

ETERNAL DOCTRINE

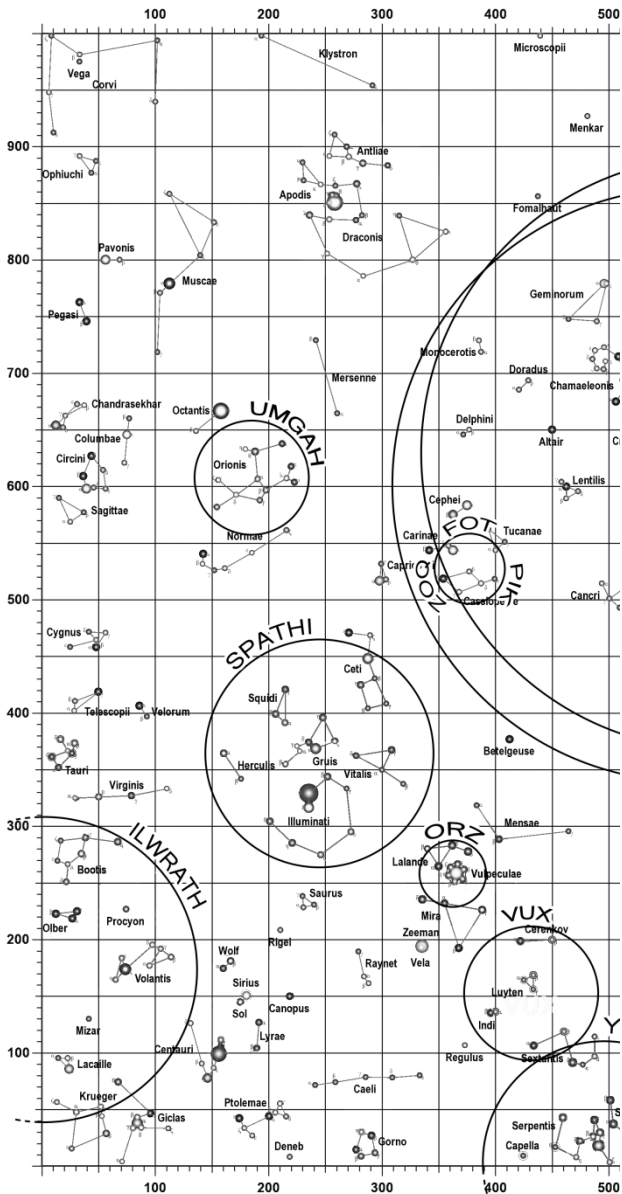
PART I

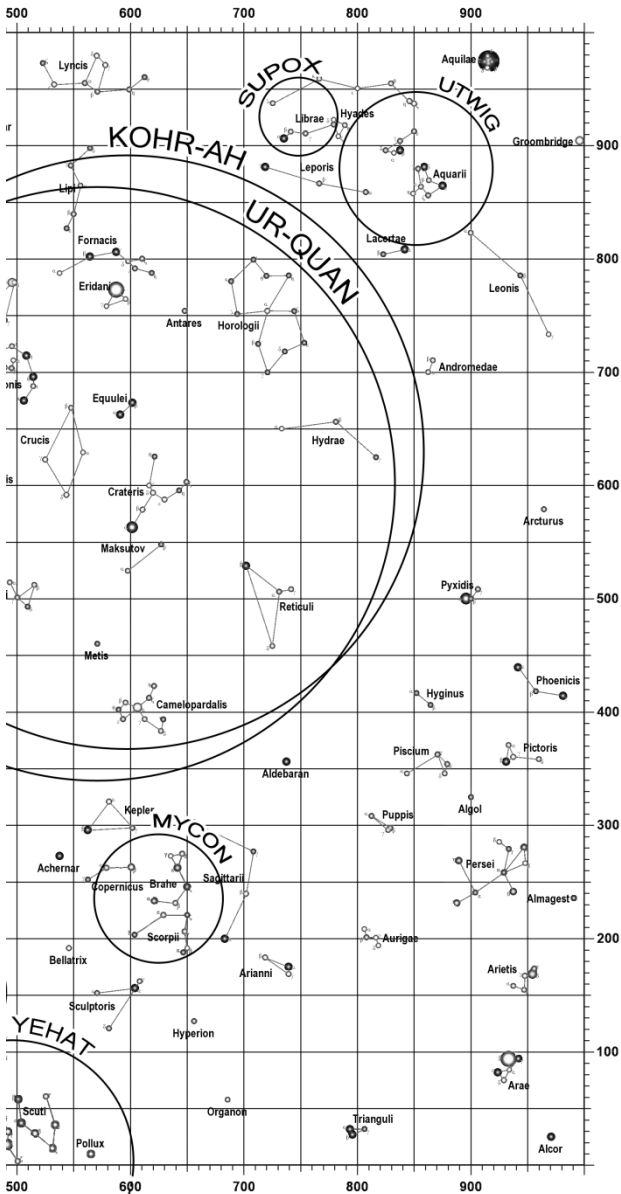
Tommi Salminen

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

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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 all possible radars. “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 inquired.

