

# ETERNAL DOCTRINE

## PART III

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Based on the universe of  
**STAR CONTROL**  
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## CHAPTER 13

# FOUR BUTTERFLIES

**October 29<sup>th</sup> 2155, Sol, 175.2 : 145.0**

Gruber woke up next to Veronica as was planned. Without any drama, he dressed up and made his way for breakfast where he met with Commander Hayes. After bringing their joke pool up to date, they both headed to the briefing room where the command council was scheduled to have a meeting.

The New Alliance of Free Stars still didn't have any written rules, so the command council was basically just a bunch of key players who got together from time to time to discuss what they should be doing next. They were referred to as the command council simply for convenience.

On the other hand, one could ask what exactly would make the command council official. If the aforementioned key players would declare themselves as the rightful leaders of the alliance, would that make it so? Or would they have to write it down to make some kind of a constitution? What difference would that piece of paper make? Who would have to approve it, other than the self-proclaimed command council?

There had been some discussion about writing a set of ground rules when the new alliance was formed. Back then they had agreed that there was no need to bother with politics as they all knew how to behave and all politicians were on the other side of an impenetrable wall. Of course, that was when the starbase in Earth's orbit was the only member in the alliance.

*As the alliance grows, so does the likelihood of problems that result from lack of rules. What would the alliance do if some race (\*cough\* Orz \*cough\*) would start, say, eating members of another race? What **could** the alliance do?*

Gruber had thought about this from time to time. Whenever he did, he remembered the words of a wise man: *It's not a problem until it becomes a problem.* Luck had brought them this far, so they could just as well keep relying on it.

As Gruber and Hayes arrived at the briefing room, most of the other council members were already there. In addition to Gruber, Hayes and Zelnick, the other human members were Captain Trent and doctors Chu and Fredrikson. Speaking for the Zoq-Fot-Pik were formally some high-grade officials of theirs, Mik, Mok and Nak, but the commanding trio of the Voyager was also present. The Spathi democracy worked perfectly, thanks to Fwiffo, as the population outside their slave shield was 100 % present. The Orz were represented by a seemingly singular entity that was sometimes referred to as \*FatFun\*.

The Arilou were also permanently invited to the council, even though they weren't really a member race. Two of them were always present – new individuals every time – and one was always silent.

As Gruber sat down he noticed the Shofixti, *Captain Tanaka*<sup>\*</sup>, sitting two seats to his left. He hadn't been aware that the old warrior Captain Halleck had rescued from Delta Gorno was a part of the council. Not that Gruber had anything against it – he had just gotten the impression that the poor old furball was in a state of deep depression and somewhat unable to contribute. But then again, maybe the

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<sup>\*</sup> Tanaka wasn't really a captain – just a regular pilot of a Shofixti Scout vessel. Everyone addressed him as Captain though, probably just to make him feel better.

folks here figured that they needed to make Tanaka feel important so he wouldn't commit hirikara, the ritualistic Shofixti suicide for defeated warriors. There was still hope to find Shofixti females, and if they pulled that off, Tanaka would be needed more than any race had ever needed an individual before.

The last item on their agenda was to formally welcome the Pkunk ambassadors, who would be called in to the room at the appropriate time. Gruber was very much looking forward to that since he hadn't had the time to meet with the Pkunk yet.

There was never much debate in the council and once again they had quickly agreed on all the major topics.

The next mission for the Vindicator was to negotiate for the Shofixti maidens with Admiral Zex at Alpha Cerenkov. The Arilou assured them that the portal spawner would be ready in a few days, so they agreed to wait for that before taking the trip to Vux space. One of the rainbow world coordinate pairs pointed to Zeta Sextantis, which was four days away from Alpha Cerenkov, so they would consider paying that star a visit too.

The red probes caused an unwanted and seemingly unrelated problem, but still a big one. An increasing number of them had been sighted in the asteroid belt, chopping up asteroids of all sizes with their electrical discharge. Captain Trent was requested to stay at the starbase with the Tobermoon and organize the defenses. Captain van Rijn would take Trent's place in the Vindicator's fleet.

