he managed to open his mouth only slightly.

“As wide as you can,” Mehul instructed.

Gruber struggled and little by little he made progress.

“That’s enough,” Mehul then stopped him.

Gruber was disappointed. He was sure he could have done better. Mehul then put the thing he had been holding into Gruber’s mouth.

“Try to say *aah*,” the doctor requested.

How stereotypical, Gruber thought.

“aaa— *cough* *cough* *cough*”

“Close enough,” Mehul decided. “Drink this.”

He offered one end of a long straw to Gruber, who couldn’t see what was at the other end. Gruber reluctantly took a sip and an unfamiliar liquid filled his mouth. It had zero taste, but somehow it completely moistened his mouth which, he now understood, had been really dry.

“Tell me your name,” Mehul said.

Gruber was curious to see how well he could talk now.

“Adam Gruber,” he replied with little effort and felt pleased with himself.

“Where are you?” was the next question.

“Aboard the Vindicator.”

“What year is it?”

“2155.”

“What is the current date?”

Gruber felt the question was unfair.

“That depends on how long I’ve been here,” he answered.

“Very good,” Mehul replied. “It’s been three days since you were brought here. Do you remember what happened?”

Gruber thought about it very carefully. He could remember everything up to the point when he was in the hole and something had pushed him to the surface. After that he could remember heat, thirst and the need to pee, but nothing concrete before some random flashes of the room he was now in.

“Yes,” he truthfully responded. “Where are we? I mean the ship, where are we going?”

“I’m sure the captain is eager to answer your questions,” Mehul said and took out his communicator.

“He can talk now,” Mehul said to the device and tucked it back into his pocket.

Gruber suddenly remembered Mehul’s attitude problem towards Captain Zelnick.

“Do you still question the captain’s leadership?” he asked the doctor.

Mehul seemed a bit embarrassed.

“No,” he said. “You were right and I was wrong. I hope we can put that behind us.”

Gruber was relieved to hear that.

“Yes we can.”

Mehul gave him a strange, yet satisfying smile.

“Let’s talk business then,” Mehul began. “Now that you’ve recovered from the dehydration and several other conditions, there’s nothing really wrong with you. You will probably feel weak for a day or two, but you can get back to work as soon as you have the strength to stand up.”

Gruber tried to rise to a sitting position, but the attempt was futile.

“Take your time,” Mehul suggested. “There’s nothing to gain from rushing it. I think you can get out of here in 24 hours.”

Gruber relaxed his body and prepared for a long wait.

“You don’t need my attention anymore, so I’ll take my leave now,” Mehul continued. “Call me if you need me.”

Gruber nodded in agreement and Mehul left the room. Very soon afterwards Zelnick entered.

"I heard you were awake," he said. "I can see the rumors of your death were greatly exaggerated."

"Only slightly," Gruber replied. "What's our status?"

Zelnick took a chair and sat down next to Gruber's bed.

"We are currently heading towards Alpha Apodis."

Gruber recalled that Apodis was a small constellation inside the larger Draconis constellation and that Alpha Apodis was a super-giant.

"So we're selling the coordinates of Beta Pegasi right away?" Gruber checked. "I suppose the plan is to check Epsilon Draconis afterwards?"

Epsilon Draconis was one of the systems that were supposed to contain a rainbow world.

"That is correct," Zelnick said. "Of course we would like to check Epsilon Draconis as well before selling the coordinates, but that would require several days of needless transit time."

"Let's not forget," Gruber began, "that according to the Spathi the area around the Draconis constellation is supposed to be hostile territory."

"Yes, the territory of the 'Thraddash'," Zelnick said. "I'm not worried about that, since even Fwiffo said that they are a weak race. We'll just do our business and get out quickly."

That comment was *so Zelnick* in Gruber's opinion.

"You know how it always goes when you put it casually like that," he remarked.

Zelnick smirked at the thought.

"History is behind us and the future hasn't happened yet," he quoted.

That comment struck a nerve.

"That's your mother's line, isn't it?" Gruber recognized.

Just then the door opened and Rigby entered the room. For whatever reason he was holding something which looked like a flower pot.

“I asked Rigby to join us,” Zelnick explained. “He’s been studying the plants that saved your life.”

“And I’ve been thrilled to do so,” Rigby continued. “I have a specimen right here.”

He showed the pot to Gruber. Instead of dirt, it was filled with something rockier. Gruber assumed it was the soil from Alpha Pavonis VII.

“Notice this part here,” Rigby said and pointed at a small hole in the soil. It looked just barely too small to fit a finger.

Rigby then handed the pot to Gruber and turned off all the lights to completely darken the room.

“I see, or rather, I don’t see right now,” Gruber commented. “So I assume that the creature comes out of the hole now.”

Just then a dim red light was turned on.

“They seem to sense only a small part of the spectrum,” Rigby explained. “Look closely now.”

Gruber looked at the hole and indeed something was emerging from it. At first it was just a stem that protruded further and further, but after it was about 15 centimeters tall, the stem suddenly divided into several branches. The plant then looked like a mast of a sailing vessel.

“See the web?” Rigby asked.

Gruber looked closely and, yes, there was something between the branches. Indeed it looked exactly like a mast – it even had sails.

“I’ll turn the lights back on now, watch closely,” Rigby instructed.

It was good that Rigby gave the heads up, because otherwise Gruber might have missed the event entirely. Immediately after the lights were turned on, the plant retracted back into the hole faster than lightning.

“Interesting,” Gruber commented, “and also, impressive.”

“As I’m sure you’ve figured out already,” Rigby began, “during the day these plants hide underground to escape the unbearable heat on the surface. When night falls, they reach out from their holes and set up this web to catch airborne plankton.”

“That’s pretty much what I thought, yes,” Gruber said. “So what’s at the other end of the stalk?”

Rigby seemed to be beaming with enthusiasm.

“I was hoping you’d ask that,” he joyfully said and took out a pen and a notepad from somewhere. He drew a horizontal line on the first page. “Here’s the surface.” Then he drew a snaky twin line downwards. “This is the tunnel the plant digs for itself.” He drew several more similar twin lines, each connecting to the others beneath the surface. “This is the network of tunnels the plant uses.” Then he colored one of the tunnels and continued the coloring above ground as well. “Here is one of the plants from your perspective.” Then he did the same for all the tunnels so that the stalks were all connected below the surface.

“So it’s the same plant,” Gruber noted.

“Indeed it is,” Rigby agreed.

“They’re not all the same, are they?”

“Not the same, no. But close.”

“What do you mean?”

“Think about earthworms,” Rigby said. “If you cut one in two, both ends may continue to live. Are they then the same or not? That’s philosophy.”

Gruber could see where the story was going.

“So are you saying that all of those plants are pieces of just one... progenitor?”

“I’m quite sure of that,” Rigby replied. “I tested the genes of several samples and they were all identical. It appears that no matter how small a piece you cut off, it always manages to live if it can feed and escape the heat of the day.”

It was a scary thought. A life-form like that would be extremely difficult to kill.

“So what we have here is the ultimate weed,” Gruber said.

“That’s a pretty accurate way of putting it,” Rigby agreed. “And indeed these are plants, not animals. Their cells have a strong resemblance to those of plants on Earth.”

“What would happen if...” Zelnick suddenly said, “if we threw these things at our enemies? I mean, like on the homeworlds of some Hierarchy races? Would these plants be able to take over entire ecosystems?”

Gruber gave the idea some thought, but he didn’t like the conclusion.

“That’s biological warfare,” he said.

Zelnick looked like he had never heard the term before.

“Is that bad?” he innocently asked.

“It’s against the rules of the old alliance,” Gruber explained. “Although sending the ‘Evil Ones’ to the face of Spathiwa was an equal deed, so whoever did that was not above this kind of action.”

Zelnick looked like he wasn’t satisfied with the answer.

“Why is that forbidden?” he asked. “I mean, why is it allowed to nuke an entire planet into oblivion, but sending in new dominant life-forms is not?”

It was a fair point in Gruber’s opinion. They might need to have a discussion about the matter in the command council.

“I think the reasons are mainly historical,” Gruber guessed. “Now that I think about it, I don’t actually know why such a line has been drawn. Maybe it’s about using another life-form that has no say in the matter? Or maybe it is just considered unfair?”

Zelnick obviously wasn’t buying it.

“So we can eat our enemies alive if we want to, but we can’t have our dogs eat them alive?”

Gruber was pleased with Zelnick's way of mind.

"You make a strong case, captain," he said.

The following silence indicated the need for a new topic.

"We got the warp pod," Zelnick said. "According to Skeates it's pretty advanced stuff – a piece of real high-class equipment."

Gruber hadn't even considered the possibility that the warp pod wasn't with them. Still, hearing about it made him feel better.

"That's why we went down there, right?" Gruber said.

"Right," Zelnick agreed. "And all the samples you brought from the wreckage, together with the 3D scan data, have already allowed us to get a pretty good idea of how a Dreadnought functions. When we get back to the starbase, Dr. Chu and his pals will have a real blast."

"What's our plan with the Melnorme?" Gruber asked. "I mean, what purchases are we going to prioritize?"

Zelnick gave an ominous laugh.

"I haven't quite figured that out yet," he admitted. "I was hoping we could decide on that now."

Gruber was glad that his opinion was valued.

"I think the top priority is to confirm everything we have on the Sa-Matra," he said. "First and foremost, we need to make sure it even exists. If it does, we need to know what it is exactly and where we can find it. If that goes well, we then need to know how to deal with it. If the Chenjesu were right about everything and we really need a matter-antimatter bomb, we need to ask the Melnorme how to repair the Ultron to get the bomb from the Utwig. That is, unless they know of another bomb we could get our hands on, or, if they can sell us the technology to build such a bomb ourselves."

Zelnick seemed to agree on everything.

“That all sounds logical,” he said. “And then there’s the Syreen matter: Where are their ships and how can we convince them to join our cause?”

“There’s that, too,” Gruber said, “but I say the Sa-Matra is the top-priority here. If we get our tanks full of fuel and all the information I described, **then** we could ask about the Syreen.”

“And the radiation shielding,” Zelnick continued. “It would be cool to explore the surface of the rainbow worlds.”

Cool indeed, Gruber thought. One couldn’t even imagine what they might find on a Precursor dump. But on the other hand, they might just as well find nothing. It was a gamble, but an interesting one.

“It looks like we have plenty of purchases to make,” Gruber summed it up. “Some of these we will probably have to save for later. There are still an additional 500 credits coming from the coordinates of the rainbow world at Epsilon Draconis.”

Just then the door opened and Belov entered the room. He noticed the captain and immediately took half a step backwards.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt,” he apologized. “I can come back later.”

“Nah, come on in,” Zelnick welcomed him.

“I’ll just take my leave then,” Rigby said, grasping his chance to get out. Gruber had already forgotten that the man was there, sitting in the shadows, holding the pot.

Belov took cautious steps towards Gruber’s bed.

“It’s nothing important, sir,” he addressed Gruber. “I just need your opinion on a bet I made with Ahmed.”

Gruber made a gesture indicating that he was all ears.

“What bet?” Zelnick asked.

Belov quickly straightened his posture and replied to the captain in a formal manner.

“Sir, when we were preparing to land on Alpha Pavonis VII, I waged 100 credits that we would need rope down on the surface. Ahmed took that bet.”

Belov started to look uncomfortable as he continued to explain the details.

“While we were on the crash site, I used the rope to do something unnecessary, just for the sake of the bet. Ahmed saw through my attempt and I admitted defeat, there’s no question about that. But then you, first officer, got stuck in that pit and we **would** have needed the rope, although I didn’t have it anymore since I left it at the crash site. Now Ahmed thinks that it doesn’t count since the rope wasn’t actually used in that need, but I think that the bet wasn’t about whether the rope would be used, only if it would be needed.”

Belov gave an apologetic look to Zelnick. Apparently he considered Gruber as *one of the guys*, but the captain was an authority to fear and respect. It was just as it should be, Gruber thought.

“So, er,” Belov continued, “I was hoping that you could be the judge on this matter, since you were the one who needed the rope.”

Gruber laughed, but only inside his head. On the outside he put on a serious face and acted as if he was trying to make a serious judgment.

“I’ll think about it,” he said.

Belov took the cue, saluted, and hastily left the room, obviously regretting setting foot there in the first place.

“I can see that the work of a first officer carries all kinds of duties,” Zelnick commented.

“You don’t know the half of it,” Gruber exaggerated. “I don’t get paid enough.”

“But what do you think?” Zelnick asked. “That’s a tough one.”

“What is?” Gruber asked. “Do you mean the bet?”

“Yes,” Zelnick said. “What **is** your final judgment?”

Once again Gruber couldn’t help feeling amused at what the captain clung onto.

“I said I’ll think about it,” Gruber answered.

CHAPTER 8

TWO DOCTRINES

September 26th 2155, Alpha Apodis, 258.2 : 850.7

“That’s extortion!” Zelnick commented on the price the Melnorme announced for the information on how to destroy the Sa-Matra.

“*Our prices are non-negotiable,*” Trade Master Ultramarine stated the undisputed fact.

They had had 64 credits upon arrival, and then they had sold the coordinates to the rainbow world in Beta Pegasi for 500 credits and bought fuel to fill their tanks, bringing their credit balance to 504. Then they had bought information. Zelnick and Gruber had agreed that they should first simply ask where the Sa-Matra was. The Trade Master agreed to reveal that piece of information at a steep cost of 350 credits, but they hadn’t made the purchase yet. They wanted to first find out the prices of all Sa-Matra-related pieces of information that they wanted. However, they would have to come up with a strategy to deal with the Sa-Matra by themselves, since they didn’t have 59 000 000 credits.

“Excuse me for just a second,” Zelnick said and turned to Gruber.

“What now?” he asked the first officer.

Gruber preferred smaller individual purchases.

“350 credits is a bit too much at this point,” he advised. “We should first confirm that the Sa-Matra is even real and located in this quadrant. That information might come cheaper.”

“So I’ll ask the price for a true-or-false question like that,” Zelnick suggested, giving Gruber the chance to stop him if he disagreed.

Gruber didn’t disagree, so Zelnick asked and the Melnorme answered.

“We can tell you whether the Sa-Matra is in this quadrant or not for 10 credits. Do you wish to make that purchase?”

“That’s affordable,” Zelnick said to Gruber.

Gruber nodded.

“Yes,” Zelnick then said to the Trade Master.

“The Sa-Matra is currently stationed in this quadrant,” Trade Master Ultramarine said. *“Your credit balance is now 494.”*

Gruber wondered whether there was point in such a purchase after all. Of course they were also able to confirm that the Sa-Matra was real for a mere 10 credits. If they couldn’t think of a better way to spend their remaining credits, they could use most of their balance to learn the Sa-Matra’s exact location.

“There’s something I want to confirm,” Zelnick said to Gruber. “Something that’s been really bugging me for the past few months.”

“Is it about the Ur-Quan’s intentions?” Gruber guessed.

“How did you know?” Zelnick asked in amazement.

“It’s been harassing me as well,” Gruber replied. “Even though I hate myself for it, I can’t stop thinking that the Ur-Quan might actually be defending the galaxy from the Kohr-Ah.”

“Why the self-loathing?” Zelnick asked.

“Because they are the enemy and they must remain so,” Gruber explained. “In any case, if that information is affordable, we can purchase it.”

Zelnick turned to the trader again.

“Can you confirm if what the Ur-Quan have told us is true?” he asked.

“That depends on what they have told you,” the Trade Master replied, once again very skillfully keeping the customer from feeling stupid for asking a stupid question.

“They say that they are not our enemy,” Zelnick explained. “They say that they are actually defending us from a greater evil and that it is in our best interest to remain under a slave shield.”

“I see,” the trader said and kept a small pause. *“What you’re asking is a matter of opinion and that is something we do not sell. However, what we can sell you is lots of information on what led the Ur-Quan and the Kohr-Ah to the war they are now fighting. Knowing all that, you would then be more qualified to make the judgment for yourself. I will gladly sell that historical data to you for a modest fee of 160 credits.”*

In Gruber’s opinion it was too expensive for abstract knowledge. If they made that deal, they couldn’t afford the information on Sa-Matra’s whereabouts anymore.

“Very well, we shall make the purchase,” Zelnick said to the trader without asking Gruber.

“An excellent choice,” the Trade Master commended Zelnick. *“We are initiating transfer of the data now.”*

Katja got permission and accepted the data transfer. Gruber took the chance to criticize the decision.

“Captain, I don’t think this is a wise course of action,” he said. “While I am personally very interested to see the data we just bought, I think we should prioritize solid, useful data at the moment.”

Zelnick’s face seemed surprisingly confident.

“I appreciate your advice,” he began, “but I disagree. We can’t defeat our enemy if we don’t know them. I’m sure that the history of the Ur-Quan is much more valuable to us than 160 units of fuel.”

Katja notified them that the transfer was complete.

"Your credit balance is 334," the Trade Master said. *"What else can we do for you?"*

"Oh crap, I miscalculated," Zelnick agonized and slapped himself in the forehead. "I thought we would still have credits for the location of the Sa-Matra."

Gruber took a deep breath so he wouldn't say anything unnecessary.

"We'll just get some info on the bomb instead, right?" Zelnick now checked with Gruber.

"Right," Gruber replied.

Zelnick turned to the trader again.

"I am interested in buying new technology," he said.

"What a coincidence," the trader joyously replied. *"I am interested in selling new technology."*

"So, uh..." Zelnick tried to begin. "We'd like a matter-antimatter bomb. How much would that cost?"

"21 000 000 credits," the trader replied. *"Do you have an additional 20 999 666 credits on another account?"*

Zelnick checked his pockets very thoroughly to make a point.

"No, no I don't," he then said as if he had just realized it.

Gruber silently commended the captain on the performance.

"Looks like we won't be buying technology after all," Zelnick continued and then changed the topic entirely. "Do you know what this is?"

He showed an image of the wrecked Ultron.

"Yes, we have lots of information on this subject as well," the trader boasted.

"Can you tell us how to fix it?" Zelnick asked.

"Absolutely!" the trader joyously replied. *"The cost for that information is 150 credits. Do you wish to make the purchase?"*

Gruber considered it a fair deal. They could get their hands on a matter-antimatter bomb with 150 credits instead of 21 000 000. Of course they had no guarantees that fixing the Ultron would actually get them the bomb, but it seemed like the odds were good.

“Yes,” Zelnick replied. “Please tell us how to fix it.”

The trader’s smile widened.

“You already know that the device is called the Ultron,” the trader began. *“It is a Precursor relic which is inoperable in its current state. It is evident that neither your nor our technology can replicate the necessary spare parts. However, the Precursors built their devices to serve multiple functions and therefore you can use other Precursor artifacts to fix this one. We took the liberty of scanning the data you have on the device and we can conclude that you are able to fix it with three specific relics:*

- *the Rosy Sphere, which is in the possession of the Druuge at their central trade world in Zeta Persei*
- *the Clear Spindle, which is in the possession of the Pkunk at their homeworld in Gamma Krueger*
- *and the Aqua Helix, which is in the possession of the Thraddash at their sanctuary in Zeta Draconis.*

If you have these three relics, you will be able to easily repair the Ultron without any further instructions. Your credit balance is now 184. Is there anything else we can do for you?”

Everyone on the bridge checked the star map at the same time. Zeta Draconis was very close, only about 25 units away and Gamma Krueger was at 052.2 : 052.5, just a bit over 150 units from Sol. Zeta Persei, on the other hand, was on the far side of the quadrant. When they had first heard of the Druuge, they had agreed that they wouldn’t make a trip that far without a very good reason, but now they probably had one.

“Should we save the rest of the credits for later?” Zelnick checked with Gruber.

Gruber agreed and Zelnick wrapped things up with Trade Master Ultramarine.

“It has been a pleasure dealing with you, Captain Zelnick,” the trader concluded on his part the same way all Melnorme always seemed to do. *“We look forward to your next visit.”*

Then the transmission was cut.

“Mr. Samusenko, set course for Zeta Draconis,” Zelnick ordered. “We’ll get that Aqua Helix one way or another.”

“Aye-aye, sir,” Samusenko replied. “ETA 30 hours.”

“Katja, send all the info to the starbase,” Zelnick then commanded.

“Affirmative, sir,” the communications officer replied.

Zelnick then turned to Gruber.

“Let’s go through the data on the Ur-Quan right away,” he said. “Get Rigby and come to the conference room.”

The Melnorme had conveniently prepared the package for human file structure, so they didn’t have to waste time converting it. They made the data public so everyone on the ship could read it, but Zelnick, Gruber and Rigby were having their own private reading session. In a few hours Gruber felt he had understood the big picture.

Nearly 25 000 years ago there had existed an alliance of star faring races called the Sentient Milieu, which was very much like the Alliance of Free Stars. Its members cooperated to enrich their cultures, to provide a safe crèche for emerging sentient species and, not least of all, to defend themselves against external hostilities. There were seven notably active members in the Milieu: the Yuli, the Drall, the Mael-Num, the Faz, the Taalo, the Yuptar and, the most famous of them all, the Ur-Quan.

The Ur-Quan had evolved on a harsh world on the other side of the galaxy. They were solitary predators whose way of life resembled that of praying mantis or polar bear on Earth. They had a very limited set of social behaviors, most of which dealt with sex. Just like humans, the Ur-Quan had to compete for survival against many physically superior species and thus evolved intelligence and tool use. But unlike humans, they also had to master their fierce territoriality to build a cooperative planetary culture. Just when they had begun exploring their solar system in crude atomic vehicles, they were discovered by the Taalo. After some convincing, the Ur-Quan once again conquered the hunting beast within themselves and, instead of ripping the Taalo apart, joined the Sentient Milieu.

However, the Ur-Quan couldn't completely shut down the predator instincts that they had evolved over the past millennia. For some reason the Taalo were the only race whose presence they could tolerate. The Ur-Quan were therefore the solitary scouts of the Milieu and the Taalo relayed all communications they had with other Milieu species.

After the Ur-Quan had joined, the Sentient Milieu flourished for several thousand years and at its peak it included the membership of a hundred worlds. Much thanks to the bold Ur-Quan adventurers, the Milieu had discovered countless ruins and relics of the Precursors. They were well on their way in piecing together the ancient mystery when darkness suddenly fell upon them.

On one routine planet fall, an Ur-Quan scout encountered a small creature, later known as a Dnyarri. Before the Ur-Quan could defend itself, the Dnyarri had used its strong psychic powers to take over the scout's mind. It commanded the Ur-Quan to take the Dnyarri aboard the ship, along with several hundred others of its kind. Then the Ur-Quan scout, having no say in the matter, returned to the capital planet of

the Milieu. Within hours, every resident of the planet had fallen under the Dnyarri's command. Within a month, Dnyarri-compelled starships had spread the creatures across the Milieu.

One race in the Milieu was able to fight back. The Taalo were silicon-based life-forms whose physique most resembled that of a rock and they were natural immunes to the Dnyarri's psychic compulsion. The Dnyarri wouldn't permit anyone to exist outside their control, so they ordered the Milieu to attack and destroy the Taalo home planet – the moon of the second planet in Delta Vulpeculae, one of the few milieu worlds located in the same region of space as Sol.

“Do you remember what the Orz said?” Gruber suddenly interrupted their silent reading marathon. “The Orz mentioned a ‘playground for Taalo and Orz at Delta Vulpeculae’. They also claimed that the Taalo can ‘slide’ and ‘play time jokes’ whatever that means.”

Zelnick and Rigby nodded to acknowledge that they remembered the Orz saying that, but at the same time they relayed their wish to continue reading, so that's what they all did.

The Taalo were indeed wiped out by the Ur-Quan, but according to the Melnorme data, they had managed to create a device which would give other races psychic immunity like their own. Judging by the destruction of the Taalo, it is safe to assume that the device either didn't work as intended or was never put to test. There was no mention of the fate of the device in the data.

With the Taalo gone, there was nothing to stand in the Dnyarri's way. As centuries of the Dnyarri dominion passed, what was once the Sentient Milieu deteriorated and degenerated into a great galactic gulag. Races that didn't serve the Dnyarri with the demanded speed were ruthlessly wiped out from existence, which was the fate of the Yuli and

the Drall. The agents of this genocide were always the Ur-Quan, who were the most psychically sensitive race and thus most easily compelled, making them the favored slaves of the Dnyarri.

As years passed, the Dnyarri genetically altered the Ur-Quan to split them into two sub-species. The green Ur-Quan were the scientist, technicians and administrators and also responsible for maintaining the limited infrastructure of the Dnyarri civilization. The black Ur-Quan were the basic laborers and soldiers.

After nearly 2500 years of Dnyarri dominion, a chance discovery by a green Ur-Quan named Kzer-Za finally led to the violent overthrow of the slave empire.

Kzer-Za was a researcher, specializing in repairing the mental damage inflicted by long-term exposure to the Dnyarri's psychic compulsion. During Kzer-Za's lifetime, the Dnyarri had already become lax in their dominance. They occasionally, by accident, permitted their slaves moments of self-direction. Kzer-Za was able to use those moments to figure out that when a slave was just about to die, the Dnyarri had to release their control or they would die themselves. Kzer-Za also realized that the Dnyarri would have to temporarily release control also when the slave was experiencing extreme pain. Kzer-Za then had to find a way to share these findings with all other Ur-Quan.

Kzer-Za waited for the right moment and then injected itself with a dose of acidic poison, sending incredible waves of pain through its body. In the few moments before the acid killed it, Kzer-Za was able to transmit its discovery across the planet and into space as well.

Before the Dnyarri knew what was happening, Ur-Quan everywhere were torturing themselves with anything they could get their talons on. During the few seconds of freedom they sought out the nearest Dnyarri and crushed it.

As the Ur-Quan gained longer and longer periods of freedom, they developed new tools and weapons against the Dnyarri. The most gruesome of these devices was the Excruciator – a device inserted directly into the brain to generate a constant stream of agony. The Dnyarri could not make the necessary mental connections anymore and were slain by the thousands. The Ur-Quan slave revolt was won.

The Ur-Quan then faced two decisions: First, how to punish the few frightened Dnyarri still alive on their homeworld. Second, how to ensure that the Ur-Quan would never be made slaves again.

The first decision was made swiftly. They didn't kill the Dnyarri, as that would have been too kind a fate. Instead, the Ur-Quan genetically altered the Dnyarri to strip them from their sentience, bringing them down to dumb animals. The Dnyarri would then be further debased by being forced to serve the Ur-Quan for all eternity, doing the most demeaning task the Ur-Quan could imagine – to act as translators and make physical contact with other species.

The second decision was not made so easily. The green Ur-Quan, who had started calling themselves the Kzer-Za, wanted to establish the Path of Now and Forever, meaning that all other sentient species would either be made slaves of the Ur-Quan or be forever imprisoned on a single planet. Another view was introduced by a black Ur-Quan named Kohr-Ah, who proposed the Eternal Doctrine, meaning simply the systematic eradication of all non-Ur-Quan sentient life from the universe.

“These positions seem a bit extreme, don't you think?” Zelnick asked.

“Of course,” Rigby said. “If I understood correctly, at that point they had all been suffering from the non-stop agony of the Excruciators for years to defeat the Dnyarri, not to mention several millennia of slavery. Most of them were likely mad, and I do mean insane-mad.”

“It appears that that’s when the civil war between the green Kzer-Za and the black Kohr-Ah began,” Gruber observed “Do you see any mention of how long ago that was?”

Rigby and Zelnick looked through the data.

“I think that was roughly 20 000 years ago,” Rigby reasoned.

“Wow,” Zelnick remarked, “and I thought that the Great War was a long one. So how did the war start?”

“I think the last part of the data covers that,” Gruber said and continued reading.

Neither side submitted. Before the others could stop them, the followers of the Eternal Doctrine had started executing their dogma and burned the Yuptar’s homeworld to ashes. When they were about to do the same to the Mael-Num, the followers of the Path of Now and Forever confronted them. That’s when the first shots of the doctrinal conflict were fired.

For decades they were engulfed in a bloody conflict and it seemed likely that they would completely annihilate each other. But then the Kzer-Za made a discovery that changed everything – they found the Sa-Matra, a Precursor battleship. With the Sa-Matra they sliced through the opposing forces in days and the followers of the Eternal Doctrine, who were now calling themselves the Kohr-Ah, were defeated.

However, the Kzer-Za didn’t destroy the Kohr-Ah. They accepted the possibility that they were wrong and that the Kohr-Ah were right. The Kohr-Ah were directed to fly through the stars, travelling counter-spinwise in the galaxy whereas the Kzer-Za would travel spinwise. They agreed that when the two forces met, they would engage in ritual combat with the Sa-Matra given to the winner.

“So this is the war they are fighting right now,” Zelnick concluded.

“If the Kohr-Ah win,” Gruber speculated, “the Kzer-Za will stand aside and let them kill everyone.”

“We can’t let that happen,” Zelnick said. “Isn’t there any way we could help the... Kzer-Za? Should we start calling the green ones Kzer-Za, by the way?”

Gruber thought about what one of the green Ur-Quan had said during their battle three months earlier.

“They said pretty clearly that they don’t want our help,” he reminded the captain. “Of course that doesn’t prevent us from attacking the Kohr-Ah. And yes, I think we should call the green ones Kzer-Za from now on.”

“But what happened to the Mael-Num?” Rigby asked.

They all checked the data once more.

“Here it is,” Gruber said after a while and explained it to the others.

The Kohr-Ah had arrived at the Mael-Num homeworld slightly before the Kzer-Za. As they were about to start raining death, a plea came from the surface. The Mael-Num asked why the Kohr-Ah were going to kill them. Something about the words obviously struck the Kohr-Ah, as they went to great lengths in explaining their reasoning. As they were doing so, the Kzer-Za arrived and the fighting started. The Mael-Num were then able to escape amidst the confusion.

“Wait a minute,” Zelnick said. “The words the Mael-Num used are quoted here. See? Here. *What you are doing to us is wrong! Why do you do this thing?*”

“How can there be a quote?” Rigby wondered. “What kind of sources do the Melnorme have? This data looks like they were there themselves.”

The following silence indicated that there were no guesses, but also that there was no point in questioning the reliability of the Melnorme’s information.

“This was a sad tale,” Zelnick summed it up. “What did we gain from it?”

“Plenty,” Gruber rushed to point out. “Now we know that the Ur-Quan, both green and black, are weak to psychic manipulation. And we just happen to know some folks that are pretty adept at psychic manipulation, right?”

“The Dnyarri?” Zelnick guessed.

“The Syreen,” Rigby continued the thought correctly.

“Right,” Gruber agreed, “although the Syreen didn’t actually dominate the Ur-Quan in the Great War. I wonder what the difference between them and the Dnyarri is. We should definitely ask them.”

“Yes, let’s fly there right away!” Zelnick eagerly suggested.

“I second that!” Rigby exclaimed.

Gruber rubbed his forehead for a while. He had known that his captain was more interested in women than saving all sentient life in the galaxy, but now they had a xenotech like that as well. Not that Gruber himself would mind checking with the Syreen, keeping it strictly business rather than pleasure. Of course after they had taken care of the official matters, they would have a few hours of spare time during which—

Gruber was suddenly able to snap out of it.

“I think there are a few things we need to do in this region first,” he reminded the other two.

“The Aqua Helix, sure,” Zelnick agreed, “but is there something else?”

A memory of something important struck Gruber just then.

“The talking pet!” he remembered.

Zelnick and Rigby obviously weren’t prepared for such an enthusiastic outburst from Gruber and couldn’t tell right away what Gruber was after.

“They are the Dnyarri, right?” Rigby checked.

“Right,” Gruber said, “and do you remember what the Arilou asked us to do?”

“Ah,” Zelnick and Rigby realized in unison.

“The Arilou said,” Zelnick began to recap, “that they witnessed the crash landing of the Dreadnought we examined at Alpha Pavonis and found that the talking pet had survived, although barely. They then took it to the Umgah, since they themselves lacked the bio-science skills to save the wounded creature. And we were supposed to find out how the creature was doing.”

Just then something struck Gruber, not like a frying pan in the face this time, but instead like a bolt of lightning. It was a thought that sent cold shivers down his spine.

“And the Spathi said that—” Gruber began shouting what he had just realized, but he was so excited that he dropped his portable console to the floor. He reached down for it.

“—They said that—”

thump

He hit his head on the table as he was getting up.

“—The Umgah are acting like zombies!” he finally managed to say as he stood up, rubbing the top of his head.

Gruber noticed that both Zelnick and Rigby had their mouths open.

“The Dnyarri,” Rigby mumbled. “But I understood that the Ur-Quan had dumbed down the Dnyarri to a harmless level.”

“And then the Umgah got their hands on it,” Gruber reminded him.

The Umgah specialized in bio-engineering. If the Ur-Quan could do something to alter the genes of a species, the Umgah could undo it ten-fold.

“We need to recruit the Dnyarri!” Zelnick declared.

Rigby was more cautious.

“But sir, didn’t you pay attention to the story?” he asked. “If we meet with the Dnyarri, we would be completely at their mercy. They could take over our minds whenever it would please them.”

“Oh, right,” Zelnick said.

Rigby looked like he was cooking up a major idea.

“We could try to make Excruciators of our own, though,” he soon suggested.

Gruber had to intervene.

“I advise against tinkering with our brains at this point,” he said. “We could first check the Taalo homeworld at Delta Vulpeculae in case the mind shield is still there. Even if it wasn’t, we might learn something in the process. We should also send a scout to the Umgah homeworld to see what’s happening before going there with the Vindicator.”

“Right, of course,” Zelnick agreed. “We got a little carried away there.”

“I got the impression,” Rigby began, “that the Dnyarri are incredibly evil and powerful – not something to be toyed with. We need to be **very** careful. And if the Ur-Quan find out that the Dnyarri have returned, if that really is the case...”

Rigby didn’t have to continue the sentence. The Ur-Quan probably still had Excruciators or something similar at hand.

“I believe that using the Dnyarri against the Ur-Quan would work only once,” Gruber speculated.

All three of them tapped their fingers on the table.

“So what now?” Zelnick asked.

“Now,” Gruber began, “we figure out how to steal a Precursor relic from an unknown, hostile alien race called the Thraddash.”

CHAPTER 9

VIOLENT RHINOS

September 27th 2155, Zeta Draconis, 277.6 : 867.3

*Maybe the Thraddash will give us the Aqua Helix if we just ask nicely. Or maybe not. Maybe they will open fire at the first sight of us, which is what a Hierarchy battle thrall **should** do. That course of action would actually make our job a lot easier since we wouldn't have to worry about morality issues. However, if the Thraddash are as weak as the Spathi claim them to be, Captain Zelnick might hesitate to use deadly force.*

There should be no room for mercy or hesitation. We should simply be glad if the enemy was weak and seize the opportunity to strike a blow against the Hierarchy. We were also weak when we joined the Alliance, but we still managed to play a major role in the early days as suppliers of war material. If the Hierarchy had wiped us out then, when we were unable to properly defend ourselves, the blow would have been devastating to the Alliance even though we didn't have any decent ships.

We should also consider the possibility of recruiting the Thraddash. It is hard to imagine why any race would voluntarily become slaves (like the Mycon did), so they might be willing to join us in our revolt. And even if they wouldn't dare to go that far, there is a chance they would be sympathetic to our cause and at least negotiate on the Aqua Helix.

One final note of not-getting-carried-away: We have no idea what kind of an artifact the Aqua Helix is. What does it

look like? What does it do? Is it even something we can take with us? Would the Thraddash rather destroy it than let it fall into enemy hands? I dare say all these questions will be answered soon.

Zeta Draconis had eight planets. Upon first glance they couldn't detect any ships in the system, but there had been several spoors in hyperspace. If they took care of their business in a reasonable amount of time, they should have no trouble evading unwanted encounters afterwards. However, zero Thraddash presence wasn't exactly what they had wanted, since they didn't know on which planet the Aqua Helix was, if it even was on a planet. They were just told that the device was on a Thraddash shrine in the system and there was no rule against building shrines in space.

"So now what?" Zelnick asked. "Should we start searching all these planets for... what?"

"We can scan a planet's surface for unusual energy readings," Dujardin reminded the captain. "That way we can find any signs of an active civilization."

"Any suggestions on where we start?" Zelnick looked for opinions.

Gruber thought that their best bet was to start from the habitable zone, where life was most often found. Although, now that he checked, there didn't seem to be any planets inside the habitable zone in the system. Maybe they should start from the innermost planet then. He suggested this course of action to the captain and got no objections.

Several hours later, as they were getting near the first planet, they received an ansible message from the starbase. Hayes and his pals had agreed that meeting with the Pkunk was a priority that couldn't wait for the Vindicator's return, so they were preparing to send the Arilou on a diplomatic mission to Gamma Krueger. They had also agreed that since

the Arilou could travel so fast to distant stars, they could make the trip to the Druuge trade world in Zeta Persei as well to negotiate on acquiring the Rosy Sphere. Hayes also wanted to boast that they were now producing Cruisers at a steady rate. Everything seemed to be in order...

...including the large fleet of ships orbiting the first planet of Zeta Draconis. The ship type was unknown to the computer, but Fwiffo was able to verify that they were the Thraddash. Soon after they were seen from the Vindicator, they broke off from orbit and scattered. Then the Vindicator was hailed on an open frequency and they answered the call.

The alien that was soon projected on the communications screen looked... tough, for lack of better word. Gruber remembered some old animation videos he had seen a long time ago where the characters were animals acting as humans, dressed in human clothes. If in one of those animation shows there had been a bad guy who was a rhino, it could have looked exactly like what they were seeing on the screen. It was even smoking a cigar.

"So, what's this?" the alien said in a surprised tone. *"An unknown alien species? How wonderful, someone new to fight! We are the Thraddash of Culture 19. What have you to say before we begin combat?"*

Gruber and Zelnick had agreed that they shouldn't reveal their true intentions right away.

"Slow down a bit, we mean you no harm," Zelnick lied. "Why do you wish to fight us?"

"HARG! HARG! HARG!" the Thraddash laughed. *"Stupid, weak alien! We are Famous Ur-Quan Combat Thralls! It is our obligation to destroy all non-Hierarchy forces. Although, even if we weren't Ur-Quan Combat Thralls, we would still attack you. You see, we know well the value of a good fight. Either you win and prove your superiority or you lose and are vanquished. If the vanquished is lucky, it may survive to learn an important*

lesson from its defeat. This is the way of the Thraddash! We fight and learn and improve! All other cultural schemes are inferior. This is a proven fact."

Zelnick whispered to Gruber:

"I don't think we can recruit them."

He then continued the conversation with the Thraddash.

"Is this your homeworld here?"

"*SNORT! What a laugh!*" the Thraddash continued laughing. "*It amazes me that a moron like you is able to fly a starship. Take a good look at that planet. Does it look habitable? NO! Our homeworld orbits the glorious star D—*

...

Wait a minute! You puny weaklings! You don't have the muscle so you try to trick us to tell you secrets! Well it won't work! Ha! I caught you in the act. HARG, this is NOT our homeworld, dolt! Here, on the dark continent of Funt, high on a mountain, in an ancient shrine, resting in a special ceremonial cradle, glowing with its magical blue light, is the Aqua Helix – the most revered of all Thraddash relics, the sign of any Culture's authority!"

If there ever was the time to be a smooth talker, now was it, Gruber thought. Idiots like the Thraddash could blurt out highly valuable information without even realizing it. Captain Zelnick would just have to find the right words.

"Aqua Helix, eh?" Zelnick humored the alien. "Sounds impressive. What does it do?"

"*Ho-ho, so you have some brain at least,*" the Thraddash commended. "*The Aqua Helix has been at the heart of all our Cultures, except for Culture 9 and they don't really count. It guides us, motivates us and rewards us. We know the Aqua Helix is great because all our previous cultures have known this to be true! If it wasn't anything special, WHY would we spend so much blood and passion over the little thing? It would be a colossal waste! An absurd travesty! HARG! Actually, this is what Culture 9 said during*

their two-week period of dominance before Culture 10 wiped them out, thus proving Culture 9 wrong and once again proving that our cultural scheme is superior."

To Gruber it sounded like the Thraddash were just like that voodoo shop keeper in New Orleans who was selling a priceless Precursor artifact for 5 dollars, only this was the other way around.

"You talk about different cultures," Zelnick began. "What do you mean by that?"

The Thraddash took a long puff from its cigar.

"I am absolutely certain that was the least stupid thing that has ever come out of your mouth, puny alien," it declared. *"I will gladly tell you how our superior culture works, even though talk is usually for sissies, weaklings like those of Culture 14."*

The alien placed its arms / front legs behind its head and leaned back.

"For ten thousand years, we Thraddash have fought and died, learned and improved. Then, along came Culture 14 which insisted that all this – this perfect method – was wrong! They claimed that each time we violently transformed to a new Culture, we inevitably blasted ourselves back at least five hundred years in development. Hmph! Some people just cannot accept the cost of progress. Indeed, the FOOLISHNESS of Culture 14's peaceful whining was revealed when they were conquered by Culture 15 after only a ten year reign. And did the change to Culture 15 set us back five hundred years? NO!"

The Thraddash hit its fist on the table.

"Two, maybe three hundred years, tops."

"Those idiots," Zelnick pretended to agree with the Thraddash. "Say, could we go take a look at this magnificent Aqua Helix?"

The Thraddash seemed to contemplate the request.

“Okay, go ahead,” it then replied. *“We can fight after you have enlightened yourself at the sheer magnitude and wonderfulness of the— WAIT A MINUTE! You were planning on stealing it, weren’t you!”*

“Er...” Zelnick searched for words. “No we weren’t?”

The lie didn’t work.

“You are just like the vile Culture 16!” the Thraddash furiously accused.

Then the screen went blank as they cut the transmission. The Thraddash fleet then took a tight formation, which in Gruber’s opinion looked offensive.*

“Prepare for battle,” Zelnick announced, although their fleet was already in battle formation and everyone was ready for everything.

“We’ll test their defenses,” Trent said and ordered two nukes to be launched at random targets in the enemy fleet. Wu did the same and soon four nukes were seen speeding away from the Cruisers.

“There are 15 enemy ships in total,” Dujardin reported. “They are all of the same type. Their size is close to that of the Stinger. So far their speed seems moderate.”

As if on cue, right after she had said that, all the enemy ships broke formation by storming into different directions with amazing speed. The nukes couldn’t turn fast enough to keep track of their targets and therefore they missed entirely. As a safety precaution, when that happens, the nukes are automatically deactivated to avoid unwanted collateral damage. They drifted harmlessly towards the planet and would probably burn in the atmosphere, if the planet had one.

“McNeil, fire away if you get the chance,” Zelnick said to the weapons officer.

* Meaning that they were preparing for an attack, not that the formation offended Gruber in some indescribable way.

“Yes sir,” McNeil responded. “I’m ready for action!”

The enemy was still pretty far away and outside the weapon range of everything except the Cruiser’s missiles.

“Sir, take a look at this,” Dujardin then said and showed a view from the telescope on the main screen. “This is the area from where the enemy fleet just stormed away.”

The area was filled with some sort of flaming mass arranged in several straight lines, probably 15 of them.

“So when the enemy uses that booster or whatever,” Gruber speculated, “they leave a trail of this flame behind.”

“Judging from the temperature of the flames,” Iwasaki, the hull officer began, “I’d say we should steer clear of them. I fear they could burn through our shielding.”

“Okay, that shouldn’t be too difficult,” Zelnick acknowledged the information.

Just then four of the enemy ships used their boosters again and this time they were all storming right towards the Vindicator.

“They’re fast!” Dujardin reported. “Ten seconds until flyby.”

Trent had already reacted and fired another nuke at the enemy’s path.

“McNeil?” Zelnick checked.

“I got it,” McNeil replied, took aim and fired.

The shot from the Hellbore Cannon hit the first enemy ship directly, wiping it out of existence. Trent’s nuke was also targeted at that ship so the nuke exploded where the ship had been. The shockwave pushed two of the incoming ships off course, but the last one now had a clear shot at the Vindicator.

“Brace for impact,” Zelnick called out as the enemy ship fired at them.

thump *clang* *bong*

The sound of hits echoed throughout the hull, but that was all. There was no notable shock or anything.

“Iwasaki?” Zelnick demanded a damage report.

“Nothing, sir,” Iwasaki replied. “Those shots cannot penetrate our shields.”

Just then the enemy ship that had fired at them used its booster again and curved away, leaving the trail of fire right in front of the Vindicator. They had about one second to dodge it, which obviously wasn’t enough and they flew right through the fire and flames.

For a split-second the bridge bathed in the yellowish light of the flames and then they had gotten through.

“Iwasaki?” Zelnick demanded a new report.

“We’re good,” Iwasaki reported, “but our hull took damage. I advise against doing that again.”

The rest of the enemy fleet was attacking the escorts of the Vindicator. It seemed that the Orz couldn’t use their boarding troops against such small and maneuverable ships, but their turrets were fast enough to keep up with their targets. The Zoq-Fot-Pik Stingers were engaging four of the enemies one on one and seemed to be doing a fine job of it. Trent and Wu had no trouble fending off the enemy as their point-defense lasers were enough to take out the weak projectiles shot by the enemy. They could also occasionally hit the enemies directly with the lasers when they got too close. For some reason the enemy mostly ignored the Star Runner, which probably suited Fwiffo just fine.

There were bright flashes every now and then – whenever a Thraddash ship was destroyed. Dujardin counted down from 15 to keep track of how many enemies were remaining. The battle was going smoothly without losses or surprises until she had reached 4.

“A new ship just appeared from behind the planet,” Dujardin reported. “It’s one of those red probes again!”

The probe went straight to the nearest ship, which conveniently belonged to the Thraddash, and attacked it with its lightning weapon.

“Sir, the Thraddash are hailing us again,” Katja reported.

“They’re fighting a losing battle,” Zelnick said. “They will be wiped out in a few minutes if this goes on. Let’s hear what they have to say, maybe they want to surrender.”

The presumably same Thraddash individual was soon displayed on the screen again.

“So it’s you!” it shouted in an angry and accusing tone. *“You’re the one behind this red probe menace! I should’ve known that it takes cowards like you to send robot emissaries of death to do their dirty work. Ha! Now that we’ve caught you red-handed, you can answer what it is about Epsilon Draconis that interests you so much. We’ve seen your probes study the first planet. You’ve obviously put some jammers down there since our scanners malfunction when we go near the planet. SPEAK, ALIEN! REVEAL THE TRUTH! CONFESS YOUR CRIMES!”*

“Okay,” Zelnick agreed, “but will you stand down if I confess?”

“HARG! HARG! HARG!” the Thraddash laughed again. *“You act all high and mighty after your successful surprise attack, but you wimps will soon run out of luck. Even if you managed to get out of this system alive, you would still be a poor second to the Ur-Quan in terms of power. No! We will not surrender to the likes of you!”*

Meanwhile, a nuke shot from the Seraph destroyed the probe. The Thraddash ship it was attacking was already inoperative, but in one piece.

“Bwahaha, you incompetent fools shot down one of your own!” the Thraddash snickered.

“Captain, there’s a new fleet of ships emerging from the other side of the planet,” Dujardin reported.

“What kind? How many?” Zelnick demanded.

“So far they’re all the same as the previous Thraddash ships. There’s more and more of them coming into view. There’s already 13 of them – now 14.”

Zelnick reported this to the other captains, although most of them had already noticed. There were now only three ships of the original Thraddash fleet left and one of them was disabled. Two of the Zoq-Fot-Pik Stingers intercepted the last functional enemies and the rest of the Vindicator's fleet turned to face the new enemy squadron.

"So you finally noticed our main fleet," the Thraddash who was still linked commented. *"Let's see how quickly you are destroyed when the tables are turned."*

Zelnick then cut the transmission.

"Is the whole fleet visible yet?" he asked Dujardin.

"I think so," she replied. "There are 22 of them. All are of the same ship type as the ones we just destroyed."

"Let's do it like last time then," Zelnick declared.

After about 15 minutes the Alliance of Free Stars was still without casualties, but the Thraddash fleet was down to four, including the previously disabled one. The Vindicator's Point-Defense laser system was tested against the weak enemy projectiles – just to avoid the unpleasant noise that came from getting hit.

One blast from the Hellbore cannon reduced the number of enemies by one more. Three Zoq-Fot-Pik Stingers chased one enemy ship in a planned manner right to the hands of the fourth Stinger, or more accurately, right into its tongue-lance, which was an inadvisable place to be. One Orz Nemesis then landed three hits in succession on the last functional enemy and the battlefield fell silent.

"What shall we do with that disabled ship?" Zelnick asked Gruber.

It was a new situation to Gruber. If the enemy wasn't able to fight back, they were usually simply executed, since there rarely was a chance to take prisoners. But now, with the Vindicator's advanced lifeform analysis tools, they might be able to interrogate the enemy.

“I think we should try to take one of them alive,” he suggested.

“Alive?” Zelnick said in surprise. “How would we pull off something like that?”

Gruber figured that the enemy ships were so small that they could fit one inside the Vindicator’s storage bay. Then they could just cut open the hull and use electrical tazers on everyone inside or, if tazers wouldn’t work, threaten the captives at gun point to enter the cages in the containment area. And if the enemy still wouldn’t cooperate, they could simply be shot. He proposed this to the captain.

“How brutal,” Zelnick commented. “How many should we take?”

“We need only one alive,” Gruber replied.

In Gruber’s opinion Zelnick’s face showed a sign of hesitation, but he still nodded in agreement.

“Even though the enemy hasn’t been much of a threat so far,” Gruber began, “we should still consider ourselves as being on a tight schedule here. In my opinion we have three tasks ahead of us and we should start working on them simultaneously. The first priority is of course securing the Aqua Helix. We should send a landing team down to the surface as soon as possible. Our secondary objective should be scavenging all the debris from the battle, which we should also start doing right away. I’d say that getting the live captive is of lower priority, but there should be nothing stopping us from starting working on that as well right now.”

Zelnick was nodding as if he would agree with everything Gruber suggested.

“That sounds convincing,” he said. “Let’s do that.”

The captain then addressed the radar operator.

“Danielle, can you locate the Aqua Helix?”

“Let’s see now,” she replied. “The Thraddash said that it’s on a mountain on a dark continent. There are three continents visible from here and one of them is indeed

darker than the others. I'll scan the mountain tops on that continent for unusual energy sources... There."

She put a view of the scan results on the main screen. There was one highlighted area.

"I dare say that's our target," she concluded.

"Impressive," Zelnick commented. "Gruber, brief the landing team and get them down there right away. This time you're not going, since you'll oversee the capturing process. Iwasaki, take care of the scavenging. Samusenko, get that disabled ship into our storage bay."

"Yes sir," all three men said in unison.

A few hours later the shuttle had taken off and a damaged Thraddash ship was inside the Vindicator's storage module. Gruber and Skeates were inspecting the enemy craft, which wasn't notably bigger than the shuttle. Several crew members were ready to shoot at anything that came out of the ship. The ship hadn't responded to their transmissions anymore and they still had no idea how many Thraddash individuals were inside. There were no visible windows in the craft through which they could see inside.

Gruber and Skeates agreed that they would drill a small hole into the ship's hull and use it to pump in some sleeping gas from the medical bay's supplies. According to Dr. Mehul, the gas should have some effect on all carbon based life-forms that breathed. And since the Thraddash were seen smoking a cigar, they probably breathed.

If everything went according to their plan, they would cut open what they thought was a door to the ship after injecting the gas and then find an unknown number of unconscious Thraddash inside. They would then drag one to a cage in the containment area and execute the rest.

Skeates tried the drill on the ship's hull and it worked as it should. The Thraddash technology seemed primitive,

somewhat similar to what humans had when they first joined the old alliance.

The drilling made a terrible noise, which of course gave everyone inside a heads up that something bad was about to happen. When the hole in the hull was ready, Gruber inserted a thin hose and turned on the gas pump. They then waited for 15 minutes, during which they heard a few strange sounds from inside the ship.

“I think it’s safe to open the door now,” Gruber said after all sounds had stopped. He then signaled the team with the laser cutters to start their work.

Gruber stepped back as two men worked on the cutters and four men with tazers took positions near the door. Four more crewmen were a bit further away, ready to shoot at the doorway with lethal weapons in case of an emergency. They were also prepared to open the cargo hold doors if things got completely out of hand.

“Almost there,” the man with the laser reported after a few minutes, “get ready!”

As soon as he was finished, the door panel fell to the floor and the cutter team dashed away from the ship. Gruber grasped his tazer tightly as he watched the sleeping gas pour out of the ship. He half-expected a swarm of armored Thraddash soldiers to storm out and start shooting, but luckily that didn’t happen.

After the air had cleared, the tazer team stepped inside the ship while Gruber waited outside. Soon the leader of the team reported that there were two bodies, either dead or unconscious. Following Gruber’s orders, they dragged both of the bodies outside the ship and tied their arm and leg equivalents. Gruber then checked, to the best of his knowledge, whether the aliens were alive. He quickly concluded that they were. He reported the situation to the captain via the communicator.

“I thought you were going to take only one,” Zelnick said.

“That’s still the plan,” Gruber replied. “With your permission we’ll kill the other one now.”

Zelnick had a troubled look on his face.

“This doesn’t feel right,” he hesitated. *“Shooting unconscious captives seems like something that bad guys do.”*

Gruber had expected Zelnick’s hesitation. It’s easy to push a button on the bridge and destroy a ship full of enemy individuals, but when you have one of them right in front of you, it feels more personal. Pulling the trigger gets significantly easier after doing it for the first time, though.

“There are no good guys and bad guys in a war,” Gruber educated the captain. “There’s just your side and the opposing side, both doing what it takes to win. And if they don’t, they lose and die.”

Zelnick processed Gruber’s point of view for a while.

“Well, if you think it can’t be helped,” he finally agreed.

“That’s what I think,” Gruber replied.

Zelnick sighed.

“You have my permission to kill one of them.”

“Roger that.”

Gruber then tucked the communicator back into his pocket and took a rifle from one of the crewmen. He walked to the unconscious Thraddash body closest to him, pointed the rifle into the back of its head and pulled the trigger.

CHAPTER 10

INTERROGATION

September 28th 2155, Zeta Draconis, 277.6 : 867.3

The bio-lab of the Vindicator was accessed from the shuttle hangar, meaning that they had to drag the unconscious body of the Thraddash for about 200 meters to reach its cage. As with all heavy things, it got more and more heavy along the way. Somewhere between the crew module and the Hellbore Cannon module they gave up trying to haul the body with their bare hands and got one of the loaders to do it in the pneumatic exoskeleton.

The cage prepared for the Thraddash was in a room that obviously wasn't optimized for interrogation. However, if you wanted to do all sorts of tests with the captive, like poke it with long sticks, there were advanced tools for that.

After the body was finally shoved into the cage, Gruber, Rigby and Vargas stayed in the room to discuss strategy while waiting for the creature to wake up. Someone else had taken Rigby's place in the landing team for the current mission.

"There should be only one interrogator at a time," Vargas suggested. "According to human psychology, the best results are achieved when the interrogation is done on equal terms."

"But it's in a cage," Rigby pointed out.