“We’re at about 20 %,” he 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 declared 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 red laser beams were immediately seen from the main window. They 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 would have 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 appeared behind 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 seemed to surprise Vargas and to Gruber's observation it seemed like a positive surprise. This annoyed him.

"What irritates you?" Vargas asked.

"I'm not sure, 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?"

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

"What has changed since the last time?" Vargas asked. 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 home world. 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 has 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?" he then asked.

This sudden question caught Gruber by surprise and his mind 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?"

"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. 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?"

“Because it’s the truth. 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.”

“So 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.”

“You should call her,” Vargas suggested.

Gruber had to disagree right off the bat.

“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, but...” Gruber continued, “...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. This made Gruber relax a little.

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

“And what happens if we succeed?”

Gruber gave this a 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, and it bothers me.”

“Well, there has seldom been any ultimate evil in the history. 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.

It 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 their enemy at that time and although he has proven his worth several times since then,

there still are some who haven't forgiven him. Gruber himself thinks of Fwiffo as an important ally.

"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."

"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 even 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 you can't help who you are.

"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 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 and when they did, they’d contact the starbase via the ansible. 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 him to carry on. He then sat down at the same table, opposite of Samusenko.

“You came here at a good time,” Samusenko said.

“I did?”

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

“Great, show me.”

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 this 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 to the Ilwrath.

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

“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 home world 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 up Spathi, Orz and Zoq-Fot-Pik forces. Gruber was also hoping 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, and we have important news. Check this out,” Zelnick said and initiated the transfer of the updated star map.

“Very well, 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 assured. He was trembling and searching for cover. Zelnick looked at him as if impatiently waiting for a confession. Fwiffo had no choice but to continue talking.

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

Zelnick gave him some slack.

“Your people have disappeared from the starbase.”

“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.

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

All the pieces suddenly fit 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 home world 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. Getting in contact with the Chenjesu was their top priority right now.

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.”

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 you on the battlefield is no ally at all.

I remember when we gave Fwiffo a shore leave the last time we were at Spathiwa. He returned to us out 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 had reached the orbit of the second planet and the ridiculously powerful hyperwave transmitter the

Spathi had delivered was now ready for transmitting a message through the slave shield. The Chenjesu could send and receive hyperwave signals naturally and the strength of their signals was far superior to any transmitters used during the previous war.

When the crew at the starbase examined the new transmitter, they had sent some messages down to Earth, but there had been no way to know whether anyone was listening. Now it would be different.

There were some stupid, but at the same time understandable, assumptions that talking with the Chenjesu would somehow solve all their problems. And what's more, they could be some super-Chenjesu now, if they were really somehow merging with the Mmrmhrm as Thomas Rigby had deduced after their last visit at 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 ending with a question. Gruber and Zelnick came up with it by themselves. 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, but in doing so you have interrupted the process. Explain this intrusion.”

Zelnick turned to Gruber for counsel.

“We should confirm that they really are the Chenjesu,” he 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 a few minutes as he often erased a word after writing it.

“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.”

This is going very well, Gruber thought. The Chenjesu are alive and co-operative. Maybe they have some good insight on how to defeat the Ur-Quan. At least they should be able to tell 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.”

“Do you think there’s any way we could give them more energy?” Zelnick asked Gruber. “You know, to speed things up a bit.”

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

Zelnick pointed a finger at him clearly indicating that it was a good idea. Then he relayed the question down to the surface.

“Do you have the means to penetrate a slave shield?”

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 Mmrmhmr) 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? 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 Mmrrnmhrm – for details.

Zelnick got to it.

“What if we could find some way to get you more energy? Would that speed things up?”

Maybe the hybridization subjects had to think about this, 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. He 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 was concentrating its forces on Rigel and the pressure on the Indi-Mira line was 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 Vulpeculae and conquering the Androsynth home planet.

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

Reinforcements were urgently requested at Rigel and the offensive at Vulpeculae 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 crumble.

According to what they were told just now, 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 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.

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, not without reinforcements from the Rigel base. But 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 was clearly Precursor design. The Ur-Quan called it the Sa-Matra, meaning 'great trophy'. According to the Chenjesu speaker the Vindicator shares some similarities in design, but the Sa-Matra was many times larger. It had weapons and defensive systems that made it invulnerable to all Chenjesu technologies.

The Chenjesu had no choices beyond submission and devastation. Together with the Mmrmhmr 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 and neither did the humans. At least Gruber had never heard of it.