Earlier, Gruber might have felt uneasy without Trent, but now he trusted that Captain Zelnick knew what he was doing. Also, he had heard that van Rijn was actually one of the best, even though she mostly stayed out of the limelight. In any case, once they had dealt with Admiral Zex, they would use the portal spawner to travel to the edge of charted

space and search for the probes' origins from Vega and Beta Corvi.

The Pkunk made a memorable first impression in the council. Right off the bat they announced that the *Great Spirit* had guided them to give Captain Zelnick a gift. Without delay one of them approached Zelnick and gave him an object which looked like some kind of a glass ornament. The Pkunk themselves said that they had no idea what it was, but Zelnick then immediately proclaimed that it was the Clear Spindle, one of the artifacts required to fix the Ultron. The Great Spirit was obviously a pretty good guy. What's more, the Pkunk joyfully declared that they would donate four of their Fury-class starships to the alliance, with the condition that the ships were assigned to the Vindicator's fleet. It seemed a bit suspicious, but Zelnick eagerly accepted the offer.

The science team had something to work with again. They would try to find a link between the wrecked Ultron, the Clear Spindle and the Aqua Helix. They would also thoroughly test the rock the Orz had delivered, hoping that the rock was indeed the mind shield created by the Taalo. And to the amusement of everyone interested in mind control, the Thraddash captive had snapped out of its trance and was now back to its old hostile self. Since Vargas was the most qualified person to research the matter, and since Zelnick wanted a hostage **and** a guinea pig, it was agreed that the prisoner would stay aboard the Vindicator. Gruber also wanted to interrogate the alien further, so he was very happy with that decision.

After the council meeting was over, Gruber wanted to spend some time getting to know the Pkunk and *Captain Tanaka*. The Pkunk were still the center of all attention so Gruber approached *Captain Tanaka* first.

“Excuse me,” he began to start a conversation. “Do you have a minute?”

He could talk without the translator since the Shofixti were one of the very few races who were physically able to speak human languages and, as luck would have it, *Captain Tanaka* had learned English during the Great War.

“Ah, herro Mr.Gruber,” the Shofixti replied with an unorthodox but understandable accent. “I arways have time for my arriance friends.”

Gruber pointed out that the old warrior hadn’t said anything during the council meeting.

“So what’s your take on all this?” he asked.

*Captain Tanaka* bowed.

“I am deepry humbred by everything you have done for me,” he replied. “I just wish I could be of more herp.”

“That’s why we’re trying to acquire the females of your species,” Gruber said. “If we succeed, you will be invaluable.”

The Shofixti seemed to be feeling a bit down.

“If we succeed,” *Captain Tanaka* repeated. “Untir that I am nothing but a defeated warrior – a worthress sherr.”

Gruber didn’t want to question *Captain Tanaka*’s view. Instead he gently moved the conversation to another topic.

“I’m sure you’ve heard this a lot but…” he began. “How did you survive the solar blast in your home system?”

The old warrior climbed back into his chair. He wasn’t much taller than Fwiffo so he had to make a little effort.

“No, nobody has asked me that,” *Captain Tanaka* replied to Gruber’s surprise.

Gruber assumed that this was one of those cases when everyone thinks that someone else must have done something and therefore nobody ends up doing it. That’s why you always have to buy a new deck of cards on a cruise.

“I was not in the system when it happened,” the Shofixti continued.

Gruber also sat down.

“Where were you?” he asked.

*Captain Tanaka* closed his eyes.

“I was assigned to a Yehat squadron as a forward scout performing a deep recon in Mycon space,” he explained. “We were sent to investigate reports of unusuar Mycon activity around Beta Brahe.”

This was all news to Gruber.

“What did you find?” he asked.

“I was the first ship to enter the system,” *Captain Tanaka* recalled. “My scanners showed a smarr freet of Mycon crustered around the first pranet, conducting a test of some device. The unit was smarr, not even harf the size of my ship. When the Mycon activated it, a grow began to radiate outward. I crept crosor, to get a better rook. Suddenry there was a frare, rike a newborn sun, brinding me and overroading my sensors.”