"Well yes, there's that," Vargas agreed, "but we mustn't add any unnecessary threatening elements, such as several interrogators or someone constantly pointing a gun at the prisoner."

"In human psychology," Gruber reminded.

“Of course,” Vargas said, “but this is an excellent opportunity to study alien psychology.”

Knowing Vargas’ field of interest, it was no surprise to Gruber how excited the man was.

“So who will be the one asking questions?” Rigby asked.

“I am,” Gruber said. “I know best what we want to achieve and basic interrogation was a part of the Star Control officer’s training program.”

“Right,” Vargas agreed. “We’ll observe from the next room.”

Just then the Thraddash moaned and grunted.

“Looks like it’s waking up,” Vargas said and signaled Rigby that they should exit the room.

Soon Gruber was alone, looking at the slumberous alien behind bars.

“Check one two.”

“Check three four.”

He heard Rigby’s and Vargas’ voices in his earphones. He looked at the camera in the room and gave a thumbs up to indicate that he heard the checks. He then placed a chair in front of the cage and sat down to wait for the alien to come to its senses.

The Thraddash tried to stand up but failed, assuming it was bipedal, and stayed on all fours.

“What is this place?” was its first question.

“You are a prisoner,” Gruber explained. “This is your cell.”

The alien growled and grasped one of the bars in the cage. It pulled itself into a standing position and tried to shake the bars loose. Gruber sat motionless, knowing that no amount of brute force would break the bars.

Soon the Thraddash also realized that what it was doing was pointless. It then took a few steps back and rammed the bars. It tried that a few times, but it was no use. The cage

remained undamaged and for some reason Gruber found himself enjoying the show.

“You puny weaklings,” the Thraddash said while taking a break from trying to trash the place. “Only inferior aliens like you resort to such cowardly actions.”

“Your fleet is destroyed,” Gruber informed the alien. “Were you able to observe the battle after your ship was disabled?”

The Thraddash sat down and calmed a little.

“No,” it responded. “*SNORT* But I bet your casualties were severe!”

Gruber smiled at the captive.

“There were no casualties on our part,” he politely answered.

“I suggest you humor it, just a little,” Vargas suggested. *“I’m sure it will be a lot more responsive after that.”*

Gruber considered it for a while and then agreed.

“Although,” he continued, “our forward armor needs repairs.”

“HARG! HARG! HARG!” the Thraddash laughed very loudly. “I knew our Reeunk afterburners were too much for you. You do have some backbone in combat though, I give you that, but still nowhere near as much as the Ur-Quan.”

“How did you come across the Ur-Quan?” Gruber asked.

The Thraddash took a cigar from somewhere, put it in its mouth and somehow lighted it.

“They enslaved us, dolt, over fifty years ago,” it replied. “When they first came into our space, we attacked them with gusto. We zipped in to fire our Mark 6 blasters and then were supposed to zip back out to prepare for another attack run. SNORT!”

The creature took a long puff from its cigar.

“Unfortunately, before we could zip out, our ships were either blasted to smithereens by the Ur-Quan’s fusion bolts

or were picked apart by the swarms of Ur-Quan fighter-vessels.”

Gruber tried to imagine that battle, but didn't understand one thing:

“Why didn't you escape with your afterburners?” he asked. “It looked to me like you could outrun anything with your ships.”

“Indeed we can, now,” the Thraddash proudly said. “But back then our ships weren't yet equipped with the afterburner. It was about 10 years ago that Maintenance Engineer Reeunk invented the afterburner effect when he accidentally stuck his cigar in the aft fuel valve of the ship he was working on. WHABOOM!”

The alien used its front legs to help describe what happened.

“The ship took off like a farg out of hell, and Reeunk was fried to a crisp. Yes, we remember Reeunk with much fondness. We have of course refined the device over the years and equipped our entire fleet with it.”

“So the Ur-Quan defeated you and you chose the role of fighting slaves, am I right?” Gruber checked.

“There was no choice,” the Thraddash said. “Only a fool would choose fallow slavery.”

It was a successful insult, Gruber thought, although it probably wasn't intentional.

“What happened after you were enslaved?” Gruber asked.

“I will gladly tell you,” the Thraddash answered, “because that was when the glorious Culture 19 was formed. Immediately after the enslavement we realized that a change was in order – a new Culture had to be established. So, of course, we began a thermo-nuclear exchange to decide who would lead this new Culture. We were all quite disappointed when the Ur-Quan in orbit above our homeworld launched waves of fighters that intercepted all our missiles. They

explained that slaves were not permitted to engage in such destructive conflicts. So my people, being superior, introduced a super-lethal poison into our opponents' water and air, thus ending the conflict, HARG! HARG! HARG!"

The alien took another long puff from its cigar and blew a circular shape with the smoke and then continued.

"The Ur-Quan were not particularly happy about this resolution, and killed all of our leaders. Under other circumstances that would have started a larger inter-Thraddash war, but the Ur-Quan appointed new leaders, apparently chosen at random, and explained that further disobedience would result in the destruction of our species."

The Thraddash then stumped its cigar into the floor and concluded the story:

"Frustrating, huh?"

Gruber had to ask the obvious:

"If you have been an Ur-Quan battle thrall for 50 years already, why didn't you participate in the Great War between the Alliance of Free Stars and the Ur-Quan Hierarchy?"

This question apparently struck a nerve.

"We wanted to," the Thraddash replied and grasped air with its fist, "Oh, how we wanted to! We were the first battle thralls the Ur-Quan enslaved in this part of the galaxy, so we thought we had priority. But instead, the Ur-Quan thought we were too weak to hold our own in the upcoming battles, so they left us here to 'guard the flank'."

The alien then stood up and walked to the side of its cage.

"If only we had been stronger and less... *SNARF* troublesome. You see, another reason the Ur-Quan wouldn't take us with them was because we kept picking fights with the new battle slaves like the Umgah blobbies or those religious idiots, the Ilwrath."

Gruber agreed with the Ur-Quan.

“I’d like to know how they evolved such a hostile culture,” Vargas commented.

Gruber saw no harm in asking about Thraddash history, since at least this individual seemed rather proud of it.

“Have you always been this hostile?” he asked. “Was the... Culture 14 if I remember correctly... the only exception?”

First the Thraddash was just surprised, but then it burst into laughter.

“Hostility? HARG! HARG! HARG!”

It took the Thraddash a while to regain its composure enough to continue.

“We are not hostile,” the prisoner explained. “Hostility is unwarranted aggression! *SNORT* If you want to know about hostility, let me tell you about Culture 12. They were SO hostile that while they were on their way to their first great battle, Jugkah the battlemaster stepped on Gnusko the tactician’s foot, causing him great pain. The annoyed Gnusko turned on Jugkah and sliced his body in half! This miffed Jugkah’s troops who took it upon themselves to murder Gnusko and his elite troops.”

The Thraddash was obviously enjoying telling the story, judging by the wide smirk on its face.

“The REAL trouble started when now-dead Jugkah’s master sergeants Muuhd and Pudt started arguing about how to kill Gnusko – simple crucifixion, or the slower ‘Lead Tattoo’ technique. The argument was resolved when Muuhd and his five hundred troops were slaughtered by Pudt and his gang.”

There was a pause in the story as the Thraddash lit up another cigar.

“This probably all would have gone down in history as a great day of learning for Culture 12, were it not for the surprise arrival of Culture 12’s original enemy, the Yajag and his cronies. They wiped out Culture 12’s army, thus

beginning the long and glorious Culture 13. Indeed the following Culture 14 is a black sheep among our cultures in history, but they also taught us a valuable lesson and reinforced our resolve. But as you see, Culture 12 was hostile, unlike us in the glorious Culture 19 who merely want to kill you.”

Gruber appreciated the honesty of the Thraddash.

“That’s brutal,” he remarked, meaning it as a compliment.

This made the interrogation subject laugh again.

“Brutal? You don’t know the meaning of brutal until you’ve heard the story of Culture 3!”

“This is great stuff,” Vargas commented. *“Keep it talking.”*

“How brutal WAS Culture 3 you ask?” the Thraddash continued. “Culture 3 was SO brutal that they maimed, tortured, enslaved and in general brutalized THEMSELVES! You see, Culture 2 had made a virtue of stoic resistance to pain, stubborn fortitude, that sort of thing. So when Culture 3 came around, they had a problem: How were they going to impress everyone as being even tougher?”

The captive leaned towards the bars of its cage.

“Their answer? They would arrive at a battle, stand on a tall hill where everyone could see them and chop off one of their own limbs! Then they’d wave it around, screaming and shaking it at their enemies.”

“Did it work?” Gruber asked, sincerely interested.

“It did!” the Thraddash proudly answered. “It scared the hell out of their opponents! They ran like crazy! You could tell who was a real war hero back then by how few arms or legs they had left.”

The subject stumped its cigar into the bars.

“War parades were quite different too,” it continued. “Instead of sturdy old warriors walking slowly past the reviewing stands, they tended to roll, and at a good clip, too.

To you, an inferior alien, this may seem bluntly stupid – the product of a sick, primitive society, eh?”

“Yes it does,” Gruber truthfully said.

“*SNORT* You couldn’t be more right!” the Thraddash agreed. “Culture 3 was, as you can well understand, only the third Thraddash Culture. It was far from the tempered perfection you see before yourselves right now.”

Gruber nodded in agreement as there was some sense in the first part of what the alien was saying.

“I have a question for you cowards,” the Thraddash suddenly said.

Gruber made no actions towards shooting the alien before it could ask the question, so it asked:

“Why do your probes always fly in the direction of Vega after they are done with their misdeeds, hmm? Do you have a secret base there?... Ha! That’s it, I got you! You have a probe factory somewhere near Vega and use it to send endless waves of destruction upon your foes!”

The expression on the alien’s face changed to a much less hostile one.

“How admirable!” it concluded.

Gruber recalled all pieces of information they had on the source of the probes. The Zoq-Fot-Pik had calculated a line on which the source must be, the Arilou had said that they came from a world with no surface and now they were told that the probes often fly in the direction of Vega. Gruber checked the star map. In addition to Vega, the only star in that direction on the line was Beta Corvi, which was right next to Vega. Now they knew where to look if they wanted to get rid of the probe menace. He was so thankful to the Traddash that he decided to let it think that the probes were indeed human design.

“You seem to have it all figured out,” Gruber commended the captive.

“I have also figured out what you did to my co-pilot, Fkank,” the Thraddash continued. “Seeing what vile creatures you are after all, you must have executed him. That’s what I would’ve done.”

Gruber kept a pause during which he hoped that Vargas would give him advice. He was just about to tell the truth when he heard Vargas’ voice:

“Tell the truth.”

So he told the truth.

“Serves him right for getting captured,” the Thraddash remarked.

“So your buddy was Fkank,” Gruber began. “Do you have a name?”

The captive leaned towards the bars again.

“I do,” it replied. “And I dare say you do too.”

“I do,” Gruber answered.

It seemed like neither of them were about to reveal their names any time soon. Gruber suddenly had a dangerous feeling of bonding with the captive. That was the one big mistake you could make with a prisoner of war. He felt he had to get out of the room so he made his way for the door. As he had just opened the door, the Thraddash spoke:

“If you’re going to kill me, just kill me,” it said.

Gruber looked back at him from the open doorway.

“Not yet,” he said.

Suddenly the Thraddash threw itself towards the bars again.

“THIEF!” it shouted and tried to force itself through the bars.

Gruber was puzzled for a moment, but then looked behind him and noticed Belov, Witherspoon, Ahmed and Cuvelier carrying a large blue object which had the shape of a helix. The Aqua Helix, no doubt, he thought and closed the door.

“I see your mission was a success too,” he said to the landing crew.

They set the helix down on the floor.

“Yes it was,” Witherspoon said.

“A walk in the park,” Belov summed it up.

“There were no guards,” Witherspoon explained, “no defense systems, and there was a landing site right next to the shrine where we found this thing.”

Gruber inspected the artifact. Just like most Precursor relics, it looked like a piece of modern art with no specific purpose. Rigby then came out from the room where he had observed the interrogation and joined the crew around the Aqua Helix.

“So this is supposed to fix the Ultron,” he skeptically stated. “I don’t see how.”

“You’re neither a Precursor prodigy nor a technician,” Witherspoon reminded him.

“That is true,” Gruber said. “We should get Skeates and Captain Zelnick to take a look at this.”

While Rigby and Vargas continued interrogating the Thraddash, Gruber was briefed on what exactly the landing team had found down on the surface.

The Aqua Helix had indeed been inside a shrine. It was in a large cylindrical room where the walls were filled with scripts that bore resemblance to old Egyptian hieroglyphs. The landing team had recorded a complete 3D model of the room, so they would all have plenty of time to try to make sense of the scribblings. Of course it would be a lot quicker to have their Thraddash captive to work as a translator.

Gruber relayed the information to Vargas via the communicator.

“I don’t think we can get much out of the captive right now,” Vargas replied. *“It still hasn’t gotten over the shock*

of realizing that we took their treasured relic. Whatever the device is capable of, the Thraddash seem to value it highly."

Gruber was with Zelnick and Skeates as they inspected both the Aqua Helix and the Ultron wreckage.

"I don't see how these are supposed to be related," Zelnick said after a while. "I was hoping there would have been a slot or something in the Ultron where we could have just inserted the Aqua Helix."

Skeates felt the smooth surface of the Aqua Helix.

"What did the Melnorme say about these, exactly?" Skeates asked.

Gruber displayed a recording of the conversation from his communicator.

"To be exact," Gruber pointed out, "they said that we need to have all three artifacts and **then** fixing the Ultron will be easy."

"I really don't see how any other artifact could make this one work with that one," Skeates said, pointing at the helix and the Ultron.

All three of them soon concluded that there was nothing more to gain from looking at the artifacts, so Skeates returned to his duties and Zelnick stayed behind to converse with Gruber.

"The scavenging is finished," he said. "We did everything we came here to do. Now what?"

Gruber hadn't had the chance to tell the captain about the probes' origins so now he did.

"Vega?" Zelnick repeated and checked the star map. "That's pretty far out."

"267 units," Gruber said. "The trip would take us approximately 11 days one way."

"It's good to know where to go if dealing with the probe menace becomes a priority," Zelnick began, "but I say we shouldn't take that long a detour at this point. I think we

should prioritize checking out the Umgah and the possible Dnyarri.”

Gruber agreed with the captain. Even though the probes needed to be dealt with eventually, right now was not the time. They had more pressing matters at hand.

“We just need to figure out how to do that safely,” Gruber reminded the captain. “If we go to Umgah space carelessly, we might fall under the Dnyarri’s mind control ourselves.”

Zelnick seemed to do some serious thinking.

“Do you have any ideas?” he asked.

“Not right now,” Gruber admitted. “But we have a long way ahead of us and plenty of time to think. The Umgah’s home star, Beta Orionis, is actually about as far as Vega – 282 units to be exact.”

“And we even have the Thraddash captive to entertain us on the way,” Zelnick said and took out his communicator.

“Mr. Samusenko?” he said to the device and got a reply. “Take us to Beta Orionis.”

“No, we need to stop at Epsilon Draconis first,” Gruber reminded the captain.

“Oh, right, the rainbow world,” Zelnick remembered. “Mr. Samusenko, make that Epsilon Draconis.”

CHAPTER 11

ANCIENT EVIL

October 10th 2155, Beta Orionis, 197.8 : 596.8

October 2nd 2155: Captain Zelnick came up with a cunning plan on how to safely check what the deal is with the Umgah: We will use the captured Thraddash ship. Skeates was sure that the intact ship we captured could be adequately fixed for flight, thanks to the vast supply of spare parts we salvaged from all the wreckage. The only problem is the pilot. We will have to convince our captive – probably at gun point – to do our bidding.

And now we have confirmed that there is a rainbow world at Epsilon Draconis. Not that there had been any doubts about it. I'm looking forward to our next meeting with the Melnorme.

October 3rd 2155: Vargas has been successful with his interrogation techniques. According to the Thraddash prisoner, the Ur-Quan base of operations is in the Crateris constellation. Now we need to send scouts into that area to find out if that's where the Sa-Matra is.

The captive was also surprisingly willing to help us execute Zelnick's plan. Of course, the only option given to it was death.

October 8th 2155: The Thraddash ship looks horrible, but according to Skeates it is airtight and will fly. He was also kind enough to install a circuit breaker, which will disable the entire ship with a push of a button from the Vindicator. I

still think this is not enough. We must prepare for the chance that the ship will return with a Dnyarri on board. And we also need to make sure that the captive will want to return.

October 9th 2155: Thanks to the simple yet brilliant idea of Captain Trent, we have installed one of the nuclear warheads of Tobermoon into the Thraddash ship. The trigger is given to all three human captains: Zelnick, Trent and Wu. If there is any reason to believe that a Dnyarri is on board the Thraddash ship as it returns, any one of the captains can detonate the bomb. I find it difficult to believe that the Dnyarri could control all three of them from such a distance without even knowing they are there. Also, if the ship is not back in 12 hours, the bomb will be detonated. Just to make sure, we strapped the prisoner into the ship so it can't bail out.

Now we are all set. There is equipment for recording everything on board the Thraddash ship, which Skeates has named Torch (probably because of the flaming afterburner). The captive knows what it's supposed to do and we can get the recordings even without its consent.

The ship is away. Thanks to the afterburner, it should reach the first planet, the Umgah homeworld, in five hours.

One final note: Ever since we arrived in this system, every crew member with esper potential has reported feeling... bad. According to Dr. Mehul there's nothing physically wrong with them, but they all themselves describe it as a "terrible, sickening feeling".*

* After spending some time with the Syreen, screening for psychic abilities was made part of the health checks of all Star Control recruits. So far humanity has found no use for this information, but maybe someday...

Eleven hours had passed since the Thraddash ship left and there was still no sign of it returning. The few Umgah ships they had seen had completely ignored the Vindicator's fleet in the outskirts of the system.

The condition of the crew members with esper potential had gotten worse. None of them could stand anymore and they had all been taken to the infirmary for hydration since they had vomited all over the place. Even though Gruber didn't feel ill, he did have an urge to get out of the system. If nothing happened in the next hour, they would remote-detonate the nuke in the Thraddash ship and fly straight to Sol. Gruber found himself almost hoping that the ship wouldn't return.

Suddenly Katja reported that they were receiving an ansible transmission from the starbase. They always sent a report to the starbase whenever they entered a new system. It was rare for the starbase to call them, especially since it was only 11 hours since their last chat. And what was more; the starbase requested a video feed, which was an ominous sign in Gruber's opinion.

The link was soon established and it didn't surprise anyone anymore that the speaker for the starbase was Lydia. There was something different about her appearance, but Gruber couldn't put his finger on what it was exactly.

"Hello," Lydia greeted Zelnick with a friendly smile. *"I'm sorry to trouble you, but can I speak to First Officer Gruber, please?"*

So she had changed her way of speech again, Gruber thought. Maybe it was for the best.

Zelnick agreed to the request and Gruber stepped into the limelight.

"What's the matter?" he asked Lydia.

"We need your communicator data," Lydia got straight to the point. *"Specifically, we need your personal log entries. This relates to the Groombridge incident."*

The request was something Gruber had not expected.

"I already gave Matthewson my communicator," he said.

"*Yes, but we need the data from your new one,*" Lydia insisted.

That didn't make any sense to Gruber, although it probably did to Lydia.

"But I got the new one after Groombridge," Gruber tried. "What do you need that for?"

Lydia seemed impatient.

"*Oh trust me, that's a loooooooong story,*" she said. "*Let's just say that we need to confirm something. Can you send the data over now?*"

Gruber reluctantly took his communicator from his pocket and attached its contents into the ansible feed.

"There, did you get it?" he checked.

Lydia looked away from the camera and asked something of someone else in the room. Then she turned back to face Gruber.

"*Yes, thanks!*"

She didn't say anything for a while after that, but continued to look intensely at the screen with a smile on her face, clearly expecting Gruber to say something.

"*Well, what do you think?*" she finally asked since Gruber couldn't think of anything to say.

"Er..." Gruber hesitated for a while. "Good job?"

These were obviously not the words Lydia was waiting for.

"*No, not that!*" she said in frustration. "*Oh, you are so clueless!*"

She then pointed both her forefingers towards her head.

"*This!*"

Gruber wasn't sure what she was pointing at. Her ears? Her eyes? Her forehead? He was probably at the part where he had to notice what was different about her appearance.

As Gruber took his time replying, Zelnick suddenly whispered to him:

“Her hair, man... She used to have a long pony tail.”

Did she, Gruber thought. He hadn't paid any attention to Lydia's hair, so he decided to trust the captain on this.

“It looks nice,” he hastily answered to Lydia without having time to think whether her hair really looked nice.

He then observed that Lydia now wore her hair down and it was cut to shoulder length.

“*Don't get killed,*” Lydia said and closed the link, obviously not satisfied with Gruber's reply.

“Smooth,” Zelnick commented.

Gruber thought about it for a while. The hair really did suit her.

“Captain, I can see the Thraddash ship now,” Dujardin suddenly reported.

“Hell, it's about time,” Zelnick remarked. “Katja, can you contact it?”

“I'm sending an invitation, but so far the ship hasn't responded,” the communications officer reported.

“Actually, it's not even flying this way,” Dujardin noticed and put the radar on the main screen.

Indeed if the Thraddash ship kept its current heading, it would miss the Vindicator's fleet entirely. Its course was currently about 30 degrees off. Zelnick then hit the switch that should disable the Thraddash ship.

“Samusenko, intercept it here,” Zelnick ordered and showed a location on the map. “Trent, Wu, are you seeing this?” he then checked with the Cruiser captains.

“*Yes and I've got my finger on the trigger,*” Wu replied.

“*Same here,*” Trent said.

“Katja, the recordings?” Zelnick asked for the data package from which they could see what had happened to the ship.

“We need to get closer for the transfer to work,” she explained. “The range of the transmitter is about 10 000 kilometers.”

Hundreds of thousands of kilometers later they were ready to receive the data package. Just like all the Umgah ships they had seen, the Thraddash ship had now completely ignored them – or maybe that was because it was disabled.

“Samusenko, keep our distance until we have analyzed the recordings,” Zelnick commanded.

“Aye aye, sir,” the navigation officer responded and set the velocity of the Vindicator to match that of the Thraddash ship.

“We’ve got the data,” Katja reported.

“Great, let’s go through it quickly,” Zelnick said.

Some fifteen minutes later they were certain that there wasn’t a Dnyarri or anything else unwanted on board the Thraddash ship, unless one considered the Thraddash captive itself unwanted. But on the other hand they were now also certain that there was a Dnyarri on the Umgah homeworld.

All the Umgah ships in orbit of their homeworld had ignored the Thraddash ship as well. As instructed, the Thraddash had hailed the Umgah homeworld on approach. After an unusually long wait, the call was answered – not by the Umgah, though. It was the talking pet, the Dnyarri. It simply instructed the Thraddash to leave, but since the Thraddash didn’t comply fast enough, it somehow convincingly commanded the Thraddash to go home. The Thraddash had then immediately turned the ship around and taken off towards the edge of the system at full speed.

“That’s pretty scary,” Zelnick commented.

“I think your plan worked really well, captain,” Gruber summed it up.

“Let’s get our prisoner back,” Zelnick said. “Grab the ship into our storage bay again.”

About an hour later Gruber was in the storage module, waiting for their prisoner to be unstrapped from the cockpit of its ship.

“Sir, the creature is mumbling to itself,” Belov then reported from the temporary doorway into the ship.

Gruber stepped into the ship to check it out and soon heard the Thraddash captive’s voice. It was constantly repeating one sentence:

“We are the polite and courteous Thraddash.”

Gruber signaled Belov to continue uncoupling the captive from the ship, but at the same time tying it up again for the walk to its cage.

“Can you hear me?” Gruber asked the Thraddash.

To everyone’s surprise, it didn’t ignore this question.

“Hello and good day,” it greeted Gruber. “How are you today? We are just fine, thank you. Are your mates and offspring well? How simply marvelous!”

The captive wasn’t really looking at Gruber, even though it was looking in the direction of his eyes, which made Gruber feel uneasy.

“What is the number of the current Thraddash Culture?” Gruber asked to check if the captive had any sense left.

The alien seemed to give it a serious thought.

“We are the polite and courteous Thraddash,” it finally replied.

Gruber stepped back.

“Take it to its cage,” he said to Belov and the others.

When Belov reported that the Thraddash was successfully put behind bars, Gruber was already in the conference room with Zelnick and Rigby. All the captains in the fleet were virtually present in the meeting.

“We know there is a Dnyarri on the Umgah homeworld,” Gruber began, “and we need its cooperation in our fight against both Ur-Quan sub-species. However, since approaching the Dnyarri is too dangerous, we cannot negotiate with it. We have learned that the Taalo had created a device against the Dnyarri’s psychic manipulation, but we don’t know if the device is still intact, or if it ever even worked. In any case, if it still exists, we can most likely find it at the moon of the second planet in Delta Vulpeculae – which used to be the Taalo homeworld. We also know that the Orz like to, uh, hang out on that planet, so they might be able to tell us more about the Taalo and their... mind shield. Maybe captains *Heavy* and *Wet* could shed some light on the subject?”

Gruber motioned that the two Orz captains were expected to speak now.

“Orz will tell again,” one of the two Orz holograms said. *“*Silly* campers like *word game*. It is ok for the Orz. For too much fun Orz play at Taalo *playground*. Taalo *slide* well and play *time jokes*.”*

*“Campers want *heavy* things,”* the other Orz hologram interrupted or continued. *“Taalo things are so *heavy* it is *colorful*. For better *enjoyment* Orz bring things to alliance *house*. Do you want?”*

Gruber wished that Lydia was there to translate. Now it was he who had to guess what the Orz meant. He explained to Zelnick that he thought that the Orz were offering to bring some device, hopefully the Taalo mind shield, to the starbase.

“Yes,” Zelnick answered the Orz.

“Another topic we have on the agenda is the location of the Sa-Matra,” Gruber declared. “We now know that the Ur-Quan war is centered in the Crateris constellation. We also know that the Ur-Quan battle platform, the Sa-Matra, is stationed somewhere in this quadrant. Everything we do will

be in vain if we cannot destroy the Sa-Matra and therefore locating it will be our top priority. Obviously we can't search the entire constellation with the Vindicator. We need some more subtle scouting methods. All ideas are welcome."

Gruber sat down to indicate that anyone could speak.

"*We can do that,*" one of the Zoq-Fot-Pik holograms said, or more precisely, Dip from the Voyager said.

"*Yeah, we're really good at that!*" the Pik from the Seeker boasted. "*Our deep space scouts have gotten quite adept at avoiding Ur-Quan patrols.*"

"*The furthest coordinates our scouts have ever been coreward are Grefnuuf-zork, Ah-ho, Bada-bing,*" the Pik from the Tracker said.

"*That's 525.0 : 622.9 in your coordinate system,*" the Zoq from the Tracker translated. "*Although the Crateris constellation is even further, we can notify our leaders that we should send scouts there.*"

To Gruber it sounded like a good idea. The Zoq-Fot-Pik sphere of influence was well inside Ur-Quan territory, so they had the best probability to pull off a mission like that.

"*Should we send someone there right away?*" Dip asked.

"*Pick me! Pick me!*" the Pik from the Traveler eagerly exclaimed.

"Sure," Zelnick agreed, "I can see you won't have trouble finding volunteers."

CHAPTER 12

TIME JOKES

October 28th 2155, Sol, 175.2 : 145.0

452 hyperspace units and 18 days later the Vindicator was back at the starbase. The Traveler had diverged from the Vindicator's fleet and was supposed to reach the Zoq-Fot-Pik homeworld in Alpha Tucanae at about the same time the Vindicator reached Sol. Both of the Orz ships had stayed with the fleet instead of flying to their supposed homeworld, but there was every reason to believe that the word had already reached every Orz in the galaxy. There had been no changes in the condition of their Thraddash captive, who was still only repeating the same polite phrases.

A lot had once again happened at the starbase while they were gone. The Arilou had returned from their diplomatic mission to Gamma Krueger and they had brought with them a delegation of Pkunk emissaries. Another one of the Arilou ships had left for Zeta Persei earlier to negotiate on the Rosy Sphere with the Druuge. They were expected to return in a week or so.

The Pkunk, who had made themselves at home at the starbase, were avian creatures. They seemed extremely cheerful, but also like they were living in a world of their own.

The Ur-Quan warp pod was handed to the Arilou. They seemed so surprised to receive it that it was almost insulting. They said that they couldn't construct the portal spawner at the starbase and would have to take the warp pod to their

home to do that. They estimated that the process would take about a week.

All the data and samples from the Dreadnought wreckage were handed to Dr. Chu, who seemed overjoyed with the present. He would probably not be seen much in the next few days.

The starbase's supply of base metals had exceeded their production capacity. Only their lack of more exotic resources prevented them from building Cruisers one after the other. The contents of the Vindicator's storage bay were once again a huge help, even though the Thraddash ships were relatively primitive and the materials weren't too valuable for the most part. Still, everyone knew that if you were going to recycle something, it should be metal, since the process of refining minerals into metals demanded a huge amount of energy.

There were two new Cruisers ready now – Isadora and Anna 53.

“Anna 53?” Gruber asked, since it was a rather unusual name for a starship.

“I know, I know,” Hayes blushed. “There were circumstances and... I let Lydia come up with the name for that ship. Apparently Anna was a friend of hers. I don't know what the number is though. A few Unzervaltians on the other hand insisted that we name **something** Isadora to honor Captain Burton.”

“That makes sense,” Gruber agreed.

“By the way, Lydia has been eager to see you,” Hayes said. “She said she and Matthewson had made some kind of a breakthrough, although she refused to tell me what it was. Apparently she wanted to hear your opinion on it first.”

“I'll go see her after we're done,” Gruber decided. “So, who are the unlucky sons of bitches that will have to captain Anna 53 and Isadora?”

Hayes handed Gruber two files.

“Luka Sharov for Isadora and Famke van Rijn for Anna 53,” he answered.

Gruber knew Sharov pretty well, but van Rijn was familiar to him only by name.

“I know Sharov will make a fine captain,” he commented. “I’ll have to look into van Rijn, since I don’t know—“

He had to stop there, because he wasn’t sure whether Famke was a man’s or a woman’s name. He checked the file.

“—her background,” he continued. “Don’t get me wrong though, I do trust your judgement.”

“I’m sure you do,” Hayes replied. “There’s only one more thing I need to tell you before you go.”

“Only one?” Gruber checked.

Hayes nodded.

“I wasn’t sure whether to bring this up or not,” the commander began, “but just yesterday an Orz ship came here, saying they had some, er... ‘colorful toys’ for us. They hauled a big rock into the middle of the hangar and then their ship took off. Now, I’m not sure if that was some arrangement you have made, but in any case I had the rock moved to the storage room for now. Does that mean anything to you?”

Gruber was amused at the mental image of the scene.

“It might,” he replied. “We are trying to find a shield against psychic attacks. I’ll tell you all the details later, but I think we should put the rock through every test we’ve got.”

Gruber called Lydia and agreed to meet her at Matthewson’s lab. As he stepped into the elevator, he found himself thinking of all the wild theories and revelations Lydia would no doubt present him.

What the hell would she need the data from my new communicator for? How could that be related to what

happened in Groombridge? I haven't even written anything new about that. Is she going to analyze my writing to find out if I did indeed write the mysterious Precursor part?

He looked at the mirror in the back wall of the elevator. There was a restless old man there.

What are you so afraid of? This is Precursor research and she's done a splendid job at it so far. This might result in uncovering the secrets of the most advanced race that ever existed. Why aren't you thrilled?

He gave an apologetic look to his reflection.

*It's **that**, isn't it? You're worried that her exceptional intellect makes others question her origins.*

The elevator reached level 9 and Gruber had to stop thinking in the second person.

If she was suspected of being an Androsynth, she would no doubt have fewer friends afterwards.

He saw the familiar faint glow from Matthewson's computer screen amidst the darkness of his lab.

No, that's certainly true, but that's not what worries me.

Then he suddenly realized it.

I see... I'm afraid that she actually has figured it all out. I'm worried that revealing all Precursor secrets opens a Pandora's Box which will ultimately consume us all.

He hoped to see another mirror so he could tell himself to get real. Unfortunately he didn't see one, so he had no choice but to enter the room where Lydia and Matthewson were.

Matthewson looked like he hadn't moved at all from his spot since Gruber's last visit. Soon the man might become one with his chair. Lydia, on the other hand, was looking very pretty. The new hairstyle really suited her. As she saw Gruber, she stood up and, to Gruber's surprise, ran to embrace him.

<<I missed you,>> she said while hugging him.
<<Strange, huh?>>

Gruber was at a loss for words. He hadn't realized that Lydia thought so highly of him. He had of course missed Lydia too, but he didn't dare to say it aloud. He took a few seconds to think of something else to say instead.

<<Nice hair,>> he finally managed.

Lydia didn't seem to mind his reply. She looked rather pleased with her hair.

<<My roommate agreed to cut my hair after I told her how pretty hers was,>> she explained.

"Ahem?" Matthewson coughed to get their attention. "We had some important matters to discuss as well, didn't we?"

"Right, sorry," Lydia cheerfully replied in English and laid out a big piece of paper on the table. There were lots of notes on it and also some sort of images that were drawn by hand.

"The data you sent us from your new communicator confirmed it," Matthewson began. "We now know what the mysterious log entries in your communicator's files are."

"And it's really funny how we figured that out," Lydia laughed. "You see, we had analyzed the entries for days without getting any further. We just knew that they were in Precursor language, but couldn't decipher anything from them. Then I gave up and started reading your other *giggle*, unrelated log entries."

Gruber felt a strange sense of pressure. Although he had planned on publishing some of his log, he would have left the most personal stuff out.

"But then I saw it!" Lydia enthusiastically continued. "I compared your entire readable log to the cryptic part and saw it."

Lydia was pointing at one drawing where several arrows intersected on the paper.

"It's the same thing!" she declared while tapping at the paper wildly. "The Precursor-language entries in the log are

translations of all your other entries! Even that weird one you had written in German.”

Gruber knew all too well which specific entry Lydia was referring to, but to his surprise it didn’t bother him. The whole theory was much too bothersome on its own.

“But if it’s just everything I had written,” he began, “where did you come up with the rainbow world coordinates?”

“You wrote them!” she claimed. “Right here.”

She showed from her own console a log entry dating June 21st 2155. Gruber recognized it as something he had indeed written.

“That was after Groombridge,” he pointed out. “I just repeated all the coordinates you had found from the Groombridge log.”

“It’s the same!” Lydia insisted. “That’s where I found the coordinates in the Groombridge log.”

“You’re not making any sense,” Gruber said. “You couldn’t have found the coordinates from this entry, since I hadn’t yet written it when you found them.”

Lydia gave Gruber a murderous look.

“Trust me, I didn’t believe it at first,” she angrily said. “That’s why I wanted to confirm it before telling you. That’s why I requested the data from your new communicator as well.”

Gruber couldn’t keep up with her anymore and made no effort to conceal it.

“Oh for Five-Three-Five’s sake,” Lydia cried and tapped on the keyboard a few times.

She then showed an image from the computer to Gruber. There were two trend lines which clearly correlated with each other.

“See here? This is what you’ve written in human language,” she said while pointing at the shorter line.

She then pointed at the other, longer line.

“This is the Precursor stuff,” she continued.

Gruber then noticed that there were time units on the horizontal axis. The first date was June 2nd 2155 and the last date was August 13th 2156. The shorter line ended at October 10th 2155.

“But June 2nd was the day we entered Groombridge,” Gruber tried.

Lydia was about to hit something or someone with something or someone, but Matthewson stopped her.

“The bottom line is this,” Matthewson explained. “Everything you have written after the Groombridge incident matches with the Precursor text that somehow appeared into your communicator in Groombridge. We have verified everything you have written up to October 10th which was when you sent us the data.”

Gruber had to sit down, since the shit was getting deep.

“How can you say that they match?” he asked.

“I can’t, to be honest,” Matthewson answered. “But she can.”

Gruber looked at Lydia, who now seemed apologetic.

“I don’t know how,” she said. “I just see it. It’s like with the Orz. I just understand.”

Gruber took a few deep breaths to put all the weird pieces together.

“So what you’re telling me is...” he began, “You found the rainbow world coordinates from the Precursor text, which was a translation of the log entry where I wrote that you had found the coordinates from the Precursor text. Am I right?”

Matthewson and Lydia nodded.

“And the Precursor texts contain everything I have written since, including everything in the new communicator?”

Matthewson and Lydia nodded again.

“So whatever I’m going to write there next,” Gruber said, “you’re telling me that it’s already written there in Precursor language?”

Once more the two nodded.

“So what am I going to write next?” Gruber asked, challenging the theory.

“It doesn’t work like that,” Lydia explained. “I can’t translate the Precursor language. I just see the big picture.”

Gruber was at the same time relieved and disappointed.

“So what’s up with that date, August 13th 2156?” he asked, pointing at the rightmost part of the time axis in the image.

Lydia shrugged her shoulders to show that she hadn’t got a clue.

“Beats me,” Matthewson said. “Maybe that’s when you die.”

If words could hurt, those really did.

Lydia kicked Matthewson in the leg, painfully, judging by the sound he made.

“OR,” she began, “maybe that’s when you just stop writing your log. Maybe that’s when all this is over and we get to live happily ever after.”

“But...” Gruber tried to reason. “Why? Why would something like this be in my log?”

Lydia put her hand on Gruber’s shoulder.

“Maybe it’s a key,” she suggested.

“The Rosetta Stone,” Matthewson said while rubbing the kicked part of his leg. “Maybe it’s a modern age Rosetta Stone.”

Matthewson had obviously not presented that theory to Lydia earlier.

“What’s that?” she asked.

“It’s an ancient Earth artifact,” Gruber explained. “Before the first year in our current calendar, a single text was inscribed on The Rosetta Stone’s surface in three different

languages. The stone was then lost and two of the used languages were forgotten over the ages. The stone was found again 2000 years later and it then provided a key to understanding some other ancient texts written in the two forgotten languages.”

Lydia seemed impressed.

“Wow,” she remarked. “I thought history was just about wars and inventions.”

“So the big question remains,” Gruber began. “Assuming that your theory is correct, what do you – we – plan to do about it?”

Matthewson started typing something, obviously not interested in this topic.

“Well,” Lydia hesitated, “shouldn’t we, like, tell somebody?”

“Try explaining all this to Dr. Chu,” Gruber suggested. “I’m sure you’ll find him a lot more difficult audience than me.”

Lydia was clearly thinking about something.

“Hmm, maybe I’ll talk to him tomorrow,” she said.

“Oh, wait,” Gruber remembered. “He will probably be busy for the next few days, so don’t expect too much of him.”

Gruber and Lydia didn’t say anything for a while so Matthewson decided that it was time to end the meeting.

“If that was all, you can leave,” he suggested.

“That was all,” Lydia replied and got up.

Gruber followed her lead and they both left the room. They walked together to the elevator without saying anything and waited for it silently. When they had stepped in and the elevator doors had closed, Lydia finally broke the silence:

<<I don’t like him,>> she put it simply, which amused Gruber.

<<I don’t blame you,>> he replied.

Gruber then noticed that the elevator wasn't moving, most likely because neither of them had set the dial.

<<I'm going to have the evening off,>> Gruber decided. <<What do you want to do?>>

Lydia made a pose which clearly indicated that she was pretending to be thinking about it hard.

<<Hmm,>> she theatrically muttered.

Then she set the dial to level 5.

<<We will sit down at the cafeteria and you will bring me apple juice,>> she decided. <<Then we'll talk.>>

It sounded like a good idea to Gruber so he agreed. Soon the elevator reached its destination and the two of them stepped into the central hall of level 5, which was the level where all the entertainment was, in addition to the cafeteria. At first there had been only virtual reality equipment, but very soon a group of active crewmen had renovated one room into a small ball game court. There were goals whose size one could adjust and one could also draw any kind of lines into the floor. Some Europeans used the court for floorball, but most of the time the game of choice was football.

As Gruber and Lydia passed the ball game court, Gruber looked inside and noticed that a game of football was just about to begin. They were playing three on three. Gruber noted that the teams were once again South America versus Europe, which always had only one possible outcome. Then one of the players from team Europe noticed Gruber and called out to him.

“Hey chief, care to give us a hand here?”

The man was Josef Hasenkamp, one of Gruber's countrymen, a skilled construction worker and an enthusiastic football player. It was common courtesy to speak English when other people were around.

Gruber had often played with Josef and the others and now he found himself eager to join. He just assumed that Lydia wouldn't be interested.

"Oh, Lydia, hi, I didn't see you there," Josef continued. "Why don't you both join us? Lydia can play with the South Americans."

It came as a surprise to Gruber how familiar Josef sounded with Lydia. It surprised him even more that Lydia was eager to hop in.

<<Come on, let's play,>> she said to Gruber while pulling his arm.

Soon Gruber found himself standing next to Josef and the Danielsen brothers from the Scandinavian Union, while on the opposing side were Fernandez, Rodriguez, Lydia and that one Venezuelan guy whose name Gruber never remembered.

"Basic rules," Josef checked with everyone. "Three touches and scoring only straight from a pass, okay?"

There were no objections as that rule set was found to be most effective under those conditions.

"30 minutes, here we go," Josef declared and passed the ball to Gruber, indicating the start of the game.

Half an hour later it was once again time to proclaim team South America superior. Regardless of the defeat and the aching feeling in his legs, Gruber felt better than he had felt in ages. He was alive. And he was very surprised at how well Lydia had played. It obviously wasn't her first time. With her young and quick feet she could easily outmaneuver Gruber – and Josef too, for that matter.

They all shook hands at the middle of the court.

"Good game," Maar Danielsen commented. "You got much stronger reinforcements though."

"Damn those reinforcements," Gruber joked.

After that the players began to scatter, but Josef and Lydia stayed with Gruber.

“Same time tomorrow?” Josef invited both of them.

Lydia wistfully looked at Gruber.

“If I can still walk tomorrow,” Gruber replied and rubbed his thighs.

As he limped towards the door, he noticed how sweaty he was. He really went all out in the game. He felt proud.

<<I need a shower,>> he told Lydia. <<Let’s meet at the cafeteria in 10 minutes, ok?>>

Lydia smelled Gruber and made a funny face.

<<A-OK,>> she replied while holding her nose and giving him a thumbs up.

There’s nothing like a shower and good food after sports, he thought as he was dressing afterwards. There’s no good food here, though. But wait, wasn’t I supposed to be feeling down?

He tried hard to remember why he was supposed to be in a bad mood, although he understood the stupidity in it.

Was it something about our mission? No. Was it about Lydia? No. Was it about football? No, I’m sure football was the thing that made me feel good.

Even as he entered the cafeteria, he still hadn’t remembered. He absent-mindedly sat down at a random table and immediately afterwards realized that he hadn’t checked if Lydia was already there. He hastily looked around and to his relief she wasn’t. He got up, filled a cup with water and drank it all in one go. He filled the cup again and sat back down at the randomly chosen table.

Lydia arrived after about a minute or two. Her hair was wet, so she had obviously taken a shower as well. She waved at Gruber from the door, made her way to the table and sat down.

<<Could I have some apple juice, please?>> she politely asked.

Gruber nodded, stood up, fetched a cup, filled it with apple juice and brought it to Lydia, who took a sip with joy.

<<Mmm, there was nothing like this at my old home,>> she said, probably referring to the Androsynth homeworld.

<<The Spathi also like apple juice,>> Gruber started up a conversation.

<<I don't see why anyone wouldn't,>> Lydia remarked.

She then looked down at her mug and suddenly seemed sad.

<<There's something I've wanted to talk to you about for some time now,>> she ominously began.

Gruber put down his own mug and gave Lydia all his attention.

<<You can tell me anything,>> he promised.

Lydia fiddled her mug with her fingers.

<<The thing is,>> she said, <<sometimes I feel like I'm not welcome here. It was the same aboard the Vindicator. Most of the time everyone's really nice to me, but I get these strange looks from time to time.>>

<<What kind of looks?>> Gruber asked.

Lydia looked at him in the eyes.

<<Hatred,>> she replied. <<Looks of pure hatred. Not that I wouldn't have experience – I got that a lot back in my old home, but I always figured it was because I was different. I was one of the... normals... and some of the smart ones really hated us.>>

Gruber noticed tears starting to flow down her cheeks.

<<But now I still get that look, and I don't understand why,>> she said with a trembling voice. <<It's terrible! There's nobody around who's my age and every day I sense that some people... wish me dead!>>

Then she broke down and started crying, covering her face with her hands. It made Gruber feel helpless. For a

second he desperately tried to think of what to do, but then decided to quickly move next to Lydia and put his hand on her shoulder.

<<What is it about me?>> she sobbed. <<All I've ever wanted was to blend in – to be like everyone else!>>

Gruber figured that he had to say something comforting.

<<Nobody is normal,>> he said. <<Everyone is unique and exceptional in their own way. Your way of being exceptional has been extremely helpful and we're all grateful for your efforts.>>

Lydia dove face first into Gruber's chest and cried loudly. Gruber was unsure whether it was a sign of his comforting working or not. He looked around at the few people in the cafeteria who were now looking back at him and Lydia. He then realized that he was holding both his hands in the air, not knowing where to put them. He figured he should probably pat Lydia gently on the back, but he didn't dare to do it just yet.

<<I'm afraid that,>> Lydia tried, but the words failed her at first.

That was the cue that gave Gruber the courage to put his hands down – one on Lydia's head and the other one on her back.

<<What really scares me is that,>> Lydia managed to begin, <<what if I'm actually one of those 'Androsynth' everyone so deeply despises.>>

Gruber understood very well. Even the fact that the Androsynth hadn't been seen in decades and that they had all probably suffered a horrible fate wasn't enough for some people. These people, who were mostly pleasant and good folk you'd meet any day anywhere, had some deep grudge against the Androsynth. It wasn't logical, it wasn't understandable – they just figured that the only good Androsynth was a dead one. The legacy of Jason

MacBride's Godly Men hadn't entirely vanished, even though a century had passed.

<<Everyone doesn't despise the Androsynth,>> Gruber explained while stroking Lydia's hair. <<The Androsynth were all unique individuals, just like you and me. Most people have always understood that, but there has also always been a loud minority that discriminates against those who are some way different from the others.>>

<<But you just said that everybody is different,>> Lydia sobbed.

Gruber felt a drop of sweat on his forehead. If there ever was a time to make one's point understood the right way, it was right then.

<<That's the thing,>> he said. <<Say you have five people in a room. Four of them are white and one of them is black. Who is different from the others?>>

<<Well *duh* the black one, obviously,>> Lydia replied, taking Gruber's story as a riddle.

Gruber then had to improvise an actual riddle into the example.

<<And if three of those four white individuals are women and the black one is also a woman, who is the different one then?>> Gruber asked.

<<So there are two that are different,>> Lydia followed the story.

<<And if the black one and two white ones, er... like ice cream,>> Gruber continued, <<but the two others don't... Now who's different?>>

Lydia raised her head and looked at Gruber.

<<Now it's all mixed,>> she answered while managing to make a smile.

<<So you see,>> Gruber tried to conclude, <<it's all a matter of perspective. One can always find a reason to accuse someone of being different if one wants to. That's just how bullying works.>>

Gruber felt good while realizing that the story he had come up with on the fly made sense in the end. Lydia wiped her eyes on her sleeve.

<<So what's your thing?>> she asked, her voice still a bit shaky. <<What makes you different from the others?>>

Gruber tried to think of something snappy, but didn't succeed. He tried to think of something lame, but even that failed. As seconds passed, he started to panic. He had to come up with something, anything!

<<That's okay,>> Lydia saved him, <<you don't have to force yourself. After all, I know some things about you that are probably just your own thing.>>

That comment made Gruber a bit worried, but he didn't push the matter.

<<So,>> Lydia said to begin a new topic. <<What do you think of the Groombridge log now?>>

A sense of remembering a lost memory hit Gruber.

That was it. That's why I was supposed to be in a bad mood. I have every reason to believe that I die on a set date next year. And not just that – everything I write in my log from now on is actually pre-defined. The universe tends to get a lot less interesting when you believe that your actions don't make a difference.

<<Your theory results in a time paradox,>> he commented.

Lydia looked like she'd heard that one before.

<<There is no such thing,>> she insisted.

<<So what should I write next?>> Gruber asked. <<It seems so pointless now.>>

There was a hint of grin on Lydia's face.

<<It looks like there is only one thing you can write,>> she said, <<but we don't know what that is.>>

Gruber felt uncomfortable talking about the matter.

<<Have you met the Pkunk already?>> he asked to change the subject.

<<The children of the cosmic light,>> Lydia specified.
<<They are a fun bunch.>>

Gruber nodded and felt that the topic was already exhausted. He checked the time.

<<It's about time to get some shut-eye,>> he decided.
<<How's your quarters?>>

<<It's okay, I guess,>> Lydia replied. <<My roommate snores a bit, but she's nice. Her name's Famke. Do you know her?>>

The coincidence amused Gruber.

<<You might have the room all for yourself soon,>> he said. <<But no, I don't really know her. I'd like to, though, so maybe you can introduce her to me.>>

<<She's going to be a captain, right?>> Lydia checked.

<<Indeed she is,>> Gruber truthfully answered. <<And she's going to be the captain of the ship you named.>>

CHAPTER 13

FOUR BUTTERFLIES

October 29th 2155, Sol, 175.2 : 145.0

Gruber met with Commander Hayes at breakfast. After bringing their joke pool up to date, they both headed to the briefing room where the command council was scheduled to have a meeting.

The New Alliance of Free Stars still didn't have any written rules, so the command council was basically just a bunch of key players who got together from time to time to discuss what they should be doing next. They were referred to as the command council simply for convenience.

On the other hand, one could ask what exactly would make the command council official. If the key players would declare themselves as the rightful leaders of the alliance, would that make it so? Or would they have to write it down to make some kind of a constitution? What difference would that piece of paper make? Who would have to approve it, other than the self-proclaimed command council?

There had been some discussion about writing a set of ground rules when the new alliance was formed. Back then they had agreed that there was no need to bother with politics as they all knew how to behave and all politicians were on the other side of an impenetrable force field. Of course, that was when the starbase in Earth's orbit was the only member in the alliance.

As the alliance grows, so does the likelihood of problems that result from lack of rules. What would the alliance do if

*some race, say, the Orz, would start eating another race? What **could** the alliance do?*

Gruber had thought about it from time to time. Whenever he did, he remembered the words of a wise man: *It's not a problem until it becomes a problem.* Luck had brought them far already, so they could just as well keep relying on it.

As Gruber and Hayes arrived in the briefing room, most of the other council members were already there. In addition to Gruber, Hayes and Zelnick, the other human members were Captain Trent and doctors Chu and Fredrikson. Speaking for the Zoq-Fot-Pik were formally some high-grade officials of theirs, Mik, Mok and Nak, but the commanding trio of the Voyager was also present. The Spathi democracy worked perfectly, thanks to Fwiffo, as the entire population outside their slave shield was present. The Orz were represented by a seemingly singular entity that was sometimes referred to as *FatFun*.

The Arilou were also permanently invited to the council, even though they weren't really a member race. Two of them were always present – new individuals every time – and one was always silent.

As Gruber sat down, he noticed the Shofixti, *Captain Tanaka*^{*}, sitting two seats to his left. He hadn't been aware that the old warrior Captain Halleck had rescued from Delta Gorno was a part of the council. Not that Gruber had anything against it – he had just gotten the impression that the poor old furball was in a state of deep depression and somewhat unable to contribute. But then again, maybe the folks at the starbase figured that they needed to make Tanaka feel important so he wouldn't commit hirikara, the ritualistic Shofixti suicide for defeated warriors. There was

* Tanaka wasn't really a captain – just a regular pilot of a Shofixti Scout vessel. Everyone addressed him as Captain though, probably just to make him feel better.

still hope to find Shofixti females, and if they pulled that off, Tanaka would be needed more than anyone had ever been needed before.

The last item on their agenda was to formally welcome the Pkunk ambassadors, who would be called in to the room at the appropriate time. Gruber was very much looking forward to that since he hadn't had the time to meet with the Pkunk yet.

There was never much debate in the council and once again they had quickly agreed on all the major topics.

The next mission for the Vindicator was to negotiate on the Shofixti maidens with Admiral Zex at Alpha Cerenkov. The Arilou assured them that the portal spawner would be ready in a few days, so they agreed to wait for that before taking the trip to Vux space. One of the rainbow world coordinates pointed to Zeta Sextantis, which was only four days away from Alpha Cerenkov, so they would consider paying that star a visit too.

The red probes caused a seemingly unrelated problem, but still a big one. An increasing number of them had been sighted in the asteroid belt, chopping up asteroids of all sizes with their electrical discharge. Captain Trent was requested to stay at the starbase with the Tobermoon and organize the defenses. Captain van Rijn would take Trent's place in the Vindicator's fleet.

Earlier, Gruber might have felt uneasy without Trent, but now he trusted that Captain Zelnick knew what he was doing. Also, he had heard that van Rijn was actually one of the best, even though she mostly stayed out of the limelight.

Once they had dealt with Admiral Zex, they would use the portal spawner to travel to the edge of charted space and search for the probes' origins from Vega and Beta Corvi.

The Pkunk made a memorable first impression in the council. They announced right away that the *Great Spirit* had guided them to give Captain Zelnick a gift. Without delay one of them had approached Zelnick and given him an object which looked like some kind of a glass ornament. The Pkunk themselves said that they had no idea what it was, but Zelnick then immediately declared that it was the Clear Spindle, one of the artifacts required to fix the Ultron. The Great Spirit was obviously a pretty good guy. What's more, the Pkunk joyfully declared that they would donate four of their Fury-class starships to the alliance, with the condition that the ships were assigned to the Vindicator's fleet. It seemed a bit suspicious, but Zelnick eagerly accepted the offer.

The science team had something to work with again. They would try to find a link between the wrecked Ultron, the Clear Spindle and the Aqua Helix. They would also thoroughly test the rock the Orz had delivered, hoping that it was indeed the mind shield created by the Taalo. And to the amusement of everyone interested in mind control, the Thraddash captive had snapped out of its trance and was back to its old hostile self. Since Vargas was the most qualified person to research the matter, and since Zelnick wanted a hostage **and** a guinea pig, it was agreed that the prisoner would stay aboard the Vindicator. Gruber also wanted to interrogate the alien further, so he was satisfied with that decision.

After the council meeting was over, Gruber wanted to spend some time getting to know the Pkunk and *Captain Tanaka*. The Pkunk were still the center of all attention so Gruber approached *Captain Tanaka* first.

"Excuse me," he began to start a conversation. "Do you have a minute?"

He could talk without the translator since the Shofixti were one of the very few races who were physically able to speak human languages and, as luck would have it, *Captain Tanaka* had learned English during the Great War.

“Ah, herro Mr.Gruber,” the Shofixti replied with an unorthodox but understandable accent. “I arways have time for my arriance friends.”

Gruber pointed out that the old warrior hadn’t said anything during the council meeting.

“So what’s your take on all this?” he asked.