The Chenjesu currently residing at their homeworld didn't know what 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 typed. *"Why did the Ur-Quan fight the Alliance for so long without using the Sa-Matra?"*

"It remains a mystery to us as well," the Chenjesu answered. *"It might have been a matter of pride, but that is only speculation."*

"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?"

A long pause followed. After a while Zelnick had to check that the message was indeed sent. Then there was a sudden and surprising reply.

“Please don’t.”

After a few minutes of wondering 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 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.”

What a thing to say, Gruber thought. They were at the helm of a ridiculously advanced starship and yet they were supposed to be inferior for the task ahead of them. 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.*

* The translation computer pointed out that the actual parable 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.

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 clarified. "Sure I remember—oh, right, the bomb!"

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 they're keeping the bomb 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,” was their answer.

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 what 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 what was their first step in getting there.

Gruber checked the star map. Zeta Hyades was pretty damn far – 1052 hyperspace units from Procyon, and 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 of the Ultron and the Druuge who 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 planeteeering 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.

“Sorry and thanks!” Zelnick typed. *“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 seemed to recall what had been said.

“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 on 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, or take it by force?” he asked.

“Didn’t you yourself say that if you plan to save the world, you have to push a few old ladies down the stairs?” Gruber reminded the captain.

“Ouch, nice comeback,” Zelnick had to admit. “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 of Epsilon Gruis.

The Vindicator entered the vortex just now. I'll get back to this after our business here.

Their 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, 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 much smaller in true space, it would still take over a day for the Seraph to reach Spathiwa from their current location. The true space speed of a Spathi Eluder and an Orz Nemesis was almost equal to the Vindicator so they 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 were no ships 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 ago.

"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 reached the orbit of Spathiwa. Zelnick and Gruber were discussing some details about a landing party when suddenly, without a 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... 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. She got it and continued. “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 of course 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, just vent 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.

[incoming] *"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.

[incoming] *"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 can be extremely tough opponents in wrestling. They often possess 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 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. And Veronica says hi!"

Maybe not that comment alone, but Zelnick's grin made Gruber blush a little.

"We all appreciate your hard efforts," Gruber 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?"

"Ok, 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 really glad that Lydia was doing well and obviously 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 had been passing time in the canteen, telling stories about their life 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. In such a situation you should never ask a lady where she’s going. Gruber and Zelnick were now again just by the two of them, not counting the others in the canteen that weren’t really with them.

“So your woman at the starbase sends you greetings,” Zelnick reminded Gruber. Obviously he had waited on the

subject until after Samusenko and Katja had left. “How’s that going?”

“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 his **captain** would take the joke the right way.

“Ha-ha, not even a little,” Zelnick fortunately laughed. “You could instead tell me about your adventures with women when you were around my age.”

“There was only that one serious relationship,” Gruber explained, patching up his previous dumb remark by being open and honest. “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 asked.

“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?”

* 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 a 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.

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

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

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 the 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, trying to be honest, “but luckily for me, she didn’t seem to mind.”

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

“What are you implying with the ‘someone like her’?”

Zelnick seemed to give it a little thought.

“Someone out of your league.”

Now Gruber gave it a serious thought.

“I think we were both in the same league, but she was at the top and I was at the bottom.”

Zelnick scratched his head.

“This shit is getting deep,” he remarked.

“It’s like she was in line for a place in a higher league and I was struggling to stay in that particular league,” Gruber continued. “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.

“The bottom line is what she herself said,” Gruber explained. “According to her, you just have to make the best out 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?"

Zelnick laughed at the thought.

"You've got that right! 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."

"Now you lost me again, but okay. 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? It has something to do with psychology, I guess. Anyway, 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?"

"I don't think that's a real word," Gruber said, "but take it as a compliment. And also as a joke."

"If we're telling jokes," Zelnick ominously 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 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 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.”

This was disappointing, but also surprising to Gruber. This 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. He told this to Zelnick.

“Where did you hear that?” he then asked.

“From my father,” Zelnick answered. “Although I think that it was originally from my mother.”

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, which your mother took 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. How appropriate,” Gruber began. “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, and who also seems to say a lot of the same stuff as your mother?”

Gruber looked closely at Zelnick’s puzzled face and then continued.

“And with whom, now that I think about it, your face shares some similarities?”

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

“I’m talking about that ‘academy sweetheart’ of mine you’ve asked me about several times.”

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?”

For some reason this question hit a nerve.

“No!” Gruber shouted a bit too loud and too angrily, which caught the attention of other people in the room. He took a deep breath to calm himself down.

“You were born on Unzervalt in 2135 if I’m not mistaken,” he reminded the captain. “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 arise, they can finally go retrieve the Tobermoon and the Zoq-Fot-Pik Stingers from Gamma Circini.