The old warrior kept a small pause in the story, during which the audience could ask questions, but Gruber was too interested to do so, so *Captain Tanaka* continued:

“When I recovered my vision, hours rater, the Mycon and their device were gone. I was abre to affect repairs on my sensors and depart the system, but I had been cut off from my squadron, and had to traver home arone.”

Gruber didn’t question *Captain Tanaka*’s honesty, but he couldn’t believe that such a recon operation would have been performed during the final months of the war. He pointed this out to the storyteller.

“You are of course right,” the Shofixti answered. “This mission began over a year before our defeat. My trip home took a bit ronger than was pranned.”

“What happened?” Gruber asked.



“I encountered a Vux Intruder,” the old warrior explained. “Before I destroyed it, the Vux was able to affix some of those vile rimpet things to my ship and I had to return home at a greatly diminished speed.”

The Intruder class ships of the Vux were slow, but they had an unconventional way of coping with it. Instead of upgrading their own engines, they slowed down their opponents by firing specific organic material at them. Cleaning up these *limpets* from the hull after a battle with the Vux was one of the most hated assignments of the service crew.

Suddenly Gruber felt a slap on his shoulder.

“Gruber, my man,” he heard Zelnick’s voice from behind him. He could only guess where his captain had learned to talk like that. “Would you join me for breakfast? There’s something I’d like to discuss with you.”

Thanks to *Captain Tanaka*, there was now something that Gruber also wanted to discuss with Zelnick. He checked the time. It had been two hours since he ate breakfast and he knew that Zelnick was currently in the same sleep cycle as he was. He thought about making some wise-ass comment about it, but ultimately decided not to.

“I already had breakfast,” he put it simply.

“Oh? You got up early then,” Zelnick commented, sounding awfully sincere. “But hey, join me anyway. I’m starving and not in the mood for long conversations without some food on my plate.”

Gruber wanted to continue the chat with the Shofixti.

“Captain Tanaka, would you care to join us?” he asked.

*Captain Tanaka* got up.

“I’m afraid my presence is requested elsewhere,” he politely refused and bowed again. “Let us talk again some other time.”

Gruber agreed and then *Captain Tanaka* left. Gruber noticed that the Pkunk were also about to be escorted

somewhere so he had missed his chance to talk with them. The fun stuff would have to wait. It was time to talk business again with his captain.

“Alright then,” he agreed. “Let’s go.”

Zelnick didn’t say anything on the way to the cafeteria and Gruber waited patiently for the captain to sit down, stuff some food in his mouth and tell his first officer what he wanted to talk about. After that Gruber could tell the captain what he had learned just now.

Zelnick acted exactly as Gruber had predicted. As soon as he had taken a big bite of a sandwich, he started talking.

“I flkd wff Ldia,” he said, then chewed hastily for a few seconds, swallowed, and tried again. “I talked with Lydia. Apparently she knows Captain van Rijn pretty well.”

“They’re roommates,” Gruber replied, a bit offended by Zelnick’s lack of manners.

“Great,” Zelnick said and took another bite. “Whfs a Fld Rfgee?”

Gruber’s disapproving look clearly indicated that Zelnick would have to try again. The same pattern repeated.

“What’s a flood refugee?” Zelnick repeated the question, no doubt. “Lydia mentioned that van Rijn was a *flood refugee*. What does that mean?”

A reasonable question, Gruber thought. Of course someone born and raised far away from Earth wouldn’t know about it.

“There used to be this country called *Netherlands* on Earth,” Gruber began the history lesson. “It actually shared a border with my home country, Germany. The peculiar thing about Netherlands was that a large part of its area was below sea level.”

“What, it was an underwater country?” Zelnick interrupted.

“No, they had a massive wall,” Gruber explained. “Or actually, yes, in the end it *was* an underwater country. That’s

the whole essence of the story. The sea level rose quite a lot during the 21<sup>st</sup> century you see, and the Dutch had to constantly raise and reinforce the wall.”

“The Dutch?” Zelnick asked, not knowing the meaning of the word.

“The people of Netherlands,” Gruber rephrased it.

“Why call them the Dutch?” Zelnick insisted.

“I don’t know, all right?” Gruber lost his temper as Zelnick had made a habit out of derailing any and all Gruber’s explanations. “That’s just how the word is in English.”