Captain Tanaka bowed.

“I am deepry humbed by everything you have done for me,” he replied. “I just wish I could be of more herp.”

“That’s why we’re trying to acquire the females of your species,” Gruber said. “If we succeed, you will be invaluable.”

The Shofixti seemed to be feeling a bit down.

“If we succeed,” *Captain Tanaka* repeated. “Untir that I am nothing but a defeated warrior – a worthress sherr.”

Gruber didn’t want to question *Captain Tanaka*’s view. Instead he gently moved the conversation to another topic.

“I’m sure you’ve heard this a lot but…” he began. “How did you survive the solar blast in your home system?”

The old warrior climbed back onto his chair. He wasn’t much taller than Fwiffo so he had to make a little effort.

“No, nobody has asked me that,” *Captain Tanaka* replied to Gruber’s surprise.

Gruber assumed that this was one of those cases when everyone thinks that someone else must have done something and therefore nobody ends up doing it. That’s why you always have to buy a new deck of cards on a cruise.

“I was not in the system when it happened,” the Shofixti continued.

Gruber also sat down.

“Where were you?” he asked.

Captain Tanaka closed his eyes.

“I was assigned to a Yehat squadron as a forward scout performing recon deep in Mycon space,” he explained. “We were sent to investigate reports of unusual Mycon activity around Gamma Brahe.”

The story was all news to Gruber.

“What did you find?” he asked.

“I was the first ship to enter the system,” *Captain* Tanaka recalled. “My scanners showed a small fleet of Mycon clustered around the first planet, conducting a test of some device. The unit was small, not even half the size of my ship. When the Mycon activated it, a glow began to radiate outward. I crept closer, to get a better look. Suddenly there was a flare, like a newborn sun, blinding me and overloading my sensors.”

The old warrior kept a small pause in the story, during which the audience could ask questions, but Gruber was too interested to do so, so *Captain* Tanaka continued:

“When I recovered my vision, hours later, the Mycon and their device were gone. I was able to affect repairs on my sensors and depart the system, but I had been cut off from my squadron, and had to travel home alone.”

Gruber didn’t question *Captain* Tanaka’s honesty, but he couldn’t believe that such a recon operation would have been performed during the final months of the war. He pointed this out to the storyteller.

“You are of course right,” the Shofixti answered. “This mission began over a year before our defeat. My trip home took a bit longer than was planned.”

“What happened?” Gruber asked.

“I encountered a Vux Intruder,” the old warrior explained. “Before I destroyed it, the Vux was able to affix some of those vile rimpet things to my ship and I had to return home at a greatly diminished speed.”

The Intruder class ships of the Vux were slow, but they had an unconventional way of coping with it. Instead of upgrading their own engines, they slowed down their opponents by firing specific organic material at them. Cleaning up these *limpets* from the hull after a battle with the Vux was one of the most hated assignments of the service crew.

Suddenly Gruber felt a slap on his shoulder.

“Gruber, my man,” he heard Zelnick’s voice from behind him.

He could only guess where his captain had learned to talk like that.

“Would you join me for breakfast?” Zelnick asked. “There’s something I’d like to discuss with you.”

Thanks to *Captain* Tanaka, there was now something that Gruber also wanted to discuss with Zelnick. He checked the time. It had been two hours since he ate breakfast and he knew that Zelnick was currently in the same sleep cycle as he was. He thought about making some wise-ass comment about it, but ultimately decided not to.

“I already had breakfast,” he put it simply.

“Oh? You got up early then,” Zelnick commented. “But hey, join me anyway. I’m starving and not in the mood for long conversations without some food on my plate.”

Gruber wanted to continue the chat with the Shofixti.

“Captain Tanaka, would you care to join us?” he asked.

Captain Tanaka got up.

“I’m afraid my presence is requested elsewhere,” he politely refused and bowed again. “Let us talk again some other time.”

Gruber agreed and then *Captain* Tanaka left. Gruber noticed that the Pkunk were also about to be escorted somewhere so he had missed his chance to talk with them. The fun stuff would have to wait. It was time to talk business again with his captain.

“Alright then,” he agreed. “Let’s go.”

Zelnick didn’t say anything on the way to the cafeteria and Gruber waited patiently for the captain to sit down, stuff some food in his mouth and tell his first officer what he wanted to talk about. After that Gruber could tell the captain what he had just learned.

Zelnick acted exactly as Gruber had predicted. As soon as he had taken a big bite of a sandwich, he started talking.

“I flkd wff Ldia,” he said, then chewed hastily for a few seconds, swallowed, and tried again. “I talked with Lydia. Apparently she knows Captain van Rijn pretty well.”

“They’re roommates,” Gruber replied, a bit offended by Zelnick’s lack of manners.

“Great,” Zelnick said and took another bite. “Whfs a Fld Rfgee?”

Gruber’s disapproving look clearly indicated that Zelnick would have to try again. The same pattern repeated.

“What’s a flood refugee?” Zelnick repeated the question, no doubt. “Lydia mentioned that van Rijn was a *flood refugee*. What does that mean?”

A reasonable question, Gruber thought. Of course someone born and raised far away from Earth wouldn’t know about it.

“There used to be this country called *Netherlands* on Earth,” Gruber began the history lesson. “It shared a border with my home country, Germany. The peculiar thing about Netherlands was that a large part of its area was below sea level.”

“What, it was an underwater country?” Zelnick interrupted.

“No, they had a massive wall,” Gruber explained. “Or actually, yes, in the end it **was** an underwater country. That’s the whole essence of the story. The sea level rose quite a lot during the 21st century you see, and the Dutch had to constantly raise and reinforce the wall.”

“The Dutch?” Zelnick asked, obviously not knowing the meaning of the word.

“The people of Netherlands,” Gruber rephrased it.

“Why call them the Dutch?” Zelnick insisted.

“I don’t know, all right?” Gruber lost his temper as Zelnick had made a habit out of derailing any and all Gruber’s explanations. “That’s just how the word is in English.”

“Sorry, so did something happen to the wall?” Zelnick rerailed the conversation and continued eating his breakfast.

Gruber decided to leave dates out of the story.

“Yes,” he answered. “There were circumstances, but the bottom line is that the wall eventually collapsed and almost the entire area of the country was flooded.”

Zelnick made an empathetic face.

“That sounds like there must have been casualties,” he figured.

“Indeed there were,” Gruber replied. “And the ones who survived had nowhere to go.”

“Ah, *flood refugees*,” Zelnick figured it out.

“Right,” Gruber confirmed, “and indeed Famke van Rijn was one.”

“So where did she go?”

“India,” Gruber replied. “Back then India struggled with a disproportionately large number of males, so they were happy to welcome female refugees.”

“Wow... Why did that happen?” Zelnick asked. “The skewed sex ratio I mean.”

Gruber contemplated his qualifications on giving lessons about traditional Indian culture to an Unzervaltian. He decided he shouldn’t try.

“There are other people here who can give you a detailed answer,” he evaded the topic. “To put it very simply, some Indians considered boys much more valuable than girls.”

Zelnick didn’t seem satisfied with the answer.

“I didn’t know you could choose the gender of your child,” he said, probably considering the possibility that it was normal and that he just didn’t know.

Gruber could see only one way for the conversation to go, and that wouldn’t leave Zelnick thinking too highly of Indians.

“Do you know who else are called Indians?” he tried to derail.

“You mean other than people of India?” Zelnick took the bait.

“Exactly,” Gruber said with a feeling of relief. “The natives of America are also called Indians.”

“Like Hayes?” Zelnick asked.

The innocent question amused Gruber up to the point of being glad he had joined the captain for his breakfast.

“No, not like Hayes,” he said. “I mean the people who lived in America before the Europeans sailed there for the first time.”

“Why would **they** be called Indians?” Zelnick asked. “Is it like the Dutch?”

“No,” Gruber answered. “It’s because the Europeans thought they had sailed to India.”

Zelnick stopped eating for a second and then laughed.

“That’s pretty funny,” he summed it up. “When did the Europeans notice their mistake?”

“I don’t know exactly,” Gruber admitted, “but when they did, the term *Indian* had already caught on.”

Zelnick laughed some more.

“I can relate,” he then said. “We had a similar occurrence at Unzervalt. When we started gathering local food, we found this red berry, which was quite abundant near our colony. We tasted it cautiously and found it sweet and filling so my mother – your darling Lily – imaginatively named it *goodberry*.”

Gruber had heard few stories from Unzervalt and he was very interested.

“So where’s the relevance?” he asked, not doubting that he would soon hear it.

“After a week or so everyone who had eaten *goodberry* got sick,” Zelnick delivered. “I don’t know the details, but I understand it was some kind of a parasite issue.”

“Was it serious?” Gruber asked.

“Untreated, yes,” Zelnick recalled. “We had a good doctor and the right equipment. The doc was able to cure everyone... You understand that I was barely born at that time, right, so I can only tell you what I’ve heard?”

Gruber did understand.

“So they still call the berry *goodberry*?” Gruber checked.

“Right,” Zelnick replied, “and mom’s not too happy about it. She feels kind of guilty about the whole thing, I guess.”

Gruber found himself enjoying hearing stories about Lily.

“I bet she tried to force a new name for the berry,” he guessed.

“She did,” Zelnick confirmed, “...and was unsuccessful.”

“I can see her holding an eternal grudge,” Gruber smirked.

Zelnick joined in on the smirking. After a small pause there was a chance for a new topic.

“So, we have a few days before we set sail again,” Zelnick began. “We should get acquainted with Captain van Rijn.”

“And the Pkunk,” Gruber pointed out. “If we’re taking four of their ships with us, we need to know what they can do.”

“Right.”

“And, by the way, I just learned something interesting from the Shofixti...”

Two days and several flight tests later they were more than glad to have the Pkunk on their side. As unthinkable as it was, the Pkunk Furies could outrun even the Vindicator in true space. They were highly maneuverable small fighter ships whose shape and color most resembled that of a butterfly. Since they weren't much bigger than the shuttle, and since the Pkunk could breathe the same air as humans, it was convenient to dock their ships in the hangar with the shuttle.

The armament of the ships was somewhat shrouded in mystery, since the Pkunk were either unable or unwilling to demonstrate their offensive capabilities. Apparently the Pkunk were so full of love and joy that their ships didn't have any conventional weapons. Instead, they claimed that when they had to fight, they whipped themselves into an emotional frenzy and threw the resulting negative spiritual energy at their enemies. The more they were able to generate hate, the more powerful they became.

“Then we unleash our fury, often with the beautiful and deadly spinning blossom attack! In fact, the sheer pulchritude of it sometimes touches our own pilots so deeply that they forget their hate. And when they do, they become unable to fight and are reunited with their ancestors in the eternal dance of the cosmic light.”

Gruber was not pleased with the explanation. He had said it before, but had to say again that an unreliable weapon was no weapon at all. The Furies would be valuable scouts and decoys, but they couldn't be relied on to take down enemy ships.

The Pkunk didn't mind Gruber's negative attitude and changed the topic entirely. The Pkunk individual they were conversing with put one of her * wings on Zelnick's shoulder

* Without any explanation, the translation computer insisted on referring to all Pkunk as “she”.

and pretended to whisper to him, making sure that everybody heard her.

“I can sense the fear in you,” she said. “But do not worry. For you, death is not the end. No, I can sense that you are too important to go away.”

“What do you mean by that?” Zelnick asked, looking somehow relieved.

The Pkunk looked closely at Zelnick as if reading an open book.

“Did you know,” the Pkunk joyously began, addressing everyone in the room, “that this man has lived many lives and that in one of his previous lives he was Duke Franz Ferdinand?”

Nobody confessed that they had known.

“It’s true!” the Pkunk declared as if revealing a big secret. “And before that, he was the Egyptian god-pharaoh Atum-ta the sixth!”

Zelnick looked exactly like Gruber felt – awkward. Then Gruber remembered that the Kohr-Ah had similar ideas about reincarnation. The Kohr-Ah had viewed reincarnation as a lottery where the ultimate jackpot was to be born as an Ur-Quan. Some human cultures on the other hand had believed that the vessels for one’s soul could be ranked, with human at the top of course, and that one’s actions in the previous life affected the rank at the next life. And the Pkunk also had a similar belief. A strange coincidence if you believed in coincidences.

“This is amazing, just fantastic,” the Pkunk excitedly said while measuring Zelnick from tip to toe. Then, reading the atmosphere in the room, she continued in a more restrained way:

“Well, to be frank, this is not all that unusual. It just so happens that almost everyone’s past lives were as famous, rich or interesting people. It seems that if you are a turnip

farmer, a salesman, or something boring like that, you aren't reincarnated. When you die, you just kind of... cease."

The Pkunk looked around, but saw nothing but confused people with nothing to say.

"We Pkunk are of course special," she continued. "But don't feel down, you are special too! Even the Ilwrath are special in their own hostile way. But we, the Pkunk, are known to sometimes do the undoable, break the unbreakable and be reborn as the unrebournable."

"What is the unrebournable?" Zelnick asked, obviously a lot more interested in the metaphysical conversation than Gruber was.

The Pkunk seemed overjoyed at the question.

"It is of course the one entity that the dying one holds most dear," she explained, probably not meaning to say it as a riddle. "As you know, fighting does not come naturally to us so in the heat of the battle we are known to experience strange revelations – feelings of the spirit leaving the body. Then, when the body is killed in battle, and if the spirit chooses so, it can be reborn as itself!"

Zelnick scratched the top of his head.

"Okay, so is that, er... good? Or is it bad?" he asked.

"That depends on whether you were good or bad yourself," the Pkunk answered.

"Like with Santa Claus?" Zelnick checked.

Once again Gruber had to bury his face in his hands.

"Exactly!" the Pkunk cheerfully replied. "Isn't the universe a wacky place?"

In some more formal conversations, the Pkunk had explained their view on what was happening with the Ilwrath. About eight years earlier the Ilwrath had suddenly invaded into Pkunk space and ever since then they had ceaselessly attacked Pkunk ships and planets. During these years of war the Pkunk had learned that the reason behind

the sudden hostilities of the Ilwrath was a hyperwave signal the Ilwrath had received, supposedly from their dark gods of death and pain, Dogar and Kazon. The Pkunk were a bit skeptical about these gods since they had never seen them on the fourth astral plane where, according to the Pkunk, most gods* liked to hang out. But then again, who else would send such transmissions on hyperwave channel 44?

Now the entire Pkunk population was down by two thirds and at the current rate they would become extinct in just a few years. But the Pkunk still refused to join the alliance. They appreciated the concern, but said that they were already making preparations for a *Final Migration* which was supposed to solve all problems, and not just theirs. They were unwilling to discuss their plans further at that point, but assured everyone that once they were ready, it would be no secret anymore.

Four days later the Vindicator was ready to jump to hyperspace again. The Arilou had delivered and the Portal Spawner was attached to the storage bay module. Externally it was a rather strange device, a mixture of Arilou and Ur-Quan design. Internally... who could say? Nobody aboard the Vindicator really understood how it worked and the science team had to figure it out with only the technical data. They didn't have time to wait at the starbase for Chu's and Fredriksson's official seal of approval. Skeates was eager to open up the device for study, but Zelnick didn't permit that for the device's virgin voyage.

The use of the spawner was supposed to be extremely simple. Once they were in hyperspace, they would just press the one and only button attached to the device and then they were supposed to appear in quasispace, in the same *location* they appeared through the natural portal several months ago.

* And one of them, the Pkunk mentioned, was Santa Claus.

Although the Arilou had originally claimed that they couldn't say where each portal in quasispace would lead to in hyperspace, they had, together with the Portal Spawner, provided a map of all portals and their target destinations. Unfortunately, there was no exit anywhere near their first destination, Alpha Cerenkov, so testing of the spawner would have to wait. Via hyperspace the trip would take roughly nine days.

CHAPTER 14

VERY UGLY XENOFORMS

November 13th 2155, Alpha Cerenkov, 422.1 : 198.6

November 7th 2155: There had been an alarming number of those red probes in the asteroid belt. We neutralized all we could find and signaled the starbase to send a scavenging team. No doubt there are still more probes somewhere in the system, and even more are bound to come here. Trent has to come up with solid defenses soon.

Our current plan is that, after our business with Admiral Zex, we will try to locate the source of the red probes in Vega and Beta Corvi – unless, of course, if we acquire the Shofixti maidens we must get them to Captain Tanaka right away.

With traditional hyperspace travel the trip to Beta Corvi would take over a month, but conveniently there is supposed to be a quasispace exit at 011.1 : 940.9. Using that, we could get there in just a day or two.

Captain van Rijn seems businesslike and effective. Not that it matters, but she lines her ship “upside down” compared to the rest of the fleet. According to Samusenko, who had fought alongside her in the past, that’s what she always does. She had spent many years in the space debris team in Earth’s orbit and that experience allegedly had toned her spatial perception skills to a superhuman level. How that is related to flying “upside down” is beyond me.

The Pkunk Furies turned out very ineffective against the probes, whose electrical discharge obviously couldn’t be dodged. What’s more, the Pkunk pilots reported finding it

more difficult than usual to reach an operative battle rage when fighting against a non-biological opponent. The Fortune, one of the Pkunk ships, received serious damage early in the battle and all the Furies were soon called back to the Vindicator. The Vux might be better suited opponents for them, but I still doubt the battle abilities of the Pkunk.

November 8th 2155: Captain Tanaka's report from Gamma Brahe was very interesting. We happen to have friends who could use some extra solar power and if the Mycon really have a device that can simulate a star... It would definitely be worth stealing. After all, we stole the Aqua Helix rather smoothly.

November 12th 2155: It has been a long time since humanity's last encounter with the Vux. Captain Rand made a memorable first impression and I'm afraid there is little hope of ever making peace. It is rumored though that Admiral Zex is different. A diplomatic solution might be possible with him. On the other hand, he is unlikely to be alone in the system, and we will probably have to break a few nose-equivalents to get to him. And that is the sunny day scenario. If Zex were commanding a large fleet with no intention of negotiating, we might have a hard time making it out alive, even with the Vindicator's speed. In the Great War, Zex always had something sneaky and unexpected up his sleeve, just like Trent.

Everyone very well knows that encountering Vux Intruders in hyperspace is an extremely bad idea. And for those who don't know, here's a reminder: Because of their superior mathematics, the Vux are able to calculate their hyperspace jumps with the accuracy of a few meters, enabling them to jump directly behind enemy ships and often win their battles in a matter of seconds.

Upon entering Alpha Cerenkov the Vindicator immediately received a broad-beam open transmission. The signal was simply an invitation to come to the first planet of the system where, according to the message, there was an amusement park. Surface coordinates were included, along with an advertisement video that kept repeating what a *fun* place the park was. There was also a disclaimer saying that the footage on the video might not exactly represent every visitor's experience.

In Gruber's opinion the signal smelled of a trap, but the content was so ridiculous that he was more curious than cautious. They briefly acknowledged the possibility of a trap, but since there were still many hours before they would reach the first planet, they let their guard down for a while.

Of course one rarely steps into a trap one expects. They had been flying straight towards the given coordinates for a few hours when Captain van Rijn reminded everyone of one of the basic lessons in military strategy – the *plus one* rule. To put it simply, it means that finding one does not mean that you can stop searching. When you see one trap, you easily get so focused on that one that you forget to check for others. That's why a basic strategy of trap setting is to make one trap quite easy to spot and set another well-hidden trap somewhere between the obvious trap and where the prey would most likely notice the obvious trap. And what was the Vindicator's fleet doing? Flying carefree towards the "obvious trap". After realizing this and getting over the embarrassment, they quickly took a more cautious formation.

It came almost as a disappointment when they finally reached the first planet without knowingly setting off any traps. The Vindicator's energy scanner then picked up something at the given coordinates, as expected.

As they got into position in orbit, they observed the area more thoroughly. There were lots of hits on the bio-scanner

all around the planet, but there was a heavy concentration at the given coordinates. The telescope revealed that there were several buildings, some of them quite large, but on the outside there was nothing of particular interest. It could very well be an indoor amusement park.

Then they received an incoming transmission without any identification signature. The signal was coming from the surface, from the given coordinates. Not answering the call was not much of an option.

“Ah, human visitors, what a treat!”

As the visual link was established they saw that they were conversing with the Vux. The grotesque sight made Gruber think that whatever Captain Rand had said to offend the Vux on the first encounter must have come straight from his heart.

“I have many pictures of your species,” the Vux continued. *“I keep them on my walls to... inspire me.”*

“Uh...” Zelnick searched for words. “That’s nice, I guess. I wish I could say the same about you, but, er...”

“Oh, but where are my manners,” the Vux continued. *“Allow me to introduce myself. I am Admiral Zex. You may know me by my reputation from the war with your alliance, but I assure you that beneath all that I am a kind and gentle being. Please be welcome! We can get to know one another... expand our interspecies relationship!”*

Zelnick blushed a little. A relationship with a green bipedal one-eyed squid was one of those things that rarely called for expanding.

“I am Captain Robert Zelnick of the starship *Vindicator*,” he replied. “You know, you really caught me off guard there. Why are we so welcome? I thought all Vux hated humans.”

Admiral Zex seemed like he had heard that comment before.

“No, no, not all Vux,” Zex replied. *“Most, but not all. It is true that when the majority of my people view one of your*

species they are forced to regurgitate. But there are those among us who have grown beyond such childishness to take a more liberal view. We, the few sophisticates, are not subject to the whims and fads of current fashion. Our likes and dislikes are strictly based on personal preference."

A tongue-like body part protruded from the creature's mouth to moisten its lip-equivalents.

"We see the... beauty in you Humans," Zex continued. "We see the value in a long-term... relationship. You are different, yes, but personally I like difference. In fact, I adore it. Your physique is so wonderfully varied! Your multitudinous rigid appendages, your tiny double eyes, your varied skin coloration, and the delightful patchwork of hair covering only parts of your bodies, leaving other parts bare and smooth! Mmmmmm..."

Zex closed its eye for a moment and Zelnick turned to Gruber.

"Is he some kind of a perv— ...you know?" the captain asked.

Gruber found the question justified.

"For the sake of diplomacy," he suggested, "let's go with 'aesthete'."

"I value your species," Zex continued. "I see you as just 'people'... like us Vux."

Zelnick turned back to the communications screen.

"Are you at the amusement park?" he asked Zex.

The question seemed to amuse the admiral.

*"Amusement park? *tee-hee* Not quite," Zex replied. "Calling this place an amusement park would be such an understatement. What I have here is the finest menagerie of creatures in all space."*

"Ah, so it's a zoo," Zelnick said. "Sorry, that was lost in translation."

The comment seemed to amuse Zex even more.

“Hee-hee-hee, still not quite,” the legendary Vux giggled. “My menagerie contains only the most beautiful creatures in the galaxy! Each of my children, as I like to call them, has a wonderful set of traits which make them unique and special... especially to me! I have a complete variety of beasts from as far away as Procyon and Alcor. So no, this is not your ordinary zoo. I have worked diligently for many years to craft my menagerie, to gradually improve it. Perhaps you can’t tell, but I am rather proud of it.”

Gruber and Zelnick had agreed that it was always a good idea to keep others talking since you never knew when some crucial piece of information was slipped out.

“Why is your... menagerie... here instead of your home system?” Zelnick asked. “This seems like a rather remote place with few visitors.”

“Ah, such a good question,” Zex commended. “But you always were a bright species. After the Great War, in which I played some small part, the Vux high council faced a dilemma. They could not tolerate my behavior, nor could they accept my desires as natural, but they also could not refuse my military genius and could not ignore the many victories I gave them.”

“I see,” Zelnick commented. “So you had to be silenced.”

“In a way, yes,” Zex agreed. “They had to reward me, but could not let me ‘poison’ the minds of our youth with my ‘bizarre’ ideas and ‘perverted’ lifestyle. So the high council granted me this planet and sent me out here so that I might pursue my... hobby in peace.”

“A hero’s exile,” Zelnick remarked.

*“A splendid way to put it, yes,” Zex agreed. “Oh, listen to me rambling on and on. You want to see my collection, don’t you? It would be my **privilege** to give you a guided tour **personally**.”*

Zelnick turned to Gruber.

“I guess we should confirm that the Shofixti maidens are indeed here and alive, don’t you think?” he suggested.

“That is correct,” Gruber agreed. “Even though the Melnorme have been a reliable source of information so far, we can’t rely on them blindly. But we don’t want to show all our cards to Zex, so let’s not tell him yet what we’re really after.”

Zelnick turned to Zex again.

“We are very eager to see your collection, yes,” he admitted. “Do we have to pay something, or...?”

Zex seemed terrified of the thought.

“Dear me, no,” Zex quickly replied. “I would never charge anything from my **dear** friends. You just land at the shuttle bay and me and my team here will take good care of you.”

A few hours later Gruber found himself on the surface of an alien world again. He was greeted by several Vux individuals who seemed a lot less enthusiastic than Admiral Zex. In fact, he got the feeling that he and his team were as welcome as an itchy nose in a space suit. They had landed with a full surface mission crew and they were all carrying weapons. The atmosphere was close enough to human preference so they didn’t need any extra equipment.

All Vux looked the same in Gruber’s opinion. Nobody had claimed to be Admiral Zex and it felt like their hosts were waiting for something – probably the admiral. Gruber checked their surroundings, but found nothing out of the ordinary at the landing site. Jenkins remained in the shuttle and Ahmed stayed with her. Alongside Gruber were Rigby, Witherspoon, Belov, Cuvelier, Kilgore, Hawthorne, Robinson, Shoji and Keller, whose place Skeates had taken on their last surface mission.

As Gruber looked at his team he noticed something strange about Belov. At first it was hard to say what it was

exactly, but then he realized that the man looked fat. He hadn't seen Belov in a few weeks, but had a hard time believing that someone could gain such a remarkable spare tire in such a short time. He was about to ask if there was something he should know, but just then the door to the landing bay opened and an important looking Vux appeared. The other Vux made way for the important looking one and Gruber's team formed in a relaxed double line.

"No need for formalities," the important looking Vux said.

"Admiral Zex, I presume?" Gruber checked.

"Indeed I am," Zex replied. "Welcome, welcome... My, don't you look just adorable. Is your captain coming?"

"Unfortunately, no, not this time," Gruber truthfully explained, ignoring the compliment. "I'm sure you understand. I am First Officer Adam Gruber."

Zex seemed a little disappointed at first, but cheered up quickly.

"The pleasure is **all** mine," the admiral insisted and winked, which was quite impressive for a being with only one eye. "Right this way, please. I will give you the tour of a lifetime!"

Zex indeed had a commendable collection and did a fine job presenting it. Some of the life forms were extremely alien. At some times Gruber felt like watching a freak show and he didn't like enjoying it. Sometimes it was like laughing at a guy in a wheelchair. At other times it was like laughing at prisoners in Auschwitz.

Prisoner was definitely the right word to use at times. Some of the creatures were screaming and waving as if begging for the humans to rescue them. The translator didn't notice anything worth translating, but Gruber preferred to trust his own instincts over a computer program. Admiral Zex assured them that none of the creatures were sentient,

but in Gruber's opinion there was nothing else Zex could have said. He found himself contemplating why being sentient or not would matter if creatures were kept in captivity against their own will merely for the amusement of the captor. Humans had started to respect animal life only about 200 years earlier, when life was still abundant on Earth. Maybe the Vux did not share that respect. At least the Vux in general had very little respect of humans.

Whatever the case was and however badly the creatures were treated, there was little the landing team could do about it right there and then. They had to prioritize their own mission and acquire the Shofixti females – with force if necessary and possible, but preferably through negotiations.

Not all of the creatures shown on the tour were *alive* per se. The rule of thumb seemed to be that if the creatures could reproduce, they were encouraged or forced to do so and to live out their natural life-spans. However, if they could not reproduce and their expected life-spans were short, they were kept in deep freeze, suspended animation or some other similar form of preservation.

After a while Zex ominously said that there was just one more attraction to show them. They hadn't seen any sign of the Shofixti yet and Gruber had a feeling Zex knew very well what they were after.

And Gruber was probably right, since the last attraction was a set of 12 transparent portable cryogenic tanks, each containing a single Shofixti.

"Magnificent," Zex proudly said. "Simply magnificent, don't you agree? To the best of my knowledge, these are the last Shofixti females in existence. If you had a Shofixti male in your pocket, you would probably pay **anything** to get your hands on these critters, am I right?"

Gruber saw no reason to deny the fact.

“You are right,” he admitted. “What do you want for them?”

That question was obviously what Zex had been waiting for.

“If you’re thinking about ships, weapons and resources, perish the thought,” Zex said. “All my material wishes have already been granted.”

Zex obviously wanted Gruber to be the next to speak.

“Everybody wants something,” Gruber said.

Zex gave a girlish giggle and looked around as if to check that no outsiders were around.

“You are right,” the admiral said. “Do you believe in love at first sight, Mr. Gruber?”

Gruber was always prepared for stupid questions. The thing was that if the question contained options, you immediately chose one at random and answered so that the conversation could move on.

“Yes,” he answered, hoping that he wasn’t the target of Zex’s affection.

“*Tee-hee-hee*, how delightful,” Zex commented. “Then I’m sure you understand that after I set my eye on this one specific **person**, that **person** has been the only thing on my mind. I would give **anything** to be with that **person**, even the Shofixti maidens.”

“Who is this lucky person?” Gruber asked, still hoping that it wasn’t him, but now he was a bit more worried.

Zex giggled some more.

“Oh, I don’t dare say the name out loud,” Zex insisted.

Then the legendary admiral looked around again and seemed to make up its mind about something.

“I’ll whisper it to you,” Zex said and approached Gruber.

“Absolutely not!” Zelnick declared over the radio.

“Sir, please relax,” Gruber said. “Nobody expects you to surrender yourself to Admiral Zex. I’m just doing my duty reporting the situation.”

“There has to be something else,” Zelnick insisted. *“Ask the admiral. I’m sure the collection is still missing a unicorn or something.”*

It was worth a shot so Gruber asked Zex, after relaying Zelnick’s refusal.

“A creature of the legends?” Zex repeated. “Hee-hee, what an interesting proposal... As luck would have it, there **is** one gorgeous animal which I do not yet possess. If you were to deliver that creature to me, I would definitely give you the Shofixti maidens.”

Something fishy was going on, Gruber thought. Zex didn’t react at all to being turned down by his *loved one*. Surely Zex didn’t expect Zelnick to agree to the proposal, but the admiral was still way too cheerful.

“What creature are you talking about?” Gruber cautiously asked.

“Obviously I have never seen it,” Zex replied and was suddenly holding a small piece of white crystal, “but I have studied it thoroughly from an ancient wildlife handbook, written millennia ago by some unknown alien author.”

Zex’s motions made it evident that the handbook either was inside the crystal or was the crystal.

“I will give you a quick presentation of what I know of the creature,” Zex continued. “Follow me please.”

They were led back to the elevator, one floor up and through a narrow corridor where there were cages on both sides, like in a kennel. All the cages were empty. At the end of the corridor there was an important looking door through which they entered a large room.

The room had a pleasant atmosphere. A gentle natural light pushed through windows of different shapes in the

ceiling. Several types of armchairs were laid out in groups. One wall was completely covered behind a dark red curtain. In one corner there were ten ordinary looking chairs in a circular formation. Somehow the room seemed a bit retro in human fashion, but fashion was only for those with no style, and Zex obviously had style.

“Feel free to take a look around and make yourselves comfortable,” Zex suggested. “I will set up the presentation over here.”

The admiral entered the ring of chairs and started tinkering with some kind of a device. Gruber observed Zex for a while and took note how completely the admiral’s attention seemed to be on the device. If they wanted to steal something, the right moment was just then.

Unfortunately, Gruber saw no reason to steal anything at the moment. Instead, he saw a small gap in the curtains covering one of the walls. He was too curious not to look behind the curtain. He pulled the curtain slightly, but saw no wall – only darkness. The room they were in was obviously a lot larger than it appeared and some other section was separated by the curtain. Gruber tried to listen, but the dark side of the room was quiet.

He turned around to see what Zex was doing, and indeed the admiral was still tinkering with the strange device. Gruber’s curiosity had gone unnoticed.

Then he heard that something started to hum in the darkness. He turned back to the darkness and saw something so absurd that he immediately made up his mind: If he told someone about it, he would say that he couldn’t believe his eyes. But since that was such a cliché and he didn’t like clichés, he actually did believe.

There was a retro Coca-Cola™ vending machine in the middle of the darkness.

Gruber took a step back and checked what everyone else was doing. Witherspoon was closest to him, standing about

two meters away; checking out a lamp that looked like it belonged to a middle class family in North America in the 1950's. Gruber got her attention and asked her to look through the gap in the curtains.

“What? I don't believe it!” she unsurprisingly remarked after looking and took an involuntary reaction step into the darkness.

Gruber suddenly remembered the earlier discussion about traps and reached out to stop Witherspoon. He took out a flashlight and checked the area. He was surprised to see large metal bars just a meter or so in front of them. There were also some objects behind the bars.

After a few seconds he had a pretty good idea of the big picture. There was a huge cage behind the curtains. It was roughly the same size as the room on the other side. Inside the cage there were swings, a treadmill and the Coca-Cola™ machine.

“Alright, please gather around here,” Zex announced just then and dimmed the lights before Gruber had a chance to discuss their findings with Witherspoon or anyone else.

Gruber decided it would be best to see what Zex was planning to show them before making a point about what was behind the curtain. He was keeping a close eye on the admiral, though. He also wondered why Zelnick hadn't said anything over the radio in a while.

The material Zex showed them was unpleasant. There was an animated version of the legendary beast so now they had at least some idea what it looked like, but other than that there was little information. According to some old fairy tale, the beast lived in yellow light in the constellation *Long, thin creature that has swallowed the huge beast*, whatever that meant.

Most of the footage felt like a Mr. Universe competition as the animated creature was doing tricks and poses. Zex

seemed to be enjoying the show, based on the fact that the admiral's tongue was hanging out.

After a while the show came to an end and the lights were turned back on. Unfortunately, Gruber then realized that something was constraining his movements.

"Thank you for your participation," Zex said.

Gruber noticed that his entire team was tied up. Some kind of thin wires had come out of the chairs and entangled them.

There was a series of groans and grunts.

"What's the big idea?" Belov demanded.

Zex walked behind Cuvelier and stripped him of his weapons.

"Do not worry," Zex said. "I will release you as soon as I have gathered your weapons."

Zex picked up weapons from everyone one by one. Gruber made a great but futile effort to break himself loose and it seemed that everyone else was doing the same.

"Why?" Gruber asked after Zex had picked up the weapon from Keller who was the last in line.

"A change of plans, I'm afraid," Zex explained. "Regrettable, but necessary. My collection could never be complete without you humans, but you, like many other aliens I have here, probably wouldn't stay here willingly."

Zex walked towards the only door in the room.

"I'm sure you'll find your *quarters* rather pleasant," the admiral continued. "I have made great improvements since the previous cage I had prepared for your species."

Zex opened the door and gave a final announcement:

"I'm sure you understand that I prefer to own pairs of males and females, so four of you are obsolete."

Then Zex closed the door and at the same time the wires holding them retracted back inside the chairs.

Gruber immediately tried to report to Zelnick, but the radio was completely silent. There was zero signal. He could just as well try to contact the Vindicator by waving his hands.

There was rising panic in the air. Many of the crew members said and did unnecessary things. It was understandable in Gruber's opinion, as they had just become part of the collection of some alien pervert.

"Everybody quiet down," Gruber ordered before everyone was lost in the panic.

At least Gruber had had training for a somewhat similar situation. He remembered a set of process diagrams that provided the arguably optimal way of handling any surprising turn of events. Each of the process flows started with *Keep calm and analyze the situation*.

Then a hologram of Zex suddenly appeared in the middle of the room.

"I wish to formally welcome you to your new home," the hologram said. *"There is no need to be ashamed; you are not the first creatures to walk into their containment areas voluntarily... You have probably noticed that you cannot communicate with your comrades outside. This is an exquisite feature of your cell, so do not blame your transmitters."*

Everyone checked their radios.

"I will give you more orienteering material in a short while. In the meantime, feel free to explore your quarters. You are allowed to play with whatever toys you can find."

The hologram disappeared as suddenly as it had appeared. Belov was already banging the door and Cuvelier was with him, shouting something in French through a small hatch in the door.

"They understand it only if you say it in English," Hawthorne reminded him, but Cuvelier's message was probably not that important anyway.

“Now what?” Witherspoon asked Gruber.

Gruber looked at the door, then at the windows in the ceiling and then at the curtains covering the cage before replying.

“Now we figure out how to bust ourselves out of here.”

CHAPTER 15

PRISON BREAK

November 14th 2155, Alpha Cerenkov, 422.1 : 198.6

Every prisoner of war has always had one objective – escape. If one prisoner got away while all others were executed, it was a victory.

After getting over the initial shock, the imprisoned landing team was in a huddle, contemplating their situation and planning the Great Escape.

“We must assume,” Gruber began, “that the door is the only exit. Therefore our goal is to get the door open. After that we have to improvise.”

“Improvise our way to the shuttle,” Belov continued.

“Right,” Gruber agreed. “But if we have a chance to—” he stopped at mid-sentence as he had just realized something obvious.

“Well, anyway, joke’s on them,” Maria Hawthorne said. “I can’t have children.”

“And we must also assume,” Gruber continued, preventing any more unnecessary pieces of information from leaking, “that they can see and hear everything we do.”

Everyone fell completely silent at once.

“So to sum it up,” Belov said after a while, “we have to break out of a prison, designed just for us, without any tools and without talking to each other?”

“And the captain doesn’t even know what has happened to us,” Cuvelier added. “The Vux might even be attacking them as we speak.”

“You are both right,” Gruber said, “but I’m sure the captain can handle it. We should just focus on our own situation.”

In truth Gruber wasn’t all that certain since they were up against the legendary Admiral Zex, but there was nothing the landing team could do about it.

“Can anyone of you speak Japanese?” Shoji suddenly asked.

Gruber immediately realized what the man was after.

“That’s right!” he joined Shoji on the thought. “We’re safe if we use any other language! Everybody, one at a time, what languages do you speak?”

Everyone named a few languages one at a time, except for Witherspoon, who could only speak English. The team then formed up in a web so that everyone could understand everyone after some number of translations – except Witherspoon, who would have to interpret expressions and pitches of voice or learn a new language really quickly.

Gruber, Keller and Robinson were the German-speaking core. Robinson translated German to Japanese for Shoji. Keller translated German to Russian for Rigby, Belov and Kilgore. Kilgore translated Russian to French for Cuvelier. Rigby translated Russian to Spanish for Hawthorne.

The situation was somewhat similar to a game Gruber remembered playing when he was a kid. In that game you passed on a complicated message in a chain of people by whispering it to the next player. The difference now was that instead of whispering you had to translate – and Robinson, for example, was not fluent in Japanese.

After the setup was ready, it was time to test the chain. Shoji said something in Japanese to Robinson.

<<Um...>> Robinson searched for German words.
<<Soldier’s light er... turns blue when, uh... he is drunk.>>

So far Gruber was not impressed. Keller then said something in Russian, and afterwards Rigby said something to Hawthorne in Spanish.

“Alright, in English now,” Gruber decided.

“I said,” Shoji began, “Green light for drunk admiral.”

“What the **hell** does that mean?” Belov criticized.

“You said it could be anything,” Shoji defended himself.

“Alright, alright,” Gruber said to bring back order.

“Hawthorne, what message did you get?”

Hawthorne gave a weird look.

“Blue man’s lantern is blue,” she said.

They quickly decided to keep communications minimal all together. Gruber then fully opened the curtains and showed everyone the cage he and Witherspoon had already found. The cage had very old-school bars on every side. The space between the bars was quite wide, but still too narrow for anyone to squeeze through – not that they had any reason to enter the cage.

Suddenly Zex appeared on the hologram display again.

“I must say I’m a little ashamed of that old cell. I designed it a long time ago and back then I thought you were a much more primitive race. Luckily I acquired access to this network-thing of yours during the war and then I was able to learn so much more about you! Aah... the memories...”

Everyone gathered around the hologram to listen.

“I am quite confident that I was able to replicate your famous refreshment drink accurately. That machine in the cage was supposed to keep my human visitors happy. Unfortunately I forgot to leave the cage door open. If you play nice I will let you have a taste in a few weeks. But now, if you’ll excuse me, I have some urgent matters to attend. Bye-bye.”

Witherspoon threw her water bottle at the hologram just as the image disappeared. The bottle was open and a stream of water gushed out as it flew. The bottle hit the wall on a spot where there was some kind of a control panel. Upon impact there were sparks, the sound of a short circuit, and a set of lights went off in the room.

“I didn’t throw it that hard, did I?” Witherspoon asked.

Gruber and Rigby examined the broken panel. Gruber poured some water from his own bottle on another part of the panel and there was a similar response – apparent short circuit and the sound of a fan stopping.

<<This is interesting,>> he said to Rigby in German. <<Their technology looks extremely vulnerable to conductive liquids.>>

They both looked at the door. To their disappointment there was nothing that resembled a control panel there. Odds were that if there was a control panel to the door it was on the other side. They tried to locate it by peeking through the hatch in the door, but the hatch was so small that they only saw the corridor through which they came.

Gruber tried really hard to remember the scene when they entered the room. How had Zex opened the door? Gruber tried and tried, but had to finally admit that he hadn’t paid attention to that particular detail. And the effort of trying to remember gave him a headache. He asked Rigby if he remembered.

<<Sorry, no,>> Rigby apologized, <<but I do remember that Zex was walking on the right side all the time. If there is some kind of a control device to this door, it must be over there.>>

He pointed left from where they were standing.

Gruber felt a sense of desperation as he thought how difficult it all would be to translate to everybody.

...

Luckily Keller, who knew German, had been right next to Zex as the admiral had placed its hand-equivalent on some glowing surface to open the door. The control panel was indeed on the right side of the door, on the same wall as the door and about a meter away. There was a small hollow in the wall where the door was so they did not have a clear shot at the control panel.

<<There's no way we can pour water around a corner like that,>> Rigby stated the obvious. <<We can't throw the bottle either since the hatch in the door is so small.>>

Rigby looked at Gruber's arms.

<<Your arm would never fit through the hatch,>> he continued. <<I'm sure neither would mine. Or if it did, it would get stuck.>>

<<Who has the thinnest arms?>> Gruber asked and motioned everyone to start translating.

...

Who else would it be than Witherspoon, who had no idea what was happening. And to delight them even more, she was so short that she didn't reach the hatch properly. Gruber gave her a little boost and then they were able to confirm that her arm indeed fit.

The task at hand could probably be eventually explained to Witherspoon with motions and gestures, but that would again most likely reveal their plan to the Vux as well. They had to rely on Witherspoon realizing it on her own. She was a clever woman so Gruber wasn't that worried. However, he was rather sure that the task was impossible. And what's more, they had only ten water bottles.

Soon Witherspoon took one bottle, barely fit it through the hatch and tried to nudge it towards the supposed location of the panel. There was a sound as the bottle hit the floor, but that was all. The door remained closed. On that note, Gruber tried to open the door, since the first rule of breaking

in was to always check if the front door was open. This time, unfortunately, the door was locked.

Witherspoon made a universal hand gesture which clearly indicated that whatever she was doing was impossible. Gruber acknowledged the gesture and started thinking aloud with Rigby and Keller.

<<We need some kind of an extension rod,>> he said.

Keller immediately shook her head.

<<A single straight rod won't help us,>> she shot down the idea. <<It might work if it was curved just the right way.>>

They looked around the room. Gruber couldn't imagine any piece of furniture becoming a curved rod. He walked to the other side of the room and put his hands on the bars of the cage. He casually thought that there were chains in the swings, lots of perfect rods in the treadmill and possibly lots of bottles in the vending machine. If only they could get inside the cage...

Gruber called the team together again and asked if anyone could figure out a way to get inside the cage. Cuvelier immediately said something in French, which Kilgore translated to Russian and Keller to German:

<<If we had rope, we could bend the bars.>>

Belov suddenly unzipped his uniform and took out a rather large coil of rope from underneath. He then said something in Russian, which Keller translated to German:

<<You always need rope in difficult situations.>>

There was laughter. The only thing holding Gruber's triumph back was the fact that they still needed a rod or something as a lever for the rope. They hadn't really gotten anywhere, but regardless of that, Belov started knotting the rope around two bars and the rest of them started trashing the room, trying to find anything that could work as a lever.

Act like you got a purpose, Gruber thought as he tried to tear off the cloth from an arm chair with his bare hands. *At least morale is high at the moment.*

Some minutes later, Hawthorne triumphantly declared something in Spanish while holding a thin metal object in her hand. Apparently it had been some kind of a protective casing where the wall met the floor. The object looked like it should do the trick.

Hawthorne handed the metal object to Keller. She put one foot over it and tried to bend it, almost as though she was trying to load a crossbow, to no avail. Gruber then took it and after a while of applying brute force to it he had to admit that they could never bend it by hand. But on the bright side, it should work all the better as a lever for the rope.

Gruber handed the object to Belov who combined it with the rope, making a setup similar to a tourniquet. Belov then turned the lever several times until it started to get difficult. Gruber could see the bars bending slightly and helped Belov turn a few more rounds. A human of reasonable proportions* could then fit through the gap. They carefully released the tension, but the gap in the bars remained.

With great pride Belov was the first to step inside. Gruber took a moment to appreciate the great effort they had put into breaking into a cage rather than out.

After the moment was over he joined Belov at the Coca-Cola™ machine. There was a very small and simple display that could only show a few letters at a time. The text *ice cold drinks* was scrolling on it. There were several buttons where you could choose which drink to take, but they were all labeled Coca-Cola™. Gruber pushed the top button.

* not Dave

Nothing came out of the machine. Instead, for a short moment, the display showed 2.50.

Belov said something in Russian and made a gesture that could be interpreted as handling money. Gruber took a closer look and indeed there was a coin slot in the machine. It was unlikely that anyone in his team was carrying cash, since the use of physical money had ended some 100 years ago.

Gruber gently tapped the front of the machine with his fist a few times, thinking how they had solved a ridiculous problem only to face another one. He then noticed that Belov wasn't with him anymore. He turned around and saw the man approach while holding the universal key.

Gruber stepped aside and Belov took a few swings at the machine with the metal object they had used to bend the bars. An unpleasant clanging sound echoed in the room. After a little bit of pounding the machine gave up and its front panel came loose. Gruber moved the panel aside and chuckled at the sight. There was indeed Coca-Cola™ inside the machine – in original glass bottles, which were quite possibly valuable collector's items.

Rigby joined them at the machine and took one bottle in his hand.

<<You know, I just got an idea,>> he said and took a breath mint from his pocket.

After some Boy Scout engineering, they were all at the door again. They had armed themselves with everything they found in the cage – including the chains from the swings, metal poles from the treadmill and glass shards from the vending machine. Witherspoon was holding a metal rod that had an unopened Coca-Cola™ bottle strapped to its other end with pieces of cloth torn from the furniture.

Cuvelier lay on his stomach in front of the door and Witherspoon was standing on top of him so she could reach

the hatch. She pushed the rod through the hatch bottle end first and then pushed her arm through as well. The tricky part was then to open the bottle without spilling too much of the contents and dropping one of Rigby's Sotnem-brand breath mints into the bottle while pointing the bottle at the door's control panel – all with one hand.

The hatch was so small that Gruber and the others couldn't see how Witherspoon was doing. She made a lot of funny faces one makes when one is trying very hard to concentrate.

"I think I got it," she said after a while.

Immediately after that there was a loud gushing sound, followed by the sound of liquid dropping on the floor.

There was also a *clack* from the lock on the door.

Gruber tried to push the door and it actually opened. It was the silliest moment of his life. For a second the only thing he wanted was to tell someone about it. Too bad they still had to fight their way out of an alien complex armed with only melee weapons. It kind of ruined the moment.

Gruber soon snapped back to reality and took command. Most of the team had had very little combat training, and the little they did, had involved using firearms. Then he remembered that they might be able to contact the Vindicator again.

"Captain, do you copy?" he said to the radio.

"Gruber, what the hell, man?" he heard Zelnick's voice. "*We thought you were all dead. What happened?*"

"It was a trap," he put it simply. "We were captured and put in a radio-shielded room. We just managed to break out. Nobody seems to have spotted us yet, but they took our weapons."

"*We had to call back the shuttle,*" Zelnick explained. "*Can you make it back to the landing bay?*"

“I don’t know yet, but that’s what we’re trying to do,” Gruber replied. “And we confirmed that the Shofixti females are here and alive. There are 12 of them in cryogenic tanks.”

Everyone was out of the room. They took positions next to the walls so that they couldn’t be seen from the main hallway.

“Why did they show you the Shofixti if they were going to capture you?” Zelnick justifiably asked.

Gruber thought about it for a moment. As he did, he also wondered why it was so quiet. It felt like there was nobody except them on the whole floor.

“Zex is a collector,” he answered to Zelnick. “Collectors want to show off their collections.”

He motioned the team to keep still and silent for a while.

“You do whatever it takes to get to the landing bay,” Zelnick ordered. *“We’ll send a shuttle to pick you up as soon as we know it can land.”*

“Roger that,” Gruber copied. “I’ll keep you posted. Out.”

They had two possibilities: Backtrack their way to the landing bay or take what was behind door number two. The door in question was right next to them, very close to the door they had just broken through.

“Did you notice,” Witherspoon began, “that Zex was talking to us via the hologram only seconds after leaving the room with our weapons? He couldn’t have gone far. I bet he went through that door.”

Belov was standing next to the door.

“Our weapons might still be there,” he continued the thought and started examining the door.

Gruber had no objections as Witherspoon’s logic was sound. They most likely needed weapons to get to the landing bay so they should check every possibility of finding them. Belov was already holding an opened Coca-Cola™ bottle over the door console.

“Here goes,” he said and tipped the bottle.

There was the familiar sound of the panel shorting out and a *clack* from the door. Belov then tried to push the door and it opened. Belov peeked through the doorway, motioned that it was safe and then entered the room, followed by Gruber.

It was a weird room. The only piece of furniture was a desk at the center of the room. Tens of small monitors were integrated into the desk and a few bigger ones were mounted on the walls. But what really stood out were the countless printed photographs that decorated the walls – and most importantly, all their weapons lying in an unorganized pile in one corner.

They all quickly grabbed their weapons and checked that they were operational. Then Gruber had time to pay closer attention to the photographs, which all seemed to portray humans. Gruber immediately recognized a few – Jason MacBride, Albert Einstein and one basketball player whose name he couldn't remember. Then he noticed a few pictures on the floor. There was one bigger picture above them, which had probably recently replaced the ones now on the floor. The big picture portrayed Zelnick and Zex together – closely. Zelnick's picture was obviously captured from their communications link earlier and Zex was even more obviously added into the picture afterwards. Gruber took the image down, folded it, and stuck it into his pocket for later use.

“Check this out,” Shoji then announced while tinkering with the screens on the desk. “We can see the whole base from here.”

Indeed the small monitors showed many different areas of the base. Shoji played with them some more and soon he was able to rotate the cameras. While Shoji was doing his thing, Gruber examined the bigger monitors more closely. They all seemed to display the room they had just broken out of.

“There doesn’t seem to be anyone in this entire floor right now,” Shoji soon said. “There’s a big crowd at the hangar. It looks like they’re boarding their ships.”

“There are lots of guards at the landing bay,” Witherspoon noted, looking over Shoji’s shoulder.

Gruber also walked behind Shoji who was rapidly changing images on the screens. It looked like they would have a hard time getting to the landing bay.

“What do we have here?” Shoji suddenly said and pointed at one particular screen.

The monitor displayed the area where the Shofixti were being held. There was one Vux crouching behind the cryogenic tanks, obviously doing something to them. Judging by the robes, the individual had to be Admiral Zex.

“It looks like Zex is alone,” Shoji observed.

Gruber got an idea and immediately shared it with the others: If they took Zex as a hostage, they might be able to negotiate their way out. They had the floor to themselves at the moment, but there was no telling how long that would last, so they had to move out right away.

“Lead the way, sir,” Belov encouraged Gruber and motioned that he was ready to shoot enemies.

The only problem was that Gruber was unsure where to go. When Zex had showed the Shofixti to them, they had taken the elevator to a floor that was probably just below their current floor. Gruber remembered that the elevator controls were similar to the door controls, but pouring liquid on them would probably not help this time.

“Shoji, is there a stairway?” Gruber asked.

Shoji looked for a while.

“It looks like there is – something like that,” he replied, leaving Gruber guessing what could be ‘something like a stairway’. “It’s right next to the elevator we used.”

“Great, let’s go,” Gruber ordered. “Shoji, you stay here and give me a call if the enemy is about to surprise us. Robinson, you stay with him and stand guard.”

Gruber carefully led the team through the empty corridors towards the stairway-of-sorts. Shoji occasionally reported that the course was clear. They soon reached the room where the elevator was and indeed right next to it there was another doorway. Gruber poured some Coca-Cola™ on the controls and the door opened. Then Gruber realized why the stairway couldn’t be called a stairway.

It looked like a slide – quite a steep one. It went several stories up and only one story down, but humans could only go down with it.

zzztt “If you go down, you’ll end up where Zex is,” Shoji instructed over the radio. “The hangar and the landing bay seem to be on the top floor.” **zztttt**

Gruber felt a bit uncomfortable going down when their ultimate goal was to get out, but he couldn’t see any alternative. He carefully sat down and pushed himself over the edge of the platform to the slide.

After a few seconds of unpleasant sliding on the rough surface, Gruber was at the bottom and signaled the others to follow him.

zzztt “There’s one room between you and Zex,” **zzztttt** Shoji reported, but Gruber knew that already, assuming that they ended up next to the elevator.

After everyone had slid down, they quickly secured the next room and took positions behind the door to the hall where Zex and the Shofixti were.

“Remember, we need him alive,” Gruber reminded everyone. “Don’t shoot unless it is absolutely necessary. Once we open the doors Keller, Cuvelier and I will secure Zex. The rest of you secure the area. Ready?”

Everyone was ready. Gruber motioned that Rigby could unlock the door the human way. Rigby did his thing, there was a *clack* from the door and Gruber pushed it open.

zzttt “Zex suddenly jumped up,” Shoji reported. “He must have heard you coming.” **zzttt**

The Shofixti weren’t far from the door, but they weren’t visible from the door either. They were around one corner, some 20 meters away from their current position. Gruber started running, followed by Keller and Cuvelier.

zztt “He dashed in the opposite direction!” **zzttt**

It wasn’t a long run, but it seemed unnecessarily long, as they were in quite a hurry. If Zex got away, they were as good as captured again.

“Freeze!” Gruber shouted from behind the corner before even getting into position.

They were just in time. Zex was almost at the other end of the corridor, but immediately froze as was ordered. The admiral raised both its arm-equivalents in the air.

“Don’t move!” Gruber repeated and approached Zex, pointing his gun at the admiral.

Zex turned around. Usually one could not read alien facial expressions, but Zex’s face clearly showed surprise.

“I am astonished,” Zex said in a commending tone. “I never expected you to break out so soon.”