They have plenty of time to contemplate on their next move during the 15 days of travel from Alpha Illuminati to 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 on their last session a few days ago. 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 like the Vindicator does to all its escorts.

So now Captain Tanaka was sulking on the starbase and, according to the medical staff, if the Shofixti race was going to be resurrected, the females would have to be acquired with haste. The command council was now thinking about a diplomatic mission to Alpha Cerenkov, to discuss the Shofixti maidens with the legendary Vux Admiral Zex, who has the females in his menagerie. That is, if that part of the Melnorme's information was also accurate.

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. “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 every day 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 a 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 explained, “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 a 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 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 led to believe, 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 would live up to their promise, they would use it to construct a ‘portal spawner’ for the Vindicator. With it they could jump to quasispaces from anywhere in hyperspace.

The crew of the Vindicator had very little experience of the so called quasispaces where the Arilou seemed to hang around. They themselves had entered quasispaces by accident when a naturally occurring vortex sucked them in at coordinates 043.8 : 637.3. The quasispaces were 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 this encounter was that they could probably put the Hellbore Cannon into its first real test now. 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 a 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 more hot 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 very 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.”

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 told Gruber.

Now they were discussing the possible surface operation in the Vindicator’s conference room. Dujardin had pointed out that the surface was insanely hot only at 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 the 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 would have 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 off the team directly to 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’ll jump off the shuttle in pitch-black to 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 come 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 on 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 the Polaris a long time ago.”

“What’s that?” Zelnick asked.

“It’s a star on 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 towards 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 on the crash site.”

Gruber and Rigby were briefing 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 casts a high vertical pillar of light which cannot 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 would be 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 object of saving valuable materials in mind, they 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, at least according to Captain Trent. Gruber requested that they send 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 long time 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 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 wasn'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 now 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 light 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 a 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 need rope in difficult situations. You never know in advance what the need will be, but it will come.

The time was now 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.

Now 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 now 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 indeed was 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 on top of 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 as 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 on the planet's surface.

"Are we on top of 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. They had perfect timing. 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 aforementioned 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 indeed 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 carefully 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. Something organic? There was supposed to be life here, so maybe the whole planet was covered in airborne plankton of sorts.

"Listen up, everyone," he suddenly heard Zelnick's voice over the radio. He 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 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 our eyes open. Robinson and Kilgore, take the... thing for carrying the warp pod. Skeates, start unreeling the life thread. Witherspoon and Ahmed, you have the point. Shoji, you stay here with Jenkins. The rest of you, take the tools."*

Clear-cut orders, just what we 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 on 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 construct 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 you'd think. It must be the particles in the air, he thought. Then he looked back and saw one particularly bright star on the sky, which was probably the Vindicator. If you'd walk 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 to 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 the presumably 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. 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 took 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 with 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 would be empty, that is, if all the seats would be 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 a 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 tested that four people was 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 never-ending marathon. They moved so slowly that Gruber wondered whether they would make it to the shuttle before the break of dawn, which was 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 to. 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 from one eye.

“Sir, take a look at this,” Witherspoon suddenly called out to him. She was pointing her helmet light to 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 to 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 the aforementioned section, 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. This 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 a 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 his left foot on Gruber’s hands.

“Ready?” Gruber made sure. *“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 and, with the gravity being so low, pulled herself up with ease.

“Know your own strength, do you?” she commented once she had restored her balance. 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.

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

Gruber took a sip of water and noticed that his bottle was almost empty. He followed the life thread with his eyes and 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. He sounded 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 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 so was Witherspoon. 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 this long. He had now 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 and checked his surroundings. He was still following the life thread and carrying the things he should be carrying. He was just now 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 this moment and leaving the crash site. He looked towards the shuttle and noticed that they were about a kilometer away.

Then he felt a bump.

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 words:

“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 taken his hand, her other hand had to be empty. And she had just now 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 jumped down. Gruber estimated that with such low gravity she should be ok 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 ok.

"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 to 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 up from the pit.

"Alright, lower the life thread now," Witherspoon said and Gruber got to it.

He grasped the thread and pulled it. There wasn't much loose in it. 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 suggested 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 got 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 rope. It was surprisingly easy in low gravity. When he reached the end of the thread, he let his other hand go and extended it downwards.

“Can you reach my hand?” he asked.

Witherspoon tried to jump again, but still fell ways short. Gruber put his other hand back to the thread and lowered himself to hang from it.

“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 few times more 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 from 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 this 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 demanded.

"We'll figure something once you're out of here," he declared 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 with 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 right now, but Gruber was so close that he might be able to catch a glimpse of them. He 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.

He 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 actually worked. 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.

"Sure."

"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 to 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 up. 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 he 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 the 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 bended 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, which didn’t change anything since it was already dark.

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 to 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, 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.