Cuvelier and Keller rushed to Zex’s side and took control of the tentacleish limbs. Judging by Keller’s face the skin of the Vux felt unpleasant.

“Remarkable,” Zex said as its limbs were tied up. “Truly remarkable.”

Gruber holstered his weapon.

“I’m sure you understand the situation,” he said to Zex. “We want out of here and you are going to help us do that. If you don’t, you die.”

“But of course,” Zex immediately replied. “My dear human, I’m sure you don’t believe me, but I **want** you to escape.”

Gruber was expecting Zex to start smooth-talking right away. Their host had already betrayed them once. The credibility of a proven liar was equivalent to someone selling hololenses from the trunk of a car at a highway rest stop.

“You are right,” Gruber replied, “I don’t believe you.”

The rest of the team caught up with them.

“There are too many guards at the landing bay,” Gruber said to Zex. “What can you do about that?”

Zex’s one big eye was wide open. It seemed as if the admiral was enjoying the situation and that made Gruber worried.

“Landing bay?” Zex repeated. “Oh no, we will take my personal Intruder.”

“We?” Gruber grabbed the word.

“You can’t get away without me,” Zex explained. “My crew will never let your shuttle land and you need me to pilot the ship.”

The last part was unquestionable. If they were to steal a Vux ship, they needed a Vux to fly it.

“And you obviously can’t fit these into your shuttle,” Zex continued, referring to the cryogenic tanks containing the Shofixti.

That was also true. If Gruber didn’t do something, Zex would take control of the situation very quickly.

“What were you doing here?” he asked, hoping that Zex wouldn’t have a snappy comeback.

“I was preparing these tanks so we could take them with us,” was Zex’s snappy comeback. “They are ready now.”

Gruber started to feel like he and his team were the hostages. He lost his composure and pointed his gun at Zex again.

“Why are you so eager to help us?” he asked.

Zex was unshaken.

“I assure you that pointing a gun at me is unnecessary,” the admiral replied. “If I don’t escape with you now, I’m as good as dead anyway. I can tell you all about it once we’re out of here, but now we have to move. If my countrymen find out that you have escaped, they will make sure that nobody gets into my ship.”

Zex tried to walk past Gruber, but Gruber put his arm in front of the admiral.

“Give us the short version now,” he demanded.

Zex sighed.

“I have been grounded here for years,” Zex quickly explained. “Recently the high council decided that I, with my open-minded lifestyle, am too dangerous alive after all, so they came up with all kinds of false accusations and summoned me to court. A squad is supposed to arrive any day now to pick me up, although I believe they would just shoot me on sight and tell the people I resisted arrest.”

Don’t trust him, don’t trust him, don’t trust him, Gruber had to keep repeating to himself.

“So why would you go through all that trouble to imprison us?” Witherspoon asked.

The question was on Gruber’s mind as well.

“I **had** to,” Zex claimed. “If I hadn’t, my countrymen would have killed you. I was planning to let you escape when the timing was right, but I never imagined you would escape by yourselves – and with such efficiency. You really are a resourceful species.”

Don’t trust him, don’t trust him, don’t trust him...

“Fine,” Gruber said, “we’ll board your ship. But you are our hostage. If anything goes wrong, we will kill you.”

Zex sighed again.

“I am worthless as a hostage,” Zex explained really slowly. “Most of my crew want **me** dead almost as much as

they want **you** dead. I'm telling you, there will be resistance. We cannot get into my Intruder without firing a few shots."

"Where is this ship of yours?" Witherspoon asked.

"It's in the hangar with all the other ships," Zex replied. "Mine is a bit modified so you can easily tell it apart. It's also closest to the cargo elevator so we don't have to cover that much open ground."

Gruber forgot to repeat the phrase in his mind.

"The cargo elevator is right around the corner," Zex continued. "We can take all these tanks with us and get up to the hangar before my crew notices anything."

Zex looked anxiously at Gruber, who reluctantly admitted that their only chance was to trust Zex.

"Let's move," Gruber ordered. "Everybody grab a tank."

It didn't take long until all the cryogenic tanks were in the elevator, since they were designed to be easily moved around. Shoji and Robinson had also joined the others without incident. Zex appeared to do its best describing what to expect when the elevator reached the hangar floor. Zex also assured them that the entryway to the ship would be open. The only problem was that there was some 50 meters of open hangar between the entryway and the elevator. Their advantage was that there was nothing out of the ordinary about the cargo elevator being in use, so they were safe until someone actually spotted them.

They were as ready as they'd ever be. Gruber told Zex to activate the elevator and the admiral seemed to obey. The giant double doors closed very slowly and as they did Gruber spotted strange marks on them as if made by huge claws. There was also a hint of red here and there. Judging by the size of the elevator, Zex had brought or at least had planned on bringing some impressive creatures there. Gruber wondered for a second whether a Tyrannosaurus could fit inside.

The doors finally closed all the way and the elevator started moving. There was little reference to tell how fast it was going, but at least it was moving upwards. Zelnick tried to motivate them over the radio, saying that if they all died, the Vindicator would do the Hellbore Cannon's first surface bombardment test. He also said that the entire crew was listening to the radio communications.

There were ten humans, Zex and 12 cryogenic tanks. One person could easily transport two tanks at once, but then they couldn't use their weapons. They had decided that Shoji, Cuvelier and Hawthorne would each take two tanks. Gruber was in charge of Zex and needed two hands for it, so he wouldn't take a tank. All the rest of them each took one. Zex had volunteered to take two tanks, but he was refused the honor.

The elevator stopped moving. Gruber positioned Zex in front so that when the doors opened, Zex was the first thing anyone saw.

The doors began to slowly move out of the way. Gruber immediately saw that Zex had at least brought them to the correct floor. He was half expecting a platoon of enemies pointing their guns at the opening doors, but to his pleasant surprise, there was no such thing. Looking from behind Zex's *shoulder* he could see one Intruder-class ship quite close to them, its rear end towards the elevator, entry ramp lowered, just as Zex had promised.

The hangar was a giant artificial cave, stretching out several hundred meters before them, and the faint sunlight streaming in through its mouth gave the impression of the last light of the day. Zex's ship was close to the left wall, so most enemies were probably to the right. At least they didn't have to step into crossfire.

There was nobody between them and the target ship. Gruber peeked to the right and saw two Vux about 20 meters away. They were casually looking at the hangar so at least

the team hadn't been spotted yet, but there was no way to get into the ship without at least these enemies noticing.

There was plenty of space between the doors now. Waiting could only make the situation worse.

"Let's move," Gruber ordered. "Don't shoot until we are spotted."

With that said, Gruber dashed towards the ship, holding Zex in front of him as a shield. Just then he realized what a bad idea that was, since if Zex died there would be nobody left to fly the ship. He didn't have time to do anything about it though, so he just focused on running forward and taking note when they were spotted.

The first few seconds felt promising. Nobody had looked their way yet. Gruber took a quick glimpse backwards and saw that the whole team was following him closely. And then shots were fired.

Gruber sensed a gush of air on his face, indicating a very close miss. He instinctively positioned Zex between him and the assumed direction of the shot and fired a snap shot at some random Vux he saw in the distance. From the corner of his eye he could see the two Vux he had spotted earlier pulling out their guns, and being shot dead right away.

It took Gruber half a second to get the big picture of the hangar. There were small teams of Vux here and there and everyone was gradually realizing that there was something unusual happening.

More shots were fired at them. Several shots missed and hit the wall behind them, but at least one shot hit one of the cryogenic tanks. Gruber continued running, pushing Zex in front of him. The distance to the ship seemed a lot longer than it had just a few seconds earlier. He didn't have time to take aimed shots.

Most of the team had run faster than Gruber and were now ahead of him, throwing random shots towards the enemy. He took a quick glimpse back again and saw that

Belov hadn't gotten far and was taking aimed shots using the tank as cover.

The shooting was getting intense. Gruber noticed one Vux in a particularly dangerous position taking aim. He had to stop to take that enemy down with an aimed shot, but the enemy managed to get one shot in before him.

Witherspoon screamed in agony in front of Gruber and fell down. Gruber dashed towards her, but before he could help her, Zex had already put its limbs under her and lifted her up as easily as one would lift an empty bag. Not having time to think it over, Gruber took the tank Witherspoon had been in charge of.

Then Gruber felt an incredible sensation of pain in his right arm, just below the elbow, and his weapon fell to the floor. He didn't have time to stop and pick it up. Then he saw Kilgore slump to the floor in a way that made it obvious he was beyond saving.

Gruber tried to take Kilgore's tank as well, but his right arm didn't move as it was supposed to. He then realized that there was a chunk missing from it.

He felt like the next few seconds were in slow motion. Looking forward he saw that the first ones had reached the ship. Zex was way ahead of him, still carrying Witherspoon. He saw Zex take a quick glimpse back as well and their eyes* met. Looking back he saw that Belov was still pinned down behind the tank in the same spot. Looking at the enemies he saw that some of them were boarding their ships.

One shot hit the tank Gruber was pushing, and that made his time flow with normal speed again. Those of the team that had reached the ship were now giving cover fire from good positions. Gruber concentrated on running the rest of the way as fast as he could and soon he too reached cover behind the ship's entry ramp.

* All three of them.

He looked back and saw Kilgore's body next to one tank. There were two separate trails of blood leading to the ship, starting from about half way to the elevator. He checked his arm and immediately realized that he was responsible for the other trail. He hoped that someone would tell him he was bleeding so he could respond with the classic *I don't have time to bleed*. He got no such attention though. Instead, Hawthorne took the tank Gruber had brought and pushed it inside the ship. Belov still hadn't moved and was now under heavy fire. The tank he had looked badly damaged.

Gruber couldn't think of anything clever. He had had some basic combat training, but nothing too tactical. He wanted to rescue Belov, but had no idea how to do it. And what was more, someone was shouting something in his ear. *Who would bother me at a time like this? Haven't they any common sense?*

"Sir! Get inside the ship! Sir!"

Rigby was shaking him from the shoulders.

"Sir, you are wounded! You cannot do anything! Sir!"

Gruber grasped the situation again and realized the sense in what Rigby was saying. He took one last look at Belov and cursed the difficulty of leaving someone behind. They had to take off right away. Waiting for Belov would put everyone in danger.

And then he felt a sense of relief as Belov was hit in the head and the man fell lifeless to the floor. *Great, now we can leave without any regrets*. Then he realized what he had just thought and mentally kicked himself in the butt. *I'm seeing Vargas right away if we get back to the Vindicator*.

He dashed up the entry ramp, followed by Keller, Robinson and Rigby who had been giving most of the cover fire. As soon as they had all reached the inside of the ship, the entry ramp closed. Zex was probably already in control.

"Sir, you're bleeding," Witherspoon commented with a hole in her thigh.

It was too late, Gruber thought.

“Gruber, report, dammit!” he suddenly heard Zelnick’s voice over the radio.

He wondered how long the captain had been demanding an update. He then reported two dead and at least two wounded.

“*What about the Shofixti?*” Zelnick asked.

Gruber realized he had forgotten the Shofixti entirely. As he started counting the cryogenic tanks he felt the ship take off.

There were ten tanks on board. A quick examination revealed that one of them had been shot inoperable and, based on the holes in the tank, the Shofixti inside could not have survived. Two other tanks were in bad shape, but he couldn’t say whether the inhabitants were okay. The rest of them were in relatively good condition. He reported seven alive and two unclear.

Then he counted his teammates. He could see Rigby, Witherspoon, Hawthorne, Robinson and Keller. Witherspoon noticed the first officer making a head count and assisted him.

“Cuvelier and Shoji went to the bridge with Zex,” she explained.

zzttt “*That’s right,*” Cuvelier said over the radio. “*Admiral Zex instructs everyone to strap themselves in as best as they can since we are about to make a quick ascent to orbit.*” *zztttt*

Gruber looked around for something to cling on to. The cryogenic tanks came with a mechanism to latch them firmly to the floor so they wouldn’t have to worry about those. Finding nothing better, Gruber grasped one of the tanks – with only his left hand.

Then he remembered that the hangar had been full of Vux ships.

“Cuvelier, have we cleared the base already?” he asked over the radio.

zzzt “*It appears so, why?*” *zzzttt* Cuvelier responded.

“I’ll tell the captain to bomb the hell out of that place,” he said.

Witherspoon gave him a strange look.

“Sir, the place was filled with all kinds of life forms,” she reminded. “There were lots of creatures that appeared sentient as well – prisoners like us. If we fire the Hellbore Cannon at the base they will all die by our hand.”

Gruber gave it some thought. Witherspoon was of course right, but on the other hand, if they fired, they could destroy a large number of Vux ships before the ships could even take off.

“That is a decision for the captain,” he replied and reported the situation to Zelnick, along with Witherspoon’s concerns.

“*Understood,*” Zelnick plainly responded.

Gruber looked at Witherspoon who looked back at him. Hawthorne was tending to Witherspoon’s bleeding leg and Rigby came over to Gruber with some bandages. After just a few seconds Cuvelier shouted to the radio.

zzzt “*A friggin’ large ball of fire just came down from the sky.*” *zzzttt*

Gruber’s eyes met Witherspoon’s again. He then reached for his belt, grabbed a Coca-Cola™ bottle, opened the cap and tasted home.

CHAPTER 16

TIME TO WRITE

November 14th - December 8th 2155, away, home, away again

November 14th 2155: At the medical bay. Dr. Mehul is about to fix my arm and... Screw it. I'll just continue this tomorrow.

November 15th 2155: Where to begin? From the beginning, I guess...

There is now nothing but a big hole in the ground where Zex's menagerie used to be.

The wounded, Witherspoon and I, were transferred to the Vindicator right away. Belov's and Kilgore's bodies could obviously not be retrieved.

Vargas already visited me here and I'm glad he did. It took me one night's sleep and one psychologist to realize the great emotional stress our latest mission put us all through. I didn't know Belov and Kilgore that well and now I feel like I should have known them better. They were good men.

From what I hear the reason we got out with as few casualties as we did was Belov. He gave up on running to the ship and concentrated on defending the rest of us. He made a great sacrifice. When all this is over, I'll set a coil of rope next to his tombstone, no matter how suspicious that might look.

There were a few Vux ships in orbit that tried to stop us, but, from what I hear, the Pkunk Furies took good care of them. Apparently the Furies are very effective against an easily-hated race such as the Vux.

All things considered I should see our mission as a great success. We lost two, but rescued at least seven – and an entire species at that – not to mention the valuable prisoner we got... Although I sometimes still feel like we're the prisoners and Zex is pulling the strings behind the curtains. As a precaution, not to show all our cards to Zex, we're flying home without jumping to quasispaces.

November 16th 2155: The folks at the starbase haven't been idle either. We had a lengthy discussion via the ansible before leaving the system.

Captain Tanaka was given a heads up on the things to come. He has the ultimate duty – or reward, depending on how you see it – in front of him and he must be in top shape when the time comes. He has ten days to prepare himself.

The Arilou have returned from their diplomatic mission to the Druuge central trade world in Zeta Persei. They were able to confirm that the supposed last piece of the Ultron – the Rosy Sphere – was indeed in the possession of the Druuge, but the Druuge were unwilling to part with it at a reasonable price. Apparently slaves are their primary currency, so we might have a hard time bartering.

So far our attempts at fixing the Ultron with the Clear Spindle and the Aqua Helix have been futile. The Ultron remains a piece of scrap metal and the two artifacts seem completely unrelated to it. The good news is that neither of the artifacts appear to be mere ornaments.

The Aqua Helix is composed of a homogenous super-hard material which rated Mohs-13. Laser scanning revealed that the shape of the helix was perfect. Focused ion and nucleo-magnetic scans on the other hand revealed nothing about the object's interior, probably due to some unknown attributes of the substance. To sum it up, Chu and his pals claimed that the Aqua Helix was definitely built for

a purpose, but they didn't know what that purpose was, or who had built it, or when it was built.

The Clear Spindle was found to have super-conductive characteristics between 18 and 22 degrees centigrade. It had no clear use or means of activation, but the science team suspected it was of Precursor origin and actually a part of a larger device, whatever that was.

Then there was the rock the Orz had brought – the supposed Taalo mind shield. So far nothing had distinguished it from an ordinary rock, but it was still undergoing tests and Dr. Chu insisted he had a good feeling about it.

In other, more serious news... The starbase has been attacked several times by the red probes in just a few days. So far the attacks haven't been too serious – nothing but lonely probes randomly approaching and being blown to bits. The starbase is actually getting a lot of valuable materials from them. But let's not forget that the number of the probes seems to be growing geometrically. Locating their source must be our next objective.

November 17th 2155: Zex is still cooperating. I can't say whether it's because Zex is willing or because there is constantly a gun to Zex's head. (Zex's pronouns piss me off so I'll just ditch them and use his— ITS name instead.) Zex is piloting the Intruder-class ship to the starbase with us. Zex must know that Zex will be imprisoned upon arrival, so Zex might still try something sneaky. We must not trust Zex, even though Zex's official explanation was very convincing. Here's the long version of Zex's story:

Zex's obsession with bizarre alien life-forms was well known amongst the highest ranking Vux, but the general

* Dr. Chu made a very clear point that the parent device in question was most definitely **not** the pile of junk called the Ultron.

populace saw Zex only as a godsend savior of the people – a charismatic military leader of unquestionable value. The high council was indeed afraid that if Zex was allowed to return home as a celebrated hero, many would understand and even adopt Zex’s ‘perverted’ lifestyle. It could have brought an end to the current Vux way of life and greatly diminished the high council’s influence, which was mostly based on upholding hatred and disgust against all other races – most of all humans.

The high council had to get rid of Zex, but they understood that they couldn’t simply kill Zex, nor could they put Zex in prison. In both cases there would have been riots of unacceptable magnitude. Instead, they decided to put Zex away for a while until things had calmed down and the worst Zex-mania had come to an end. Officially Zex was given a great reward – an entire planet – while in truth Zex was just given a very big cell. The high council allowed Zex to continue expanding the alien collection, thinking that Zex would then be less likely to stage a revolt.

It took longer than the high council had expected, but at last some 20 years later they considered the timing was right for getting rid of Zex. What they didn’t expect was that Zex had spies close to the council and was prepared to escape. What Zex didn’t expect was the arrival of the Vindicator just as Zex’s own plan was supposed to be put in motion.

Zex immediately saw an opportunity. Instead of forcibly breaking out and possibly getting a lot of negative publicity, Zex could get captured by the ones the people hated the most. Zex had prepared a getaway-kit, which was stored in Zex’s own ship. The kit, which was now aboard the Vindicator, contained frozen embryos and complete data on most of the species in the collection. Zex assured us, sounding sincere, that it was the greatest pleasure of Zex’s life to show off the collection to humans just before having to let go of it.

So how is getting captured supposed to serve Zex's interests? That Zex hasn't told us yet. Seeing someone smile at me with my gun to their head makes me uneasy.

November 18th 2155: In my opinion we are placing too much weight on the word of the Melnorme. We now have two of the three objects they said the Ultron could be repaired with, but at the same time we have made zero progress. I have a hard time believing that the Rosy Sphere could be the key.

But of course the captain does not share my lack of faith. If I'm not careful I fall victim to his innocent optimism and start believing that the Rosy Sphere has a slot for the Aqua Helix and the Clear Spindle. Then we'd just insert the modified Rosy Sphere into the Ultron and voilà.

November 19th 2155: I forgot to mention that I was released from the medical bay three days ago. I now have to wear this stupid metal casing over the wound and wait for the nanobots or whatever to do their thing and make my body repair itself.

On another note, I had another session with Vargas, who has been very busy the last few days. We killed countless alien creatures who were helplessly imprisoned in Zex's menagerie. We might have even wiped out the remaining population of entire species. It hadn't bothered me earlier, but last night it was the only thing I could think about and I couldn't sleep.

It was one of those moments when I was really glad I wasn't the captain. Zelnick is a young lad who constantly has to make life-or-death decisions in a matter of seconds. And to make it worse, there are those who question his every move. I don't, though. For the record, Captain Zelnick has my complete support. He had to act to protect his ship and its crew. Sadly, Witherspoon, for example, doesn't see it like

that. In addition to being bitter towards her captain, she suffered worse injuries than I did and we will probably have to replace her once we get to the starbase.

Zelnick puts up an admirable front, but I fear he is suffering inside. I just hope he doesn't end up like Yallah Rangoon, the first captain under whom I served. He was one of those legendary tough captains you see in movies and such – those who eat oranges without peeling them. The problem was that it all ended with the war. When he didn't have to fight anymore, he collapsed mentally. I visited him several times over the years at his peaceful and beautiful home in Bengaluru where his daughter, who was also peaceful and beautiful, took good care of him. He never recovered though, at least not before I was assigned to the starbase and lost all communications with the surface.

I sincerely hope that Captain Zelnick is attending all his sessions with Vargas.

November 20th 2155: I had a quick talk with Admiral Zex who assured me that if we hadn't wiped out the base, the Vux would have killed everything within anyway. It made me feel a bit better. I discussed it with Witherspoon, but her opinion didn't change. It might be that she has reached her limit.

I also questioned the Thraddash captive again, although it was more like a friendly conversation than an interrogation. He is an amusing fellow, but I get the feeling he knows nothing more that can help us. The folks at the starbase will have to decide what to do with him.

November 21st 2155: We have a problem with one of the cryogenic tanks – the one that suffered the most damage. We didn't notice it at first, but the tank's fuel cell had leaked and even though we were able to make the tank use Vindicator's power, it was too late. The process had already

gone over the point of no return and we had no choice but to try and wake the inhabitant. Dr. Mehul is in charge of the operation. According to him we should expect to see results tomorrow.

November 22nd 2155: It worked. We now have a young female Shofixti with us. She seems a bit rude and uneducated, high-born even, but I'm sure Captain Tanaka won't mind.

November 23rd 2155: Nothing important to report. I wonder how Lydia is doing...

November 24th 2155: We encountered and destroyed one of those red probes near Sol in hyperspace. I hope it was a coincidence and that they're not targeting Sol specifically.

November 25th 2155: We reached Sol! It's great to be back home.

November 25th 2155 #2: There was an alarming number of probes near the asteroid belt. Three of them attacked us at once, but posed no real danger. However, if next time it's not three, but 30, we might not get away without a scratch.

December 3rd 2155: It was fun while it lasted, but we have to take off again. I have been on a vacation, if you could call it that, and refrained from writing. Here's a quick summary on what has happened over the past week:

The rock – the supposed Taalo mind shield – turned out to be something special after all. In all our standard tests it performed just as any ordinary rock would, with one exception. When current was fed into it, anywhere along its surface, everyone who had esper potential got a bad

headache. Curiously, so did Lydia, who obviously hasn't gone through esper tests.

Speaking of Lydia, I spent most of my free time with her and really enjoyed it. We played football, conversed with lots of aliens, tinkered with electronics, pranked some people, talked about deep and shallow things... She's a great girl. I find myself eagerly awaiting our return just so I could be with her again. If we ever see peace, I'd like to make sure she gets a chance at living a normal life. I could take her with me to the place I grew up in and take care of her until she could take care of herself. I would support her choices and always have a safe place for her to stay. I would raise my eyebrows when she wore flashy clothing. I would worry when she started dating some random guy. I would shed a few tears, in secret, when she finally moved to her own apartment... I would live the adult family life I never had... I now have a personal motive to kick some Kohr-Ah butt!

On another note, Captain Tanaka took his new task very seriously – and joyously. Given their short gestation and maturation and the average litter being so large, the base should be swarming with little Shofixti when we return again.

We left our prisoners, Zex and the Thraddash, at the starbase. Zex has been extremely polite and cooperative, up to the point where I find it disturbing. I told Hayes to be careful. Zex is a manipulative genius and definitely up to something. At least we deactivated Zex's ship so Zex cannot escape, even though I'm sure that escape is not the thing Zex is after.

And the Vindicator... There is no longer a shortage of building materials, so we were able to outfit our ship as we wanted. We don't have to rely on one insanely powerful main gun anymore as we accompanied it with not one but two Fusion Blasters. We also built a third Fusion Blaster

which we mounted at the stern to protect us against enemies that get behind us. The down-side is that even though the Fusion Blasters don't require as much energy as the Hellbore Cannon, they still require a lot. We had to build an additional Shiva Furnace for the forward guns and one simpler Dynamo for the rear gun. We also agreed that we needed more crew now that we have all these new modules and also since our fleet could use a portable pool of replacement crew. We built a new Crew Pod in slot 11 to provide life support for 50 additional crew members. We now have only one module slot available and we're saving it for future use. Here's the whole module layout:

- 1 Hellbore Cannon*
- 2 Fusion Blaster*
- 3 Fusion Blaster*
- 4 Crew Pod*
- 5 Ansible*
- 6 Shiva Furnace*
- 7 Point-Defense Laser*
- 8 Shiva Furnace*
- 9 Storage Bay*
- 10*
- 11 Crew Pod*
- 12 Dynamo*
- 13 Fuel Tank*
- 14 Fuel Tank*
- 15 Fuel Tank*
- 16 Fusion Blaster*

Now that the Vindicator is fully equipped, all the efforts at the shipyard can be directed to building new ships. Soon we might even be building Shofixti Scouts as well. I'm sure the Yehat would be happy to see their adopted race being

brought back from the dead. Maybe we could get them to join our cause then.

As for our next mission... The Zoq-Fot-Pik had calculated that the source of the red probes was on the same line as Alpha Tucanae (400.0 : 543.7) and Epsilon Muscae (152.0 : 833.3). In addition, the Thraddash had blurted that the probes came from the direction of Vega (033.3 : 975.0), which is very close to the line. Another star, Beta Corvi (033.3 : 981.2), is right next to Vega so I'd consider them equally possible sources. Luckily, there is supposed to be a quasispace exit very close by so instead of wasting over a month in hyperspace travel one way, the trip should take us only about three days. We'll start with Vega since it's closer to the quasispace exit.

December 5th 2155: Wow, the Portal Spawner really works. We simply pushed a button and emerged in quasispace. Then we entered a portal and, just like that, we were on the other side of the quadrant. Thank you, Arilou!

December 6th 2155: We are approaching Vega. We don't know what it is we're searching for exactly. Hopefully it's one of those you-know-it-when-you-see-it things.

The Arilou mysteriously hinted that we should search for a 'world with no surface'. I can only imagine they meant a gas giant, but I fail to see how we can find anything of interest from one of those.

December 8th 2155: After two days of searching we have finally decided to leave Vega and try our luck at Beta Corvi. There was one gas giant here, but we saw neither probes nor anything else out of the ordinary.

Searching for something is frustrating when you don't know if the thing you're searching for is in your search area. Say you notice at home that your wedding ring is missing.

You have no recollection of when you had it on for sure last time. You could have dropped it somewhere outside your home, but it might just as well be somewhere in your home. You can never be sure, unless you find it. You first search all likely places, but can't find it. Then you move on to unlikely places, but still can't find it. If the lost object is important enough, you might start tearing down walls. And all this time you know that it might all be for nothing.

Let's just hope we get lucky at Beta Corvi.

CHAPTER 17

SOURCE

December 9th 2155, Beta Corvi, 033.3 : 981.2

There were seven planets in the system, the fourth one being the only gas giant. No probes were on sight. The gas giant looked very similar to Jupiter.

Jupiter didn't have any artificial satellites though, whereas this planet had one, orbiting it at a geostationary point. And what was more, the satellite openly broadcasted instructions on how to use it to contact life forms in* the planet.

"This is a first," Zelnick said. "We are the first humans, if not first overall, to contact beings living in a gas giant."

Gruber couldn't help pointing out the obvious.

"Someone had to set up that satellite," he said.

Zelnick acknowledged the observation. Then he asked the communications officer to establish a connection to the satellite.

"Any last minute tips?" Zelnick asked Gruber while waiting for someone to answer their call.

"Follow the two basic rules and you'll do fine," Gruber reminded.

"Hello, visitor!" the computer translated in a friendly voice. *"We are the Slylandro. I am Content to Hover, a Slylandro speaker."*

* It seems inappropriate here to say *on* the planet.

The screen showed colorful gas swirling around several glowing bits – like jellyfish inside a tornado.

“Your presence here fills us with excitement!” the gas creatures continued. *“We have gotten so few visitors over these many Drahn* . We hope you can stay to talk with us for a while.”*

Zelnick was ready for the usual introduction.

“Hello,” he said in an equally friendly tone. “We represent the New Alliance of Free Stars. I am Captain Zelnick of the starship Vindicator. We have never seen creatures quite like you... Are you really living inside that gas giant?”

The glowing bits remained more or less stationary, but the gas span around them and rapidly changed colors.

“Oh, this is so terribly exciting!” the creature repeated. *“We will be happy to tell you about ourselves if you will please, please do the same.”*

The spinning of the gas slowed down somewhat.

“You see, we Slylandro have been extremely interested in learning about the galaxy, but our physique makes us incapable of leaving our gas giant home. Therefore, we are totally reliant on our infrequent visitors to keep us informed about events outside this planetary system. And visitors usually only show up every few Drahn.”

The gas didn't change color anymore. There were now three glowing bits on screen, each with their own cloud surrounding them. The color of the gas was a mixture of red and orange, very similar to the great red spot of Jupiter.

“We hope that our newly deployed exploration probe fleet will not only gather information for us, but inform other races of our presence here as well!”

“Bingo,” Zelnick quietly said.

* The translation computer explained that the alien used a word that meant four million rotations of their planet. Since one rotation was 14,2 hours, one Drahn was approximately 6480 years.

“Actually,” he then addressed the Slylandro, “the probes are the reason we’re here.”

“*So they work! Wonderful!*” the speaker rejoiced.

“Er... I don’t think so,” Zelnick replied.

He then turned to Gruber.

“I don’t think these jolly guys would send out a fleet of bloodthirsty probes.”

“At least not intentionally,” Gruber said. “The probes always did claim to be on a peaceful mission of exploration.”

“*What do you mean? Why not?*” the Slylandro asked, sounding a bit worried.

“We have encountered these probes several times,” Zelnick began. “Each time they first claimed to be friendly, but then attacked no matter what we did.”

All three of the gas creatures were now spinning around each other.

“*Our probes never attack!*” the speaker then said in an offended tone. “*They have only defensive capabilities. You must have our probes confused with someone else’s!*”

Zelnick scratched his head.

“Okay, tell us about **your** probes then,” he demanded.

The Slylandro calmed down again.

“*We got our probes just a few hundred rotations ago from a race calling themselves the Melnorme,*” the speaker proudly explained. “*In exchange for studying us, they said we would get 10 000 Gree-dots or something like that which we could use to buy stuff from them. Fortunately, 10 000 Gree-dots was exactly the price of their catalog item 2418 – Remote Self-Replicating Robot Explorer Probe!*”

So it would take 20 rainbow worlds to satisfy the Melnorme as much as studying the Slylandro did, Gruber calculated. They must be interesting creatures.

“So you bought only one probe?” Zelnick asked.

“Yes, that was the really neat part!” the Slylandro replied, getting excited again. “We only bought one, but since it’s self-replicating, we should soon have hundreds, even thousands!”

Gruber instructed the captain to ask about the probe’s programming, which he did.

“It’s really simple,” the floating gas bags replied. “The probe was sent out to a random direction to collect information. It seeks out other civilizations, life-forms and all kinds of interesting places. When its data banks are full, or when it has replicated itself ten times, it returns here.

When it doesn’t have anything more important to do, it zaps rocks and similar space junk into their component parts and absorbs the debris. When it has enough raw materials, it fabricates a duplicate of itself. And that duplicate could self-replicate too!

We expect the first probe to return any rotation now with data banks full of interesting stuff!”

So far all the pieces fit together in Gruber’s opinion. There was obviously some malfunction or a bug in the probe’s programming that made the probes attack. It also seemed improbable that the Melnorme would sell such a defective product. But how could they know for sure?

Gruber recalled the probe’s behavior. They approach, send out a friendly greeting, answer one question and then attack. But if it’s true that they only have defensive capabilities, they aren’t really attacking. So what are they doing then?

If their defensive program gets somehow triggered, they have really deep-learned the saying about offense being the best defense. If their defense trigger threshold was set too low, could that be it?

Gruber suggested that Zelnick asked about the probe’s defensive capabilities, which he did.

“That behavior was hard-coded by the Melnorme, we couldn’t mess with it,” the gas creatures explained. *“The probe fires its missiles if and only if it has been attacked and it cannot communicate with the attacker.”*

“Missiles?” Zelnick and Gruber asked in unison.

“Yes, the probe is armed with a battery of missiles and nothing more. It’s not supposed to be anything too devastating.”

That piece of information once again fit nicely into the puzzle, Gruber thought. The probes have never fired any missiles at them, so they’re not defending themselves. All that hassle about turning off all combat systems when encountering the probes had been for nothing.

“Did you do something to the probe?” Zelnick asked, “Or did you just send it out as it was when you got it?”

Gruber gave the captain a thumbs up for coming up with a good question.

“We only set some priority parameters, nothing more,” the speaker replied.

“What parameters?” Zelnick kept on the subject.

The three gas entities calmly circled each other for a while.

“We can tell you the basic outline of the probe’s program as it was explained to us,” a new voice said.

“Please do,” Zelnick replied.

The new voice started reciting some logical clauses. Gruber couldn’t keep up with the flow and obviously neither could Zelnick.

After a few minutes the explanation was over.

“That’s it,” the new speaker said. *“Simple, right?”*

Zelnick scratched the back of his head.

“Can you give us a moment?” he asked and turned off voice transmitting. “Katja, can you run that by me again, a bit slower this time?”

The communications officer quickly replayed the last part of the dialog and added subtitles to it. Then they got a hang of the probe's program:

SCAN (for targets, as defined in Target List)
IF (no current target)
THEN (select New target from Current Targets list)
IF (Current Position is AT Current Target)
THEN (Set Current Behavior to New Behavior)
PERFORM (Current Behavior)

The Slylandro also provided them with the Target List table and the Probe Behavior table with default priorities:

TARGET LIST (with associated default priority)
Space Vessel (5)
Transmission Source (4)
Astronomical Anomaly (3)
Planet Bearing Life Signature (2)
Raw Replication Materials (1)
PROBE BEHAVIORS (target requirements – default priority)
Communicate (Space Vessel OR Transmission Source – 5)
Record Data (Any target – 4)
Analyze Data (Unanalyzed data in queue – 3)
Prepare Replication Materials (Any Target – 2)
Move to Current Target (Any Target – 1)

Gruber wasn't a programmer, but to his eye the logic looked sound. He still summoned Shoji to the bridge just to be sure.

“So what parameters did you change?” Zelnick asked.

The original speaker continued.

“*We decided that since we had only one probe, we should crank up the replication priority so that there would be more probes sooner. That's the only change we made.*”

Zelnick had the program flow on a small screen and he put his finger on the [Prepare Replication Materials] row.

“What was the new priority you assigned to it?” he asked.

“I don’t see why this interests you so much,” the speaker said, *“but we’ll play along with you. I only know that the new value was supposed to be higher than the old one. I’ll ask the one who made the change. Just a moment...”*

One of the gas entities left the screen for a few seconds and then came back.

“This is a bit extreme,” it continued. *“I was told that the setting was changed to 999, which was the highest possible value.”*

Zelnick gestured for a time out and turned to Gruber who wondered whether the translation computer could relay the meaning of the captain’s gesture to the Slylandro.

“What’s your take on this?” Zelnick asked.

Before Gruber could answer, Shoji entered the bridge. Gruber explained the situation quickly and showed him the outlay of the program flow and told him what the Slylandro had modified. It didn’t take long for Shoji to comment:

“Not good, not good,” he said with his strong Japanese accent.

A few minutes later Zelnick was ready to reveal the grim truth to the sympathetic floating gas bags.

“Sorry for the pause,” he began. “We looked through the probe’s program and... Well, it is **your** probes that keep attacking our ships. Please understand that—”

*“Our probes **do not** attack!”* the Slylandro speaker cut Zelnick’s line short.

All the gas on the screen turned blue.

“I get it, I’ll rephrase that,” Zelnick apologized. “Your probes keep trying to **recycle** our ships... Think about what your probe does when it meets a ship, given its new priority settings.”

The blue changed to purple.

“Fine, I’ll humor you this one last time, but then the accusations must stop, alright?”

“Alright,” Zelnick agreed.

The purple changed to orange.

“Like we said,” the speaker patiently began, “alien ships are the top priority target. Once a probe scanned a ship, it would instantly move toward it...”

There was a small pause.

“Then, when it got to the ship, it would initiate communication automatically...”

There was another pause.

“When communications were terminated, a new behavior would be selected. Then...”

The pause was a bit longer than the previous one.

“Then...”

There was an intense pause.

“Uh-oh.”

There’s nothing quite like the moment when you realize you have made a critical mistake.

*“A new behavior would be selected,” the Slylandro continued. “Since the replication setting was set to maximum, the probe wouldn’t get time to pick a new target... It would use the current target – the ship – for raw replication materials. It would process the ship, breaking it into *sob* component compounds with *sob* electrical discharges!*

What have we done?”

A crying gas creature was not a pretty sight.

“Now that w—” Zelnick began, but was cut short again.

“Traveler!” the speaker cried out while everyone and everything on the screen was spinning around wildly, showing all possible colors. *“You must tell us what we can do before our probes destroy all life in the galaxy!”*

“Sue the Melnorme?” Zelnick suggested to Gruber.

"We can't do that," the Slylandro replied, catching Zelnick's suggestion by accident. *"The Melnorme made us agree to a formal Waiver of Damages in case something like this happened. We can't recall the probes either, since this model doesn't have a recall transmitter. Model 2419 would have had that, but it was out of stock."*

"Well, darn," Zelnick said and turned to Gruber, this time making a point about not talking to the microphone.

"Could we deploy the entire alliance to hunt down the probes?"

Gruber thought of how few ships they still had.

"That would never work, given their pace of replication," he shot down the idea. "As soon as we destroyed one, two would already have taken its place. No, we need a way to make them hunt down each other."

"Or a Mega-Self-Destruct-Code," Zelnick suggested, forgetting the microphone.

Suddenly the gas turned green.

"That's it!" the speaker rejoiced. *"You're a genius, traveler! Why didn't we remember that? There is a self-destruct code! We can reconfigure the probes to seek other probes and broadcast the sequence!"*

In Gruber's opinion there was one problem with that idea.

"How are you going to do that?" Zelnick put Gruber's thoughts into words.

Green changed back to orange.

"Oh, right," the speaker calmed down. *"But at least we can give you the sequence for now. And the probes should all return here eventually. Then we can give them new orders."*

"That's a good start," Zelnick said.

The Slylandro soon transmitted the code to the Vindicator and afterwards it was quickly forwarded to the

starbase via the ansible. Now that all the pressing matters had been discussed with the Slylandro, they could finally talk about more interesting things like biology, culture, history, football and the glowy bits inside the Slylandro, which turned out to be their reproductive organs and taboo as a topic for discussion.

Zelnick had the crew quickly come up with an *introduction to humanity* package, which they shared with the Slylandro. Vargas and Rigby joined the conversation when topics relevant to their interests were discussed.

The Slylandro were ancient creatures. According to them, they had lived for thousands of Drahn – millions of years – on their planet, which they called Source. Similarly to life on Earth, they too gradually evolved from simpler beings. They became social and invented language so they could better cooperate when herding food into dense concentrations.

Their world consisted of a five hundred kilometer band of atmosphere in which they could survive. Below were the Depths, a region which grew darker and more hostile the further down one went. A typical feat of courage for Slylandro juveniles was to sink far enough into the Depths so that their gas bag was almost ruptured by the pressure. The tissue scars left by the trip lasted many rotations and were thought to attract the opposite sex. Above their world was the Void, a calm and quiet region. When the Slylandro travelled up too far into the Void, they got dizzy and started behaving inappropriately.

The Slylandro had a perfectly egalitarian society – all were equal. That of course didn't stop anyone from being a jerk, but their world was huge and they had no barriers to restrict travel so when someone or something was bothering them, they simply went somewhere else.

As one might guess, the Slylandro had no physical technology. From time to time, in their long history, some of

them had tried to work with objects, constructing weapons and other tools from the carcasses of dead beasts. But eventually, whatever it was that they had been building, got too heavy and dragged them down to the Depths.

Their lack of technology raised a justified question. A single Slylandro could live for thousands of years, but they had limited memory. How could they so well remember events that had happened millennia ago?

The answer was History Chants. Since they had no permanent way to keep records, the passing of events were converted into long songs whose rhythms and patterns helped prevent the introduction of error into the records.

As they had said in the beginning, they got very few visitors. Their History Chants covered about 40 Drahn, some 360 000 years, and during that time they had been visited by five other races before the humans. There were the Melnorme just a while earlier, but before them the previous visit had been about 20 000 years prior – by none other than the Ur-Quan.

At that point in the story there had been some heated discussion. Zelnick had told the gas creatures about the war between the alliance and the Ur-Quan Hierarchy, but the Slylandro insisted that the Ur-Quan had been really great guys, making frequent visits and telling them about all kinds of interesting things. A lot of what the Slylandro explained had been in line with the Melnorme's history lesson: Back then the Ur-Quan had been brown and part of an alliance called the Sentient Milieu. The Slylandro also remembered that in addition to the Ur-Quan, there had been five other core races in the Milieu – the Yuli, the Drall, the Taalo, the Mael-Num and the Faz. In addition to the Ur-Quan, the Yuli and the Drall had visited the Slylandro frequently for over a thousand years. But at some point the visits had suddenly stopped without warning and the Slylandro hadn't heard from the Milieu since.

So what was the fifth race that had visited them?

At the beginning of the Slylandro's chanted history, a race of shaggy giants had made frequent visits to the Source over a period of several Drahn. The Shaggy Ones were described as being worried, always hurrying from place to place, seeking knowledge as though they had been in a desperate search for some important secret – some answer to a question they had never shared with the Slylandro.

The last time the Slylandro saw them, the Shaggy Ones had come on a great circular starship, supposedly even larger than the Vindicator. They had discovered their Answer and were leaving to go somewhere. They never told the Slylandro where exactly they were going, but in the same context the History Chants told of a set of ten worlds that were unlike all others. The Shaggy Ones either discovered those planets or perhaps even assembled them – the true meaning had been lost in the ancient chants. These planets were organized in a pattern which in some way alluded to the Shaggy Ones' ultimate fate.

“Groombridge,” Zelnick triumphantly declared to Gruber and Rigby in the conference room.

They nodded.

“I dare say we can call this trip a success,” Zelnick continued.

“I dare agree,” Gruber said.

“Indeed,” Rigby also agreed. “In addition to tackling the probe menace, we got some important information – not to mention a vast amount of unimportant but highly interesting information. Oh, if only I could do an autopsy on one of those magnificent creatures...”

“How would that even work?” Zelnick asked.

Rigby laughed at his own idea.

“I don't know,” he replied. “That's the fun part.”

CHAPTER 18

PIECE OF JUNK

December 16th 2155, Sol, 175.2 : 145.0

Upon returning to Sol, the Vindicator contacted the starbase as usual. The hyperwave network had been re-established so they could now initiate instant communications from the edge of the solar system without having to use the ansible.

“Glad to see you’re back in one piece again,” Hayes greeted them. *“Before we go any further there’s something you should know...”*

Gruber had heard that phrase before. It was one of Hayes’ trademarks.

“...Just a few hours ago, without warning, a squadron of Arilou ships had arrived here. They mysteriously requested that one of their Skiff vessels would be allowed inside the hangar, explaining only that they had some cargo to deliver. We had no reason to object so we let them in. One Arilou individual came out of the ship carrying a small red spherical object, claiming that it was the Rosy Sphere we required. I tried to ask them how they had acquired it, but they refused to go into details.”

“That’s great news!” Zelnick triumphed. “I’ll be sure to buy them a beer.”

The Arilou were known to be rather fond of regular beer, but drank it only when a human offered it.

“You’re too late for that,” Hayes replied. *“They left as soon as they had delivered the ball. Their emissaries here*

claim that they know nothing of the matter, although I'm pretty sure that they're lying."

Telling obvious lies was also a trait of the Arilou. It was unclear whether they understood that everyone knew they were lying.

"So... how's the Ultron?" Zelnick asked.

"We haven't tried putting the pieces together yet," Hayes said. *"We are running some basic tests for the sphere first. I think Dr. Chu and his pals want your input on the matter."*

Zelnick rubbed his hands together.

"I can hardly wait," he said.

Some hours later the Vindicator was back at the starbase. The supposed Rosy Sphere was only five centimeters in diameter and, just like the Aqua Helix, its shape was perfect. It was composed of blood-red translucent substance and it had atypical ferromagnetic properties while remaining utterly non-conductive.

"An interesting piece of work," Chu concluded his preliminary report.

"I still don't see how this object is related to the Aqua Helix or the Clear Spindle," Gruber spoke his mind.

"Well, let's bring all the pieces here," Zelnick suggested. "Maybe we missed something."

Junior Scientists Edward Hawkins went into the next room and soon returned carrying the Clear Spindle. He placed it on the table next to the Rosy Sphere. He then pushed a few buttons and a robot worker brought them the Aqua Helix, which was too heavy to be carried by one person. The three artifacts were then all lined up next to each other and all the people in the room looked at them in silence for a while.

"Well?" Gruber demanded, implying that Zelnick should know what to do next.

“I don’t know,” Zelnick uncomfortably confessed. “Maybe we should look at the Ultron wreck again.”

The same robot that had brought them the Aqua Helix went away for a while and soon returned with the piece of scrap metal also known as the late Ultron. It laid the object next to the others.

And then Gruber saw **it**. He didn’t have to check with the others, he knew that they had to see **it** too. It was all so simple, so obvious. The Ultron wasn’t broken. It was simply missing these three pieces – not one and not two, but exactly all three of them. They wouldn’t even have to reassemble the Ultron, just *combine* it with the three artifacts... just... *put them there*. It was somehow too trivial for words.

“This is...” Chu began, putting his hand on the parent device. “This is simply amazing. Such ingeniousness. Such modularity. Such... multi-purposeness.”

It was the most divine moment of Gruber’s life. The sense of revelation and enlightenment was indescribable.

“The Precursors sure knew their stuff, huh?” Zelnick commented.

Gruber couldn’t have agreed more. Indeed what they were witnessing went beyond human understanding. He couldn’t even say how and when exactly the artifacts were put together, but as sure as he was standing there, the Ultron was whole again. No tests were necessary to confirm it. There were simply no other possibilities.

“So now what?” Zelnick asked, looking at the Ultron as if expecting it to do flips and tricks.

“Ho-ho-ho,” Chu laughed like a certain merry character living north of the Arctic Circle. “Now, my friends, it’s time to practice science.”

...

<<I wish I could have been there,>> Lydia enviously sighed as Gruber explained, or rather, tried to explain what had happened with the Ultron.

<<What **were** you doing, by the way?>> Gruber asked out of simple curiosity.

Lydia gave him her usual unreadable grin that was tauntingly full of encrypted information.

<<Making friends,>> she replied.

<<Any luck?>> Gruber pushed the matter.

Lydia made a V-sign and showed the screen of her communicator. Judging by the amount of portrait-style photos and messages attached to many of them, she had come up with some kind of friend-tracker software. Gruber took the communicator into his own hand as Lydia was clearly expecting it of him.

<<Did you program this by yourself?>> he soon asked, impressed by the quality of the software.

Lydia beamed with pride.

<<I sure did,>> she said. <<And look who's at the top.>>

Gruber scrolled to the top and saw himself in a picture that was probably taken without him being aware of it. A smile crept on his face.

<<Very nice,>> he commended her.

He then scrolled down towards the end of the list. He stopped in the middle for a while when he saw Matthewson's face as there was something wrong with it. It took Gruber a few seconds to realize what it was, but finally he got it: Matthewson was smiling.

Gruber nodded to Lydia in acknowledgement and then continued scrolling. He quickly reached the end and was just about to give the communicator back to Lydia when the last image on the list caught his attention.

<<Admiral Zex?>> he asked.

<<Ding, you are correct, mister,>> Lydia cheerfully replied. <<Zex is a very nice guy.>>

Gruber got worried. Zex was the smoothest talker he had ever met. It seemed like only a matter of time until Hayes would give Zex the key to the starbase.

<<Zex is a puzzle,>> he said. <<Be careful with... him.>>

Lydia took her communicator back.

<<Don't worry,>> she said. <<I'm not looking to replace you.>>

After parting with Lydia, Gruber felt a great urge to talk with Zex. He didn't see any reason to resist the urge so he went straight to the alien containment area. He passed the cell of the Thraddash captive and checked that the prisoner hadn't been disposed of yet... Nope, there the creature still was, smoking a cigar. Gruber still had no idea where the cigars came from, but he had more important things on his mind at that moment so he continued forward.

He soon reached Zex's cell and saw that the admiral already had company. The visitor was sitting right in front of the cell's bars and Zex was sitting on the other side, very close to the man. Both of them were leaning a bit forward, completely silent. Gruber decided to stay back for a while and observe.

It took Gruber a while to figure out that the visitor was Trent. As he realized that, he got even more curious to see what the two greatest strategic minds of the quadrant were up to. Soon Trent moved his arm a bit between the two and then fell motionless again. After a while Zex made a similar motion.

Gruber ran out of patience and approached them. Both Zex and Trent stood up as they noticed Gruber and then he saw what they had been doing.

They were playing chess, Trent playing black, and Zex seemed to be winning. Gruber had played with Trent a few times in the past, but Trent had been way out of his league.

"Ah, More visitors," Zex remarked. "What a treat."

"Sir, this guy is killing me," Trent complained. "I explained the rules of the game to Zex only two games ago. I

won our first game easily, second I lost after a great struggle, and now I'm being made a fool of in the third."

Gruber felt a strange sensation of satisfaction since there was someone out of Trent's league as well. But he also had wished that Trent was the greater genius of the two. Maybe chess didn't relate directly to war strategy, but still...

"Let's talk business, shall we?" Zex proposed.

"We're always eager to hear Hierarchy secrets," Trent replied.

"What did you have in mind?" Gruber asked Zex.

Zex leaned towards the bars.

"A little bird told me that you need a great deal of portable solar energy," Zex said.

Gruber and Trent didn't say anything.

"And I know where you can get it," Zex continued.

Gruber and Trent followed the protocol – *Do not interfere when the enemy is revealing secrets.*

"The question is..." Zex delayed. "How well do you know the Mycon?"

At that point Zex seemed to realize that the humans wouldn't join the conversation just yet so Zex had to continue.

"The Mycon are a nasty bunch and we prefer to keep them at a distance," Zex began. "Unfortunately, their sphere of influence nowadays almost reaches the border of our patrolled space and therefore we know more of them than we would want to. For instance, we know that they thrive at a temperature around 300 degrees centigrade and that they have an unpleasant habit of artificially creating those temperatures on their preferred colony planets."

The story seemed like it could get interesting any second, so Gruber listened carefully.

"And why is that unpleasant, you might ask," Zex continued. "It's because they prefer to do that to planets very much like your home planet... or ours. And do you know of

a similar planet, the home world of a certain race, whose temperature suddenly rose by a few hundred degrees some decades ago, forcing that race to abandon their formerly beautiful world?”

It was turning out to be quite an accusation, although Gruber continuously had to remind himself not to trust Zex so blindly. But the admiral had a way of talking too damn convincingly.

“Beta Copernicus I,” Zex concluded. “The former home of the Syreen. And before you ask, yes, I am implying that the Mycon destroyed the Syreen homeworld. Or rather, I’m not implying, I’m straight out telling you.”

It was finally appropriate for Gruber to intervene.

“You said that you knew where we could get portable solar power,” he focused on the point.

Zex seemed pleased that the audience had been listening.

“I’m sure you see the relation,” Zex said. “When the Mycon colonize a planet, they first send a spore pod down there which, in time, shatters the planet’s crust. They call these pods ‘The Deep Children’. The resulting uncontrollable volcanic activity is usually enough to wipe out all former inhabitants. When they have the planet to themselves, they set up some kind of device into the planet’s orbit. With that device they are able to control the surface temperature at will, usually boosting it all the way up to 300 degrees. We have every reason to believe that the device in question radiates energy which, when placed in orbit, rivals that of the star – a solar manipulator if you like.”

Gruber remembered what *Captain* Tanaka had said. Zex’s story seemed to match that perfectly.

“So,” Gruber began, “are you saying that the device is still at Beta Copernicus I?”

“No, no,” Zex replied. “The Mycon have destroyed many worlds after that. To get to the point, according to my latest intel, they began the process at the first planet of Beta Brahe

not too long ago. I'd bet my freedom the device is there as we speak."

That was quite a statement from someone behind bars.

"And if we went there now," Trent began, "would the Mycon give the device to us if we asked nicely?"

The admiral laughed.

"Probably not," Zex answered. "It seems that when the colonization process is ongoing, about half of the entire Mycon armada is guarding the planet – or more specifically – guarding their 'Deep Children'. I dare say they would rather die than abandon those pods. And **that** is their weakness. **That** is what you should exploit."

Now they were in Trent's domain and Gruber decided to leave the conversation to the experts.

"So we should strike when the Mycon are transporting their 'Deep Children' to another world," Trent said. "If what you said was true, they wouldn't need the solar manipulator right away. It might be left with fewer guards while the major part of the fleet is escorting the pods."

"Precisely," Zex agreed.

Trent fell silent for a while. He was obviously coming up with a master plan.

"If we knew where they were going to migrate next," he then began, "we could ambush them there. If they indeed guard their Deep Children with such ferocity, we might have a chance to wipe out a major part of their fleet in one swift stroke."

"How could we know where they were going?" Gruber joined in.

The admiral chuckled.

"The Mycon are suckers," Zex said. "If you were to simply tell them of a planet that would suit their needs, they would take your word for it and start preparing for the trip."

Gruber inadvertently rubbed his hands together. Then he realized that he, again, had trusted Zex completely, against his own conviction.

“We would need a genuine planet,” Trent pointed out. “Otherwise the Mycon would realize too soon that something’s wrong.”

“I agree,” Zex said. “Sadly, I don’t know of any appropriate planets near their region of space – excluding the Vux space of course. I’m sure you understand why that wouldn’t work.”

Trent nodded.

“That, and we don’t have the ships to set up the trap,” he concluded.

Gruber remembered that they had actually got side-tracked.

“But if all that holds, we probably could still steal the solar manipulator,” he speculated. “That is unrelated to the actual trap, isn’t it?”

Trent and Zex both nodded.

“True,” Zex said. “But it would be a shame to waste such a tasty opportunity for a huge victory.”

An obvious question came into Gruber’s mind.

“Why are you telling us this?” he asked.

Zex looked at him and tapped the bars of the cell.

“There are two things in particular I don’t like,” Zex explained. “The Mycon, and being behind bars.”

It was a valid motivation in Gruber’s opinion, but there was one thing he had to point out.

“You do realize,” he said, “that we’re not letting you out of there just because you told us all this, right?”

Zex sighed.

“I understand it will take time to convince you that I’m your friend. But I’m off to a good start, aren’t I? I have footage of the Mycon launching the spore pods into a planet if you’re interested.”

Indeed the admiral was off to a good start.

“We’ll see,” Gruber said.

Gruber then typed into his log.

We need to find an Earth-like planet somewhere near Mycon space. And we need a fleet of counter-Mycon ships for the trap.

Unfortunately they didn’t have that many ships that would do the trick. The Earthling Cruiser was too slow to avoid the Mycon Podships’ homing plasmoids, although they could provide support from the back lines. The Spathi Eluder would be ideal, but they only had one of those. The Orz Nemesis would probably work fine, but the Orz were too unpredictable and therefore unsuited to form the core for such an operation. The Zoq-Fot-Pik Stinger was too weak and it could be used only as a secondary unit. The Pkunk Furies might work, but the Pkunk weren’t in the Alliance and they only had four of those fighters. The Arilou Skiffs would be ideal, but, again, the Arilou weren’t in the Alliance.

If only the Syreen Space Patrol was here, Gruber thought. The Syreen and their Penetrator starships would be well suited for this operation. But wait! Didn’t the Syreen say that their ships weren’t destroyed at the end of the war, but instead stashed in some hidden vault? That’s right! Now we just need to find the vault.

Gruber checked that Trent agreed with his reasoning and then they explained the plan to Hayes and Zelnick.

“This is great stuff,” Hayes commended them. “The Syreen might be more willing to help us now, knowing that they could get revenge against those responsible for the destruction of their home world.”

“But we still need to find their ships,” Zelnick said.

Gruber read from his notes.

“The ships are supposed to be in a vault on some random planet whose sun is either red or orange,” he said. “And the system couldn’t be farther than 200 hyperspace units from Betelgeuse. If we assume that the Ur-Quan didn’t take detours to confuse the Syreen while they were flying blind, we could focus the search on a ring of – say – 150 to 200 hyperspace units.”

They all checked the star map.

“And I think it would safe to assume that it’s not towards the area of Alliance races,” Trent continued the thought.

Hayes made some markings on the star map and then highlighted some stars.

“There are about ten candidates,” he observed, “and most of them are in Ur-Quan space.”

It was time to show everyone that the New Alliance of Free Stars was more than just the Vindicator’s fleet.

“This is a job for the Zoq-Fot-Pik,” Gruber said. “Most of the candidates are practically on their back yard.”

A few days and a vigorous testing marathon later they knew that the Ultron was in fact the ‘Appendages of Dawn’, an artifact mentioned in a Precursor fragment found in Rigel in 2123. It was described as a ‘Mental Amplifier’ which focuses mental energies of the holder ‘for the purpose of discreet change’. Unfortunately it was evident that human brain emanations were not compatible with the Ultron and neither were those of any Alliance races present at the starbase.* Perhaps the Utwig would be a better fit since they valued the device so highly.

* It was a bit unclear if the Orz had truly understood what the fuss was all about. Quite possibly they had just taken the path of least resistance and went with the crowd. Further testing on them was deemed unnecessary since everyone silently agreed that amplifying the mental powers of the Orz wasn’t a good idea.

They wanted to make haste so they could bring the fixed Ultron to the Utwig before it was too late – before they decided to commit mass-suicide with their Precursor bomb. And of course they hoped that the Utwig would be so pleased that they would give the Alliance the bomb in return, and preferably join the Alliance.

The only problem was that they didn't know where the Utwig home world was. It seemed inappropriate to deliver the Ultron to Zeta Hyades, the system where the Utwig supposedly kept the bomb. They had encountered Utwig ships in Epsilon Aquarii some months earlier, so that would be one place to start looking. Also, there was supposed to be a rainbow world at Gamma Aquarii, right next to Epsilon, so they could possibly get two birds with one stone by going there first.

After jumping from true space to hyperspace, hyperspace to quasispace and from quasispace back to hyperspace, they had travelled from 175.2 : 145.0 to 775.2 : 890.6 in three days. The quadrant felt a lot smaller than before. The effect was similar to the way Earth suddenly got smaller after the invention of airplanes.

There were no hyperspace spoors on the radar, so they set course for Gamma Aquarii.

CHAPTER 19

THE EXCHANGE

January 3rd 2156, Beta Aquarii, 863.0 : 869.3

December 31st 2155: New Year's Eve. There were no Utwig ships at Gamma Aquarii, but there was another rainbow world. We're rich.

January 2nd 2156: Success at Epsilon Aquarii. The Utwig we met told us right away that the Ultron should be delivered to a specific temple on their home world which is at Beta Aquarii I. They refused to take the Ultron themselves and also were reluctant to say anything more since it was their high proctors' duty and privilege to communicate with the Ultron.

January 3rd 2156: We're entering the orbit of the Utwig home world. So far nobody has paid any attention to us. Let's see what they think after we present ourselves...

Gruber sat in the shuttle along with the landing team again. According to the Vindicator's scanners, the atmosphere should be safe for humans without any additional equipment. The temperature at their landing site was currently a pleasant 24 degrees and no clouds were on sight.

The Utwig weren't celebrating yet. They said that the festivities would begin only when the leader of their high proctors would hold the Ultron in her hands. Until that moment, they would all continue to wear the mask of Ultimate Embarrassment and Shame.

Gruber's orders were clear: *Do whatever it takes to get the bomb*. He would have to improvise how to handle the negotiations. The Ultron was their only bargaining chip and they knew next to nothing about the Utwig.

Jenkins announced that they would land in a few moments. They had been instructed to do so on a specific mountain top where the infrastructure resembled that of the Incan Empire at its prime. The Ultron was tightly strapped to the floor in front of Gruber. Even if the shuttle were to rapidly spin around all its axes, the Ultron would definitely be safe – given that the shuttle itself stayed intact.

Soon there was a thump which indicated they had touched down. Gruber took one final moment to admire the simplicity of the Ultron's structure and then ordered the crew to release its straps. It was important to do it while the shuttle's ramp was still closed since, who knew, maybe the Utwig would consider it blasphemy to restrain their holy device in such a forceful way.

As the ramp got lowered, the inside of the shuttle was bathed in the green light of the local sun. As usual, their eyes quickly got used to the color of the natural light and the green effect faded away. Gruber was the first one to exit the shuttle and take a look at the surroundings.

There was a long row of identical creatures in front of him. It felt as if there was only one creature and its image had been copy pasted dozens of times into an extremely organized formation. The creatures were wearing purple robes that bore a resemblance to the ones used by Ku-Klux-Klan in the early 20th century, with the exception that their hats weren't pointy.

It was ghostly quiet. There wasn't even any wind to make background ambience. All the aliens were just silently looking at the humans. Gruber almost expected for someone's communicator to beep. In fact, he found himself hoping for it – anything to break the silence.

Gruber looked back as Hawthorne and Robinson appeared from the shuttle carrying the Ultron. He expected a roar of applause, but there was none. He expected some unorganized muttering and shifting, but there was none. At that moment he started to suspect that all the creatures in front of them were actually mannequins.

Hawthorne and Robinson carefully laid down the Ultron between the humans and the Utwig/mannequins. Not a single word had been said yet. Gruber contemplated whether he should start talking or approach the aliens and, if he got no response, nudge one of them to check that they were alive. He had some recent practice with staring contests, thanks to Lydia, so he wasn't too much in a hurry.

Finally one of the creatures took a step forward. It was the one at the exact center of the row. The alien approached the Ultron with slow, but steady pace. Gruber waited, standing right next to the device.

As the creature got close, Gruber took note of its eyes. They were watery, as if the creature was silently crying its heart out. The creature then crouched and put its hand on the Ultron's surface.

Immediately as its hand touched the device, the creature started shaking. **Then** began the unorganized murmur Gruber had hoped for earlier. The creature touching the Ultron started making strange noises and the others appeared to be whispering to each other.

Suddenly the creature stopped trembling and fell silent for a second. It then took the Ultron into both its hands, stood up and lifted the Ultron above its head as if the device weighted nothing.

"It is a miracle!" it declared.

Then came the roar of applause. All the other Utwig took off their masks and threw them in the air. Their faces resembled that of a particular extra-terrestrial in an old movie whose name Gruber couldn't remember.

“Oh happy day!” the one holding the Ultron rejoiced and turned to face Gruber.

Hawthorne and Robinson seemed ready to dash and dive if it looked like the Utwig would drop the Ultron.

“Joyous occasion!” the Utwig continued. “You will be immortalized as the blessed figures that delivered unto us our future!”

Don't haggle with yourself, Gruber thought. *Let them offer something first.*

“The Ultron sings to me again,” the Utwig said. “Such a beautiful voice... oh, how I have missed it! And there is so much to do... Indeed, it seems that you should proceed to the second moon of the sixth planet of Zeta Hyades and take what you find there. We no longer have need for it, but the Ultron reveals that you will.”

“That went well,” Zelnick commented over the radio.

“But wait!” the Utwig continued. “The Ultron throbs and whistles! Matters of significance are being relayed to our brains. It has been so long since we communicated with the ultimate in such a manner, but slowly the truth is revealed... our destiny!”

The rest of the Utwig were now silently listening again, as were the humans. The one with Ultron continued:

“We have been directed to join with our Supox allies and attack... You!”

The long row of Utwig individuals all turned their heads to look at each other. Gruber gripped his sidearm.

“No, wait, that's wrong, sorry!” the Utwig with the Ultron corrected. “We don't attack **you**; we attack **your enemies**... The Kzer-Za and the Kohr-Ah...”

“Phew”, Zelnick said.

“No, wait, that's still wrong,” the Utwig said and Gruber gripped his weapon tightly again.

What now?” Zelnick commented.

“It seems that,” the Utwig continued, “we should strike only the black ships. Yes, now I’m sure of it. We will take our Supox allies with us and immediately launch a major offensive against the Kohr-Ah. In addition, we will join your alliance and grant you the boon of our Jugger starship designs, as well as a supply of trained starship captains. I can also say with certainty that the Supox will give you the same assistance.”

“That’s better,” Zelnick said in a relieved tone. *“Impressive negotiations, Mr. Gruber.”*

Gruber was pretty sure he hadn’t said anything.

“I’m sure my role in it was significant,” he replied as a modest man.

The Utwig with the Ultron turned to face Gruber again.

“Now we must go, as should you,” it instructed. “We must proceed to perform our essential service for the universe. And we must hastily organize a decree regarding a temporary mask of Joyous Reunion.”

With that said, all the Utwig began to scatter. The one holding the Ultron turned around politely, but efficiently, and walked away.

“Mission accomplished,” Zelnick summed it up. *“Return to the ship ASAP, we have a bomb to pick up.”*

Three days later the Vindicator entered the vortex leading to Zeta Hyades. A pack of Utwig and Supox emissaries were aboard the Vindicator, ready to captain new ships the alliance would build. Almost their entire fleets were already on their way to attack the Kohr-Ah at the Horologii constellation. Hayes pointed out that it was a most unwise course of action, as the alliance should wait until they were all ready for a full-scale offensive. The Utwig, however, trusted the Ultron’s guidance above that of the humans and the Supox had a history of following the Utwig everywhere,

so they left and there was nothing the alliance could do about it.

It wasn't necessarily such a bad idea, though. Zoq-Fot-Pik scouts had reported that the Kohr-Ah were pushing the Kzer-Za hard and that without intervention the Kohr-Ah would probably win the doctrinal conflict within a few months. The Utwig and the Supox might be able to give the alliance a bit more time and, not incidentally, force the Kzer-Za and the Kohr-Ah to weaken each other even more.

The Utwig could also confirm that the Kohr-Ah were indeed the true enemy. According to them, the Ultron had enlightened them on the subject and revealed that the goals of the Kohr-Ah were mutually exclusive with their very own existence. They also claimed that the only ones who could truly stop the Kohr-Ah were Captain Zelnick and the Vindicator – a statement that seemed to put a lot of pressure on Zelnick.

The Vindicator's destination was the second moon of the sixth planet. The planet was a gas giant and it had only two moons, so the *second* moon meant the one whose orbit was higher. According to the Utwig, they had already abandoned their guard station and the bomb should be left unattended.

There were ships in orbit of the second moon, though – ships of unknown type. There appeared to be six of them, but there was no way of telling if there were more behind the moon or on the surface.

The ships were long and thin. Their silhouette somewhat resembled that of a trumpet. As they noticed the approaching alliance fleet, they turned so that their long shape was pointing towards the Vindicator, making them appear very small. They soon hailed the Vindicator and Zelnick answered the call.

"We are the Druuge of the Crimson Corporation," the alien introduced themselves. *"The planet you approach*

belongs to us. All other claims are hereby rendered invalid and uncontestable. Depart."

The alien looked disturbingly like the devil in Christian mythology as portrayed in popular culture.

"So you're the Druuge," Zelnick replied. "We've heard about you. We were planning on purchasing the Rosy Sphere artifact from you, but our friends, the Arilou, beat us to it. It worked great, by the way, thanks! But what makes you say that—"

"So it was **you!**" the Druuge interrupted. "*Befriending thieves and frauds makes you just as guilty.*"

"Whoa, whoa, slow down," Zelnick defended against the sudden accusation, "what are you talking about?"

The Druuge squeezed an odd ball that was displayed on a stand next to the creature.

"*The Rosy Sphere...*" it began, "*It wasn't purchased from us... It was stolen from us, by these 'friends' of yours. Our price for it was 100 able bodied crewmen, which these 'Arilou' immediately agreed to pay. They sent exactly 100 of their kind to our trade vessel and we, as honest merchants, gave them the Rosy Sphere. Without a word their ships then departed the system and, simultaneously, all these crewmen they had provided us vanished as well.*"

"Er..." Zelnick searched for words.

The Druuge let go of the sphere.

"*But, we are willing to overlook this crime on your behalf,*" the alien continued, "*provided that you leave... now.*"

Zelnick tapped the armrest of his chair.

"Very well," he then said. "We will leave as soon as we have picked up something from the surface."

The Druuge took the same sphere in its hand and threw it forcefully on the floor, breaking it.

"*What kind of a fool do you take me for?*" it demanded.

"*We know what's down there and we know very well its*

value. And most importantly, it belongs to the Crimson Corporation. Your presence here can only be interpreted as an attempt to deprive us of what is rightfully ours.”

In Gruber’s opinion the conversation seemed to be leading to an ugly outcome.

“The Utwig gave it to us,” Zelnick made his case. “What makes you say it belongs to you?”

The Druuge laughed.

“The Utwig cannot give you something that isn’t theirs,” it claimed.

Then the alien seemed to calm down somewhat.

“Since you appear to be genuinely unaware of the circumstances, I will explain... We came here years ago to sell the Ultron – a useless piece of junk – to the Utwig. Already back then we knew of the weapon on the surface below us. That was to be our price. But the Utwig used a clever ploy to cheat us!”

The Druuge took a replacement sphere from somewhere and put it where the one that was now in pieces on the floor used to be.

“I had convinced the morose Utwig fools that the Ultron was the answer to all of their pitiful dreams. ‘Super powers?’ HAR-HAR-HAR! Oh, of course. I told them that it would grant them the powers that they craved – the Second Sight. The Ultron would allow them to see into the past and the future. The Ultron would slowly imbue each of them with unique secret powers of great significance. The Ultron would ensure that their race’s huge potential for greatness would be fulfilled. And they believed it all. They capered and laughed at their good fortune. But then... Then I made a mistake.”

“What mistake?” Zelnick asked.

The Druuge took a deep breath and the pitch of its voice lowered as it continued.

*“The self-doubt and lack of clear reason left the Utwig vulnerable to our every manipulation. We had expected the Utwig to fall for our sell – to buy the **useless** device – but never with such gusto. Before I could announce the price, the Utwig High Proctor begged to hold the device, just for a moment. The fool I was, I permitted this – to close the deal... a grievous mistake.”*

“Why was it a mistake?” Zelnick asked again.

The Druuge sighed.

“The moment the High Proctor touched the Ultron, her body arched and her eyes rolled back in her head. She began to babble meaningless phrases and howl like a beast. We could do nothing but observe this act in silence. After a while her body relaxed and her eyes slowly closed. When they re-opened, they shone with a wild and frightening light. She declared that the Ultron was all they could have dreamed of, and more.

I tried to say a word about the price, but she interrupted me, claiming that the Ultron fed my thoughts directly to her brain and that spoken words were unnecessary. She insisted that she knew what I desired.

...What could I say? That the Ultron was a farce and could do no such thing? I was stunned and silent.

Me and my associates were lead to a small vault. The High Proctor declared that I desired and object of great antiquity, secret function and high value. She ceremoniously opened the door to the vault and explained that because we had been of such great service, all of the treasures within were ours.

What we found inside was a hodge-podge of ancient and useless artifacts which were of no value to us. I could see no way to salvage the disastrous situation at that time, so with tears in our eyes we carried the junk to our ship and left. Ever since then we have tried to sell this junk to random travelers, with little success. When the Arilou bought the

Rosy Sphere – one of these artifacts – we thought for a second that our luck had turned. But then it turned out that they had tricked us as well. It was then that we decided we would correct the injustice and come here to pick up what was rightfully ours.

There. You have heard our justification. It is valid and unassailable. Now leave.”

It was a sad tale in Gruber’s opinion. Usually he found it pleasing when the tricksters get tricked themselves, but there was some cruelty in the Druuge’s story. What was even sadder was that it seemed highly likely that they would have to fight the Druuge over the possession of the bomb.

“I sympathize,” Zelnick assured the Druuge, “I really do. However, we really, really need the bomb. If we don’t get the bomb, we all die – you too. So can we please have the bomb in peace?”

The Druuge made a scary face.

“No, you may not,” it replied in a strict tone. “We know your soul, young captain. It is no brighter than ours. We acknowledge our greed. We revel in it. You are the dishonest one. Hiding your shame in shadows, you fabricate justifications and rationales, but in the end, we are just the same.”

“I disagree,” Zelnick said. “Unlike you, we are actually trying to save the galaxy.”

The Druuge didn’t seem to buy it.

“Idealistic fool,” the Druuge said. “Since you won’t listen to reason and continue to stand in our way, you leave us no choice but to forcibly move you.”

The Druuge then cut the transmission.

“I’m done being pushed around,” Zelnick announced. “McNeil, take them down with the Hellbore Cannon.”

“Yes sir,” the weapons officer replied and immediately fired.

“Let’s see if they give up after this display,” Zelnick said.

Gruber didn't remember Zelnick ever being the first one to shoot. He was glad that the captain had it in him.

"Impact in five... four..." McNeil counted. "They're returning fire!"

"Six shots incoming," Dujardin said. "The Projectiles are fast! Evade!"

"One... impact!" McNeil reported.

They could see one of the enemy ships being blown to bits.

Zelnick then quickly maneuvered the Vindicator sideways to dodge the incoming fire. The Zoq-Fot-Pik Stingers were such small targets that it was unlikely the shots would hit them at such a long distance. Gruber was also sure that Fwiffo would have no trouble dodging the shots, but he was worried about the two Orz Nemeses and the two Earthling Cruisers – the Cruisers in particular were poor at evading.

One shot missed the Vindicator at a safe distance, but five other projectiles were targeted at some other ships – on all four sides of the Vindicator. Gruber knew that in their current formation the Seraph was *below*, the Anna 53 was *above*, the Star Runner and the Stingers were on the port side and the Nemeses were on the starboard side. All Pkunk Furies were in the shuttle bay, inside the Vindicator. He could not see any of the other ships from the windows on the bridge so he checked the tactical display.

Five enemy shots had passed their formation, which meant that one had had to hit. It was strange, though... The particles had such great momentum that it felt improbable they would just stop at a small ship, such as any of the Vindicator's escorts. Even if they had hit, Gruber would have expected to see the projectiles on the display, passing the formation.

"*We're hit!*" Captain Wu of the Seraph reported.

There was something wrong with his voice, as if it took great effort for him to talk. Gruber checked the monitor where Wu's image was and saw that Wu was somehow hanging from his seatbelt, as if a strong force was trying to pull him from his seat. Gruber checked the tactical display again and noticed that the Seraph was spinning and drifting backwards, apparently out of control.

"Permission to engage the enemy?" Captain van Rijn of the Anna 53 requested.

"I guess they won't be surrendering," Zelnick said to Gruber.

"Granted," Zelnick then replied to van Rijn and opened a channel to all the ships. "Take them out!"

"We... No control..." Wu tried to report. *"Lost... inertia... Uhh—"*

Captain Wu passed out. Gruber noted that the Seraph was missing two of its four engines and was spinning so fast that if they couldn't control their inertia nullifier, the crew inside would experience at least six G's, possibly more.

"Captain, we have to stop the Seraph from spinning," Gruber said. "And we have to do it fast or we lose the crew."

Zelnick seemed preoccupied with the controls.

"You handle that," he hastily replied.

"Sir, the enemy ships are all moving away from us," Dujardin reported. "It seems that their cannon bears a great recoil."

Given the velocity and the apparent mass of the projectiles, the Druuge starships would have to be at least as massive as the Vindicator to manage the reaction force resulting from firing. The Kohr-Ah ships also fired large projectiles at great velocities, but their ships were so big that they endured the recoil – or had some other means to cope with it.

The Seraph was drifting away at a velocity that indicated the entire momentum of the projectile was absorbed.

“Their projectiles must be like hollow-point bullets,” McNeil speculated.

Anyone could make a weapon whose projectiles would pierce the target and keep on going afterwards. They would make a hole in the target, sure, but most of their momentum would be left in the bullet and the target would not necessarily slow down much. The idea with hollow-point bullets was that they expanded, or even shattered, on impact, transferring their entire momentum to the target and thus providing a lot more stopping power. It was Newton’s third law of motion at its finest.

Gruber contacted Fat-Pot-Mik, the commanding trio of the Tracker.

“Can you attach yourselves to the Seraph and use your thrusters to bring it under control?” he asked.

“We should be able to, yes.”

“Stinger-tongue to the rescue!”

The Tracker set off in the direction of the Seraph. Gruber recognized that there was nothing more he could do about it so he focused on the battle itself.

“Captain, how about sending in the Pkunk Furies?” he asked.

The Pkunk ships were small and very fast. In theory, they should be ideal against opponents like the Druuge, given that the enemy didn’t have any pesky secondary abilities.

“Good idea,” Zelnick agreed and gave the Pkunk pilots the command to take off.

A nuke was fired from the Anna 53. The Voyager and the Seeker accelerated towards the enemy, along with the Orz Nemeses *Flamenco* and *Fox*. They were soon passed by the four Pkunk Furies: Joy, Love, Fortune and Harmony.

“I don’t think I should go there,” Fwiffo suggested. “The Spathi Eluder is designed for running away, not for chasing.”

“Agreed,” Zelnick said. “Go see if you can help the Tracker in stopping the Seraph from spinning.”

“*Will do,*” Fwiffo replied.

There was little the Vindicator could do. Being such a large target, chasing the Druuge ships that were still moving away would be risky. The Druuge then fired some more shots towards their pursuers and picked up even more speed. They couldn’t outrun the Anna 53’s nuclear missile, though.

There was a flash in the distance, indicating that the nuke had detonated. The number of enemy ships on the tactical display was reduced to four.

“They seem vulnerable to your missiles,” Zelnick said to van Rijn. “Fire a broadside!”

“*They’re already too far,*” van Rijn explained. “*But it looks to me like the enemies gain more and more speed as they shoot. Given their current trajectory, I’d expect them to eventually come out from the other side of the moon.*”

True enough, even though the shots of the Druuge hadn’t hit any of their pursuers yet, the Nemeses and the Stingers were barely even catching up to the enemy ships. The Furies, on the other hand, had just reached their reported firing range. Gruber was eager to see how the Furies performed, although soon they would end up behind the moon and communications would be lost.

Zelnick opened a channel to the Pkunk pilots, but couldn’t give them any orders, because all the Pkunk were screaming.

“—*Fool! Idiot! Jerk! Loser! Moron!*—”

Gruber remembered that the Pkunk had claimed their weapons were actually their negative spiritual energy which they created by whipping themselves into an emotional frenzy. Perhaps insulting their enemies played a part in that.

“—*Baby! Dodo! Nerd! Nitwit! Stupid!*—”

Whatever it was the Pkunk were doing, it seemed effective. All four of the Furies swarmed around one enemy

ship, burning it with bright beams of light. Their prey couldn't do anything to defend itself and its hull soon cracked with a showy explosion.

“—Twit! Wimp! Cellist! Worm! Dummy!—”

The other Druuge ships fired at the Furies while picking up speed again. The distance between them was now so short that there was no time to dodge the shots. The Pkunk would just have to steer clear from the enemy's firing sector.

Unfortunately one of the shots hit. The image from the Harmony went blank and the insults of its pilot, Yompin, ceased. A bright explosion indicated that there would be little to salvage and no hope of survivors...

...But then there was another bright light and Yompin's image suddenly reappeared on the screen.

“I reject!” she screamed.

Now there were four Furies again. Just then, the moon eclipsed the battle.

“Wait, what just happened?” Zelnick asked.

Dujardin played back the recording from a few seconds back. It was just as Gruber thought he saw the first time. The Harmony was hit and it got destroyed. A moment later there was a flash and then the Harmony was intact again.

“An illusion?” McNeil suggested.

“An illusion that absorbs a projectile like that?” Gruber shot down the idea.

The Nemeses and Stingers returned from behind the moon. The commanding trio of the Seeker explained:

“The enemy outrun us.”

“There was nothing we could do.”

“The Pkunk are still in pursuit.”

“I could swear the enemy got one of them, but there it still is...”

Captain *Heavy* of the *Flamenco* joined in on the conversation in their own weird way:

*“Pkunk *bubbles* won’t go away. First time fun in *slow time*. Orz want to *smell* Pkunk more.”*

Impressing the Orz wasn’t easy, so the Pkunk had a remarkable trick up their sleeves.

“Ok, let’s put that aside for now,” Zelnick decided. “They should come back from the other side of the moon in some time. Let’s get ready. Fwiffo and Fat-Pot-Mik, how are you doing?”

“Ready to start tonguing!”

“He means that we are just about to attach ourselves to the Seraph, hang on... There.”

The Tracker was now spinning with the Seraph.

“Engaging thrusters...”

The spinning slowed down.

“We have it under control.”

“Excellent work,” Zelnick commended them. “Fwiffo, organize a team to take care of the wounded. Van Rijn, if the enemy does appear from the other side of the moon, you be sure to greet them with nuclear explosions.”

“Of course,” van Rijn replied.

A short while later they could see the enemy again. There was only one left, flying straight towards the Vindicator, rear first, with great velocity. The Furies were still on its tail.

“McNeil, do your thing,” Zelnick gave the command to the weapons officer as a nuclear missile was launched from the Anna 53.

McNeil took aim and...

“Sir, a message from the enemy ship,” Katja reported.
...fired.

“Displaying it now,” Katja continued and set it up on the main screen.

“I surrender!” the Druuge on the screen pleaded.

“Van Rijn, cancel the nuke!” Zelnick quickly ordered.

The nuclear missiles of the Earthling Cruiser could be remotely disabled, but the Hellbore Cannon of the Vindicator had no such capability.

“Impact in three... two... one...” McNeil counted until the Hellbore Cannon’s shot hit the enemy.

“A direct hit,” he then reported.

“The enemy ship is destroyed,” Dujardin checked. “No chance of survivors.”

Zelnick didn’t look pleased.

“They brought it on themselves, captain,” Gruber reminded him. “Events such as these are common on the battlefield.”

“I know,” Zelnick said, even though he probably didn’t know.

Meanwhile, Captain Wu had regained consciousness.

“We’re in bad shape,” he reported. *“I don’t have the numbers yet, but I fear we’ve lost some crew.”*

“We’ll get right on it,” Zelnick said.

He then turned to Gruber.

“Organize the bomb retrieval and the scavenging,” Zelnick ordered.

CHAPTER 20

MIGRATION

January 8th 2156, quasispace, vortex leading to 190.9 : 092.6

Retrieving the bomb wasn't exactly a spectacle. The device was set within a simple defensive grid, but the grid got neutralized when Jenkins accidentally landed the shuttle on top of it.

The artifact itself was a black cylinder, roughly the same size as the Ur-Quan warp pod they had retrieved from Alpha Pavonis. It was covered in Precursor script and although they couldn't translate the text, it was evident that the message was a warning, repeated again and again. The energy readings from the bomb were so unorthodox that they all agreed not to experiment with it until they were back at the starbase.

The Seraph had sustained heavy damage and nine crew members were found dead. The ship was deemed damaged beyond repair without a dock so the remaining crew members were transferred to the Vindicator and what was left of the ship was towed back to the starbase. The wreckage of the Druuge ships had been recovered and stashed into the storage bay, with the exception of the ones hit with the Hellbore Cannon and that could only have been picked up one particle at a time.

Gruber was writing his log as the Vindicator was about to enter the vortex leading from quasispace to a region near Sol in hyperspace.

The Pkunk performed well in the skirmish with the Druuge, although we still don't know for sure what happened with the Harmony. The Pkunk 'explained' that Yompin refused to go away, so when her body died – which was when the Harmony got destroyed – her spirit refused to leave this world.

Apparently that happens often to the Pkunk, and since the spirit would have a boring time without a body, the spirit would also refuse to let the body leave this world. And what's more – again, this is according to the Pkunk – the body would have a boring time in the vacuum of space without a ship, so the spirit would also refuse to let the ship leave this world.

...And the most ridiculous thing is that, of all the theories regarding what happened to the Harmony, this is so far the most feasible one.

But now I think would be a good time to pat ourselves on the back and say that this mission was a success. We now have the bomb that supposedly carries enough power to destroy the Sa-Matra. We also have two new allies who are currently marching towards the Horologii constellation to attack the Kohr-Ah with the intention of evening the odds in the doctrinal conflict.

There were casualties, sure, but I dare say they were a small price to pay for what we got.

And, let's not forget, we now know that the Pkunk Furies can be extremely deadly in combat. Even though we currently have only four Pkunk ships in our command, I believe we could make the Pkunk join our cause in the long run.

About the bomb... If I would have to describe it with one word, I'd use the word 'scary'. It has a strange aura – the kind that makes it difficult to stand near it. In fact, it makes

you wish you and the bomb were in different star systems. It sends chills down my spine every time someone touches the device.

The Utwig don't seem to know anything more about the bomb either. And speaking of the Utwig, upon boarding the Vindicator the only thing they cared about was to find some fitting material they could fashion masks out of. So now they are all walking around wearing white bed sheets that have two eye holes in them.

“Jumping to hyperspace... now,” Samusenko announced.

They landed at coordinates 190.9 : 092.6. It was two days from Sol and one day from Alpha Centauri where they could sell the location of one more rainbow world to the Melnorme.

“Sir, multiple contacts on the radar,” Dujardin reported.

In Gruber's opinion it was a rather plain way of phrasing what they were actually witnessing. The hyperspace radar looked like there were hundreds of ships all around them, maybe even thousands. Or more precisely, there were countless ships towards the negative Y, but few on their route to Alpha Centauri.

“What the hell is this?” Zelnick demanded. “Who are they?”

“They are all moving in the same direction,” Dujardin observed, “towards the positive X.”

Gruber calculated that they had about ten minutes until the closest spoor would pull them to true space. He notified the captain.

“Shall we jump back to quasispace?” Samusenko suggested.

Indeed they could use the 10 fuel units for the jump again and try their luck at the next closest exit which, unfortunately, was in the middle of Ilwrath space.

“Let’s wait a while,” Zelnick said. “These ships are coming from the region where the Ilwrath are attacking the Pkunk. Danielle, does the speed of these spoors match that of either the Ilwrath or Pkunk ships?”

Dujardin observed for a while.

“A perfect match for the Pkunk,” she reported.

“The final migration,” Gruber said. “Captain, do you remember? The Pkunk claimed they were making preparations for some kind of a *Final Migration*, which would solve all their problems. Maybe we are now in the middle of that?”

Zelnick looked like he remembered.

“Let’s ask what they are doing,” he decided. “Samusenko, fly us towards that nearest spoor.”

A few minutes later they were so close to the spoor that both parties were pulled to true space. Then they immediately saw that they had indeed encountered the Pkunk.

“Ah, you are the human everybody is talking about!” the Pkunk joyously said. *“You have caught us at the second most important event in our history. Congratulations! No, wait... I think this is after all the **third** most important event. But still, we congratulate you! No shame in third place!”*

“Greetings,” Zelnick formally said. “What is this important event? What are you doing? Where are you going?”

“Since you are a perceptive individual,” the Pkunk began, *“you might have noticed that we, the Pkunk, are physiologically similar to the Yehat.”*

Gruber hadn’t noticed, but then again, he wasn’t said to be the perceptive one. Sure, the Pkunk and the Yehat were both avian, but that seemed to be the extent of the similarities.

“This relationship is not a coincidence,” the Pkunk continued, “for indeed, in the Harmonic Realm of Creation, there is no coincidence. To be more specific, we are an off-shoot of the Yehat species – a peaceful, empathetic off-shoot – which fractured from the Yehat race early in its space age. You see, we create peace, tranquility and harmony whereas the Yehat are birds of prey who live in a constant balance of terror with their fellow creatures.”

Zelnick turned to Gruber.

“She lost me there,” he whispered. “Did she answer any of my questions?”

Before Gruber could reply, the Pkunk continued.

“We have decided that our Yehat siblings are in need of our love and good counsel. We have waited far too long to return home and heal the wound that has kept our race apart these many centuries. When we arrive at their doorstep, we will greet our Yehat brethren with warm hugs of affection which I am sure shall be returned in kind.”

“So you, er...” Zelnick hesitated. “You’re migrating to Yehat space, am I right?”

“Yes we are!” the Pkunk joyously replied. “And by ‘we’ I mean all of us.”

“And by all of you,” Zelnick said, “you mean... your entire race?”

“You are most correct!” the Pkunk proudly replied.

“What about the Ilwrath?” Zelnick asked. “Won’t they invade your home system?”

The Pkunk waved her wing as if to brush off the thought.

“Nothing but material possessions, captain,” she confidently replied. “We Pkunk, having risen to the ninety-ninth psychic plane, plus a tad, are far beyond trapping our spiritual needs with crude matter.”

Zelnick scratched his head.

“Well, if you say so,” he semi-agreed. “Good luck then, I guess.”

“*Thank you and you too,*” the Pkunk replied. “*Farewell.*”

Zelnick cut the transmission and turned to Gruber.

“Contact our Pkunk pilots,” he said.

The next day they arrived at Alpha Centauri, sold the coordinates of the rainbow world in Gamma Aquarii for 500 credits and filled their fuel tanks. Since they had an abundance of credits and the Vindicator’s module slots were almost full, they decided to finally buy the last module the Melnorme had for sale – the designs for a double-capacity fuel tank. The prices for the pieces of information they wanted all had too many zeroes. In Gruber’s opinion it was unlikely that they could get anything more out of the Melnorme, other than fuel.

The Pkunk that were stationed on the Vindicator had agreed to stay and continue on the *holy quest* until the exciting end, whatever that was.

Two days later the Vindicator was back at the starbase. The first thing they did was to transfer the bomb to Dr. Fredrikson’s lab for testing. Gruber felt a great relief when the bomb left the Vindicator, even though he was certain that if the bomb accidentally went off, it wouldn’t matter whether it was at the starbase or on Mars. His relief didn’t last long anyway, since he himself went to the starbase on the next shuttle.

The shipyard got straight to work modifying the Vindicator’s fuel tanks to the new double-capacity variant. After that operation the Vindicator could store enough fuel to take a tour around the Ur-Quan spheres of influence. A squadron of Utwig ships was also put in the production queue and repairs were started on the Seraph.

Captain Tanaka had been busy. Gruber didn’t count them himself, but he was told that there were over a hundred

Shofixti on the starbase already. A section of the living quarters had been dedicated to them, but it was evident that, given the growth rate of their population, some other solution would be required soon.

“One thing has been bugging me,” Zelnick said to Gruber as they were on their way towards Admiral Zex’s cell. “Why are we placing so much value on the Shofixti? I mean, it’s nice to see their race resurrected and all, and I hear they grow up really fast, but in terms of war... We don’t have the time to train them, do we?”

Zelnick raised a fair point in Gruber’s opinion, seeing as he probably didn’t know the most interesting facts about Shofixti biology.

“You are half-right,” he answered. “Normally, following Star Control guidelines, it would take years to go through the training of a starship crewmember, not to mention the training of a fighter pilot. But the Shofixti are a special case.”

“How so?” Zelnick asked to keep Gruber talking.

“There are two reasons,” Gruber explained. “First, it only takes a month or so for the Shofixti to reach maturity. Even though some of us humans would consider them child soldiers, taking up arms in an early stage is part of their culture.”

They reached the elevator and Gruber set the dial to the alien containment area.

“Second,” Gruber continued, “the Shofixti are born with a certain set of talents – inherited from their male parent. If the male parent was, say, an excellent archer, all of the offspring would know how to use a bow efficiently without anyone ever teaching them. And now, luckily for us, Tanaka is the male parent of the entire first generation.”

Zelnick seemed impressed.

“So you’re saying we have a horde of Shofixti-babies who knew how to fly a starship before they knew how to walk?” the captain checked.

The elevator reached the cell block.

“That is exactly what I’m saying,” Gruber summed it up. “Their new civilization has to start learning other skills from scratch, though.”

They passed the cell of the Thraddash captive. It was empty. There was still a faint smell of cigar in the air. Perhaps the prisoner had been deemed to be of no further use and was disposed of. Gruber and Zelnick didn’t discuss the matter.

As they reached Zex’s cell, the admiral got up to greet them.

“Ah, my favorite visitors,” Zex said. “How can I be of assistance?”

They had agreed to get right to the point.

“Tell us about the Yehat and the Pkunk,” Zelnick requested.

Zex leaned against the bars.

“Well, I know the Yehat pretty well,” the admiral began, “but I have never met the Pkunk. I have only seen them on a few scout reports – when some of their ships had entered Yehat space.”

“What did the reports say?” Zelnick inquired.

“That the Yehat destroyed them...” Zex continued, “...opened fire on sight.”

Gruber wasn’t too happy about the story and made little effort to hide it.

“They might have just been unlucky, though,” Zex said.

“What makes you say that?” Zelnick asked.

Zex leaned more towards Zelnick.

“The Yehat aren’t as unified as you humans or us Vux,” Zex explained. “Their people are organized into many different *clans*, with many different cultures. If one clan

opens fire on the Pkunk on sight, it doesn't mean that all clans do."

Gruber of course knew that, but he also knew that Zelnick didn't know.

"The Yehat have a history of bloody clan wars," Gruber explained. "The wars came to an end when a single queen was able to unite the clans. But that still doesn't mean that they have to like each other."

"And indeed they don't," Zex contributed. "Every clan mostly keeps to themselves as much as possible. And according to my little birds, there is quite a lot of dissatisfaction with the queen nowadays."

"So how long has that queen reigned?" Zelnick asked.

Gruber and Zex quickly exchanged looks.

"There have been many queens," Zex said.

"Supposedly the first queen came before their space age," Gruber explained. "But the Yehat claimed that their current queen – or the queen that they had 20 years ago – was descendant of that first queen."

"Veep-Neep is her name, by the way," Zex specified. "The current queen that is. It's the same one that surrendered to the Ur-Quan at the end of the Great War. And I know from reliable sources that many clans considered that act highly shameful. Their shame was then magnified to the extreme by the courageous last stand of the Shofixti... On that note, it would be highly interesting to see what the Yehat would do if you showed them that the Shofixti have been 'reborn'."

Again Gruber had to snap out of trusting Zex so completely. But still, there was much promise in those words. If there was any chance of getting the Yehat back to the alliance, it was worth a shot. Gruber checked his communicator to see if *Captain* Tanaka was available.

He wasn't. According to the not-available-message, he had been out of range for several days now.

Incidentally, Gruber's communicator beeped just then, indicating an incoming call. The caller was Leonov from the control room. Gruber answered the call.

"The Sa-Matra has been found," Leonov announced the huge piece of news like it was the score of a minor-league football game. *"Zoq-Fot-Pik scouts located it from Delta Crateris. There's a briefing in two hours."*

Since Gruber was unprepared for an announcement of such magnitude, he hadn't made any effort to prevent Zex from hearing it.

"Ah, so you **do** know about the Sa-Matra," Zex remarked.

Gruber thanked Leonov for the information, and also thanked him for sharing the information with their prisoner. Then he closed the connection, hoping that Leonov would feel guilty.

"What do **you** know about the Sa-Matra?" Zelnick asked Zex.

The admiral let go of the bars and took a step back.

"You know, I'd really prefer to get out of this cell," Zex declared.

Zelnick looked at Gruber in a *you-handle-this-situation* kind of way.

"You must understand that we cannot let you leave," Gruber said.

"Oh, by no means," Zex replied, sounding sincere again. "I have nothing to gain by escaping as I have nowhere to go. I don't want to leave this base, I just want out of this cell."

Zex appeared disturbingly harmless.

"So you're saying that you spill the beans on the Sa-Matra only if we promote you from prisoner to guest?" Gruber summed up the deal.

Zex leaned towards Gruber.

"That's a fine way of putting it," the admiral commended him. "I don't want to sound mean, but I've been very co-

operative these past weeks and I'm still stuck in this tiny cell."

Zex looked at Zelnick.

"Our **relationship** cannot go further unless you trust me," Zex continued.

"Trust you?" Gruber said. "You have already betrayed us once. Why should we trust you now?"

Zex looked back at Gruber.

"When you suddenly came to my home, my hand was forced," the admiral replied. "But I understand that you are unable to see the events from my point of view."

"So what is your point of view?" Zelnick asked to join the conversation, which seemed to cheer Zex up.

"I had a plan," Zex began, "a plan that would have enabled me to take over the High Council in a matter of years. However, that plan flew straight out of the window when you unexpectedly showed up. At that point I saw only two possible options: Either I would run away from my political enemies, or I would let myself be captured by the enemies of my political enemies."

Zelnick nodded.

"And you chose us," he said.

Zex nodded.

"The enemy of my enemy is my friend," Zex replied. "And besides... I like you."

Zelnick blushed.

"But what do you have to gain from all this?" Gruber asked. "How would it help you if we defeated the Hierarchy?"

Zex sighed.

"It wouldn't, if I'm stuck in this cell," the admiral explained. "I assume that if you defeat the Ur-Quan, my people will surrender. You would then probably impose some sanctions for the former battle thralls. When that happens, I plan to be on your good side and negotiate a very

favorable deal for the Vux. By taking advantage of that publicity, it would be easy for me to take down the current High Council and set our people free from their bigoted tyranny.”

Gruber and Zelnick took a moment to take in the explanation. Zex sounded extremely convincing... again.

“I’m sure we would rather see **you** as the leader of the Vux,” Zelnick said.

Gruber decided to remain silent since he recognized Zex had gotten the better of him again.

“We’ll discuss your release in the next Command Council’s meeting,” Zelnick continued.

The meeting began two hours later. The only thing on their agenda was supposed to be the Sa-Matra. It was also the first formal meeting where the Utwig and the Supox were present. The Shofixti were not represented as *Captain Tanaka* was away.

The Zoq-Fot-Pik had sent numerous scouts deep into Ur-Quan space, but none had returned. However, one of the scouts had managed to send a short burst transmission that went as follows:

Target found at Mrragh-ahah, Zeg-paue, Jingle-Yoyo.

According to the Zoq-Fot-Pik emissaries, in the standard coordinate system that meant 620.0 : 593.5, which pointed to Delta Crateris.

There was also one image included in the transmission. It was a photo, taken from the edge of the star system, zoomed in on one of the planets. The image wasn’t sharp, but it was enough to reach two important conclusions: First, there was something huge in orbit. Second, it was guarded by a ridiculously large fleet. The photo was still being analyzed, but even with a quick glance one could say that there were at least a hundred ships – and those were only the ones visible on that one hazy image.

“This confirms our earlier suspicions,” Hayes began. “Obviously we can’t just march in there and drop the bomb at their doorstep. We need a diversion.”

“We need the Dnyarri,” Gruber added.

“And we need more intel,” Trent finished.

Zelnick nodded with everyone else.

“Perhaps the crystal ones could tell us more,” the Zoq said.

“Absolutely,” Trent agreed, “and about the bomb as well. They specifically said that we should send all data we have on the bomb to them if we ever acquire it.”

“They might even know something about the Dnyarri,” Gruber said to stay on his subject.

It seemed like the alliance had a purpose again.

“All of you are right,” Hayes wrapped it up. “The Vindicator should travel to Procyon as soon as possible and discuss everything with the Chenjesu. Meanwhile, we need to send more scouts to Delta Crateris.”

“Unfortunately we don’t have much to spare anymore,” the Zoq said.

“Yeah, we sacrificed all of our best scouts already,” the Pik continued.

Gruber also felt that the Zoq-Fot-Pik had done their part on the matter already.

“I’m sure we can be of assistance,” one of the Arilou representatives said.

“As can we,” the Utwig representative followed. “Our forces are battling the Kohr-Ah as we speak. The Ultron surely guides them to find some additional information on this Sa-Matra.”

“Excellent,” Hayes said. “That settles our main agenda. Is there anything else?”

Zelnick hesitated for a while before standing up.

“There is,” he began. “About our prisoner, Admiral Zex...”

After the meeting Gruber and Zelnick made their way back to the containment area. The council had agreed that if Zex gave the alliance crucial information on the Sa-Matra, Zex could be let out of the cell. The admiral would still be confined to the starbase, though.

Gruber had also asked about *Captain* Tanaka's whereabouts. Hayes was able to tell him that after *Captain* Tanaka had succeeded in his ultimate duty, he wanted to finish his old mission and report to the Yehat. There was no reason to deny that to him, so he had taken his old ship and set out towards Yehat space. It seemed likely that he would never be heard from again.

Zex got up and took hold of the bars as Gruber and Zelnick approached. Zelnick explained the deal to Zex and beckoned the admiral to start talking.

"As I'm sure you know," Zex immediately began, "there is only one Ur-Quan commanding each Dreadnought. All of their crew consists of their slaves, such as us, the Vux. The Sa-Matra is different, though. I know that the Sa-Matra is crewed entirely by the Ur-Quan – probably because they consider it a holy artifact. Anyway, I personally witnessed the Sa-Matra in action at the end of the Great War. So great was its power that, even though it was used against my enemies, I considered it unfair."

Gruber made sure he was recording everything.

"Describe its capabilities," Gruber instructed.

"Of course," Zex complied. "I saw it fire blasts of fusion energy that resembled the Dreadnought's shots in composition, but their speed and mass were both much greater. And what's more, they homed in on their targets. I doubt even your ship could evade them. Small fighters would have a much better chance at that, but then again, no such enemy fighters ever got even remotely close to the

Sa-Matra, so I don't know if it has some other form of defense against them."

"Go on," Gruber urged.

"I saw the Sa-Matra destroy targets several light-minutes away," Zex continued. "It also didn't seem like it would run out of ammo or combat batteries any time soon. I suspect it can keep on firing for hours."

"What about the rate of fire?" Zelnick asked.

"Hmm..." Zex tried to recall. "I believe there was a lag of about a minute or so between shots."

Gruber imagined the devastation the Sa-Matra could do before its enemies could even see it.

"Does it have a weak spot?" he asked.

"None that I know of," Zex answered. "I can say for sure though that no conventional weapon could penetrate its armor. You need to come up with something else... something sneaky... And in my experience, that's what you humans do best."

Zex's praise made Gruber feel proud.

"Is there anything else?" he checked.

Zex was eyeing the lock of the door to the cage.

"I can't think of anything else right now," Zex replied. "I'll tell you what... If you let me out now and show me around this base, I will tell you where the Ur-Quan stashed all the Syreen ships."

The proposal came as a pleasant surprise, especially since Gruber was about to let Zex out anyway.

"That sounds like a deal," he said and opened the door.

CHAPTER 21

ZOMBIE BLOBBIES

January 29th 2156, Beta Orionis, 197.8 : 596.8

We're about to activate our dead man's brake and approach the Umgah homeworld. Since this is an extremely risky mission, I think it would be appropriate to recap some of the interesting things that we have learned in the past few weeks... Just in case we die here... in which case nobody would ever read this log, so what am I doing?

Our new friend, Admiral Zex, claimed that there are dozens of Syreen Penetrator starships hidden in a huge underground vault at the moon of the first planet in Epsilon Camelopardalis, 593.7 : 393.7. It fits the description the Syreen gave us – a red-or-orange star no further than 200 units from Betelgeuse. Now that we know the Mycon are responsible for the destruction of the Syreen home planet, the Syreen might be eager to get their hands on their ships. I can't wait to tell them.

Speaking of Zex, Lydia told me that she spends a lot of time with the admiral and that they get along really well. I don't know what to think about that. Hayes assured me that he is constantly keeping an eye on Zex, but I fear that if Zex wanted to, Zex could outsmart us.

We had a short, but meaningful discussion with the Chenjesu and the Mmrrnmhrm. They were very interested and knowledgeable regarding the bomb. Unfortunately, they had some bad news though... According to their

calculations, even this frightening bomb we have is not enough to destroy the Sa-Matra, but, they claimed they could amplify it to make it equal to the task. Unfortunately – once again – they would have to be on the same side of the slave shield as the bomb to do that. If we trust their word on this, it seems that we must acquire the solar amplifier the Mycon supposedly have and boost the hybridization process of the Chenjesu and the Mmrrnmhrm, even though they are not too excited about the idea.

Surprisingly they also knew about the Dnyarri and warned us that the Dnyarri are the embodiment of evil – at least according to legend. They also knew that the Dnyarri indeed possess strong mental powers that could help us against the Ur-Quan ... if we can find a way to tame the Dnyarri's power.

Now that the Pkunk have left their home, we can only speculate what the Ilwrath are going to do. They have recently been increasingly active near Sol and therefore the defenses of Sol are being fortified, which needlessly drains our resources. If we could find a way to get rid of the Ilwrath, it would help us a great deal.

On a lighter note, we just received word from the starbase that the Shofixti population has quadrupled since we left. The only habitable and accessible planet we know of right now is the former Androsynth homeworld, so we're planning to send the Shofixti there on a colonization mission soon.

“Let's go through this one last time,” Zelnick said before pushing the big red button that activated the dead man's brake system. “Gruber, would you mind?”

“Not at all, captain,” Gruber replied. “Once the *dead man's switch* is active, we must push this button once every

minute, or the Vindicator will automatically perform an emergency warp and fly to Sol on autopilot. Captain van Rijn has in her possession a remote trigger for the switch, which she can use if she has a reason to believe that we here are being manipulated to keep pushing the button. The system will be activated when we push this button for the first time. Deactivating it will require the captain, myself, and Mr. Skeates to input a code into the system – a personal code known only to us.”

Zelnick seemed satisfied with the setup.

“We’re not taking any chances with the Dnyarri,” he addressed the officers on the bridge. “Our mind shield appears strong, but obviously we can’t be sure without testing it. And we can’t test it without approaching the Dnyarri. And we probably can’t approach the Dnyarri without kicking a few ass-equivalents in the process. Knowing what happened to the Thraddash, we have to be extra careful. That’s why we have this complicated insurance scheme – this *dead man’s brake*.”

Everyone seemed ready.

“Alright then,” Zelnick said and pushed the button “Mr. Samusenko, take us to the first planet.”

It was a pain to fly several hours in true space, having to push the damn button every minute. After 34 minutes* Zelnick was ready to crack and asked if they should disable the switch entirely after all. Gruber was able to motivate him by explaining that trains of the 20th century all had a similar switch the driver had to keep on pressing. After an additional 81 minutes Zelnick suggested that they would use duct tape or some other Boy Scout solution to make the button stay pressed. Gruber then further motivated him by explaining that many train drivers had done something of the sort back

* Gruber took time

in the day and – if caught – had received severe punishments. Of course he didn't actually know that, but it made a good story.

One lonely Umgah ship happened to be on their path. It didn't react to their presence, though. It was just sending out a constant signal with a single message:

“Nothing. Happen. Very. Boring. Depart. Never. Return. Funny. Ha. Ha. Ha.”

The New Alliance of Free Stars ignored the message and continued.

Finally they reached the orbit of the first planet. There were Umgah ships here and there, but their positioning and movements appeared strange – as if they were randomly moving around the entire star system. Zelnick and Gruber had agreed that they wouldn't try to contact any of the ships yet. Instead, since they had arrived at the Umgah home planet, Zelnick ordered the communications officer to send an invitation to chat on the common hyperwave frequency.

“We're getting a response now,” Katja soon reported. “The signal is coming from the surface. Establishing connection... Ready.”

An image of the Ur-Quan's talking pet – a Dnyarri – appeared on screen.

“What do you want?” the Dnyarri asked in a hostile tone.

So far things were going better than they had expected as they didn't have to waste time searching for the Dnyarri.

“We come in peace,” Zelnick announced. “We want to talk about overthrowing the Ur-Quan Hierarchy.”

The Dnyarri appeared pleased to hear that.

“Good idea!” it said. *“May I just say I'm behind you 100 percent! But unfortunately the Umgah are all too busy to come to the hyperwave caster right now so, er... Come back later... **Much** later.”*

The other ships in the Vindicator's fleet were positioned as close to the Vindicator as possible, since they didn't have any factual data on the range of the Taalo mind shield.

"It's **you** we want to talk with, not the Umgah," Zelnick explained. "We know of your crash at Alpha Pavonis. We know what you are, Dnyarri. Let's get to the point. We—"

"Argh!" the Dnyarri interrupted him. *"Why didn't you just leave when I gave you the chance? I cannot let you interfere with my plan, not when I'm so close..."*

Suddenly Gruber felt a strange and powerful unpleasant feeling. As if a strong, cold wind gushed inside his head.

"Aiee!" the Dnyarri screamed. *"I cannot compel you! Your minds are closed to me... What the hell are you aliens, descendants of the Taalo?"*

"We're—" Zelnick tried, but the Dnyarri cut him short again.

"Never mind, I'll just resort to more primitive measures."

The screen went blank.

"They cut the transmission," Katja announced.

"Captain, all the Umgah ships have now set course towards us," Dujardin reported.

"Of course," Zelnick said. "Well, we're prepared for this, aren't we?"

Zelnick then opened a frequency to all the other ships in their fleet.

"Let 'em have it," he ordered.

They had assumed that their relatively small fleet could take down a vast number of Umgah Drone vessels without exposing themselves to any great danger. However, they had not expected the Umgah ships to move as if piloted by novices. It wasn't even a battle. It was a slaughterhouse.

It didn't take long until the enemy ships stopped approaching them.

“We’re being hailed from the surface,” Katja reported and Zelnick gave her permission to answer the call.

“Well, hello there, **friendly** starship captain,” the Dnyarri began. “You will never believe this, but somehow, when that Ur-Quan Dreadnought crashed, the injuries I suffered triggered some kind of a... personality transformation. I became evil and spiteful! Cruel and nasty! Whimsically unpleasant!”

There was no point in interrupting the alien as it looked like there was going to be quite an apology.

“But now I’m cured!” the Dnyarri continued. “I don’t know exactly how, but when you were fighting with the Umgah, a chunk of ceiling fell upon my head and gave me quite a whack! Ouchy-oochy... It still hurts...”

In Gruber’s opinion the Dnyarri was as convincing as Fwiffo had been in a similar situation.

“When I awoke,” the Dnyarri explained, “the universe had ceased to be the dark and hostile place I previously thought it to be. Instead, I was overwhelmed, yes, even awed by the beauty and perfection of it all! I also discovered that I had completely lost those wicked **temporary psychic powers**. I can now look forward to a new life, filled with happiness, butterflies and goodwill for all! Your job is done, oh noble starship captain. You have saved me! Thank you, thank you, thank you! Now you can safely turn off your psychic protection.”

“You’re right,” Zelnick smiled at the creature. “I will never believe that.”

The Dnyarri gave Zelnick a hostile look.

“Okay, okay, so I was lying,” it admitted. “Boy, are you a **pain**, you know that? So what exactly was it that you wanted? My life?”

Zelnick stood up.

“We represent the New Alliance of Free Stars,” he proclaimed. “We are going to strike a fatal blow to the Ur-Quan and we need your help to do that.”

The Dnyarri seemed to cheer up.

“*Bravo,*” it commended Zelnick. “*It appears our goals are aligned. I too wish to see the Ur-Quan beaten, humiliated and destroyed. Now that you demolished my own plan, I have no choice but to go with yours. What kind of an arrangement did you have in mind?*”

“You will come aboard our ship,” Zelnick began. “When the time comes, you will use your powers to confuse the Ur-Quan to our advantage. After that you are free to do as you please. But any tricks and you’ll be sucking vacuum.”

There was a strange smile-like expression on the Dnyarri’s face.

“*No tricks, Captain Zelnick, *hehheh* no tricks,*” it said. “*I’m on your side now. If you don’t mind, for my own protection I’d prefer to keep the Umgah under my control until I’m aboard your ship.*”

The Dnyarri boarded the Vindicator in a small craft that appeared to be specifically designed for transporting small cargo between the surface and orbit at a planet with an atmosphere. The creature was stashed in the cargo hold in a sealed compartment with an airlock. The arrangement was made in mutual understanding – the Vindicator’s crew wouldn’t bother the Dnyarri and the Dnyarri wouldn’t bother them.

Soon the Dnyarri’s effect on the Umgah seemed to wear off as the movement of their ships started to make sense. Not long afterwards, the Vindicator received a transmission from the surface.

“*All hail savior!*” an Umgah declared. “*The killer of the wicked Dnyarri in our presence! Hail!*”

Gruber had almost forgotten how weird the Umgah really looked. Their purple bodies could best be described as ‘random’. If you gave a chunk of wet clay to a small child and then attached any amount of eyes, mouths and tentacles to it*, the result would be an Umgah.

“Uh, yeah, that’s us,” Zelnick lied. “It’s good to see you’re okay... I think.”

“*Hail! Hail! Hail!*” the Umgah kept on chanting, which made Gruber feel uncomfortable. “*We must reward superior hero! But what do we have to give? We are simple blobbies. We Umgah have nothing but vast amounts of biological skills and data.*”

“Well...” Zelnick began, but the Umgah interrupted him.

“*Have it! Have it! Genetic modification! Yes, it perfect gift! We add some extra eyes! A few tentacles! Other organs of whatever size and shape you desire!*”

“Eh, thanks,” Zelnick tried to honor the proposed gift. “But how about if you, instead, joined the New Alliance of Free Stars?”

The Umgah laughed like it was the funniest joke in the world.

“No,” they finally said.

Zelnick seemed a bit offended.

“Wow, that was... blunt,” he said. “Well, if you won’t join, how about some information, hmm? Like, we heard you tricked the Ilwrath into attacking the Pkunk.”

The Umgah laughed again.

“*Har! Har! Har! That long time ago! What an old joke. Wait! That makes it even funnier! The Pkunk must be extinct! Har! Har! Har!*”

“Er, yes... ha-ha...” Zelnick forced a laugh. “Could you tell us how you pulled that off?”

* the clay, not the child

“Oh, that easy,” the Umgah replied. “We use this powerful hyperwave caster at outskirts of Ilwrath home system. We transmit on channel 44, giving commands as Dogar and Kazon.”

“Could you undo it?” Zelnick asked. “The Ilwrath are beginning to be a pain in our asses as well.”

The Umgah suddenly showed its teeth – on all four of its mouths.

“Undo joke? UNDO JOKE? Oh no, human hero make fatal mistake!

...

Har! Har! Har! Good joke, eh? Scared you! No, cannot undo joke. Spoil-sport Spathi stole our super cool hyperwave caster. The Ilwrath out of control and can't do anything about it! Har! Har! Har!”

Gruber felt uncomfortable with the conversation and obviously so did Zelnick.

“That’s... funny,” Zelnick humored the alien. “We’ll just be going then, unless, of course, you have some big Hierarchy secrets to tell us.”

The Umgah suddenly seemed very cooperative.

*“Sure, we’ll tell our secrets,” it said. “Now let me see... What **are** secrets? Oh yes!... remember! It about Mycon! You see, Mycon only other race we know of that have same kind of biotechnical skills as Umgah. But amazing thing, they do all with their own bodies, don’t need tools. They just **think** genetic modification, and it happen!”*

“That’s incredible,” Zelnick commented. “I mean... no, it’s not... That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Agree!” the Umgah said. “We found that pretty hard to understand too, so when nobody looking, we clonk one on head, bring it back here and slice it up for detailed study. And what we find...”

There was a skillful pause – just the right length at just the right time to prepare for the climax of the story.

“Those guys not product of any natural evolutionary process,” the Umgah delivered. *“They constructs! They some kind of multi-purpose biological tool. We don’t know who made them or for what purpose, but they way beyond anything we ever heard of. We not figure out much more before tissue samples all gross, so guess that pretty much all of big secret.*

...

Oh... do us favor? Please not tell anybody about clonking Mycon. It kind of against Ur-Quan laws, and not want get Mycon mad at us.”

“I promise,” Zelnick convincingly said.

Neither of them said anything for a short while.

“Are you sure you wouldn’t join the New Alliance of Free Stars?” Zelnick asked again.

“Sure,” the Umgah immediately replied. *“We in your debt, great hero. But already we tired of worship. If we were friends, every day we would say ‘Hail great hero!’ That boring. If we were enemies... Great Enemies... That funny. We prefer funny.”*

“Excuse me?” Zelnick said.

The Umgah laughed again.

“To arms!” they shouted. *“It our Great Enemy! Attack!”*

And then the Umgah cut the transmission.

“They’re not really attacking us, are they, Danielle?” Zelnick wistfully checked with the radar operator.

“Enemy ships all around as are getting into formation,” Dujardin reported.

Zelnick hit the arm rest of his chair with his fist.

“Those ungrateful sons of bitches,” he cursed. “Patch me through to the Dnyarri.”

There was a monitor at the Dnyarri’s compartment. Soon the image of the creature was displayed on screen.

“I want to complain,” the Dnyarri said right off the bat.

“I don’t care,” Zelnick brushed the creature off. “Can you employ your powers against the Umgah for a short while again? Those backstabbing blobbies turned on us.”

The Dnyarri rolled its eyes.

“Hello? Hello, you idiotic creature,” it replied. *“Why do you think I haven’t compelled each and every one of you already? And why do you think I have this TERRIBLE HEADACHE!”*

“We’re not turning off the mind shield, quit acting,” Zelnick called the possible bluff.

“Fine, believe what you want,” the Dnyarri said. *“But the fact remains that right now I cannot compel anyone any more than you can, so if you don’t have any more stupid questions, keep quiet and let me sleep.”*

Zelnick cut the signal.

“Asshole,” he declared.

Gruber couldn’t remember seeing the captain so angry before. Right then Captain van Rijn opened up a link to the Vindicator.

“Shall we run or fight?” she asked.

Zelnick sighed and asked for Gruber’s opinion.

“We have nothing to gain by fighting here,” Gruber counseled.

Zelnick nodded.

“Mr. Samusenko, start the emergency warp,” he ordered.

While the emergency warp unit was charging, the rest of the Vindicator’s fleet gave cover fire to keep the enemy at bay. Their fleet was strong enough to pull that off without any great difficulty. It would have taken a few additional minutes for the Umgah to get into more dangerous positions. When the emergency warp was ready, the Vindicator pulled all of its escort ships along with it into hyperspace.

Two weeks later they entered the vortex leading to Alpha Tauri, the Ilwrath home system at 022.9 : 366.6. They had

not seen any Ilwrath ships on the radar, which was consistent with the Ilwrath's current calculated sphere of influence. Apparently the Ilwrath had mobilized their entire fleet to attack the Pkunk and left the hyperspace region near their home system unpatrolled.

The Vindicator had made a short stop at Gamma Normae along the way to contact the starbase via ansible. They had agreed that trying to replicate the Umgah trick was worth the shot. After all, it was likely that the powerful hyperwave caster they had was the same one the Umgah had used. If they were successful in imitating the Ilwrath gods, they could order the Ilwrath to retreat from the vicinity of Sol – or maybe even commit mass-suicide.

The system looked peaceful. There were five planets orbiting a green dwarf star. There was every reason to believe, though, that the innermost planet was far from peaceful. The location of the Ilwrath homeworld was known already in the Great War because the Chenjesu had made contact with the Ilwrath before the arrival of the Ur-Quan.

“Here goes,” Zelnick said as he got ready to transmit. “Katja, set the hyperwave transmitter to channel 44.”

Zelnick and Gruber had had lots of time to prepare their speech. Since they didn't know how the Umgah had acted and what kind of characters Dogar and Kazon were made to be, they had decided to keep their messages simple.

“You're good to go, sir,” the communications officer reported.

Zelnick acted the part of Dogar and Gruber played the part of Kazon.

“**Ilwrath!**” Zelnick exclaimed in a deep and mysterious voice.

There was no benefit from changing one's voice, as the translation computer chose the voice on its own. But if it helped Zelnick to get into character, there was no point in denying that from him.

“Heed these words!” Gruber joined in with an almost neutral voice, but not quite.

They waited for a response, which didn’t take long to come.

“Attend!” an Ilwrath frantically shouted. *“The Cruel Twins Of Pain And Death Have Returned To Instruct Us! Acolyte! Turn The Volume To Maximum Immediately!... Dogar And Kazon! What Can We, Your Humble And Devious Servants, Do For You?”*

A promising start, Gruber thought. He and Zelnick checked their script-tree from the branch where the Ilwrath swallowed the bait completely.

“Our evil children,” Zelnick began with the same silly voice. **“Leave this place!”**

“Seek new prey!” Gruber continued, noticing that he accidentally used the same kind of voice as the captain.

The Ilwrath made some clicking and clapping sounds.

“Oh Mighty Dogar! Oh Mighty Kazon!” they all worshipped. *“We Hear Your Words And Obey Your Divine And Cruel Insights. The Pkunk Are Unfit For Our Sacramental Tortures! We Relish The Prospect Of Killing Worthy Prey!”*

...

“But Who Shall We Prey Upon Next? Who Shall Suffer Our Inspired Torment?”

Zelnick pointed at the dialog branch where they went after the jackpot. Gruber nodded in agreement.

“Towards the core!” Zelnick began. **“For too long have you lived at the mercy of your masters!”**

“No, that is not living,” Gruber continued, completely engulfed in character. **“That is someone letting you live.”**

Strange screams could be heard from the Ilwrath.

“Evil Dogar! Cruel Kazon!” they shouted. *“We Pray Thee Gods, Forgive Us For Our Worthlessness!”*

“It is time to break those chains!” Zelnick declared like someone finishing up an emotional political speech.

“Rise up!” Gruber followed. **“Kill gloriously in our name!”**

Now the Ilwrath were cheering.

“From The Chambers Of Pain We Hear Your Words, Cruel And Evil Lords Of Darkness,” the Ilwrath speaker said. *“And As Your Voice Crackles Out Of The Speaker Boxes, It Sends Thrills Across Our Carapaces. Our Hairy Quills All Stand Erect And We Pant And Wheeze With Holy Fervor!”*

“Kill! Kill! Kill!” the rest of the crowd chanted.

“Your Divine Guidance Has Shown Us The Way,” the speaker continued. *“The Ur-Quan Hierarchy Is No Longer Off-Limits! Those Loathsome Umgah Once Mentioned A Race Near Their Region Of Space And They Shall Be Our Next Prey. The Thraddash! We Will Go And Kill All Of Them! This We Shall Do In Your Names!”*

“Evil Dogar!” the crowd cheered. *“Hideous Kazon!”*

Gruber thought that the mission was accomplished and that they should try to end the conversation...

...Unfortunately Zelnick’s new power over the Ilwrath seemed to have gone to his head.

“We require changes!” the captain practically shouted.

The comment seemed to excite the Ilwrath even more.

“Your Will Is Our Inspiration!” the Ilwrath speaker said. *“What Shall We Do?”*

Gruber tried to whisper to Zelnick to ask what the hell the man was doing, but he was unsuccessful.

“You are no longer the Ilwrath,” Zelnick began while gathering attention for his next line. **“YOU ARE NOW THE DILL-RATS!”**

Gruber hastily forged a (figurative) wire model which clearly indicated that Zelnick should stop talking immediately. The aliens were ecstatic, though.

“We, The Dill-Rats, Bow And Scrape Off Our Appendages In Your Honor, Mighty Dogar And Kazon!”

Gruber figuratively rubbed the figurative model in Zelnick’s face, bringing the captain to his senses. Gruber then decided to take initiative.

“We return now to the fetid darkness,” he informed the ~~Ilwrath~~ Dill-Rats. **“Obey our commands!”**

The cheering quieted down somewhat.

“Farewell, Oh Great Gods Of Evil And Darkness,” the Ilwrath speaker said. *“We Are Awed By Your Malevolent Presence, And Swear Unto You To Commit Even More Vile And Treacherous Deeds Tomorrow Than We Did Today!”*

Gruber took the liberty of cutting the transmission and giving the captain a disapproving look. Zelnick at least seemed to be ashamed.

“Let’s get out of here,” the captain commanded. “Inform the starbase and set course for Sol.”

CHAPTER 22

THE CAMELOPARDALIAN

February 18th 2156, Betelgeuse, 412.5 : 377.0

*We're close. And I don't mean close to the warm bodies of the Syreen, even though we **are** close to them as well. I mean we are close to being ready for the final push. There are just a few more things to take care of. And then this war might come to an end – one way or the other... I'd prefer the other.*

Someone pointed out that today it has been exactly one year since the Vindicator arrived at the starbase for the first time. Time sure flies, huh? They say that happens when you're having fun. I remember having fun once... a long time ago...

...Jokes aside, we have been able to confirm that the entire Ilwrath armada is on its way to the Draconis constellation. Even though the Thraddash were ultimately a quite sympathetic race and posed only a small threat, we have every right and reason to hope that the Ilwrath and the Thraddash wipe each other out. At the very least, they should keep each other busy while we go to war with both of the Ur-Quan sub-species.

The Dnyarri has been pretty passive these past three weeks. While I'm glad that the mind shield works, we have to come up with a means for the Dnyarri to use its powers against the Ur-Quan when the time comes. I don't trust the Dnyarri enough to disable our shield, even for a few

seconds, so we'll probably have to get the creature off the Vindicator to do its thing.

So why have we come to Betelgeuse? Here's the deal: We will inform the Syreen about the whereabouts of their ships and, with all the dirt we have on the Mycon now, we let them know that it was the Mycon that destroyed their original home planet, not a natural disaster. Of course we cannot be absolutely sure that it was the Mycon, but it fits the big picture. If we have to, we can confirm it with the Melnorme and I'll be damned if there isn't any proof of Mycon activity on the surface of Syra.

Ultimately we need to get the Mycon colonization fleet on the move. When they reach their destination, the alliance will be waiting for them there. Meanwhile, the Vindicator will go to Beta Brahe and steal the solar manipulator – assuming they haven't moved it. So now the real question that remains is... Where do we set up the trap and how do we lure the Mycon there?

Zelnick claimed that before getting down to business he had to take care of some personal stuff with Commander Talana. Gruber and the rest of the visiting team didn't mind spending some off-time with their hostesses, so there were no complaints. Surely business could wait.

Without getting into too much detail, when Zelnick finally returned with Talana (and with a stupid grin on his face), all the men were brisk and ready for anything.

“Now then,” Commander Talana began as all the high-ranking Syreen officials and the humans were present, “what was this important piece of information you wanted to tell us?”

Gruber took care of all the talking. He told the Syreen about the stashed Penetrator starships and the theory on what happened to Syra, the Syreen home planet. Judging by the reactions of the Syreen, their late home world was a touchy

subject. Once it had sunken into them that the Mycon were actually responsible for their homelessness, things got a little emotional. A lesser man would have been glad that pleasure had been taken care of before business. Gruber considered himself a greater man, though, so he decisively thought about nothing but ocean until things had calmed down a bit.

“The Mycon will pay,” Talana summed up the thoughts of her people. “Oh, they are **so** going to pay.”

“I take it you want us to transport a team of your captains to Epsilon Camelopardalis then?” Gruber checked.

Talana nodded with a scary amount of determination in her eyes. In Gruber’s opinion women with too much determination were dangerous – especially if they had psychic powers. He wouldn’t want to disagree about anything with Talana.

They agreed – or rather, Talana decided – that the Vindicator would leave as soon as the Syreen captains and a bunch of equipment were on board. While they were away, Talana would come up with details about the trap they were going to set up.

While there was lots of scenic beauty at the Syreen starbase, Gruber was relieved when he set foot on the Vindicator again. He hadn’t seen the Syreen in such a state of mind before and he didn’t know how to handle that. He hadn’t discussed it with the captain yet, but he got the impression that Zelnick agreed with him.

But at least everything was so far going as planned. There were a few dozen strong-minded Syreen officers making themselves at home at the crew pod in module slot 11, which had more empty space than the one at module slot 4. The Vindicator suddenly had a majority of females on board, which was quite rare in the days of Star Control.

It was common knowledge that only females of the Syreen had the psychic ability they used in combat to

distract their enemies. It was on another level than the power of the Dnyarri, though. The Syreen had to be very close to the enemy ship for their power to work and even then they could only make the enemy forget what they were doing – not control their minds. And currently, with the mind shield active, they couldn't do that either. Instead, all of them complained they had a headache.

Luckily there was a quasispace exit portal only one day away from Epsilon Camelopardalis, so the trip wouldn't take too long and they had little risk of being spotted by the Ur-Quan while flying through their patrolled region of space. Of course they didn't know what kind of a vault was waiting for them, not to mention if the information was even reliable. If the place turned out to be too heavily fortified they would simply retreat and think of something else. However, it was also likely that there were no guards there. The Camelopardalis constellation was on the edge of the Ur-Quan sphere of influence and if the Kzer-Za were being pushed hard by the Kohr-Ah, they probably had concentrated their forces near the Crateris constellation where the Sa-Matra was. And who would they guard the ships from? The only ones capable of flying those ships were supposed to be stranded on Betelgeuse.

The Syreen were all invited to the bridge to see the Vindicator make the transition to quasispace. Most of them were in awe, but some seemed a bit frightened. Gruber was of course ready to comfort ladies in distress, but there was unfortunately no need for that.

Utilizing quasispace the Vindicator and its fleet arrived at Epsilon Camelopardalis in two days. Hierarchy presence was not detected. There were only two planets in the system and according to Admiral Zex, the Syreen ships were stashed on the moon of the first planet.

It took them roughly ten hours to reach the first planet, whose orbit pretty much resembled that of Mars, but this planet appeared green when viewed from afar. The color wasn't caused by plant-life, though. A quick analysis of the planet revealed that the cause was solid chlorine, which covered the entire surface. The moon, on the other hand, looked like a dull rock, but it did have an atmosphere.

Then came the interesting part. Everyone held their breath as Dujardin ran the energy scan on the moon, looking for signs of the vault.

"There!" Zelnick exclaimed and jumped up from his seat as the scan was finished and highlighted one particular area near the equator.

They all saw it quite well even without the captain pointing it out, though.

"Anything on the bio-scan?" Gruber asked Dujardin.

"Nope, nothing on the large-scale one," the radar operator replied. "I'm zooming in on the energy reading now."

Image of a small area around the energy source was displayed on the main screen. There were some visible gases in the atmosphere, so the image wasn't as crisp as it could be. But still, they could make out a landing site of some sort. Comparing the site with the surroundings made it evident that it was the only place within a few hundred kilometers where the Syreen ships could have landed. Nothing else could be made out of the picture.

"Hold on," Dujardin suddenly said. "I ran a focused bio-scan on that site and picked up something."

"What is it?" Zelnick asked.

Dujardin switched the bio-scan view on the main display together with the telescope view.

"There's a single entity there," she interpreted the image.

"What kind of an entity?" Zelnick demanded.

Dujardin focused on the highlighted part of the bio-scan view.

“I’d say it’s between a cat and a rhino in size,” she calculated.

As soon as she had said that, the target was lost.

“Now it must have gone underground or something,” she speculated.

“What if it’s with the Hierarchy?” Zelnick raised a question. “In that case we need to go down there quick before it can alert the Ur-Quan.”

Indeed there was little they could gain by waiting. The weather might never get any clearer.

“Or, more likely,” Gruber thought out loud, “if it alerts the Ur-Quan, we need to get the ships before the Ur-Quan arrive.”

Zelnick nodded.

“Speaking of which,” the captain began, “you, Mr. Gruber, have a habit of getting into trouble on surface missions. You’re probably still our best guy on dealing with aliens, but do you want to go?”

Gruber wasn’t sure whether Zelnick was being serious

“I appreciate your concern,” he played it safe. “I prefer going. Shall I get the landing team ready?”

“Please do,” Zelnick said.

Soon two groups of people – one human and one Syreen – were assembled at the hangar. Gruber’s team’s primary objective was to locate the entrance to the vault and secure it. A secondary objective was to locate the life form they saw on the scanner and make sure it wouldn’t interfere with their primary objective. One of the Syreen captains would join the human team and the rest of the Syreen would wait on board the Vindicator until the area was secure.

“And finally, here’s the conditions down there,” Gruber announced. “Temperature is a pleasant -50 degrees with an

atmospheric pressure of roughly 1.5 bar. Gravity is close to 0.5 G and the day lasts approximately eight hours. The sun will come up on our landing site in less than an hour, so we can leave right away. We are expecting pretty bad weather with strong winds, occasional lightning and visibility of about 200 meters.”

“A typical weather where I come from,” Ahmed said. “No need for suits.”

Gruber assumed the man was joking, but replied seriously nonetheless.

“Unfortunately,” he said, “the rest of us aren’t used to such conditions and the air is toxic, so we do need suits.”

There were no other comments.

“Let’s get going then,” Gruber ordered. “First team, board the shuttle.”

With Belov and Kilgore gone and Witherspoon out of commission, they had had to assign new people to the landing team. Everyone’s favorite Filipino, Tai, was one of the lucky ones. Tai wasn’t his real name, but since that one was impossible to pronounce without a violin, everyone called him Tai. Another new recruit was a Russian lady named Galina Volgina who, as a fun fact, won the silver medal in fencing at the Wellington Olympics in 2128. Gruber could only hope that they would someday have a use for that skill. The last available seat was taken by a pristine Syreen individual called Alia. Gruber took steps to ensure that he would sit next to her on the shuttle.

Jenkins checked that everyone was strapped in and then steered the shuttle out of the hangar and towards the planet. There were the usual sounds and bumps as they entered the atmosphere. After one particularly bumpy phase, Gruber, as a gentleman, had to check that Alia’s wardrobe hadn’t malfunctioned.

“Approaching landing zone,” Jenkins announced after the ride had calmed down.

The passengers could only wait, so they did exactly that. Soon the shuttle touched down and they all checked their gear before lowering the ramp. Cuvelier and Ahmed then went outside first and secured the site, followed by the rest of the team.

The weather was as bad as they had forecasted. There was a semi-thick fog that moved fast with the strong winds and every now and then they could hear thunder. There was a thin layer of a snow-like substance on the ground and the area around the shuttle was soon filled with footprints.

Dujardin confirmed over the radio that the landing team was at the right coordinates and that there was currently nothing on the bio-scan. They split up into small groups and searched the area for anything out of the ordinary, hoping to find the entrance to the vault. The vault door couldn't be too well hidden, since it would have to be big enough to fit a Syreen Penetrator starship.

"I got something over here," Rigby was the first to report. *"It's a small building – very small... about the size of a shower unit."*

Gruber had teamed up with Hawthorne, Robinson and Alia and couldn't see Rigby over the fog.

"You'd all better get over here," Rigby soon continued. *"Someone's been here."*

Everyone had homed in on Rigby's location and was soon looking at a small booth with a barrier next to it – like a checkpoint. The booth had a door, a window, a table and a chair. On the table there was some sort of a contraption whose appearance bore a slight hint of Spathi design. But the most noticeable things in the whole scene were the footprints leading in and out of the booth. Or rather, it was evident that the prints weren't made by human feet, but something had definitely moved there recently.

“These prints must belong to whatever it was we saw on the bio-scan,” Rigby said.

Gruber took the contraption from the table into his hand and inspected it.

“Captain, we should get Fwiffo’s comments on this,” he suggested.

Zelnick agreed and the image from Gruber’s helmet camera was relayed to the Star Runner.

“Wow, an Entertain-o-matic!” Fwiffo excitedly said. *“I used to have one of those.”*

“What does it do?” Gruber asked.

The whole team gathered around him.

“It is, or was supposed to be, all your entertainment needs in one box,” Fwiffo explained. *“There was a vast supply of active and passive stories, interstellar communications, coffee-equivalents, virtual companions, impressive defensive capabilities and a special motivational program. You would never get bored with one of those.”*

Gruber couldn’t understand how one such object could do all that, but alien technologies had proven to be quite alien in the past as well.

“Why did you say ‘supposed to be’?” Gruber asked.

“Prior to the Entertain-o-matic’s release, there was a remarkable marketing campaign,” Fwiffo continued. *“Millions of Spathi were in line when the shops finally opened on the release day. I’m sure you know how it usually is when a hyped product comes to the market and there are not enough of them for everybody, but this was different. Everyone who wanted one got one if they could afford it. Some even got two. In one day the developers had become the richest Spathi that ever lived.”*

“So what was the problem?” Gruber asked.

Rigby organized the rest of the team to a simple defensive formation so that they wouldn’t be caught with their pants down while Gruber was on the phone.

“The device was, I’m afraid, very short-lived,” Fwiffo explained. “In just a few months all of the Entertain-o-matics had ceased to function. You can imagine my disappointment as well when I was in the middle of a most amusing interactive experience and then the device suddenly broke down.”

Gruber could imagine.

“So are you saying that this thing is broken?” he clarified.

“I’m afraid so,” Fwiffo replied. “If it’s not, it has most definitely alerted its owner of your presence already.”

Fwiffo had a way of finding comforting words. Gruber then took another look at the footprints and Fwiffo confirmed that they belonged to a Spathi.

“So we have a Spathi guard here,” Rigby summed it up. “I guess that’s appropriate.”

There was nothing special visible in the direction where the footprints lead. If they wanted to follow them, they had to hurry before the wind erased them completely.

“One more thing,” Fwiffo suddenly said. “It’s been almost 20 years since the Entertain-o-matic’s launch and they were only sold for a few months. Whoever brought that thing there must have done it a long time ago.”

It was an interesting piece of information, but not too helpful in their current situation.

“Let’s follow the footprints,” Gruber ordered.

The wind got stronger as they walked. Visibility was already down to just ten meters or so and the footprints were barely visible. They would soon have to call it quits and return to the shuttle to wait for a better weather. Without navigational equipment they would undoubtedly get lost in the blizzard, but with the systems integrated into their suits, they could easily find their way back to the shuttle even with their eyes closed.

Suddenly Gruber realized he couldn't see the footprints anymore. He was about to give the abort mission command, but then he noticed that the footprints hadn't been blown away by the wind, but instead just plain ended at the point where he was standing. He crouched and brushed the snow-like substance off the ground.

There was metal underneath.

"Would you look at that," Rigby commented, crouched next to Gruber and started brushing as well.

Soon everyone was on the ground, trying to find out how far the metal reached. After a short while it became evident that they wouldn't find its edge any time soon. Instead, they had probably been walking on it ever since they had landed.

There was some kind of a hatch where the footprints ended and no windows anywhere. They also couldn't find any means to open the hatch – no handle, no control panel, nothing.

"One thing's for sure, though," Rigby began. *"We never would have found this without the trail we followed."*

Everyone stood around looking like they had nothing to do.

"Should we blow up the hatch now or what?" Tai suggested.

Gruber did a simple substance check for the metal alloy.

"I don't think that would work," he said. "This material seems to be the same the Ur-Quan Dreadnought's hull is made of. Sure, we could punch a hole through it with the Hellbore Cannon, but that would also decimate everything beneath – including the Syreen Penetrator ships if this is the vault we are looking for."

Gruber then remembered their Syreen companion.

"Alia, can you sense anything?" he asked.

Alia kneeled down next to the hatch and remained motionless for a while.

CLANK

The hatch suddenly opened, making everyone jump in surprise and draw out their weapons.

"I didn't do anything," Alia explained.

A figure casually emerged from within. It looked like it hadn't seen the landing team yet. It was a Spathi – and it wasn't wearing a suit.

Gruber aimed at the creature, as did everyone else. The Spathi took one more step and then stopped. It looked around and saw everyone pointing their guns at it. Then it looked at Gruber, who was standing closest to it, directly in the eyes.

The world froze for a few seconds.

"YIIIIEEEEEE!" the Spathi then screamed in terror and tried to dive back to where it came from.

"Grab him!" Gruber shouted and rushed to grasp the Spathi, but he was too slow.

The Spathi might have made it back in if it weren't for Alia who was able to cut it off. Gruber had trouble following the moves, but after some impressive hand-to-hand combat, the Spathi was lying on its back and Alia had her knee pressed on the Spathi's neck.

"I'll talk, don't kill me!" the Spathi pleaded.

Ahmed and Cuvelier rushed to tie the prisoner's claws together.

"Where are the Penetrator starships?" Alia angrily demanded.

The Spathi had its eye tightly closed.

"They're right here," it frantically answered, "in this underground vault."

Gruber crouched next to the captive.

"How many of you are there?" he gently asked.

It was the classic tactic where one interrogator was friendly and the other one was aggressive.

"Just one, I'm alone," the Spathi said, having calmed down a little.

“*What are you doing here?*” Alia continued and put more pressure on her knee.

The Spathi made sounds which clearly indicated that in order for it to talk the pressure on its neck should be slightly released. Alia lifted her knee just a bit and the Spathi gasped the air which was supposed to be toxic for humans.

“I’m the guard-slash-caretaker,” it explained. “I keep this place tidy and alert my masters, the Ur-Quan, in case someone comes snooping around here. And may I ask that we move indoors since it is rather cold out here?”

“Alright, continue talking,” Gruber instructed as they got inside. “Who are you and how long have you been here?”

Having asked that, he looked around to check the surroundings. They were in a small room which had the appearance of an airlock. The hatch they had come through was in the ceiling and another one was on the floor.

“Of course, of course,” the Spathi complied. “I am Pwappy, a proud member of the Spathi navy. I volunteered for a mission that was supposed to be a one year commission on a peaceful world with a complementary Entertain-o-matic as my company. I’m afraid I’ve lost my track of time since the aforementioned device broke down, but I think my replacement should arrive any day now.”

The story sounded believable in Gruber’s opinion.

“A lot has happened after you arrived,” he said. “We are not your enemies. We even have a Spathi with us. Captain Fwiffo can vouch for our good intentions.”

Gruber contacted the Vindicator and requested that Fwiffo join them via video link. Soon Fwiffo’s image appeared on the wrist display of Gruber’s suit.

“Hello,” Fwiffo greeted Pwappy. “*These fine folks saved me from a situation similar to yours about a year ago*”

Fwiffo and Pwappy talked for some time. It seemed that Pwappy enjoyed the conversation, which wasn’t all that

surprising, given that she* probably had been alone for two decades. It turned out that her watch had begun in 2135 and for whatever reason her replacement hadn't arrived in 2136 as was scheduled. Since Pwappy didn't know how much time had passed, she had continued to perform her duty and sit at her checkpoint booth every day.

After the Spathi were done talking, Gruber requested that Pwappy show them the Penetrators they had come for. Pwappy then opened the hatch on the floor, and with that, she had fulfilled the request.

The hatch led to a catwalk in the ceiling of a huge cave. Of course the cave had to be huge if it was supposed to store dozens of Penetrator starships, but it was still hard to prepare for the sight. Currently there was light only in the area where they were, but it was enough to tell that the cave went on horizontally farther than they could throw a stone. Pwappy then flipped a switch and the lights were turned on.

It was another unbelievable sight. The ships they were looking for were right there, neatly lined up in two columns, ready for vertical takeoff. If Gruber had to guess, he would have estimated the cave to be about a kilometer in length and a hundred meters in width.

"They're all here!" Alia rejoiced.

Gruber counted 42 ships – the magic number.

"How do we get them out of here?" Gruber asked Pwappy, who now seemed highly co-operative.

Pwappy pointed at a large pull-down switch a few steps away.

"According to the manual, that is supposed to open the entire ceiling," she explained. *"I have never tested it though."*

Gruber could think of nothing more relaxing than pushing unknown buttons and flipping unfamiliar switches.

* It turned out that Pwappy was almost entirely female.

“Wow,” Zelnick joined the moment over the radio. “*That place reminds me of the factory on Vela. Should I send the Syreen team down there?*”

“Wait just a second,” Gruber said and walked to the switch.

He looked around to see if anybody objected to pulling it down. He also tried to read Pwappy’s face in case the whole setup was a trap and the switch was some kind of a self-destruct trigger. Unfortunately, Pwappy had an excellent poker face, so Gruber had to rely on the luck that had brought them far already.

“Here goes,” he declared and pulled.

The switch didn’t move.

Gruber tried again with two hands, but was still unsuccessful. He could almost hear the switch laughing at him. It was a shame Belov had kicked the bucket since he was the brute who could have forced the switch down if anyone.

Gruber was then gently pushed aside. Without a word Alia put her hand – that’s singular – to the switch and pulled it down like it was nothing.

Gruber could feel his manly ego falling down the holes in the grating they were standing on.

“*I’m sure you must have loosened it,*” Alia added insult to the injury, possibly inadvertently.

Gruber forced a smile and checked if anyone was laughing – hoping that if someone was, he could recover some of his lost ego with comical threats...

...No, it was worse. Everyone ignored the entire scene. They were all looking at the ceiling which was slowly opening with a loud rattling sound.

“Ok, send in the Syreen,” Gruber said to Zelnick.

While they waited for the Syreen pilots to arrive, they explored the interior of the vault. Pwappy had made a

primitive, but comfortable looking nest under one of the ships. Gruber couldn't help feeling bad for her. A human in a similar environment would surely have gone mad without a volley ball. But then again, Fwiffo had also been alone for many years on Pluto. Fwiffo and Pwappy might hit it off rather well, Gruber thought – if Captain Zelnick would authorize Pwappy to join them. As the thought entered Gruber's mind, he decided to check right away. He walked away from the crowd so Pwappy wouldn't hear the conversation.

“What shall we do with Pwa— the prisoner?” he asked the captain.

“*Hmm...*” Zelnick replied. “*You didn't ask for my permission when you took Lydia with us.*”

Indeed he hadn't.

“And as a reward, you assigned me to take care of her,” Gruber said. “So who will take care of this one?”

Gruber could hear Zelnick talking to someone else, but couldn't make out the words.

“*I'm sure Captain Fwiffo will be eager to volunteer,*” Zelnick said. “*Welcome her aboard if she wishes to come.*”

“And what if she doesn't?” Gruber raised a valid question. “We can't be sure she wouldn't alert the Ur-Quan.”

“*Right,*” Zelnick acknowledged the thought. “*Well, you can decide if it comes down to that.*”

Gruber hoped it wouldn't come down to that. He knew what he would have to do then, and it wasn't anything pleasant.

“Roger that,” Gruber said and returned to the others.

In a few hours the Syreen had checked the ships and deemed them capable of flight. Gruber and the rest of the landing team were at the shuttle, waiting for the ships to take off so they could close the doors behind them. That way, if

anyone came looking, they wouldn't notice right away that the vault had been looted.

"Is everyone clear?" Alia checked as she was ready to start the engines.

Gruber counted heads once more and confirmed that everyone was with him at a safe distance.

"You're good to go," he replied.

Soon they could hear the roar of the engines. Then, even though the weather was still bad, they could make out a bright light rising towards the sky. Once Alia's ship was high enough, the next ship blasted off.

The sun had already set when the last ship was away.

"Finally," Rigby said as they couldn't hear the roar of the engines anymore.

"Alright, let's close this shop and get out of here," Gruber said.

Pwappy was still with them. Gruber glanced at her and noticed that she looked sad. He could tell, having spent so much time with Fwiffo.

"Pwappy, I'm sure you'd feel a lot safer if you were with us," Gruber repeated Zelnick's words he had said to Fwiffo on their first encounter. *"Come and join us."*

Pwappy immediately brightened up.

"Happy days and jubilation!" she repeated Fwiffo's exact words. *"I thought you'd never ask."*

A few hours later they were aboard the Vindicator again, with the exception of Pwappy, who was transported to the Star Runner. Gruber was exhausted, but checked in at the bridge before hitting the bunk.

The Vindicator's hyperdrive was insanely powerful, but even it had its limits. There was no way to drag the entire Syreen fleet along. They would have to make their own way through hyperspace. The hyperdrive of the Penetrators wasn't among the slowest, so they should do just fine.

“I miss having the Syreen around,” Zelnick said as Gruber reached his side.

“Think of it as an investment,” Gruber comforted him.

Just then they received an incoming call from one of the Syreen ships.

“Captain Alia, mother of Alura, reporting in from the starship Blue Sky.”

“Hello,” Zelnick cheerfully answered.

“We’re ready to jump into hyperspace,” she reported.

“We’ll see you at Betelgeuse,” Zelnick replied.

“That we will. And hey, this is from all of us...”

She blew a kiss to Zelnick.

“Thank you,” she said with a soft voice and cut the transmission.

Zelnick blushed. Gruber put his hand on the captain’s shoulder.

“You have a talent,” he said.

CHAPTER 23

SUN DEVICE

March 15th 2156, Betelgeuse, 412.5 : 377.0

The crew of the *Vindicator* had a one week shore leave at the Syreen starbase as they waited for the Penetrators to arrive. The facilities were almost identical to the starbase at Sol, so there was no pressing reason to hurry home. Gruber also thought, in all seriousness, that a little recreation would do everyone good.

The Syreen, in anticipation of seeing their ships with their own eyes, had watched the recordings from Epsilon Camelopardalis countless times. Gruber had had the pleasure of telling and re-telling the story over and over again.

Pwappy and Fwiffo seemed to get along fine, although Fwiffo hinted that Pwappy acted a little strange from time to time. As opposed to all other Spathi, she didn't believe in the Ultimate Evil and even laughed at the idea. She wore a black cape with red stripes and insisted that Fwiffo paint the *Star Runner* with similar colors. And she refused to sit down until she had first circled the chair two times.

Commander Talana had prepared a plan for ambushing the *Mycon*, just as she had promised. Her people had reviewed the recorded *Mycon* transmissions from the Great War and were able to confirm that the *Mycon* preferred worlds just like Syra or Earth. The trap would have to be set up at another planet of that type. Unfortunately, uncolonized planets like that weren't found in every other star system. But the Syreen had sources...

When the Syreen had surrendered to the Ur-Quan at the end of the Great War and explained that their homeworld was uninhabitable, the Ur-Quan had used their extensive astronomical data stores to find a planet that was just right for the Syreen. The best fit was the first planet at Betelgeuse and the Syreen settled down there. But Commander Talana knew that there had been another planet that would have suited them fine – a planet that had ranked just below their new homeworld. It was the first planet orbiting the green dwarf star Organon at 685.8 : 057.7. There, too, the air was pure and sweet and abundant life covered the surface which the sun gently warmed and therefore it should be perfectly suited for the Mycon as well.

Zelnick and Gruber discussed the details of the plan with Commander Hayes via the ansible. They all agreed on the big picture, but they didn't easily reach a consensus on how to lure the Mycon into the trap. Even though Admiral Zex had assured them that the Mycon would simply take their word for it, and Zex's information had proven reliable so far, they felt that something more was needed. It wasn't until Lydia casually suggested it that they even considered using Zex as a messenger. But the more they thought about it, the more feasible the idea turned out to be. Soon they agreed it was their best choice and not long after they thought it was an excellent one – the obvious one, even.

Zex was eager to play the part. Even though Zex claimed to hate the Mycon, Zex also said that the Mycon had no reason to suspect that. It would seem natural for a fellow battle thrall to inform them of good possibilities for expansion. Naturally Zex wouldn't go to Mycon space alone, though. The admiral would captain his* personal Intruder, but the ship would be crewed by alliance members.

* The narrator gives in and uses the masculine pronoun from now on when referring to Admiral Zex.

Hayes reported that the Shofixti were still multiplying at an increasing rate, so they could and should be assigned to alliance ships as crew. The colony ship to Eta Vulpeculae wouldn't be ready for a few more weeks so in the meantime the Shofixti had to be sent somewhere off the starbase or they would literally and very physically run out of space.

So it all came down to timing. The Vindicator could transport about a dozen ships to the Organon region quite swiftly through quasispaces, as there was an exit portal at the border of Mycon space, just a few days away from Organon. One star system, Delta Sculptoris (581.2 : 120.8), was right next to the portal, so it was an ideal place for a rendezvous point. Once a large enough fleet had gathered there, they would move to position at Organon and Admiral Zex would fly to the Mycon homeworld at Epsilon Scorpii. Simultaneously, an Arilou scout would set off on a reconnaissance mission to Beta Brahe (639.5 : 231.2) in order to verify that the solar manipulator was still there. After successfully getting the Mycon colonization fleet on the move, Zex would meet with the Vindicator at the Bellatrix system (545.8 : 191.6), which was on a direct line between the Mycon homeworld and the Vux homeworld. They would wait there until fighting began at Organon and then move in to Beta Brahe to steal the device.

Even though the Arilou Skiff vessels were extremely efficient against Mycon Podships, the Arilou refused to participate directly in acts of war. However, they agreed to work as scouts and messengers and let the Vindicator know what was happening at Organon.

In Gruber's opinion the plan was as good as it could get. Time was against them, so they had to move as soon as the Syreen ships arrived. The Vindicator would first take as many of the Penetrators it could drag along and drop them off at the rendezvous point before returning to Sol. Then the Vindicator would take a few trips between Sol and Delta

Sculptoris until they deemed the task force strong enough to wipe out the Mycon fleet. Then they would wait...

March 31st, 2156: We have been able to transport a strong armada to Delta Sculptoris and they are just about to start their voyage to Organon. We have a formidable number of Syreen Penetrators, Orz Nemeses and Zoq-Fot-Pik stingers. We also have a small fleet of Earthling Cruisers, Utwig Juggers and Supox Blades. While the Mycon colonization fleet will most likely be greater in numbers, we can take them out if we play our cards right. Captain Trent is in command of the operation, so I'm fairly confident that things will go smoothly.

It's been a long time since I've seen so many friendly ships in one place. The Alliance is again a force to be reckoned with. But we must be careful not to get too cocky. The Ur-Quan forces are still grossly superior. If we are ever going to get near the Sa-Matra, we need the combined strength of the Chenjesu and the Mmrmhrm.

Admiral Zex left a few hours ago to deliver the bait to the Mycon. We expect to meet Zex at Bellatrix in two weeks and by that time the Arilou should also return with the latest news from Beta Brahe.

April 3rd, 2156: We arrived at Bellatrix without incident. There are four planets in this system, but none of them appear interesting. I guess we'll just be chilling then.

April 9th, 2156: This past week has officially been the longest week of my life. And I do mean officially – I have a certificate.

Sure, I have often travelled great distances and spent many weeks aboard starships, but never before have I just waited for this long. And to make it worse, we don't even have a set date when our wait will be over. The crew, me

included, lacks a sense of purpose and it has a dramatic effect on morale. When we came up with this plan, nobody figured our task would be this demanding.

April 12th, 2156: I know Zex isn't scheduled to arrive for two more days, but I'm still feeling like calling it quits.

I remember this feeling from long ago... Whenever I had a date with Lily, I used to be at least half an hour early. Then, when it was still a few minutes before the agreed time, I felt irritated for having to wait for her so long, even if she finally arrived exactly on time. I know it makes me an idiot, but there's nothing I can do about it.

April 14th, 2156: I wish I could report that Zex has arrived, but I can't. Instead, we heard something interesting from the starbase via the ansible.

Captain Tanaka has returned after reporting to the Yehat. He said that the Pkunk had arrived in the region a bit before Tanaka. The Pkunk were being obliterated by the Yehat and they weren't even fighting back. Tanaka's sudden appearance and his testimony about the revival of the Shofixti race seemed to have triggered some kind of a reaction among the Yehat, though. The members of the Zeep-Zeep clan, with whom Tanaka met, declared that they couldn't live the lie any longer and that they would restore the honor of the Starship Clans.

If I understood correctly, the Zeep-Zeep clan was planning to start a revolution, which would suit us just fine. If the Yehat won't join our ranks, it's better that they at least keep themselves occupied.

April 14th, 2156: Another entry for today, because Zex's ship appeared! I'm dying to hear how their mission went...

...Apparently it was a great success. We watched the recording of Zex's conversation with the Mycon and if they weren't lying, they seemed to have taken the bait. After a nearly endless rambling of Juffo-Wup, Deep Children and just generally how great their genes were, they had finally listened to what Zex had to say.

The Mycon were pleased and said that acceptable new worlds were a priority for the rapid and complete spread of Juffo-Wup, whatever that meant. They wished to hear more of the planet at Organon and Zex did a fine job with the sales pitch. The Mycon thanked Zex and said that the Birthing Fleet would be sent to Organon as soon as possible, accompanied by many ships to protect the Deep Children as they grow.

So, again, now all we can do is wait...

April 20th, 2156: The Arilou returned with a report from Beta Brahe. The situation was exactly as we had predicted. Initially, there were a great number of ships protecting the first planet, but soon after Zex had delivered the message, most of the fleet took off. The Arilou could then confirm that there was some kind of a radiation source in orbit. When the Arilou left the system, there were only five Mycon Podships standing guard. Nothing we couldn't handle.

As a curiosity, if we have to break a few nose-equivalents in order to steal the device, it's not stealing anymore... it's robbing. We'll be robbers.

April 28th, 2156: The Arilou reported that the Mycon fleet is just a day away from Organon. It's time we took off. Our flight time to Beta Brahe is four days, so we won't be wasting any time. We'll get a new situation report once we're there.

May 2nd, 2156: We've reached Beta Brahe. It will take us five hours to reach the first planet. During that time we expect to receive news from Organon. I can only hope that Trent has achieved a great victory...

...This feeling of anxiety is completely different from our own battles, which must be the same phenomenon as with sports. When you play yourself, there is less tension, because you can influence the outcome with your own actions and you are preoccupied with doing your job. But when you watch a game, you are a helpless observer completely at the mercy of the players. If the stakes are high enough, the tension might become unbearable and you might even have to stop watching. I know a guy who missed most of the World Cup final of 2122 for that reason and he was the most devout football fan I have ever known.

May 2nd, 2156: Great news! Everything went even better than expected. We can surely enjoy a full report once we're back at the starbase, but to sum it up, according to the Arilou we wiped out 90 % of the Mycon fleet with only minimal casualties. Our forces are now in pursuit of the enemies that managed to escape the system.

With a major part of their armada destroyed, I dare say we won't have to worry about the Mycon any time soon. Now we just need to do our part...

"I can see five Mycon Podships," Dujardin reported as they got close enough to their target for their true space radar to spot the enemies. "There's also some kind of an object at the center of their formation."

"That's our cue, ladies and gentlemen," Zelnick declared. "Get everybody to battle stations and let's see if we can wrap this up before dinner."

"Let's be sure not to hit the Sun Device," Gruber reminded everyone.

Solar Manipulator was considered a bothersome name, so they had eventually decided to call it *Sun Device* instead.

The Vindicator's fleet assumed battle formation and soon the Mycon noticed them too. The Podships turned to face their enemies, but they didn't break their formation.

"Incoming transmission from the Mycon," Katja reported.

"We're not being diplomatic today," Zelnick said. "But if they want to plead for mercy, I'll be glad to listen. Let's hear it."

The communications officer answered the call and an image of a Mycon appeared on screen. Out of all known races, the Mycon were probably the farthest from the humans in terms of biology – and that's counting the Mmrmhrm. The Mycon were more like fungi than animals and their cellular structure was several levels above that of humans in terms of complexity. The difference between humans and the Mycon was like the difference between bacteria and humans. The Mycon were simply unique – too unique for it to be natural, as the Umgah had said.

"This is a special place," the Mycon said with a plain voice. *"We will not allow it to be soiled by the Non. You must go. Now."*

"Interesting," Zelnick said like a man staring at a concrete wall. "Do tell us more."

For some reason Gruber assumed that the Mycon didn't understand the concept of sarcasm.

"This place is filled with Juffo-Wup, the power of life," the Mycon continued. *"It is hot warmth in the cold void. It flows through all things, binding them together, making them one. You are Non-Juffo-Wup, you cannot understand."*

"McNeil, do you have a clear shot?" Zelnick asked.

"Indeed I have, sir," the weapons officer replied. "Just say the word and one of those pods receives a one way ticket to oblivion."

The Mycon Podships were, as their name suggests, spherical pods. They weren't mechanical constructs like most ships and not biological constructs like the Supox Blades. Instead, they were made of rock and molten lava. Inside they had a chamber that created super-heated plasma which they fired at their enemies. And somehow these plasmoids homed in on their targets, which was a mystery the Alliance had never figured out in the Great War.

"Here is the pod of Juffo-Wup," the Mycon continued without being asked. *"When we are cold, the pod opens and warms us. When it is dark, the pod clenches and lo, there is light. You are the Non. The pod is not for you."*

"Fire away, Mr. McNeil," Zelnick ordered, ignoring the Mycon.

A bright ball of the Hellbore Cannon's fire was shot towards the Mycon formation.

"We look to Juffo-Wup for direction, and it provides the pattern," the Mycon continued, ignoring Zelnick in return. *"Endless expansion with purity of achievement and intolerance of error."*

"Send in the Pkunk," Zelnick commanded.

The four Furies blasted off, probably throwing constant insults at their enemies.

The shot from the Hellbore Cannon hit its target and then there were only four enemy ships left. The remaining Podships finally reacted and fired their homing plasmoids.

"McNeil, do your thing," Zelnick said.

He was referring to their planned course of action. They would use the Vindicator's Fusion Blasters to intercept and neutralize the Mycon plasmoids. Since their combat batteries were fit for the Hellbore Cannon's consumption, they would be able to fire several shots with the Fusion Blasters easily.

"Aye-aye, sir," McNeil replied, took aim and fired – four shots, one for each target.

Gruber watched the progress from the tactical display. The shots approached their targets and then... hit, hit, hit, hit. All plasmoids were out of the game.

"I am Shloosh," the Mycon said as the communications link was still active. *"I was incinerated fourteen thousand years ago. I live now, for but a moment, and then I am gone."*

The Mycon ships still didn't break formation.

"We're ready for another shot of the Hellbore Cannon in ten... nine..." McNeil counted down.

"The Podships thrum with the plasma containment field whose offspring seek to transform the Non to Void. The Fields grow tighter and tighter... The bass rumble of the generators rises gradually to a high burning scream. Sudden silence and a flash of light announce release. The hot pulsing subsides slowly."

"...two...one...ready," McNeil finished the countdown.

"Fire," Zelnick ordered.

The Hellbore Cannon spoke again. The Podships were too slow to dodge and soon there were only three left. The communications link was still active, though.

"The Deep Children fall from the void, gathering speed for the penetration. The tough casing warms as it passes through the atmosphere, glowing white as it hits the surface. Solid rock flows like liquid, and the child slips into the warm, safe depths beneath the crust."

The Pkunk Furies had reached the enemy ships and were ruthlessly cutting them open from their backs. A single Podship was helpless against such agile fighters, but they could shoo off their pests from one another. There was a catch, though, which Gruber hoped to witness again after over 20 years.

One of the Podships fired its plasmoid against a Fury that was attacking another Podship. The Fury then quickly

circled around its target, leaving the one Podship between the plasmoid and the Fury.

“The Mycon Podships’ homing plasmoids don’t have a safety feature for avoiding friendly targets,” Gruber explained with a smile on his face. “Let’s watch.”

The plasmoid hit the unlucky Podship in its path, punching a remarkable hole in its surface. The plasmoids were rather weak when fired at targets far away, but the Mycon ships were close to each other in their tight formation. From that distance the destructive power of the particle came close to that of the Hellbore Cannon.

“Nice,” Zelnick commented as there were only two enemy ships left and they hadn’t even broken a sweat yet.

“Survival is a priority... Expansion is a priority... Processing is a priority...”

“Oh, you’re still here?” Zelnick acknowledged the Mycon.

“...Incorporation of dense amphibole fibers ensures survival in environmental extremes...”

Zelnick cut the transmission.

“McNeil?” he checked.

“Ready,” the weapons officer replied.

“Fire at will,” the captain ordered.

A half an hour later all the Mycon ships were destroyed and the debris around the Sun Device had cleared enough for the Vindicator to inspect it closely. There was nothing to salvage from Mycon Podships.

The Sun Device looked weird. Its external appearance gave the impression of an impaled spider, whose size was roughly equal to the shuttle. It was mostly bright red, but there were some purple parts as well. The other end of the rod in the middle was obviously the place where the radiation emanated.

“Let’s get that thing to the storage bay and then make like a tree,” Zelnick commanded.

Iwasaki whispered something to Samusenko. Gruber couldn’t hear what it was, but he could hear Samusenko’s answer:

“It means we get out of here.”

It would have been tempting to fly to Organon to check with the fleet, but the Vindicator had its own mission to prioritize. The Sun Device needed to be studied at the starbase quickly so they could use it to help the Chenjesu and the Mmrmhrm as soon as possible.

Four days and one quasisspace jump later the Vindicator was back at the starbase in Sol. It didn’t take long for Doctors Chu and Fredrikson to understand that they had another scary piece of Precursor equipment on their hands. The Sun Device contained a power generator whose output magnitude was simply mind-croggling. When activated (not inside the starbase), the device radiated energy at a level that could almost match that of a small star. When placed in orbit of a planet and directed towards the surface, the output would rival Sol’s. It was evident that if the Chenjesu and the Mmrmhrm required more solar energy, the Sun Device was exactly what they needed.

Gruber had to admit that Admiral Zex had proven his worth. Zex had provided the alliance with several pieces of crucial information and had performed his part admirably in tricking the Mycon. Nobody questioned his loyalty anymore, although his position within the alliance remained unclear.

On the day following the Vindicator’s return to the starbase, the Shofixti colony ship was ready to set sail towards Eta Vulpeculae, escorted by a squadron of Orz Nemeses. Many individuals of the first and second generation of the Shofixti had enlisted to crew alliance ships

and some were given their own Scout vessels. A few females also stayed at the starbase just in case something happened to the colony ship. *Captain* Tanaka wasn't ready for retirement yet. He wanted to fight the Hierarchy to the very end and such pleasure was not denied him.

A few hours before the *Vindicator* was scheduled to take off, Gruber, Zelnick and Lydia were eating breakfast together at the starbase cafeteria.

"So you activate that Sun Device thing in orbit of the Chenjesu homeworld," Lydia recapped. "And then what?"

Zelnick glanced at Gruber.

"I don't know," the captain admitted. "I guess the Chenjesu and the Mmrrnmhrm will get more energy then."

"We hope it will speed up their hybridization enough," Gruber explained, "so that they can assist us in taking down the Sa-Matra before it's too late."

Lydia took her time sipping a can of apple juice.

"What if they can't help us in time?" she asked.

Gruber didn't like thinking about that possibility.

"Then we're in trouble," he put it simply.

"We're already in trouble," Zelnick pointed out. "But then we'd be in deep trouble."

"We have built a nice alliance, sure," Gruber said. "But the inconvenient fact remains that the Kzer-Za and the Kohr-Ah forces are still grossly superior. We might be able to get a lucky shot at the Sa-Matra and maybe even take it down, but we still couldn't resist their forces if they focused them on us instead of each other."

Lydia kept on sucking her straw even though the can was empty, making a well-known unpleasant sound.

"Would the Chenjesu change the balance of power?" she asked.

Gruber recalled what the Chenjesu had said.

“Well,” he began, “they boasted that they could single-handedly deal with the Sa-Matra and the entire Ur-Quan Hierarchy once their process is complete. And, to be fair, the Chenjesu did say that the bomb we have wouldn’t be enough to destroy the Sa-Matra without their amplifiers.”

“So yes, we believe they are the key,” Zelnick summed it up.

“But they didn’t want you to use the Sun Device, right?” Lydia pointed out.

Indeed the Chenjesu had insisted that their process had to be executed as planned or the results might be catastrophic.

“It is obvious that at their current pace they won’t make it in time,” Zelnick said. “They said it would take 35 years. The Kohr-Ah would kill us all decades before the Chenjesu and the Mmrnmhrm were ready.”

Gruber noticed that Lydia had that peculiar look in her eyes – the look which preceded a simple, innocent and effective solution to a problem.

“So we’ll activate the device anyway,” she casually said. “With or without their consent.”

Gruber had thought about it, but hearing someone said it made the possibility much more real.

“If we don’t use it, we die for sure, right?” Lydia continued. “And if we use it, we might or might not die, right?”

She had a way of making strong cases. Gruber thought she could easily become the president of Earth if the war ever came to an end.

“I can’t argue with that,” Gruber admitted.

“If you want to come with us on this trip that’s fine by me,” Zelnick said. “This time we’re not supposed to do anything too dangerous.”

Seven days later the Vindicator positioned itself in orbit of the second planet in the Procyon system – the home of the

Chenjesu. They used the powerful hyperwave caster to contact the Chenjesu through the slave shield and told them everything, including their strong opinion on how they would all die if they waited 35 years.

“We understand that there are no correct choices here,” the Chenjesu commented. *“If we were given an infinite amount of energy now, we could theoretically crack the slave shield and live on as a single hybrid race. However, we cannot predict how the hybridization process would react exactly. There is still a significant chance that we would be destroyed.”*

Zelnick typed his answer:

[We believe it’s a risk we have to take. We can see no alternative.]

The Chenjesu took their time replying.

“We cannot assist you any further in making this decision,” they said. *“We also cannot prevent you from activating the device. The choice is yours.”*

Zelnick didn’t seem pleased with the outcome of the conversation, which was understandable. He, as the commanding officer, would soon have to give an order which would be a gamble on the lives of not just one entire species, but two.

Lydia had been observing the conversation on the bridge. She approached the captain and put her hand on his shoulder.

“Do you want me to do it?” she asked, sounding sincere, although Gruber could never tell just how serious she actually was.

Zelnick motioned that he was okay.

“Get the Sun Device ready,” he said to the officers.

A team of workers in space suits, led by Dougal Skeates, carefully pulled the Sun Device out from the storage bay and hauled it to a safe distance. They aligned the device so that

its emission head was pointed towards the surface and checked that the remote control was active.

“All set,” Skeates informed the bridge over the radio. *“Just give us a few minutes to get back to the ship.”*

After those few minutes Zelnick, Gruber and Lydia were standing at the bridge’s window, looking at the Sun Device and the slave shielded planet below. Zelnick was holding the trigger that would activate the device. The trigger was traditionally designed as a red button under a clear safety guard.

“If this fails,” Zelnick said, “everything we have worked for amounts to nothing.”

“If this succeeds,” Gruber continued, “everything we have worked for gives us a chance to free the entire galaxy from the slavery of the Kzer-Za and the threat of the Kohr-Ah.”

“If this succeeds,” Lydia joined in, “I’ll treat you to a slice of cheesecake.”

Gruber could hear some of the officers behind him laughing.

“Then I hope it succeeds,” he said.

Zelnick flipped open the safety cover.

“All together, then?” he suggested.

They all put their hands above the button and looked at each other with determination on their faces.

“On three,” Zelnick said. “One...two...**three!**”

They all put their hands down simultaneously to activate the Sun Device.

They looked out the window again and saw the device getting brighter and brighter... and brighter... too bright to look at...so bright that it illuminated the entire bridge.

CHAPTER 24

THE CHMMR

May 25th 2156, Procyon, 074.2 : 226.8

“WE ARE FREE!” a loud, unfamiliar voice echoed throughout the bridge as the bright light of the Sun Device started to fade away. *“YOU HAVE FLOODED OUR SYNTHESIS MECHANISMS WITH A WEALTH OF RADIANT ENERGY.”*

“What is that?” Zelnick asked, raising his voice.

“WHAT WAS SUPPOSED TO TAKE DECADES HAS BEEN ACCOMPLISHED IN SECONDS.”

“Katja, turn down the damn volume,” the captain demanded.

“THE PROCESS IS INCOMPLETE, YET WE HAVE EMERGED.”

“There is no volume,” Katja tried to explain.

“WE WERE NOT READY.”

“There is no transmission,” she continued.

“BUT THIS IS NOW IN THE PAST.”

“This isn’t coming from the speakers.”

“WHAT IS DONE IS DONE.”

“It’s like the whole ship is resonating.”

Gruber noticed that the planet didn’t have the all-too-familiar red glow anymore.

“What are you implying?” Zelnick asked as he made his way to the captain’s chair. “Are the Chenjesu just shouting to us from the surface?”

“YOU ARE INTENT ON STOPPING THE UR-QUAN.”

“If they are the Chenjesu anymore,” Gruber pointed out.

“VERY WELL. WE ARE PREPARED TO ASSIST YOU IN WHATEVER WAY WE CAN.”

“Thank you, Mr. Gruber,” Zelnick sarcastically said. “Katja, hail the surface right away. We need to tell them to shut up for a second.”

“Hailing,” the communications officer replied. “They’re picking it up.”

And then they had a visual link. The alien they were conversing with looked a lot like the Chenjesu, but there were some mechanical parts infused with it – as if the Mmrmhmrm were growing out of the Chenjesu.

“We are the Chmmr,” the crystalline creature said via the hyperwave link like normal species.

“What a funny name!” Lydia remarked.

“So your hybridization process was a success?” Zelnick checked.

Some of the mechanical parts moved around the crystals.

“We live,” the Chmmr replied. *“That implies success. However, we are not what we planned to be.”*

“What do you mean?” Zelnick asked.

Gruber made a series of hand signs to inform the captain that the slave shield was gone.

“The sudden gush of energy forced our hand,” the Chmmr explained. *“We had to emerge uncontrollably. We cannot yet say how it will affect us.”*

“But you took down the slave shield, right?” Zelnick pointed out. “You can do that to Earth as well, right?”

The mechanical parts moved to encase the crystals completely.

“In due time, yes,” the Chmmr said. *“But first, we must focus on destroying the Sa-Matra. If we fail that task, all else will be in vain. Please bring us up to date immediately.”*

The Chmmr didn't waste any time. Zelnick and Gruber told them about the Dnyarri, the current strength of the Alliance, and everything else that had happened.

"This is good," the Chmmr summed up their opinion at the end. *"We have all the necessary ingredients. There is every chance that we will succeed."*

"What about the bomb?" Zelnick asked. "Earlier you said that you'd have to amplify it or it wouldn't be enough to destroy the Sa-Matra."

The mechanical parts all moved aside, revealing that the crystals were glowing.

"Yes," the Chmmr answered with an excited voice. *"Even though the device you possess could erase small moons from existence, according to our calculations it is still not enough to crack the Sa-Matra's armor. We will have to improve the bomb – focus its energies. We predict that by adding our own crystal amplification system, the destructive force of the bomb can be multiplied by a large factor."*

In Gruber's opinion it felt strange that the ridiculously powerful bomb they had was the one thing that needed more power.

"What about you?" Zelnick asked the Chmmr. "Can you fight alongside us when we attack the Sa-Matra? We could really use your Broodhome and X-Form vessels."

The mechanical parts encased the crystals again.

"They have all been dismantled," the Chmmr said plainly. *"We have designed a new class of fighting ship – the Avatar. It is much more effective than our old Broodhome or X-Form vessels. In competent hands, it is more powerful than any of the Alliance and Hierarchy standard ships."*

"That's great!" Zelnick rejoiced. "How big is your fleet?"

There was an ominous pause.

"We have no fleet," the Chmmr replied. *"You ended our hybridization process prematurely."*

It was remarkable, how Zelnick could emit an aura of disappointment of such magnitude.

“I...” he began, but didn’t continue.

“*Do not lose confidence, human captain,*” the Chmmr cheered him up. “*The Avatars are nothing but organized material. We will focus all our efforts on building them. We can also give you their schematics, so you can build them at your starbase as well. The fleet will be adequate in a few months.*”

Zelnick seemed to cheer up a little.

“I guess that’s good,” he said.

“What were their shipyards doing until now?” Gruber asked. “Even if they were in the middle of their hybridization process, they should have been able to automate the construction of the Avatars.”

Zelnick asked the Chmmr that very question.

“*A valid question,*” the Chmmr replied. “*Indeed we could have had a fleet of Avatars already assembled. However, all of our shipyards were working on a project of higher priority – The Survion.*”

“The what?” Zelnick asked to keep the story going.

All the mechanical parts of the Chmmr slid aside and the crystals glowed brighter than before. The Chmmr continued with a serious voice.

“*We knew that even with an infinite fleet of Avatars we could never destroy the Sa-Matra. And obviously we couldn’t rely on finding a Precursor planetary tool. We had to come up with something ourselves.*”

“Captain, they’re trying to send us a data package,” the communications officer reported.

“Receive,” Zelnick acknowledged.

“*The Survion was supposed to be a battle platform that could oppose the Sa-Matra. With it, and a strong fleet of Avatars, we could have single-handedly defeated the entire Hierarchy.*”

“Supposed to be?” Zelnick grabbed the wording. “Is there a problem with it?”

“*A problem, yes,*” the Chmmr replied. “*The Survion was a very large construction project. Even though it is already capable of flight, we estimate we would have needed an additional twenty years to complete it.*”

The Chmmr gave a thorough explanation on both the Survion and their new Avatar-class fighting ships.

The Survion was simply huge – a lot bigger than the Vindicator. It was planned to have several layers of regenerating reactive plasma shields, a crew of at least a thousand Chmmr individuals, scores of defensive turrets that would intercept all incoming fire, and, most importantly, a main cannon with a range of several astronomical units, powered by an exotic mixture of Chenjesu, Mmrmhmr and Precursor technologies.

The power source was the component whose construction required such an extensive amount of time. They had to somehow harvest the power of their star, amplify it with some crystals and... do stuff. The technology was simply too overwhelming for a human mind – at least to Gruber. Lydia seemed like she understood it a lot better, but even she couldn't explain it.

Unfortunately, as the Chmmr didn't have all those decades to construct it, the Survion was far from finished. Its main gun was inoperative and the plasma shields couldn't be activated. Basically, the Survion was just a big chunk of metal with no offensive capabilities.

The Avatar, on the other hand, was like a dream come true. The size of an Avatar-class ship was close to that of the Chenjesu Broodhome vessel, but that was the extent of their similarities. Their primary weapon was a forward-firing laser whose energy output indicated that they could cut

through anything* in a matter of seconds. The relatively short range of the laser was compensated by a powerful focused tractor-beam that could irresistibly pull smaller ships right into the firing sector. In addition, the Avatars came with a pack of small, unmanned satellites that would automatically zap anything that got too close to their mother ship, making them close to immune to missiles and small fighters.

Gruber wasn't the tactical genius, but he could immediately appreciate the value the Avatars added to a well-diversified fleet. The Chmmr probably couldn't take on both of the Ur-Quan subspecies by themselves, but together with all of their allies, the New Alliance of Free Stars might even have the upper hand.

"This all sounds good," Zelnick commented the presentation to the Chmmr. "We should get down to business right away. Where do you want the bomb delivered so you can modify it?"

"It will not be that simple," the Chmmr ominously began. *"The bomb needs to be surrounded by our crystal amplifiers and it needs additional external power. That requires a great deal of both space and energy."*

"Okay..." Zelnick said, preparing for bad news.

"With the Survion being incomplete, the only option we have is to fit the amplification system to your vessel and route a portion of your ship's fusion power through the weapon's ignition chamber."

Zelnick looked like he hadn't bought the idea just yet.

"Will that work?" he asked.

"Yes," the Chmmr convincingly answered.

The captain nervously tapped his fingers on the arm rest of his chair.

* Anything except the Sa-Matra

“We’ll fire this weapon at the Sa-Matra, right?” he wistfully checked. “It’s not going to hurt my ship, is it?”

Gruber liked how Zelnick referred to the Vindicator as **his** ship – like a true captain.

“*Your vessel will be totally annihilated,*” was the simple, yet devastating answer.

Zelnick’s face started to get a bit of red color. The captain swallowed before his next statement.

“There’s nothing we can do to change that, is there?”

The glow in the Chmmr crystals faded.

“*No.*”

Gruber, Zelnick and Lydia discussed the matter briefly before contacting the starbase. Lydia was included in the discussion merely because she refused to exit the bridge willingly and nobody volunteered to forcibly carry her out.

“I don’t like the idea of a suicide mission,” Zelnick began. “There must be another way.”

“Can’t you just jump out of the ship before it explodes?” Lydia suggested.

Zelnick turned to Gruber, obviously hoping that he would have the answer.

“We’d have to jump pretty far,” he said. “That is, if the calculations are accurate and the bomb would vaporize everything within thousands of kilometers. And even if we cleared that, the shockwave might do us in within at least one astronomical unit. I’d prefer to stay clear of the entire system when the bomb goes off.”

“Can’t we, like, remote control the Vindicator or something?” Zelnick hoped.

Gruber disliked that idea.

“I wouldn’t rely on remote control on such an important task,” he said. “And you, if anyone, should know if the Vindicator even **could** be remote controlled.”

Zelnick seemed to think about it for a while.

“Right... I don’t see that happening,” he said.

“But can’t you just, like, catapult out of the ship or something?” Lydia tried.

Zelnick wistfully looked at Gruber again. Lydia had a way of approaching difficult problems with simple solutions, which, more often than not, had a way of actually working.

“As a matter a fact...” Gruber began.

“Absolutely,” Dr. Fredrikson answered via the ansible after Zelnick had given her the details. *“We can definitely fit a catapult powerful enough to the shuttle bay. The downside is that we can’t nullify all of the inertia. The crew would have to endure at least eight G’s.”*

“I prefer that over dying,” Zelnick cheerfully said.

Lydia beamed with pride.

“Hayes here,” a new message appeared. *“We have no objections to this plan. If the Chenjesu say it can’t be helped then it must be so.”*

“The Chmmr,” Zelnick corrected the commander.

The Chmmr explained that the modifications to the bomb would take several weeks and that they had no accommodations for the human crew. The crew couldn’t transfer aboard the escort ships either simply because there were too many people. They could message the starbase and call for a pick up vessel, but even that would take over a week and time was a luxury resource they couldn’t waste.

The Chmmr suggested that they could use the Survion for transport. Its hyperdrive was at least as powerful as the Vindicator’s, so the trip to Sol would take only a few days and the work on the bomb could be started right away. The Survion didn’t have life support fitting for humans, but if the food and oxygen was provided by their guests, the Chmmr could come up with a temporary solution. The humans

would have a safe, albeit uncomfortable trip. As there were no better alternatives, that course of action was agreed on.

The Vindicator landed on the former Chenjesu homeworld, current Chmmr homeworld, at a designated star port where the Survion was waiting. Since the Chenjesu and now the Chmmr lived in a world without an atmosphere, the Vindicator's atmosphere entry capabilities remained untested.

Swarms of service droids were busy making last minute modifications, ensuring that the Survion could actually take off. The trip to Sol would obviously be its maiden voyage.

Gruber and Lydia observed Zelnick's parking skills from the main window on the bridge and simultaneously admired the architecture of their future ride. If they hadn't been told, they wouldn't have guessed that it was still decades from being finished. It was shaped like a sharp arrowhead whose tip had been carved out. The texture of the ship was similar to the Chenjesu Broodhome, but there was also something Mmrmhrmish about it.

Gruber didn't mind too much spending several days in a confined space with a hundred people. What he did mind, though, was that they would have to move the Dnyarri. Also, they could only hope that the Chmmr wouldn't get the same headaches from the Taalo mind shield as all humans with esper potential did. Turning the shield off was out of the question for obvious reasons.

Another cause for concern was the absence of toilets. They didn't ask the Chmmr, but it was unlikely that the Survion was equipped with the necessary facilities. Any idiot could carry food and oxygen to a pressurized area and survive for weeks, but if they didn't handle sanitation properly, there would be consequences. In charge of solving the problem was Dougal Skeates, Mr. Handyman, but he didn't have much time, so Gruber was a bit worried.

And one more problem was entertainment. Since they wouldn't have any privacy, they would need something to keep everyone happy, or at least occupied. Discipline could get them only so far. Sooner or later someone would snap and the upcoming five days was more than enough time for that.

A few hours later Gruber was inspecting their designated lodgings aboard the *Survion* with Skeates. It looked like the space would serve its purpose, but Gruber still didn't like it. It was obviously designed to be a containment area for alien captives, but there was only the one room with an area of no more than 300 square meters. The Dnyarri had its own pressurized compartment so at least they wouldn't have to share their cramped room with that particular creature.

Skeates chose one corner, probably at random, to fit some portable toilets. Or to be precise, the toilets were going to be as portable as a radiator that was torn off the wall. Skeates explained that he would simply cut off the facilities from the *Vindicator*, place them in the specified corner, and attach their plumbing to a temporary silo. He was certain it would work for at least five days. And if Gruber couldn't take Skeates' word for it, why would the man be in charge of the facilities then?

With the important issues under control, Gruber returned to the *Vindicator* to oversee the Dnyarri's relocation. He also saw fit to let the Dnyarri know what was happening, so he used the console that was mounted to the Dnyarri's compartment to contact the creature.

"Uhhh... *Whaddayawant?*" the Dnyarri asked, sounding like it had just got up on the wrong side of the bed.

"We are transferring you to another ship," Gruber truthfully stated. "I just thought I'd let you know."

“How considerate of you,” the creature replied in an overly polite manner. *“So now I can finally get rid of this headache.”*

Gruber was tempted to nod, but he resisted.

“I’m sorry to say,” he began, “but the thing causing your headache will be transferred with you.”

The Dnyarri rolled its eyes.

“Oh, isn’t that just fan-friggin’-tastic. So basically you don’t have any news.”

“That is correct,” Gruber agreed.

He found himself strangely enjoying watching the Dnyarri suffer. He made a note to talk about it with Vargas on their next session.

“Why did you bother to wake me up then?” the Dnyarri said. *“For all I know, and care, you could all just drop dead and I would remain trapped in here as long as my life support would hold – in a small container with a goddamn headache!”*

Of course Gruber also knew that they would have to get along with the Dnyarri to some extent in order to reach their mutually aligned goals.

“Just a little longer,” he assured the creature. “When we get back to the starbase, we might let you out.”

The Dnyarri faked a smile.

“Woof-woof, bark-bark,” it imitated a dog, which was strange, since dogs were an Earth-thing. *“So, I’ll be a good boy and then I get a treat. Thank you, master. Can I bring you your slippers, master? Is there anything else I can do for you, master?”*

Gruber wanted to humor the Dnyarri for a bit, so he changed the subject to everyone’s favorite topic – themselves.

“What do you remember from your life before the Umgah?” he asked.

That seemed to make the Dnyarri focus.

“You want my story, huh? Well, I guess I can tell you. I was indeed a Talking Pet aboard an Ur-Quan Dreadnought, but those years are like a forgotten dream to me. I was nothing but a dumb beast – an unthinking slave to the heinous Ur-Quan. I don’t remember anything in detail, but I know that we got hit in a great battle. The ship was severely damaged... There were slaves running around the corridors in panic. I remember commands, counter-commands... Then there was the scream of atmosphere outside the hull. I specifically remember a big explosion of light and thunder, followed by immense pain... That’s probably when we hit the surface of a planet.”

“Were there any survivors?” Gruber asked.

The Dnyarri looked like it was really making an effort.

“I don’t remember,” it said. “The next thing I do remember is the face of the alien you call the Arilou. It gave me something and then my pain eased a little. I remember being gently carried by one of the Arilou. Then there was an all-pervading green light and... My next memory is from another planet – one with lots of Arilou. I presume they took me to their home for further treatment, but they were ultimately unable to heal my severe injuries. Then there was that green light again and... the Umgah... yes, next I was with the Umgah. There was wet flesh throbbing all around me and the Umgah laughing as they worked on my body... It was kind of unnerving.”

“Go on,” Gruber requested as the story turned out to be a lot more interesting than he had expected.

“Suddenly, like an explosion... a thought – I mean real thought – flooded my brain! Somehow the Umgah had discovered that my brain could be easily changed, improved to give me true intelligence! What they didn’t realize was that it also brought back the sleeping psychic powers and... memories of my species’ ancient past! Memories from before

the time the Ur-Quan castrated our thinking minds and transformed my people into crude beasts.

There were always two sides to every story. Even though Gruber considered their sources extremely reliable, he still wanted to hear the Dnyarri's take on their relationship with the Ur-Quan.

"Why do you think the Ur-Quan did that to you?" he asked, assuming the Dnyarri didn't know that he already knew.

"That is a sad tale," the Dnyarri began. "But I will gladly tell you so you know what evil you're really up against... It was over twenty thousand years ago when an Ur-Quan slave raider suddenly landed on the surface of my world and immediately began capturing my people – killing those that would not submit. I know this because these painful memories are embedded deep in my genetic structure. They cannot be forgotten. Oh, how we fought the Ur-Quan! Even then they had a Hierarchy of combat thralls, which they then called by the absurd name 'the Sentient Milieu'. Ha, they were nothing but thugs, especially those hideous Taalo."

Gruber wasn't surprised that the Dnyarri viewed these historical events a bit differently than the Melnorme. If you saw two people fighting, stopped the fight and then asked who started it, it was always the other guy.

"Tell me about the Taalo," he said.

The Dnyarri looked as if it was recalling something painful.

"Those evil rocklike creatures were the worst of all," it declared. "For fun, they would take one of our children... and then... then... roll over it!... again and again!"

"So what happened in the fight against the Ur-Quan?" Gruber asked to get back on track.

"Oh, it lasted for decades," the Dnyarri said. "Millions of our people died, but with the forces of truth and justice at

*our side, we were prevailing... Until the Taalo made their fateful discovery. They forged a shield against our only weapon, our **weak** psychic powers. With that shield, they were unstoppable. We had lost. But the Ur-Quan were not satisfied merely with our defeat – our slavery. They wanted more! They wanted to punish us for our insolence at fighting back against them, so they devised the sickest, most cruel and perverse punishment ever imagined... They invaded our very genetic structure and hacked out enough of our minds to lobotomize us for all eternity. Then they made us their closest servants... their ‘Talking Pets’. This was our punishment.”*

“An interesting story,” Gruber said.

Just then Rigby approached him and saluted.

“Am I interrupting?” Rigby asked.

Gruber decided not to tell the Dnyarri what he thought of its version of the story.

“Let’s continue this some other time,” he said to the Dnyarri, closed the communications link and gave Rigby his full attention.

“We’re planning on taking the Dnyarri first,” Rigby said. “Some of the folks with headaches asked for a short break.”

“Fine by me,” Gruber agreed.

Later Gruber and a few others met with the Chmmr in person in order to teach them how to use the ansible. That way, when they returned to the starbase, they would know how the modifications on the Vindicator fared and could also instruct the Chmmr should they have any questions. The Chmmr seemed very knowledgeable about the modular structure of the Vindicator, so they probably wouldn’t need much help, though.

Not long afterwards, they were ready. All necessary life support was assembled and tested on the Survion. Both parties had been briefed on what would happen in the

upcoming few weeks. All that was left was for the crew of the Vindicator to disembark and board the Survion. Gruber and Zelnick observed that process in the shuttle hangar.

“I feel kind of bad about this,” Zelnick told Gruber. “I mean, leaving the Vindicator here. I have a strange feeling that I’ll never see her again.”

Gruber didn’t remember Zelnick referring to the ship as a she before.

“I understand how you feel,” he compassionately said. “However, I don’t see any alternatives.”

Zelnick didn’t look satisfied with the answer.

“Everybody seems to trust the Chmmr so completely,” he pointed out, “even though the Chmmr have been in existence for only about a day.”

The captain raised a valid point in Gruber’s opinion.

“I suppose everybody just considers them the Chenjesu,” Gruber said. “You weren’t in the Great War, so you don’t have that experience, but there was something in the Chenjesu that made them... trustworthy.”

“More than humans?” Zelnick asked.

Gruber gave it some thought.

“I admit feeling some relief now that we have given the bomb to the Chmmr,” he said. “It feels almost like our job is done. I know we still have a great battle ahead of us, but that’s just... business.”

“That didn’t answer my question, did it?” Zelnick remarked.

“I suppose it didn’t,” Gruber said. “To make you feel better, I can tell you I am sure we’ll see the Vindicator again – and it will be even deadlier than before.”

Gruber and Zelnick took the last shuttle out and then there was nobody left on board the Vindicator. Zelnick was constantly looking at his ship from the small windows on the shuttle. Gruber gave it a quick glance too and the Vindicator

suddenly felt distant. He had looked at the ship from afar countless times before, but never felt that way. It was one more thing to discuss with Vargas, who would probably have his hands full during the next five days.

Gruber did a roll call once everyone allegedly was present at their small compartment aboard the Survion. The space seemed adequate when everyone was standing in formation, but once the roll call ended and people were dismissed, they could see just how cramped it was. At least Skeates had done an admirable job with the toilets.

Once things had settled down somewhat, the Chmmr announced that they were about to take off. Gruber set the timer of his communicator to their estimated flight time of 122 hours, true space time included. Everything had gone smoothly, but he was still worried. The trip was going to be quite the social experiment.

Lydia then suddenly approached him with dancing steps and grabbed him by the hand.

<<This will be fun,>> she said.

CHAPTER 25

FINAL PREPARATIONS

May 31st 2156, Sol, 175.2 : 145.0

Now that we're safely back at the starbase, I find it appropriate to sum up our unusual journey.

We avoided any and all major problems. I was afraid our biggest challenge would have been the lack of entertainment, but our self-appointed cruise hostess, Lydia, took care of that. I wonder... did she come up with those yoga poses on her own or...?

Nevermind. Of course we weren't practicing yoga all the time. We were also singing and playing games. The dull parts were those when Lydia was sleeping.

Zelnick, on the other hand, wasn't in a jolly mood at all. Ever since we left the Vindicator, he has seemed a bit down – lost, even – like a part of him was missing. I guess he feels his only contribution to the war effort is flying the Vindicator so he considers himself useless at the moment. I disagree with that view, but it doesn't help much. The problem might also be that Zelnick is among the very few who have no experience with the Chenjesu. The feeling of complete trust towards the Chenjesu is something that cannot be taught. One has to experience it themselves.

Vargas was also busy during our journey, extinguishing possible conflicts before they could spread. Obviously he didn't have the opportunity to hold private sessions, but he seemed to be the resourceful type and not let such petty obstacles get in his way.

A thumbs-up to Skeates, by the way. The toilet system broke down just as we were about to transfer aboard the starbase. It's like in the speed-glider races... If the engine breaks down right after crossing the finish line, it has done its duty.

And finally, as if it wasn't a big deal, the Chmmr provided our starbase with an abundant wealth of exotic minerals. This means that we can produce whatever we want as fast as our facilities are physically able to do it. Currently all our workers are busy building Chmmr Avatars, which seem to be our most effective fighting ships.

There was a need for extra chairs at the Alliance Command Council's meeting, even though the Orz didn't need any in their scary exo-skeletons. Everyone was present: Hayes, Gruber, Zelnick, Doctor Fredrikson, two Zoq-Fot-Pik trios, Fwiffo, two mysterious Arilou individuals, Captain Polly of the Pkunk, *Captain* Tanaka, Alia and two other Syreen, two figures under white robes (presumed Utwig, but nobody checked), a row of colorful flowers representing the Supox, ominously grinning Captain *Heavy* of the Orz, an unnamed* pile of crystals representing the Chmmr civilization, Admiral Zex as a guest of honor and, finally, the Dnyarri inside a small container similar to a cat-carrier.

The Chmmr at Procyon had been successfully contacted via the ansible. The process of modifying the bomb seemed to be going as planned and the Chmmr estimated the work would be completed in about a week plus transit time to Sol.

The Shofixti colony ship was supposed to have reached its destination at Eta Vulpeculae on the day of the meeting, but there was no chance to confirm it at that time.

* Apparently the Chmmr did have individual names in some exotic sense, but, according to the translation computer, the concept was vastly different and untranslatable.

New scout reports had come in from Delta Crateris, the system where the Sa-Matra was stationed. It was difficult to come to any conclusions about defenses against external threats as the whole system was engulfed in a fierce battle between the Kzer-Za and the Kohr-Ah. The Kzer-Za would probably have lost already if it weren't for the intervention of the Utwig and the Supox who only attacked the Kohr-Ah and kept a major part of their fleet occupied in the Horologii constellation. The Alliance estimated that those courageous actions bought them a few more months, which should make all the difference in the world.

The Hierarchy battle thralls had been quite effectively neutralized compared to the situation a year earlier. Most of the Mycon fleet had been wiped out at Organon, the Vux were only a minor threat without Admiral Zex, the Yehat were preoccupied with their civil war, the Androsynth had vanished, the Spathi were hiding under their slave shield, the Umgah were probably poorly motivated to assist their masters and the Ilwrath were on their way to attack the Thraddash. The Alliance could focus solely on the Ur-Quan.

Even without their battle thralls, the combined Ur-Quan forces vastly outnumbered the strength of the Alliance, so a simple all-out frontal assault was unlikely to result in a favorable outcome. Instead, the Alliance needed to strike a quick and devastating blow against the Sa-Matra and, utilizing the chaos that would hopefully follow, take out a major part of the enemy forces. They would also have to rely on the Kzer-Za and the Kohr-Ah not being able to form a unified front.

They needed to come up with a plan – a plan that would most likely involve using the powers of the Dnyarri. And to do that, they would need to know more about those powers. First, what was the range of the Dnyarri's mental compulsion? Second, what was the range of the Taalo mind

shield? Third, how many Ur-Quan could a single Dnyarri control?

The Dnyarri had an adequate answer ready for the third question. Seeing as they didn't need the Ur-Quan under their complete control and only needed to clear a path to the Sa-Matra, the Dnyarri could simply command the Ur-Quan to fly away like it did with the Thraddash. That trick wouldn't need a constant link between the Dnyarri and its target, only a short moment to enter their mind.

The answers to the first two questions were relatively simple to figure out. They kept the mind shield aboard the starbase and sent the Dnyarri and a few test subjects of different races away on a small vehicle, constantly monitoring the exact distance between the Dnyarri and the rock. The Dnyarri tried to enter the minds of the test subjects from time to time until it succeeded, at which time they knew they were outside the shield's range. Then another craft was sent out with a different set of test subjects while constantly monitoring that craft's distance to the Dnyarri. When it was far enough, it started to approach the Dnyarri who in turn tried to compel the test subjects. When it succeeded, they had some basic idea of the Dnyarri's range.

"Impressive range," Zelnick commented as he checked the test results. "For both of them. On the one hand, it helps us, but on the other hand, it also makes our job that much harder."

Gruber was also reading Dr. Chu's report on the tests.

"I agree," he said. "We don't need to get the Dnyarri too close to the enemy, but we do need to get it far away from the Vindicator, which makes it difficult for us to protect the damn thing."

Lydia was also listening, although she didn't read the report.

“Can you use the same machine that will catapult your escape pod to safety?” she asked. “That way you could get the Dnyarri far away from the Vindicator quickly, right?”

Again Gruber and Zelnick could only nod in agreement. Dr. Fredrikson could no doubt forge a suitable pod for the Dnyarri in a few days.

“As for our escape pod,” Gruber changed the topic, “I hear Fredrikson has finished its designs already. It should be able to do its job and reach the minimum escape velocity so we can consider that part under control.”

Lydia looked at Gruber with a disturbingly perceptive look on her face.

“What’s the catch?” she asked, reading him like an open book.

Gruber had no intention of keeping any secrets, but he had planned on sharing that information at another time. Lydia, however, forced him to talk.

“There isn’t room for that many people,” he explained. “At the moment it can only fit 20 humans. And what’s more, the pod and the catapult take up all the space from the shuttle bay. That means we have to leave out the shuttle and the Pkunk Furies, although I’m sure the Furies can also dock at the Survion.

Suddenly Gruber felt like there was someone else staring at him. He turned around and got startled a bit as there was an Orz right behind him. It still had that very disturbing grin on its face.

“*Excitement, yes,*” the Orz said. “*You are funny campers. Orz enjoy *smelling pretty colors* every day. And then what? *Dancing*!*”

Gruber and Zelnick exchanged looks.

“Er...” Gruber searched for words. “Yes. Is there something we can help you with?”

The Orz took a step closer even though it was already closer than what was comfortable.

*“You *connect* almost, but not enough,” it said. “Orz help you and then you are *fully connected* for too much enjoyment.”*

Then the Orz turned around.

“Soon, but not yet,” it declared and started to walk away.

Gruber felt like he had just been bullied. He turned to Lydia, hoping that she could explain what the Orz had meant.

“Sorry, I didn’t understand that,” she apologetically said.

The Orz then stopped and turned around.

“Soon,” it once more said before turning around and continuing walking.

Gruber and the others waited until the Orz was out of the area.

“Creepy,” Zelnick concluded.

“Indeed the Orz make me a bit uncomfortable nowadays,” Gruber agreed.

Both Gruber and Zelnick turned to Lydia again for answers, but she only spread her arms to indicate that she had none.

Several days later the starbase got a word from the Chmmr saying that the modifications to the bomb were ready and that they were already transporting the Vindicator to Sol. The Chmmr seemed confident that when detonated at point-blank range, the bomb would have enough destructive force to completely vaporize the Sa-Matra. Incidentally, everything else within an unknown radius would most likely be destroyed as well. Jumping to hyperspace before detonation seemed like a good idea, but they couldn’t do that with the escape pod. There was no way to equip the pod with a hyperdrive powerful enough to perform a jump from within the inner star system. They would just have to fly away in true space fast enough.

During the days they were waiting for the Vindicator to arrive, Gruber often saw Zelnick standing in the hangar, looking at the sector where the Vindicator typically was waiting. On one particular day he noticed that Lydia was there with him, apparently cheering up the captain. When she left his side, she slapped the captain on the buttocks, making him jump at least a foot in the air. After that the man was in a much jollier mood.

On June 14th 2156 the Vindicator arrived, piloted by the Chmmr. The ship looked a lot different than just a few weeks earlier...

“What have you done to my ship?” Zelnick demanded in disbelief as the Chmmr *stepped* inside the starbase.

The Chmmr had little facial expressions for humans to read so there was no point in trying.

“All adjustments were necessary,” one Chmmr replied to the captain.

Zelnick looked at the Chmmr, the Vindicator, and then the Chmmr again.

“But...” he searched for words. “But where are the modules? And what the hell is that... thing over there?”

Indeed all the modules were gone and in their place there was a weird contraption occupying slots 7-16.

“It was unavoidable,” the Chmmr explained. “Our crystal amplification system requires a great deal of space and energy. In this short time we had, we found no way to use less than ten of your module slots.”

Zelnick looked at the Vindicator in silence for a while with his mouth open.

“There are matters of higher priority,” the Chmmr continued. “We should assemble the command council immediately.”

The Chmmr told the command council that the Alliance couldn't wait for a large fleet of Avatars to be ready. According to their unspecified but no doubt reliable sources, the Kohr-Ah's victory in the doctrinal conflict was imminent. Waiting any longer was too risky. The Alliance would have to gather all the ships they had and set out for the final push as soon as possible. The Chmmr insisted that they had all the necessary resources for victory and that with courage and fortune on their side, the Alliance would emerge victorious.

The only ship that wasn't ready to take off within a few hours was the Vindicator. The Chmmr had brought all the removed modules with them, so at least the shipyard wouldn't have to produce them from scratch, but there was still some work in attaching them.

Arguing about occupying the ten rearmost slots with the bomb was pointless, so they focused on figuring out what modules to put in the remaining six slots. After some discussion they decided to use one Hellbore Cannon, one Fusion Blaster, one Shiva Furnace, one Point-Defense Laser, one crew pod and one double capacity fuel tank. The Vindicator would carry the key to the entire offensive while being much weaker than before so a formidable part of the fleet would have to focus on protecting the flagship. All other ships would do everything in their power to clear a path to the Sa-Matra.

When to use the Dnyarri was something they would have to decide during battle. If everything they had heard of the Sa-Matra was correct, they would have a hard time getting close to it. Possibly they would have to keep their Dnyarriace in their sleeve up until the last moment when the Sa-Matra's defenses would need to be neutralized.

Almost everything the Alliance had that was capable of fighting was sent to rendezvous at Betelgeuse. A large number of Shofixti Scout vessels docked at the Survion,

along with the four Pkunk Furies that used to be with the Vindicator. Only a minimal squad stayed behind to protect Sol and Procyon. The Star Runner, Anna 53, Seraph, *Flamenco* and *Fox* stayed with the Vindicator, along with two unnamed Chmmr Avatars. The Vindicator was scheduled to be ready for take-off in just a few days so they would probably reach Betelgeuse well on time.

For a few hours the starbase was like an ant hive. Gruber joined Dave at the hangar control booth to stay out of the way, but at the same time oversee all the people who hurried here and there to do last-minute chores before boarding their ships. Gruber found amusement from looking at a monitor that showed a view of the hangar from the ceiling. He adjusted some settings and created an overlay for the camera image, showing each individual with a separate color. Then he rewinded and fast-forwarded the video feed so that the different colors of different people turned into lines which indicated their movement patterns.

“Look at that guy,” Dave chuckled while pointing at one man who had been assigned an orange color in Gruber’s graphics. “I can’t even guess where he’s going.”

Indeed the man had been running around in the crowd for quite some time already without seeming to achieve anything. If a person did that in a confined space, one would expect the person to hit a wall eventually, but this guy was essentially moving in circles.

“Crowd dynamics,” Gruber summed it up as if he was an expert of the subject. “You just go with the flow.”

Actually, even though he wasn’t an expert, Gruber did know of several crowd studies that had proven some interesting behavior models. Most importantly, if you put any number of people in a room with not much personal space and ordered them to move around, the crowd would act more or less like marbles. The crowd as a whole would

become an entity that reacted extremely primitively and predictably to different stimuli. Secondly, if the organizers had beforehand ordered a number of people to move in a specific pattern, intentionally obstructing the natural flow of the crowd, the crowd entity could absorb only a very certain percentage of these *individuals*. If the percentage of people moving in a specific pattern reached a certain threshold, the entire crowd would begin to follow the pattern. Unfortunately Gruber didn't remember what the threshold was, but it was small.

Then he spotted a touching scene where a man and a woman were hugging each other. Seeing that made Gruber remember what exactly was happening. They were about to commence the final attack. There was no turning back afterwards. The upcoming great battle would no doubt mark the beginning of the end, one way or the other. If the Alliance failed, the Kohr-Ah would kill everyone in a matter of months. If the Alliance succeeded, the dreaded war might soon come to an end. They had a good chance of success, but also a very notable chance of failure. Even if they succeeded, there would inevitably be gruesome casualties.

The hugging pair was surely aware that they might never see each other again. The thought made Gruber sad. He wanted to see Lydia. That thought, on the other hand, made him wonder when exactly he had developed such strong feelings towards her. She was definitely the person he considered most important in his life at the moment, but he was genuinely curious to find out why.

Gruber checked the time and concluded that Lydia should be sleeping at the moment. He was soon scheduled for shut-eye as well, so he delegated the overseeing process to Dave and made for his quarters with the intention of writing a bit before going to sleep.

As he opened the door to his quarters his attention was immediately focused on the person sleeping on the floor.

The person was facing the other way, but Gruber didn't have to check to know that it was Lydia – not because of her appearance, but simply because nobody else would crash on his floor. Gruber noticed that he felt pleased and was then pleased to see that he was pleased. He silently undressed, went to his own bed and fell asleep instantly.

The next day was busy for the first officer of the Vindicator, but Gruber arranged a few hours of spare time to spend with Lydia. He had planned for a certain schedule to make the most of their time, but that plan flew out the window right away as Lydia insisted they played foosball*. And as they played, he realized that his plan was grossly inferior to Lydia's... and he was also grossly inferior to Lydia in foosball.

After several seemingly tight, but nonetheless non-victorious matches, Gruber decided it was time for a snack. They grabbed something from the cafeteria and went to the observation deck where there was nobody around. They sat on the edge of the floating platform which, Gruber remembered, he had used when he had tried to get a first glimpse of the Vindicator over a year earlier – on February 18th 2155. He told that to Lydia.

<<I can't imagine the Vindicator without you as the first officer,>> she commented.

Gruber realized that neither could he.

<<A lot has happened since then,>> he put it simply.

Lydia's expression clearly indicated that she was about to ask something that seemed trivial, but in the end turned out to be extremely difficult.

<<What are you going to do afterwards?>> she asked and confirmed Gruber's expectations.

* Really foosball, not football

<<You mean if we succeed?>> he replied, trying to buy time.

Lydia gave him a strange look.

<<I already know what you do if you fail,>> she pointed out. <<Let's not talk about that.>>

Gruber remembered his earlier thoughts on the matter.

<<I used to think I'd like to go on an exploration mission,>> he said. <<I specifically wanted to take another look at Groombridge. If that would have turned out fruitless, I could have just gone to explore uncharted space.>>

Lydia nodded.

<<Why the past tense?>> she asked.

That was the moment when Gruber realized it himself completely.

<<Now I just want to retire,>> he declared. <<I want to go home and I hope you want to go home with me.>>

His sudden confession made him blush a little, but he wasn't ashamed of it. Instead, he felt proud.

<<To this small area of land you call 'Germany'?>> she checked and got a nod.

A wide smile crept on her face. She grabbed Gruber's arm tightly.

<<I'd love to!>>

They stayed in that position for a while. Gruber enjoyed his first family man moment. It was a shame they would have to destroy a Precursor battle platform before their plan would become reality.

<<You have to come back,>> Lydia then said, still gripping his arm.

Gruber thought that in such situations people usually promised they would come back. He always considered that inappropriate, though, since one should only make promises whose fulfillment was in their own hands.

<<I have to come back,>> he said instead and immediately liked himself a bit more.

Eventually duty called again and Gruber returned to the hangar where he met with Fwiffo. The Spathi captain had an unusual getup – a black cape with red stripes – similar to the one the Camelopardalian, Pwappy, always wore. Fwiffo noticed Gruber’s surprised face and took initiative in explaining his attire.

“Pwappy insisted,” he submissively laid out what was probably the truth. “I finally took the path of least resistance, which also included painting the Star Runner with similar colors.”

Gruber checked and indeed the Star Runner was also painted black with red stripes. Truth be told, it looked rather cool.

“Are you really okay with that?” he checked.

Fwiffo turned to face the hangar opening. As the starbase rotated, the Vindicator slowly slid into view.

“I think I don’t even care anymore,” Fwiffo said. “For over a year now we have narrowly evaded certain death and extreme tortures. Resisting seems futile at this point. Participating in the upcoming assault just seems so much more... convenient.”

Gruber didn’t expect to hear such words from a Spathi.

“You know how it is when you’re really tired, right?” Fwiffo continued. “At first you slow down and it gets hard to think. Then it gets difficult to stay awake and every trash can looks like a comfortable place to sleep. But eventually, when enough time has passed, you get over those feelings and you don’t feel tired anymore. At least for us Spathi it works like that. I think that’s where I am now.”

Gruber knew the feeling.

“It’s the same with us humans,” he agreed. “Although, when you finally do get some sleep, you sleep a lot and still feel terrible when you wake up.”

Fwiffo pondered it for a while.

“So when I regain my senses,” he said, “I will weep and tremble uncontrollably.”

“Let’s just hope it happens after the battle,” Gruber summed it up as he noticed Captain Zelnick approaching.

“As you were, gentlemen,” Zelnick said, even though nobody had made any effort to salute. “How’s the roster?”

Gruber showed the captain a list of names.

“The most essential crew of 20,” he explained. “And it is my duty to inform you that there were several volunteers to fill additional posts, knowing full well that there would be no room for them in the escape pod. Should I give you their names as well?”

Zelnick took the list in his hands and read it through before giving it back to Gruber.

“No,” he decided. “This crew will be enough. Oh, by the way, I discussed the strange statements of the Orz with the Arilou.”

Zelnick spoke his line as if he was going to continue, but after a while it became clear that he wasn’t going to, which annoyed Gruber.

“And...?” Gruber demanded.

That seemed to be the trigger Zelnick was waiting for.

“The one I talked with said that we shouldn’t worry,” the captain continued. “He opened up real nice during his second beer. Apparently, they have been busy altering our *smell* in a way to make it undetectable for the Orz. He said that they have been quite successful so far and that the Orz are just rambling random things. We should be safe unless we do something grossly stupid, whatever that would be.”

Gruber felt a little relieved, but not completely. Still, it was enough for him to brush the matter aside for the moment.

“Not to change the subject, but...” Gruber began with the sole purpose to change the subject. “I’m sure you already know we can’t use the shuttle to board the Vindicator as

there is no room in the shuttle bay, thanks to the escape pod and the catapult.”

“I know,” Zelnick said. “But I don’t know how exactly we are going to get in.”

Gruber had had some discussions about the matter.

“So far our best plan is to do a spacewalk,” he explained. “Do you have any experience of such activity?”

Gruber was also a bit worried since in Star Control there was a rather intense training program before anyone was allowed to do a spacewalk. The final test in particular had been feared and respected. The subject would wear a space suit and step inside a small circle at the center of an empty and spacious vacuum room. Then the lights were turned off, making the room pitch black, and the subject had to stay inside that circle for seven minutes. In truth, the seven minute period was used only to dismiss those completely incompatible – for their own safety and well-being. The real test began after those seven minutes, when the gravity was also turned off. The subject then had to simply stay quiet for another undisclosed time period – usually between five to ten minutes – after which the lights were turned back on and the gravity gradually returned.

It was one of those tests that sounded like a piece of cake, but in truth a formidable number of candidates couldn’t handle the complete sensory deprivation and started screaming during the first minute of zero-gravity. When that happened, the test was quickly terminated to prevent any mental damage. There was a mandatory one hour session with a psychologist afterwards, regardless of the candidate passing or failing. The Vindicator’s psychologist, Eduardo Vargas, had done a number of those sessions.

“No experience,” Zelnick answered. “But I did put on a space suit once – for fun. It was when Talana suggested that we—”

Gruber raised his hand to indicate that Zelnick should not continue the sentence.

“I’m sure you’ll do fine,” he encouraged the captain.

The next day the Vindicator was ready to set sail. The hangar was full of people seeing them off, giving their cheers and farewells. Hayes delivered an impressively encouraging and emotional speech which would no doubt become one for the history books if the Alliance emerged victorious.

With a final wave of goodbye, the 20 crewmen boarded the shuttle that would take them close to the Vindicator’s airlock. Gruber saw to it that Zelnick was safely escorted inside and did one more head count once everyone appeared to be inside the airlock. In addition to him and the captain, there were all six bridge officers, Skeates, Vargas, Doctor Mehul and nine maintenance crewmen. The Dnyarri was already on board in a small capsule that could be launched with the catapult. The capsule was fashioned from the unmanned transport vehicle they had used a lifetime ago to deliver the radioactive elements for the starbase power cores.

The inner airlock doors opened and closed again after everyone was inside. Then they all took off their space suits and formed a double line.

“Ladies and gentlemen...” Zelnick addressed the crew. “Let’s go kick butt!”

CHAPTER 26

FINAL APPROACH

June 21st 2156, Betelgeuse, 412.5 : 377.0

There is no turning back now. Everything we have done since the day the Vindicator first arrived at the starbase (February 18th 2155, by the way) comes down to this. Who would have thought that we'd actually have a shot at saving the galaxy?

*But let's not get too carried away (I think I'm saying that a lot.) As Hayes reminded us in his excellent speech, even if we succeeded in this operation, we'd still have a long and difficult road ahead of us in rounding up and neutralizing the remaining Ur-Quan forces. And if we succeeded in **that**, then we would have to worry about politics. Hopefully, though, at that point we could leave that part to the professionals.*

The New Alliance of Free Stars is a diverse bunch. None of our members are at their full strength, but together we are a force to be reckoned with. If the two Ur-Quan subspecies are unable or unwilling to join forces against us, I believe we might have the upper hand. Also, if they do cease their hostilities against each other until they have dealt with us, I'm afraid we don't stand a chance. There's nothing we can do about that, though. As the captain said a long time ago, you should rely on your strong points... If you are exceptionally lucky, you should rely on luck.

It feels strange now that Captain Trent is the commanding admiral of this operation and Captain Zelnick is basically just one of his pawns. I had already gotten used to standing next to the man who, in the end, called all the shots. And what's more, Trent appointed Zex as his vice-admiral. Not that I'm complaining, I'm sure Zex is the best pick for that job, but its uncomfortable having such a scheming individual outranking you. And for the record, I question neither Zex's motives nor Zex's commitment – I'm just feeling generally uncomfortable, whatever that means.

One would easily think that the commander of this operation should sit at the helm of either the Vindicator or the Survion, but that is not the case. The point is that according to the basic principles of thieving (why do I know this?) the biggest jewel is never hidden in the safe. Usually it is stashed in some non-descript box in plain sight, most often quite near the safe. Following that logic, our commander on board the Tobermoon is hidden amongst the ranks of commoners so to speak.

These past few days I have felt surprisingly home sick. I couldn't figure out why, but luckily I had a session with Vargas. We don't have the ansible with us now and therefore we have no way to communicate with the starbase. If we ever talk with the folks back there again, it will be after our glorious triumph. In a sense we are all alone now. And by "us" I mean the entire armada of the New Alliance of Free Stars.

Let's recap why we don't have the ansible with us... It's because we have a huge Chmmr-made crystal amplification system integrated into the ten rearmost module slots, leaving only six slots available. We had to consider the ansible an item of lower priority than weapons systems. There was also some discussion on whether we should use one module for living quarters (the "crew pod") or not. Sure, it is not

absolutely necessary as there are only 20 of us and this mission should take only about a month. We could all bunk in some temporary quarters like the original crew did when they left Vela. However, I agree with those who argued that we should prioritize the well-being of our crew. It would be a shame if we lost the upcoming battle because a crewmember had fallen asleep. We are already pushing everyone with much longer shifts than normal as we are seriously under-crewed.

The Vindicator and its few escorts rendezvoused at Betelgeuse with the rest of the alliance. Once everyone had refueled and resupplied at the Syreen starbase, *Admiral Trent* gave the order to jump to hyperspace and make haste towards Delta Crateris.

The Survion had a hyperdrive that was even more powerful than the Vindicator's, so, to move the fleet as fast as possible, the ships with the slowest hyperspace cruising speeds were dragged along inside the Survion's hyperdrive field. The fleet could then move at the moderate, but acceptable speed of the Syreen Penetrators.

The Vindicator, being the one ship they couldn't afford to lose, was assigned a special guard of many different ship types. In addition to the familiar Star Runner, Anna 53, *Flamenco* and *Fox*, the Vindicator was escorted closely by two Chmmr Avatars, one Utwig Jugger, one Supox Blade, one Arilou Skiff and, last but not least, Zex's modified Vux Intruder.

Wiping out all enemies that blocked their way in hyperspace was not the objective. Instead, the plan was that small squadrons could intercept the incoming spoors and stall them long enough for the Vindicator and a major part of the armada to push through. It all depended on the amount of patrols they would meet and the level of coordination and discipline the enemy would show.

The distance from Betelgeuse to Delta Crateris was almost exactly 300 hyperspace units. The Vindicator alone could travel that distance in a bit less than two weeks, but with the current speed of the armada, the trip would take three weeks – assuming no detours. Detours would be pointless though, since they moved a bit slower than their enemies.

Leaving the rest of the armada behind, the Vindicator could easily jump to quasispaces and reach Delta Crateris on its own. That wouldn't be much of a comfort though, if their scout reports of that system were accurate. They needed a major part of their forces there if the Vindicator was ever going to get anywhere near the Sa-Matra.

Uneventful days followed one another, slowly, as they pushed through hyperspace towards their target. The silence was a good thing, but it also made some people a bit uneasy. Gruber concentrated on enjoying the smooth ride as he knew they could just as well be battling enemy fleets, hopelessly outnumbered.

When the Alliance had just passed the Cancri constellation, which was their half-way mark, they picked up an unknown fleet on the radar coming from the direction of Vux and Mycon space. This fleet was also heading straight towards Delta Crateris. The Alliance first discussed the possibility of Vux and/or Mycon reinforcements, but that scenario was soon discarded as the fleet was moving too fast.

During the next few days all the Alliance could do was to keep the pedal to the metal and watch the other fleet catch up to them – just slowly enough that the Alliance was calculated to reach Delta Crateris first by a margin of tens of minutes.

“Like I said,” Gruber began, repeating his view on the unknown fleet to Captain Zelnick for the nth time as the two were alone in the captain’s quarters, “I can think of four possibilities, one of which is more probable than the rest. First, and most likely, they are a contingent of new or modified Ur-Quan ships that have been stationed in the Camelopardalis constellation. If I were the leader of the Hierarchy, I would definitely call for backup immediately as I saw a large fleet of enemies cross the border of my empire’s patrolled space. The other three options are pretty much the same, except that the fleet would then belong to the Vux, the Mycon or the Yehat. These are more unlikely simply because they would have had to start moving before we took off from Betelgeuse. Someone or something would have had to tip them off, and even then they would have still had to come up with a much faster hyperdrive than what they had in the Great War. In addition, the Mycon are now significantly weakened, the Vux are without Admiral Zex and the Yehat are fighting a civil war, not to mention that their home space is even further away than that of the Vux or the Mycon.”

Zelnick was nodding as if he agreed with everything.

“And all those scenarios are bad for us,” he concluded.

“Not necessarily if we do indeed beat them to Delta Crateris,” Gruber pointed out. “We might be able to avoid them all together.”

He got another nod that indicated the captain hadn’t really been listening to Gruber’s last line. Instead, Zelnick seemed to be contemplating something, which usually was a bad sign.

“If there was a leak,” he suddenly began, “who could it be? I mean, we have some shady characters on our team and—”

He had to stop in mid-sentence as Gruber had raised his hand in a way that signaled *Stop talking right now*.

The hand sign also came with a requirement to explain, so Gruber did.

“That is a one-way ticket to destruction,” he slightly exaggerated to make his point crystal clear. “When you start to question the loyalties of your allies in search for a traitor, you usually end up doing more damage than the traitor itself, if one even exists. The best way to dampen enemy morale is to make them think there’s a traitor amongst their ranks.”

Gruber noticed the look on Zelnick’s face indicated a strong urge to pursue the matter.

“I’m sure you are thinking of some names right now,” Gruber continued. “If you are going to take my advice only once in your life, do it now. Bury your current thoughts and drop the matter entirely. Everything you or anyone else could do would only make matters worse.”

Zelnick’s face got a hint of red color. He tapped the table with his fingers and twisted his mouth as if trying to cut salami with just his lips.

“Okay,” he finally said, but Gruber didn’t believe him.

“If you **have to** articulate your suspicions,” Gruber tried to ease the captain’s burden, “write your thoughts down on a personal journal. It helps.”

As more days passed, Gruber let a slight hint of hope enter his mind. Maybe they would reach Delta Crateris without incident after all. He built up his hopes day by day, hour by hour, right up to the point where it hurt when they were crushed.

They were just about to pass Alpha Crateris, which was less than three days away from Delta, when a number of spoors emerged from Beta – which was right on their path – and immediately set course towards the Alliance.

“There’s too many of them,” Admiral Trent addressed the fleet. *“We can’t use any clever tricks to evade them. We have to fight our way through and we need to do it fast.”*

An image of Vice-Admiral Zex appeared next to Trent on the screen.

“I have prepared a small sub-program,” Zex explained. “When run simultaneously with your true space jump routine, it should allow you to calculate your jumps much more accurately. If we use that and the element of surprise that follows, we should be able to gain the upper hand right away.”

“We will send the Survion first and test the plan with the Shofixti Scouts,” Trent continued. “If it works, the Survion can jump back to hyperspace in just a few minutes.”

At that moment Gruber was glad he was on the Alliance team. Any battle would get off to an unpleasant start if, during the first seconds after jumping to true space, a Glory Device were to go off right next to your ship. But he also found himself feeling slightly bad since every one of those detonations would mean the death of one more Shofixti. He of course knew that that was the whole point of bringing Shofixti Scouts into battle, but using them as efficiently as Trent had planned made it feel like genocide.

Regardless of Gruber’s feelings, the Survion’s fleet separated itself from the rest of the armada and headed towards the nearest enemy. It took only a few hours until they met the enemy and both parties vanished from the hyperspace radar.

“So now we wait,” Zelnick said and sat down.

He didn’t have to sit for long as only about a minute later one of the spoors came back.

“Success,” the commanding Chmmr of the Survion reported. “There were more enemies than we anticipated. We lost a great number of Shofixti Scouts, but for each we lost, the Kzer-Za lost one Dreadnought.”

“Good job,” Trent commented. *“We’ll continue with that plan for as long as it works”*

The Survion picked up the enemy spoors one at a time until all Shofixti Scouts had been used. At that point there were so few enemies left that the Alliance took care of them with ease.

“Those brave Shofixti warriors shall be remembered,” Gruber said.

“Trent and Zex sure know their stuff,” Zelnick remarked. “I’m glad I’m not in their shoes.”

Soon they passed Beta Crateris. Looking out the window they could already see the vortex leading to Delta Crateris. They could also see the vast amount of spoors of unknown origin that were right on their tail. Admiral Trent and Vice-Admiral Zex formulated and distributed a standard strategy the Alliance should assume immediately upon entering the star system. Zelnick didn’t try to conceal being uncomfortable with the Vindicator’s relatively safe role in the back lines, even though the basic idea was already known when they left Betelgeuse. Now it just seemed much more real as they got the actual orders.

Fortunately there were no more nasty surprises and the Alliance reached the target vortex on time, just barely ahead of the mystery fleet that had been puzzling them for over a week.

“Our position is insured,” Zelnick said to Gruber just minutes before jumping to Delta Crateris.

It was one of those lines after which Gruber was forced to ask for specification.

“Say we enter the system and manage to push inwards to Sa-Matra without delay,” the captain continued. “In that case, whoever is right on our tail won’t necessarily have the chance to intercept us.”

“And if we do get delayed?” Gruber forced.

“Then...” Zelnick built up the suspense. “Then we finally get to see who they are and the mystery is unveiled. Great, huh?”

Gruber didn’t see it as positively, but humored the captain.

“Maybe you’ll even get to talk with yet another new alien race,” he replied.

Samusenko started counting down as they were about to make the jump.

“By the way, captain,” Gruber began, “in all likelihood, this will be the last jump the Vindicator will ever make.”

Zelnick gently stroke the side of his console.

“I like this ship,” the captain said.

The simple, yet powerful comment moved Gruber.

“So do I, sir,” the first officer agreed, “so do I.”

“Five... four... three... two... one...” Samusenko counted. “Jump!”

The red color of hyperspace smoothly faded away, leaving only the blackness of true space. Following small flashes of red and orange here and there, a great number of ships appeared next to the Vindicator.

One flash in the vicinity was too bright to be related to a hyperspace jump. No, it was what you got when a fusion blast melted the hull of a pressurized ship.

“What the hell?” Zelnick demanded and dove to the controls. “Danielle, report!”

The radar was filled with red dots and the Alliance armada was down by one Syreen Penetrator.

“Sir, it appears the enemy was expecting us!” Dujardin reported. “We have Dreadnoughts everywhere.”

“Incoming!” McNeil shouted and pointed at a squadron of fighters that was approaching the Vindicator.

Just then precise orders were relayed to the Vindicator from the Tobermoon. Gruber quickly spoke them to the captain who then steered the ship to its assigned position.

Most of the Alliance was pushing forward, taking the wall of Dreadnoughts head-on, which was their best bet given the circumstances. The Vindicator didn't participate in the assault and for a quick while they could do nothing but observe the battle.

"We're never getting anywhere near the Sa-Matra," Zelnick spoke out loud the inconvenient truth. "Not like this. We might survive this first wall of defense, but there would be not much of us left then."

He then turned to Gruber.

"Should we use the Dnyarri already?"

That was something Trent had specifically instructed them not to do. If they played their trump card too soon, the enemy would have time to get over the initial shock and come up with a counter.

As if on cue, the Dnyarri called the bridge.

"I sense the presence of my ancient slaves," it said. *"Is it time?"*

Just then they got a message from Vice-Admiral Zex.

"The mystery fleet will arrive any second now," he reminded everyone on the back lines. *"As we can't push forward fast enough, I will oversee our defense in the rear."*

A new set of orders was relayed from Zex's ship.

"Not yet," Zelnick said to the Dnyarri and closed the link.

"I take back what I said," he then said to Gruber. "We're not surviving the first line of defense. There were countless of spoors in the fleet we're now expecting."

Gruber used up all his imagination, but couldn't think of anything to prove the captain wrong. He squeezed his fists tighter than one should. It simply seemed so wrong to be defeated there. He checked the tactical display once more and saw several ships storming the wall of Dreadnoughts in a heroic attempt to break through while the Survion worked as a shield for the less maneuverable ships to get them into

effective range. The forward team was performing well, but that wasn't enough.

"I'm detecting multiple jumps!" Dujardin reported.

"This is it, then," Zelnick said. "No matter who they turn out to be, we'll at least make every one of their crew regret signing up for this mission. Just like me. McNeil, prepare to give them a warm welcome!"

There were countless red-to-orange flashes all around and the radar went wild. The Alliance was now surrounded from both sides.

"Danielle, get me a silhouette!" Zelnick ordered.

"No hits, sir," the radar operator immediately responded. "That silhouette is not in the data banks."

"They're hailing us," Katja said, "all of us. It's a send-only signal."

"Accept it," Zelnick commanded. "Just who the hell are they?"

The communications officer did her thing and an image was then displayed on the main screen.

"Another for Tweety!" the battle cry of the Yehat echoed throughout the Alliance.

Gruber looked at the silhouette again, but it definitely wasn't the same as the one of Yehat Terminators. Or, come to think of it... some part of it was, but there was something else there as well.

"Made it just in time, did we?" the Yehat spoke. *"Don't worry lads, we're here to help."*

It was still unclear to Gruber which side the Yehat came to help.

"Sir, look at this," Dujardin said and showed a telescope view from one of the ships that had just entered the system.

There was a Yehat Terminator all right, but there was also a Pkunk Fury – as if the two ships had become one.

Suddenly all the Pkunk parts blasted off with incredible speed towards the Dreadnoughts. The Yehat ships also soon

passed the Vindicator, heading for battle. Trent quickly got the hang of the new situation and assumed command of the new fleet as well. The sudden reinforcements turned the tide completely.

After some time there was only one Dreadnought left.

“The enemy is hailing us,” Katja reported.

“So?” Zelnick replied. “Admiral Trent handles communications in this affair.”

“No, sir,” Katja said. “I mean they’re hailing us in particular. Just the Vindicator.”

Zelnick quickly discussed it with Trent and was given the permission to accept the call. The conversation would be relayed to the Tobermoon as well. They answered and the unsettling image of an Ur-Quan Kzer-Za was soon displayed on the Vindicator’s communications screen.

The alien eyed Zelnick for a while, which was disturbing as there were so many eyes.

“There is something wrong here,” the Ur-Quan finally said. *“Something which makes my sheath retract and my talons ooze.”*

“Well, it figures,” Zelnick innocently said. “Do you wish to surrender?”

The Ur-Quan gave a disapproving, but somehow strange look – one that Gruber had never seen on the Ur-Quan before.

“I sense the ugliness of a thousand evil thoughts,” the creature continued, ignoring Zelnick’s question. *“And I have located the source of these fetid emanations. They come from aboard your vessel!”*

Zelnick seemed clueless.

“What the hell are you talking about?” he asked.

“You think you represent justice, fighting against everything that is evil in the universe,” the alien spoke, sounding awfully convincing again. *“You are wrong. You have no idea what kind of power you are dealing with –*

*pointing it at us like a mere weapon. I know my time grows short, so I will make this clear: There are far worse fates than death. You might be able to defeat us, yes, but if that happens, make sure the power you used gets destroyed in the process as well. If not, you **will** suffer in the end."*

The Ur-Quan cut the transmission. Less than a minute later the last Dreadnought was neutralized by the Alliance.

"I've never seen the Ur-Quan behave that way," Zex commented, obviously having seen the speech as well.

"The Ur-Quan never lie," Trent continued the thought. *"I'm sure they considered their message to be important."*

"That doesn't change our plans though," Zex said. *"Now that the Yehat are on our side, we have the upper hand. We can confirm that there is an unusual enemy presence in orbit around the fifth planet. Combining that info with our scout reports, we can safely expect to find the Sa-Matra there."*

"Attention, all ships," Trent ordered. *"Form up and proceed towards the fifth planet!"*

CHAPTER 27

FINAL CONFRONTATION

August 13th 2156, Delta Crateris, 620.0 : 593.5

“The revolution is over and we are victorious!” one Yehat explained to the Alliance. *“We pulled the Veep-Neep harpy queen and her cronies from the High Perch and, most importantly, found a new queen. She is a queen that will unite the clans in peace and harmony like never before! Her name is Braky Girdy the First – yes, a Pkunk! – and her first command was to rush here and help the alliance at its most difficult hour.”*

Trent applauded.

“I’m sure you’ll be glad to know that the Shofixti are doing well,” he said. *“They are already in the process of colonizing a new home planet. We got this far thanks to their great sacrifices.”*

The reflections on the Yehat eyes gave the impression that there might have been one or two tears there.

“That is good to hear,” the Yehat said with a soft voice. *“Most of the clans had been utterly dissatisfied with the previous queen for years, living out their long lives in shame, but nobody had had the constitution to do anything about it. But then, when the courageous old warrior Tanaka had suddenly arrived and showed us that the Shofixti were reborn, it was like a dam was broken inside of us. The feeling was devastating. Our children had made the ultimate*

sacrifice, but we... (sob)... We had sacrificed our honor instead and lain with the enemy... we were not worthy.

Many of us were already in the airlock, getting ready to end it all, when we suddenly heard a new voice. The voice spoke the words of the Pkunk, but we knew that the words really came from within us. Suddenly we were getting insights into ourselves we never even dreamed of and it was all thanks to the Pkunk – or maybe we became more receptive with the news of the Shofixti revival. We saw the great error in our ways and immediately set out to correct all the terrible mistakes.”

The Yehat indicated that the story was over.

“*The New Alliance of Free Stars welcomes you back,*” Trent declared. “*What about your ship modifications?*”

The Yehat seemed to switch to its comfort zone.

“*What a magnificent tale that is,*” the bird of prey promisingly began. “*In our Terminator ships there had always been this one small piece of machinery which we didn’t quite understand. It was considered ancient legacy design, so we just chose to ignore it. But then, when the revolution was over and we took a close look at the Pkunk ships, we immediately knew what the thing was. The Pkunk Furies had a similar mechanism, only it was designed in reverse. The Pkunk hadn’t known what it was either, until that day... Until we all realized that we – the Yehat and the Pkunk – were one. The ships were one. They were meant to be connected. Combined, we get much faster hyperdrive and the best qualities of both ship types. We have the High-energy Force Shield and the Rapid-Fire Pulse Cannon of the Terminators and the speed and maneuverability of the Furies – not to mention the psionic energies of the Pkunk.”*

Trent’s smile was widening by the second.

“*I like it,*” he summed it up.

Having broken through the outer layer of defense at the outskirts of the solar system, the fleet of the alliance was still several hours away from the fifth planet. They had no time to rest though, since the Sa-Matra was supposed to have inconveniently long range weapon systems. When the firing started, the alliance would have to do everything in their power to keep the Vindicator safe – and most likely it would take quite a lot.

Gruber typed something in his log out of habit, but soon realized that he had nothing clever to say. If they survived the confrontation ahead of them, he could then write all kinds of witty remarks in hindsight.

“I’m detecting very strong energy bursts from the direction of our target,” McNeil reported as they were still at least ten times further away than the Hellbore Cannon’s maximum range.

There was a cloud of Kohr-Ah Marauders around a very large object in orbit of the fifth planet. The Vindicator was still too far away to get a good view of the supposed Sa-Matra, but already they could say that firing conventional weapons at the thing would be pointless.

“There’s a very large and very fast projectile incoming!” Dujardin observed. “I cannot yet say what the target is.”

“Prepare for evasive action,” Zelnick commanded. “We’ve been told these projectiles might be the nasty homing type, so let’s stay alert.”

Gruber observed the tactical display. The projectile was covering the great distance with alarming speed.

“It’s headed for the Survion,” Dujardin then clarified as she had calculated the trajectory.

The Survion moved to dodge, but the projectile immediately changed heading accordingly.

“We cannot evade,” the commanding Chmmr of the Survion notified the fleet. *“We will try to absorb the shot with our frontal armor.”*

“Ten seconds to impact,” Dujardin announced.

The Vindicator was in a position where they could see the Survion from the bridge’s window.

“Three... two... one...” Dujardin counted down.

There was a flash as they saw a glimpse of the projectile and then...

“What the—” Zelnick stole Gruber’s line.

The Survion was cut in half. Zelnick was pointing at the window as if demanding the referee to call a foul.

“We have to disable that cannon!” Trent immediately said the obvious to the entire fleet.

Gruber remembered Zex’s assumptions on the time lag of such shots – a mere minute. The Alliance would have to endure a great number of such shots before they got close enough to do anything about the cannon. And as they just witnessed, not even their strongest ship could take even one. If the enemy would target the second biggest ship next, they would have approximately one minute to come up with something really clever or everything would be lost.

“Attention all Utwig and Yehat ships,” Trent then said. *“Form a defensive barrier around the Vindicator. Do whatever it takes to make sure that not a single shot gets through.”*

Utwig Juggers and Yehat Terminators both had a strong force field that could shield them against most – if not all – conventional weapons. They worked a bit differently, though. The Terminators could use their shield only in short bursts with a long cooldown time and the shield could only take one hit at a time. The Juggers, on the other hand, could keep their shields up for as long as they were fired upon as the shields absorbed the kinetic energy of the incoming projectiles. The downside was that if the shield was up for just a short while without being fired at, the ship’s batteries would run out, leaving it vulnerable for a very long time. Another difference was that the Juggers had to endure the

entire kick of the impact whereas the Terminators didn't. The Utwig force field was like an impenetrable layer of armor and the Yehat one resembled an all-consuming bubble around the ship.

Both of these ship types immediately made haste to position themselves between the Vindicator and the Sa-Matra.

"Another energy burst!" McNeil reported.

Zelnick was getting ready to do some maneuvers.

"Captain," Gruber said, "we can't make any sudden movements."

Zelnick's expression clearly indicated that he didn't understand so Gruber had to continue.

"The other ships can't take the shots for us if we don't stay still.*"

"They're targeting us!" Dujardin announced.

The captain seemed like he understood what Gruber was saying, but didn't accept it right away.

"Are we supposed to just watch?" he asked. "If the shields don't work, it will be too late to evade."

Gruber didn't relish their situation either.

"It was always too late," he said.

"*Our ship is in position,*" one of the Utwig captains reported.

"Ten seconds," Dujardin announced.

Zelnick turned to Gruber again.

"What if this does work?" he asked. "Doesn't the Utwig ship get knocked right at us?"

"Er..." Gruber hesitated. "In fact, I think it does."

Gruber then addressed the hull officer.

"Iwasaki, can we handle it?"

Iwasaki gestured that he wouldn't like to find out.

"Three seconds," Dujardin counted down.

* Staying still was of course relative.

They could see the projectile for a very short moment and then...

The Jugger glowed red for a split-second. The massive projectile hit the Utwig ship, rocketing it backwards just like Zelnick had anticipated. The projectile seemed to have been absorbed completely as the Jugger appeared undamaged.

If they hadn't been prepared for it, the Utwig ship would probably have collided with the Vindicator in a most thoroughly unpleasant way. It was an entirely different thing to ram the Vindicator against Kzer-Za fighters as they had done a year earlier in Vela. That had been like hitting a few dogs with a 20th century car. But replacing the fighters with an Utwig ship would have been like replacing the dogs with a moose. Luckily Zelnick was able to make a quick maneuver, allowing the drifting Jugger to miss them by inches.

"A jolt like that must have killed everyone on board," Gruber speculated, "even if their ship remained intact."

A squad of three Yehat ships reached the Vindicator.

"We will take the next one," a Yehat captain said. *"Our technology might be better suited for the task."*

One of their ships took a position similar to the Utwig previously.

"A lot of folks are ready to take bullets for us," Zelnick noticed.

"You sound surprised," Gruber said.

"Do I?" Zelnick replied. "I guess I never really realized how irreplaceable we truly are. I haven't even seen the Yehat before, but they have no second thoughts about putting themselves at great risk for our sake."

Gruber didn't have to say anything since just then McNeil reported that another shot was fired from the Sa-Matra, most likely directed at the Vindicator again.

Dujardin counted down until impact while the Yehat got ready. Just before the projectile hit the Yehat ship, a

perfectly spherical transparent force field emerged over the Terminator. The massive projectile seemed to swallow the entire ship, but instead of going right through it, the projectile simply disappeared along with the force field.

"No Damage," the Yehat reported.

Zelnick let out a loud phew.

"Attention all Yehat," Trent immediately announced. *"Scatter evenly around the fleet. Leave three ships with the Vindicator."*

If the three Terminators took turns, they should all have enough time to recharge their shields if the Sa-Matra continued to target the Vindicator.

"The Kohr-Ah are moving," Dujardin reported. "They are taking a different formation."

The Kohr-Ah forces were spreading out into a plane. The movement allowed Gruber to really grasp just how vast the enemy fleet was in numbers. If it weren't for their Dnyarriace up their sleeves, he would've probably started crying right there and then.

Trent ordered the Alliance to assume a suitable battle formation. The Chmmr Avatars, Yehat Terminators and Utwig Juggers formed a defensive plane at front. Behind them, Earthling Cruisers prepared to fire their nuclear missiles and the Orz Nemeses and Supox Blades were ready to fire a few shots and then storm the enemy. The Syreen Penetrators and Zoq-Fot-Pik Stingers were waiting on the side, ready to hook inside the enemy formation. The Pkunk Furies had reattached themselves to the Yehat Terminators and they were ready to be catapulted towards the enemy alongside the Syreen and the Zoq-Fot-Pik. The Vindicator and its special guard remained on the back.

McNeil announced another shot from the Sa-Matra. That one was targeted at some other ship than the Vindicator.

"Our enemy is not stupid," Gruber observed. "They immediately noticed that firing at the Vindicator was futile."

Now they're picking off easier targets with their main cannon while their fleet can take care of persistent targets like us."

"The enemy is hailing us," Katja suddenly said. "The transmission is directed only to us – just like last time."

Zelnick got Trent's permission again and answered the call. The threatening sight of a Kohr-Ah was displayed on the screen.

"We sense something," the Kohr-Ah said while eyeing Zelnick just like the Green Ur-Quan had. *"Something... ancient. A sickly smell... A chilling wind. My ancestors scream from within their chambers in my mind... But I cannot understand their words."*

Zelnick did exactly what Gruber wanted him to do – nothing.

"This feeling..." the Kohr-Ah continued. *"a memory? It sickens us..."*

Gruber noticed from the tactical display that the shot fired from the Sa-Matra took down one Chmmr Avatar.

"What are you?" the Kohr-Ah asked.

Zelnick stood up.

"We are The New Alliance of Free Stars," he declared. "We demand an immediate and unconditional surrender!"

The Kohr-Ah ignored the demand.

"No, you are something more," it said. *"For the first time in our lives... For the first time in generations... We fear."*

The creature moved a bit farther from the camera.

"Alien," it slowly began, *"we cleanse the galaxy of filth. We have successfully done so for millennia. But you are not filth... You are a threat."*

Zelnick was about to say something, but the Kohr-Ah cut the transmission, leaving the captain looking at the blank screen for a few seconds.

"What the hell did they even want?" Zelnick asked.

“I think they just wanted to see who we are,” Gruber guessed. “If some random guy walked past you on the street and you’d get an extremely creepy feeling about him, wouldn’t you want to know who that guy was?”

Zelnick seemed to think about the example at face value.

“I might just run for it,” he answered.

“Indeed,” Gruber replied. “Humans are genetically designed to either run away or fight. But we are not predators like the Ur-Quan. Running away might be impossible for them.”

The following silence was broken by an announcement from Admiral Trent:

“We have to push forward. Captain Zelnick, if you see a chance to safely launch the Dnyarri, take it. Once the Dnyarri is away, everyone will do whatever it takes to protect it.”

“I don’t think there will be a safe chance,” Zelnick replied, “but we’re ready.”

The Alliance proceeded with full speed towards the Sa-Matra while on average every other minute one of their ships got blown to oblivion. The Yehat couldn’t protect the entire fleet and their enemies were inconveniently adept at picking targets as far away from the Terminators as possible.

As they were getting near the maximum range of the Earthling Cruiser’s missiles, they could finally take a good look at the Sa-Matra. Zelnick asked Dujardin to display its image on scale with the Vindicator’s.

“Is that really correct?” the captain had to verify.

“I’m afraid so,” the radar operator confirmed.

The Vindicator looked as pitiful next to the Sa-Matra as a bike looked next to a truck. It was on a completely different league. Even if the Hellbore Cannon could penetrate the Sa-Matra’s armor, which it probably couldn’t, they would have to keep pounding it for quite a while to take it down.

“There’s actually something strangely familiar about that,” Zelnick said, referring to the image of the Sa-Matra. “Something I can’t really put my finger on.”

Gruber saw the same thing. Even though it looked nothing like the Vindicator, there was something similar in the design, but he couldn’t point at any particular feature either.

“I can definitely verify that it is of Precursor origin,” the captain continued.

Just then a series of lights on the tactical display indicated that all Earthling Cruisers had launched nukes.

“Looks like it’s party time,” Zelnick said.

“That sounded like the Orz,” Gruber commented.

The Kohr-Ah Marauders soon returned fire and the tactical display was flooded with small dots of different colors. If the Dnyarri’s capsule was launched then, it would have been an easy target for their enemies. However, very soon it became evident that if they didn’t do something, the fleet of the Alliance would eventually be wiped out. The two fleets might have been more or less evenly matched without the Sa-Matra, but in addition to the ruthless efficiency of its main cannon, it also had a major negative effect on morale.

Officers of the Vindicator were constantly trying to find an opening to send the Dnyarri flying on a trajectory that went through the enemy formation and also close enough to the Sa-Matra to affect the crew inside the battle platform. At the same time McNeil managed to drop a few Marauders with the Hellbore Cannon and he saved a few friendly ships by intercepting incoming projectiles with the Fusion Blaster.

Admiral Trent and Vice-Admiral Zex pulled off admirable and sneaky moves one after the other, but even that wasn’t enough to turn the tide. Both sides were suffering severe casualties, but the Kohr-Ah had more strength to begin with. As the fleets got closer and closer to each other,

more of the Yehat and the Utwig were needed to provide shielding for the Vindicator, making the rest of the fleet more vulnerable. The Kohr-Ah didn't try to fire at the Vindicator much, which also provided the opportunity to get in a few more precise shots with the Hellbore Cannon.

Immediately after McNeil had sunk one Marauder in a particularly glorious way, Zelnick jumped up.

"Now!" he screamed and hit the button that launched the Dnyarri's capsule.

Gruber hadn't noticed an opening, so while he checked the trajectory Zelnick had selected, all he could do was wish that the captain knew what he was doing.

"There," Zelnick said while pointing at the window.

It was hopeless to know what the captain was pointing at, which Zelnick also soon realized and then pointed at the tactical display. He then quickly opened a link to one Utwig ship and sent them a set of coordinates.

"There's no opening," the captain then explained, "but we can make one over there."

Then Gruber saw it too. There was one Kohr-Ah ship that could easily take out the Dnyarri, but there was also one Utwig ship that could eclipse just that one particular enemy at just the right moment.

"Impressive," Gruber said.

"Dnyarri, report," Zelnick then requested.

An image of the Dnyarri was immediately displayed on the main screen.

"You could have warned me, you sadistic pig!" the creature responded. *"But yes, I'm alive and my head is clearing, which probably means that I'm just about to get outside the range of your psychic nullifier."*

Just then the one Kohr-Ah ship fired at the Dnyarri, but the Utwig that had just reached the coordinates Zelnick sent them was able to block the shot.

"There," the Dnyarri said. *"I can feel it. Here goes..."*

The Dnyarri was now in the middle of the enemy fleet. In just a few seconds many of the Kohr-Ah ships stopped firing and then started turning away from the battle... Many, but not all.

“Argh,” the Dnyarri cried. “I cannot get through to all of them!”

“Why?” Zelnick demanded.

“It’s pain,” the Dnyarri explained. “I can’t get into their minds if they are suffering extreme pain. I don’t know why, but many of them are.”

Zelnick and Gruber exchanged looks.

“The Excruciators,” they said in unison.

“The Kohr-Ah must have kept them at arm’s length all these millennia,” Gruber speculated.

“At least some of them,” Zelnick said.

“The ones on board the Sa-Matra were all easy to compel,” the Dnyarri continued. “But there was something strange going on there. I couldn’t make them do anything specific, just drop everything and stand around like zombies.”

“How long will they stay that way?” Zelnick asked.

“At least for as long as I’m here,” the Dnyarri replied. “But even if I stopped doing my thing now, they would be out of it for a little while.”

“Great,” Zelnick said. “Keep doing whatever it is you’re doing. We’ll come and get you as soon as we can.”

“Oh, by all means, take your time,” the Dnyarri said. “I am extremely comfortable in this extra small cabin with no armor and all this fighting going on around me – not to mention that huge alien battleship with unknown automated defense mechanisms that I’m now circling.”

Zelnick cut the transmission. The Alliance was focusing its fire on the Kohr-Ah that were still fighting. The ones the Dnyarri successfully compelled were ignored for the moment. The Sa-Matra hadn’t fired a single shot since the

Dnyarri began its work. The momentum favored the Alliance once more. The Kohr-Ah ships were being blown away with supreme efficiency and Admiral Trent saw to it that not a single Alliance ship was needlessly lost. The Alliance fleet was down to about a third of its original strength when it was evident that it was only a matter of time until the Kohr-Ah were defeated.

But then, when some of the Alliance ships got close to the Sa-Matra, the battle platform started firing again – not with the devastating main cannon, though. Instead, it seemed to have countless of automated turrets mounted in every direction. Their fire power wasn't spectacular, but there were so many of them that the Sa-Matra couldn't be approached.

The officers of the Vindicator observed the situation.

"We are the only ones that could probably endure that pounding for a while," Iwasaki guessed. "But not long enough for us to approach, start the detonation sequence, board the escape pod and reach a minimum safe distance."

Many of the Alliance ships had already tried to bombard the turrets with little success.

"McNeil, try the Hellbore Cannon," Zelnick ordered.

The weapons officer complied and fired at a randomly selected turret. There was a flash on the surface of the battle platform, but the turret kept on firing. Zelnick reported the observation to Admiral Trent.

"We must assume that none of our weapons will do any good," Trent said. *"We also can't wait and risk the arrival of reinforcements. You must find a way to get through."*

"There is no way," Zelnick replied. "What we need now is an armor plating that is at least a mile thick."

Gruber checked the tactical display again and was satisfied to see that the enemy fleet was being pushed back. There would be no more distractions. It was just them and the Sa-Matra.

“Then that is what you shall get,” Trent said. *“All available ships will come to work as your armor.”*

Zelnick looked at the Sa-Matra once more before speaking his mind.

“But countless ships...” he began. “Thousands of people will die before we’re even in position!”

“I did the math,” Trent replied plainly. *“It will suffice.”*

Then they received exact orders from the Tobermoon and most of their remaining fleet started to gather around the Vindicator.

“I don’t like this,” Zelnick said to Gruber. “So many have already sacrificed themselves for our sake.”

“It’s not for **our** sake personally,” Gruber pointed out. “It’s for the cause.”

“That doesn’t make me feel any better,” the captain said and steered the ship towards the Sa-Matra.

Several layers of ships of different types had positioned themselves in front of the Vindicator. They couldn’t rely on only the Yehat and the Utwig as they were fired upon from such a wide sector now that they were close to the Sa-Matra. The Earthling Cruisers were too slow so all of those ships stayed behind to help take down the remaining Kohr-Ah forces.

The firing soon got intense as the Vindicator and its escorts approached the Sa-Matra. The first layer of ships took a terrible beating and space was filled with bullets and ship parts as the fleet tried to fly as close to each other as possible. From time to time a single shot got through to the Vindicator, but its hull could easily withstand such stray shots.

A bright flash marked the destruction of the first of the ships in front of the Vindicator – a Syreen Penetrator.

“There are just a few Syreen left,” Zelnick said in a sad tone while pointing at the window. “Their population can’t take these kinds of sacrifices.”

“We can’t worry about that now,” Gruber insisted. “If we can’t get through, there won’t be any Syreen population.”

Another ship got neutralized – an Orz Nemesis. In a few seconds it would blow up as well

“And what are the Orz even fighting for?” Zelnick asked.

Just then they received a message from the said Orz ship.

“*See you soon on the *otherside*.*” it declared. “*Real sooooo—*”

An explosion marked the destruction of that ship and the link was terminated. A Chmmr Avatar rushed in to take the place of that Nemesis in the formation. Pieces of the ships were constantly hitting the Vindicator’s prow, making an awful lot of noise, and some of the pieces were disturbingly identifiable.

“We’re still good,” Iwasaki reported.

“Can’t we do something?” Zelnick demanded as a Zoq-Fot-Pik Stinger got destroyed in front of them. “Anything?”

“We are doing it right now,” Gruber said. “We’re almost at the target. Just a little longer...”

They had selected a specific location where they were going to park the Vindicator before high-tailing it out of there. It was a semi-blind spot where only few turrets could reach – if they had observed them accurately. The computer could then make sure that the ship wouldn’t drift away from that spot and the Vindicator’s hull should remain intact long enough for the crew to get away.

Suddenly they got a message from the Dnyarri.

“*Hellooo!? Come pick me up, goddammit!*”

Zelnick didn’t reply to the Dnyarri, which Gruber considered strange. The captain simply muted the creature.

Another Syreen ship had had enough.

“*Keep going,*” a final message from the Syreen captain emerged on their screen. “*You have to stop them! You have to—*”

The Penetrator got torn in half right in front of the Vindicator and the message was cut short.

“Can’t we go any faster?” Zelnick demanded with tears in his voice.

“If we pick up speed,” Steinbach replied, “some of our escorts can’t keep up anymore.”

More ships got blown up in front and new ones courageously took their place in the formation.

“You’re doing fine,” Trent reassured them. *“We’re done with the enemy fleet here. It’s all up to you now.”*

“At least call them off when we’re in position!” Zelnick demanded from Trent. “They don’t have to die only to allow us to escape!”

“Trust me,” Trent plainly replied.

A Chmmr Avatar in front of them lost its magnetic field and its satellites were shot off in random directions, one of them hitting a nearby Supox Blade. The Supox ship was at the same time under heavy fire and soon a part of it was torn off.

“You can do it!” the Supox messaged the Vindicator. *“Don’t let them uproot us for nothing.”*

Another burst from the Sa-Matra silenced the Supox and there was then a line of Yehat Terminators up front. A few Utwig Juggers around them had been able to keep their shields activated for minutes straight, but the Yehat shields weren’t of much help in that situation.

“We’ll meet in the west,” a Yehat captain said as his ship got neutralized. *“Now we fly over the vast sea!”*

A burst from the Sa-Matra silenced the communications once more.

“Alright, that’s close enough!” Zelnick decided as he probably couldn’t take it anymore and they were only seconds away from their calculated target.

The captain then flipped open the safety glass on top of the button that activated the detonation sequence.

“We’re activating the bomb,” he announced to the fleet.
“Retreat!”

“Abandon ship!” he then ordered and hit his fist on the button.

An alarm immediately went off. A beautiful female voice then echoed all over the ship:

“The detonation sequence has been activated. All crew members are to proceed directly to the escape pod.”

The Vindicator’s escorts began to break away. The one or two turrets that got a clear shot at the Vindicator started to desperately pound the ship. The loud clanging noise made Gruber uneasy even if he was told that the ship could take it for a few minutes. He was about to join the rest of the officers running out of the bridge, but Captain Zelnick was still doing some final tweaks on the ship’s computer.

“Captain, we have to go right now,” Gruber said and grabbed Zelnick’s shoulder.

Zelnick didn’t say anything, but soon got to his feet and dashed towards the exit. When Gruber took a final glance at the command console, he saw a short message from the computer appear on it:

“Goodbye.”

Gruber raised his hand a bit as if to wave.

“Goodbye,” he said and sprinted after the captain.

Gruber was the last one to leave the bridge. Special lights were turned on, illuminating the fastest route to the escape pod. It was difficult for him to run when the ship was shaking from all the firing, but he soon caught up with Zelnick and noticed that the captain was talking to his communicator.

“Do it,” Gruber heard Zelnick say to the device before tucking it back into his pocket.

“Do what?” Gruber had to ask.

Zelnick looked over his shoulder while still running.

“I agreed with Trent that he would take care of the Dnyarri,” the captain said.

“They’re—,” Gruber began, but had to stop talking as the loud announcement repeated:

“The detonation sequence has been activated. All crew members are to proceed directly to the escape pod.”

“They’re cutting it close,” Gruber pointed out. “They only have a few minutes to pick up the capsule.”

There was a strange expression on Zelnick’s face.

“Like I said,” he began, “Trent will **take care of it.**”

The emphasis on the last few words was unnatural, but Gruber decided to drop the subject for the time being.

They ran without talking for a while. *Had the distance between the bridge and the hangar always been this long?* Gruber was already almost out of breath. The announcement reminded them once more that they should proceed directly to the escape pod.

When they finally arrived at the hangar, they quickly verified that everyone was there. It took them less than a minute to board the escape pod – a task they had rehearsed hundreds of times since they had left the starbase. Gruber then checked the timer and reported to the captain that they were on time, despite the fact that it felt like they had run for an eternity.

As soon as everyone was strapped in, Zelnick gave the order to launch the escape pod, which was something they had not been able to practice. Gruber knew to expect a terrible amount of G-forces...

SWOOSH

The last thing Gruber heard from the Vindicator was the swift sound of the catapult while he sank inside his seat as if an elephant had sat on top of him. For a second he could relax, but then the engines were switched on and the escape pod accelerated again. The crew inside the capsule could do nothing but moan and grunt. There was a screen from which

they could see that they were flying away from the Sa-Matra at a formidable speed. They were already so far that Gruber couldn't distinguish the Vindicator anymore. He let himself hope that they could outrun the bomb's blast after all. With great effort he looked to his left and saw that the captain had already passed out. He didn't blame the man. Zelnick most likely had never experienced such G-forces.

It was difficult to keep track of time when you had to fight to stay conscious. By chance Gruber glanced at the bomb timer just when it showed 0:02 ... 0:01 ... 0:00.

He knew better than to look at the explosion, but he did it anyway. There was a very bright light that made him immediately close his eyes and look the other way. For a few seconds he could sense that the light inside the escape pod was getting brighter and brighter. Suddenly it felt like the universe was perfectly lit and perfectly silent.

And a moment later the escape pod was shaking and trembling like an escape pod had never shaken or trembled before.

CHAPTER 28

END OF LOG

September 21st 2156, Sol, 175.2 : 145.0

Gruber sat on the observation deck of the starbase. He had positioned the platform in a way that provided him with an unobstructed view of Earth regardless of the rotation. A number of shuttles had gathered around the planet as the long-awaited moment was only minutes away.

Gruber took two cans of apple juice from a small bag. He opened one of them and passed it to Lydia who was sitting next to him. Then he opened the other one and they both took a sip in unison.

<<I hear it's beautiful,>> Lydia said.

Gruber took his time remembering.

<<It is,>> he replied. <<It's been a long time since I've seen it.>>

<<You or anyone else,>> Lydia pointed out.

Gruber nodded.

<<How long have the Chmmr been at it?>> she asked.

Gruber took another look at the Chmmr ships positioned around Earth at regular intervals.

<<Since yesterday, I think,>> he answered.

Another perfectly synchronized sip of apple juice followed.

<<You know,>> he continued, <<there are others here who have never seen Earth's true colors.>>

Lydia gave him one of her unreadable looks.

<<Someone besides your captain?>> she asked.

Gruber tried to return the look.

<<No,>> he replied.

<<Where is he, by the way?>> Lydia asked.

Gruber gave it some thought.

<<I actually haven't seen him in a while,>> he said.

<<Why do you ask?>>

For once Lydia's body language was easy to read.

<<I kind of like him,>> she said with an embarrassed smile.

Gruber chuckled a bit.

<<Well, he is a great man,>> he said. <<Anyway, I'm afraid **that** ship has sailed.>>

<<What ship?>> Lydia threw the words right back at him.

Gruber had to pause for a bit.

<<Er...>> he hesitated. <<What I meant was that I think Zelnick... I mean, I know that Zelnick and Commander Talana are... a *thing*.>>

Lydia seemed like she understood and wasn't completely devastated, which was a nice surprise.

<<So they have become a pair,>> she checked.

<<Right,>> Gruber replied. <<But don't worry. Once we get down to Earth, you'll see there's plenty of fish in the sea.>>

Lydia looked surprised.

<<Why would I worry about fish?>> she asked.

Oh great, here we go again, Gruber thought.

<<It was just a figure of speech,>> he patiently explained. <<I meant that there are plenty of *single young men* on Earth.>>

<<But I hear there is no more fish,>> she insisted, <<and that people are starving because of it.>>

Gruber facepalmed.

<<You are right,>> he agreed. <<There actually aren't that many fish anymore – unless people down there have come up with something really sneaky during these past nine

years. Some decades ago oceans were swarming with fish, but then overfishing led to stocks falling below critical levels, which in turn resulted in entire ecosystems shifting and—>>

<<Look, it's happening!>> Lydia cut him short and pointed at Earth.

Indeed something was happening to the slave shield. Its red glow faded away, leaving the shield intact, but white. Soon it started pulsating at an increasing pace. Once Gruber could no longer distinguish one pulse from another, the shield glowed brightly for a few seconds and then vanished, revealing the true colors of the planet below.

Earth was free.

A roar of cheers erupted all around the deck, making Gruber realize just how many people were present. Lydia raised her hand for a high-five and Gruber, never wanting to leave a lady hanging, returned the gesture.

The shuttles that had been waiting in orbit all dived towards the surface. Many emotional reunions would no doubt take place in the next few hours. But more than anything Gruber was interested to hear the first news from beneath the shield.

<<I'm sure a lot of things have happened,>> he said.

<<Like what?>> Lydia asked.

<<Like things you couldn't even begin to understand,>> Gruber explained. <<We aboard this starbase aren't exactly a random sample of the population and the Androsynth sure as hell weren't either.>>

<<That didn't answer my question,>> Lydia said.

Gruber had been afraid of that.

<<For example,>> he began, <<there might be a significant Ur-Quan worshipping cult down there and the general opinion might be that the shield was actually a good thing.>>

Lydia was not satisfied with the example.

<<But if you hadn't won,>> she said, <<the Kohr-Ah would have killed everybody regardless of the shield, right?>>

<<Right,>> Gruber agreed. <<But there are very few of us who know that. Everything that has happened since the shield went up will take quite a lot of explaining. And you have to remember that half the population are dumber than average.>>

<<I can explain!>> Lydia volunteered.

Gruber paused for a second and then laughed harder than what was polite. When he regained his composure, he chinked his can of apple juice with Lydia's.

<<I can drink to that,>> he said and emptied the can down his throat. <<You should take your suggestion to Hayes.>>

Soon after leaving the observation deck Gruber got a message from Zelnick. The captain was leaving the starbase shortly and he wanted to have a final chat with his first officer. They agreed to meet at a small conference room close to the hangar.

Gruber arrived at the location first and sat on a random chair at a circular table. Just a minute later the door opened and Zelnick entered.

"As you were," the captain said and sat down, leaving one empty seat between the men.

"So you're leaving already?" Gruber checked to get the conversation going.

"Indeed I am," Zelnick replied. "I assume you've already heard the details."

Gruber had heard some rumors.

"I haven't heard any from you," he said.

Zelnick grinned.

“I’m joining the Chmmr on their voyage to Unzervalt,” the captain explained. “Once they get rid of the slave shield there too, I want to be among the first to say hello.”

“How long has it been now?” Gruber asked. “A year and a half?”

“Close enough,” Zelnick said.

“You could grow a beard,” Gruber suggested. “Just to show everyone how much you have changed.”

Zelnick rubbed his naked chin.

“I think it will be enough of a surprise when I present Talana to them,” he said.

They both let out a manly laugh.

“Although she isn’t joining me until later,” Zelnick continued.

“You’ll be famous in a few days,” Gruber pointed out. “Once our story has been told to people on the surface, everyone will want a piece of you...”

Gruber realized it just then.

“And you’ll be on Unzervalt,” he continued. “Well played, sir.”

Zelnick bowed his head to accept the congratulations.

“It wasn’t your idea, was it?” Gruber checked.

Zelnick smiled and nodded.

“You got me,” he admitted. “It was Talana who said that I should keep a low profile until things calmed down. I wouldn’t be of much help without the Vindicator anyway.”

Gruber disagreed, but didn’t say it aloud.

“Another Great War has only just begun,” Gruber said. “But based on our first reports, I’d say we’ve got this one covered. The Ur-Quan forces have fallen into chaos and they are without noteworthy allies. The Kzer-Za are not stupid and will probably surrender to the Alliance soon. Unfortunately, it looks like the Kohr-Ah will never do that and we’ll probably have to keep fighting them until none remain.”

“What’s the latest word on the *holy war* between the Ilwrath and the Thraddash?” Zelnick asked.

Gruber hadn’t checked in a few days, so he quickly looked at a certain news feed on his communicator.

“The latest entry is from yesterday,” he said. “Apparently the two fleets have more or less wiped each other out.”

“Let’s call it a draw,” Zelnick decided.

“What about your biggest fan?” Gruber asked. “I am of course referring to Zex.”

Zelnick blushed.

“I got another video message from him today,” he said.

“Did he have his pants on this time?” Gruber checked.

Zelnick looked as if he’d heard a joke about that subject for a hundred times.

“Very funny,” he said. “The lower part of his body wasn’t visible in this one. But he claimed that the next time we meet, he should be addressed as *President Zex*. I have no doubt he was telling the truth.”

“Me neither,” Gruber agreed.

They waited a few seconds for the next topic.

“Your scheme regarding the Dnyarri,” Gruber began. “I’m a bit hurt by the fact that you didn’t tell me. When exactly did you talk it over with Trent?”

“At Betelgeuse,” Zelnick instantly replied.

Gruber already knew that only Zelnick and Trent had known about it and that it was Zelnick’s idea.

“How well did you have it planned?” Gruber asked.

Zelnick leaned forward a bit.

“I just told him that we should dispose of the Dnyarri as soon as we safely could,” he explained. “Naturally, we couldn’t plant a bomb in the capsule so Trent volunteered to fire a nuke at it when the time was right. And he did.”

“For the record,” Gruber began, “I agree with that course of action. If we had left the Dnyarri to perish along the Sa-Matra, we wouldn’t have – if you’ll excuse my choice of

words – seen the body. We could never have been completely sure that someone hadn't picked up the Dnyarri's pod at the last moment. Now I'm pretty confident, seeing how it first got blown away by a nuclear explosion and then the pieces that remained got vaporized by the big kaboom along with the damn Sa-Matra."

Zelnick leaned back again.

"What about you?" he asked. "What are you going to do now?"

Gruber realized he hadn't discussed the matter with Zelnick.

"I'm going to Earth with Lydia," he said. "Earlier I had these great plans about five year missions throughout the cosmos and returning to Groombridge, but now I think I have more important things to do... And I'm not getting any younger."

"Few of us are," Zelnick replied. "I guess I'm still too young to fully understand your reasons, but that's okay."

Zelnick's communicator beeped to indicate that he should proceed to his shuttle.

"It's about time we wrap this up," he said. "Would you care to accompany me to the hangar?"

"Of course," Gruber said.

There weren't many more people in the hangar than on an average Tuesday. Since Zelnick was already some sort of a celebrity, they had kept a low profile regarding his departure and preferred to keep it that way. But at the Edge Gruber and Zelnick saw someone both of them wanted to talk to.

"Captain Fwiffo," Zelnick said to get the Spathi's attention.

"Mister Bossman," Fwiffo replied and raised his claw to salute even though he wasn't obligated to.

"Admiring the view?" Gruber asked.

“Actually, yes,” Fwiffo said. “I hear that once the Chmmr are done at Vela, they are going to *liberate* Spathiwa, so I wanted to get a good look at how the planet might look before and afterwards.”

“How do you think your people are going to take it?” Zelnick asked.

Fwiffo sighed loudly.

“Not well, I’m afraid,” he said. “As you know, the folks at Spathiwa are currently living the Big Dream. They don’t know that the shield isn’t impenetrable after all.”

“And then,” Zelnick began, “the Chmmr will appear, take down the shield and announce *You are free!*”

Something like a smile crept on Fwiffo’s face.

“Right,” he said. “It’s so sad it’s funny. I learned that from you hunams.”

All three of them laughed.

“What about yourself?” Gruber asked. “How are things with you and Pwappy?”

The smile-equivalent faded from Fwiffo’s face.

“It’s complicated,” he said. “But it’s better than nothing.”

Gruber and Zelnick both nodded.

“But hey,” Fwiffo continued, “don’t miss your flight because of me. I’m sure we’ll meet each other again if we aren’t devoured by hideous monsters.”

It was difficult to shake hands with a Spathi so they did a gesture that resembled a bro fist.

“Thanks again for picking us up,” Zelnick said.

“The Star Runner was a weird place,” Gruber continued, “but it was preferable to the escape pod.”

“No no,” Fwiffo modestly said. “Thank **you** for everything. Without you I’d still be rotting in the Earthguard all alone on Pluto.”

“And your ship wouldn’t have its custom paint job,” Zelnick said and saluted.

Gruber joined in on the friendly salute.

“Don’t remind me,” Fwiffo replied. “Have a safe life.”

“You too,” Zelnick said.

Zelnick and Gruber started walking towards the shuttle.

“Had I been in your shoes,” Gruber began, “I would have blasted Fwiffo’s Star Runner when we first met him... I’m glad you were the captain then and not me.”

“You were an excellent first officer,” Zelnick commended him.

Gruber, as a modest man, found himself feeling a bit awkward.

“Thank you, sir,” he responded. “And you were an excellent captain. I’m sure the universe hasn’t heard the last of you yet.”

“I hope they cut me some slack,” Zelnick laughed. “I’d prefer to have a long vacation. I’m afraid I have a lot of work ahead of me with the Precursor factory – and even if we managed to create another ship like the Vindicator... It’s just not the same, right?”

“Right,” Gruber agreed to humor the captain.

Just then Gruber remembered something important.

“Say hi to your mother for me,” he said.

Zelnick checked Gruber’s face. It showed that Gruber was simultaneously joking and serious.

“I will,” Zelnick said as if calling a bluff.

They reached the shuttle and Zelnick turned to face Gruber directly.

“This is it, Mr. Gruber,” he said. “Thank you for everything. We couldn’t have done it without you.”

Instead of saluting, Zelnick offered his hand. Gruber took it and shook Zelnick’s hand for what he thought was the first time.

“Likewise,” he said and exchanged a look of mutual respect with Zelnick.

Then Zelnick turned around and made his way inside the shuttle. Gruber thought that it was a remarkably cool

departure. The captain didn't waste any needless words and didn't look back after shaking hands. Gruber was about to turn around and walk away feeling satisfied when all of a sudden Commander Talana appeared from somewhere and put her arms around Zelnick.

There was a lot of smooching and sweet talk. Gruber wanted to ignore the scene, but Talana was too beautiful for him to look away.

After what seemed like an eternity, the two lovers let go of each other and Zelnick managed to board the shuttle. Talana was obviously needed elsewhere and their life together would have to be put on hold for a while. Gruber thought about going to talk to her, but then decided that after witnessing such an event it would only make him feel lonely. So he did what he should have done a few seconds earlier – turn around and walk away.

He still had two hours before the start of his sleep cycle. As Lydia was on the same cycle as him, he messaged her and suggested they met at the cafeteria for a late night snack. A few seconds later he got a response that contained a photo of Lydia's hand making a V-sign. Gruber took that as a yes.

On his way to the cafeteria he checked the news feed regarding Sol's security. There hadn't been any probe sightings in a while and it looked like that menace, too, was under control. After tucking his communicator back into his pocket he felt like whistling a certain catchy tune.

Gruber was still whistling when he entered the cafeteria and noticed Lydia, whose smile widened as she saw him.

<<That same tune again,>> Lydia recognized. <<You whistle it only when you're in a particularly good mood. What's it called?>>

Gruber had to stop whistling to answer.

<<I don't know,>> he said. <<I don't even know where I learned it. I just call it *Hyperspace*.>>

<<Sounds appropriate,>> Lydia commented. <<Any gossip?>>

Gruber told her about his earlier discussions and checked that she knew Captain Robert Zelnick had officially left the building.

<<How are you taking it?>> she asked.

Gruber wasn't prepared for that question, but then again, that was usually the case with Lydia.

<<That's my line,>> he said and chose to leave the question unanswered.

They looked at each other for a while and soon came to a mutual agreement that they should change the subject entirely.

<<What about your Groombridge Log?>> Lydia asked. <<Looks like you survived August 13th 2156.>>

Gruber had already forgotten all about that date, but then remembered that the last of the weird Precursor texts in his log had been on that date – the day when they faced the Sa-Matra. He checked his log and noticed that indeed he hadn't written anything after that.

<<So far your theory holds,>> he said and showed his log to Lydia. <<But shouldn't this also mean that if I write something on it now, the Rosetta Stone theory is proven wrong?>>

Lydia acted like she was thinking hard.

<<I'd say yes,>> she replied. <<The data we retrieved from your device contained all your future log entries up to a specific date. It would seem stupid if that would have been just some random date and not the date of your last entry.>>

Gruber had been dissatisfied with the entire mystery from the start, even though it had helped them locate all the rainbow worlds and thus provided them with lots of valuable information and commodities. He opened up his log and held his finger on top of the icon that would create a new entry.

<<I could do it,>> he said. <<I don't feel any divine force preventing me from changing the predefined future.>>

Lydia was clearly enjoying the show.

<<And yet you still haven't done it,>> she pointed out.

That comment struck a nerve. Suddenly Gruber felt like he had had his chance, but he missed it. He would only look like a fool if he opened a blank entry just to prove a point.

He put his finger away from the trigger.

<<Damn,>> he said. <<I guess we'll never know.>>

He tucked his communicator back into his pocket.

<<I know,>> Lydia said and grinned at him.

Gruber looked back at her for a few seconds in silence until they both laughed the whole thing off.

<<So,>> Gruber said to start a new topic, <<tomorrow you'll set foot on our home planet for the first time. Are you excited?>>

<<Excited, sure,>> Lydia replied. <<I guess I'm just afraid that I won't fit in.>>

Gruber was waiting for that comment.

<<No worries,>> he assured her. <<When you want to get to know people, there is one method that never fails.>>

<<Really, what's that?>> Lydia asked like an easy audience.

<<Team sports,>> Gruber declared. <<In Germany, football in particular... At least that was the case nine years ago. Once we get settled down, let's find you a team.>>

Lydia smiled at him.

<<It's funny you should mention football,>> she ominously began. <<I made secret arrangements for our last night at the starbase. Would you care to join me on the ball court?>>

A few minutes later Gruber and Lydia entered the ball game court where a number of people were already playing football. They all stopped as the two arrived.

“Welcome,” Hayes greeted them, took the ball in his hands and threw it to Gruber. “Team America here is eager to kick some European ass one more time.”

Gruber threw the ball back at him quite hard. It was disturbing how Hayes could use the word *America* to refer to either the United States or the entire continent of America, whichever way he pleased.

“Are we counting Lydia as European this time?” Gruber asked.

Hayes threw the ball back to Gruber.

“I wouldn’t have,” he said, “but she insisted on it.”

Gruber checked the teams. His first impression was that they seemed to be evenly matched. He placed the ball on the floor indicating that he was ready to rock.

“Let this be our final battle,” he said.