“Sorry, so did something happen to the wall?” Zelnick rerailed the conversation and continued eating his breakfast.

Gruber decided to leave dates out of the story.

“Yes,” he answered. “There were circumstances, but the bottom line is that the wall eventually collapsed and almost the entire area of the country was flooded.”

Zelnick made an empathetic face.

“That sounds like there must have been casualties,” he figured.

“Indeed there were,” Gruber replied. “And the ones who survived had nowhere to go.”

“Ah, *flood refugees*,” Zelnick figured it out.

“Right,” Gruber confirmed, “and indeed Famke van Rijn was one.”

“So where did she go?”

“India,” Gruber replied. “Back then India struggled with a disproportionately large number of males, so they were happy to welcome female refugees.”

“Wow... Why did that happen?” Zelnick asked. “The skewed sex ratio I mean.”

Gruber contemplated his qualifications on giving lessons about traditional Indian culture to an Unzervaltian. He decided he shouldn’t try.

“There are other people here who can give you a detailed answer,” he evaded the topic. “To put it very simply, some Indians consider boys much more valuable than girls.”

Zelnick didn't seem satisfied with the answer.

“I didn't know you could choose the gender of your child,” he said, probably considering the possibility that it was normal and that he just didn't know.

Gruber could see only one way for the conversation to go, and that wouldn't leave Zelnick thinking too highly of Indians. He decided to try derailing.

“Do you know who else are called Indians?” he tried.

“You mean other than people of India?” Zelnick took the bait.

“Exactly,” Gruber said with a feeling of relief. “The natives of America are also called Indians.”

“Like Hayes?” Zelnick asked.

The innocent question amused Gruber up to the point of being glad he had joined the captain for his breakfast.

“No, not like Hayes,” he said. “I mean the people who lived in America before the Europeans sailed there for the first time.”

“Why would **they** be called Indians?” Zelnick insisted. “Is it like the Dutch?”

“No, it's because the Europeans thought they had sailed to India,” Gruber put it simply.

Zelnick stopped eating for a second and then laughed.

“That's pretty funny,” he summed it up. “When did the Europeans notice their mistake?”

“I don't know exactly,” Gruber admitted, “but when they did, the term *Indian* had already caught on.”

Zelnick laughed some more.

“I can relate,” he then said. “We had a similar occurrence at Unzervalt. When we started gathering local food, we found this red berry, which was quite abundant near our colony. We tasted it cautiously and found it sweet and filling

so my mother – your darling Lily – imaginatively named it *goodberry*.”

Gruber had heard few stories from Unzervalt and he was very interested.

“So where’s the relevance?” he asked, not doubting that he would soon hear it.

“After a week or so everyone who had eaten *goodberry* got sick,” Zelnick delivered. “I don’t know the details, but I understand it was some kind of a parasite issue.”

“Was it serious?” Gruber asked.

“Untreated, yes,” Zelnick recalled. “We had a good doctor and the right equipment. The doc was able to cure everyone... You understand that I was barely born at that time, right, so I can only tell you what I’ve heard?”

Gruber did understand.

“So they still call the berry *goodberry*,” Gruber concluded.

“Right, and mom’s not too happy about it,” Zelnick pointed out. “She feels kind of guilty about the whole thing, I guess.”

Gruber found himself enjoying hearing stories about Lily.

“I bet she tried to force a new name for the berry,” he guessed.

“She did,” Zelnick confirmed, “...and was unsuccessful.”

“I can see her holding an eternal grudge,” Gruber smirked.

Zelnick joined in on the smirking. After a small pause there was a chance for a new topic.

“So, we have a few days before we set sail again,” Zelnick began. “We should get acquainted with Captain van Rijn.”

“And the Pkunk,” Gruber pointed out. “If we’re taking four of their ships with us, we need to know what they can do.”

“Right.”

“And, by the way, I just learned something interesting from the Shofixti...”

Two days and several flight tests later they were more than glad to have the Pkunk on their side. As unthinkable as it was, the Pkunk Furies could outrun even the Vindicator in true space. They were highly maneuverable small fighter ships whose shape and color most resembled that of a butterfly. Since they weren't much bigger than the shuttle, and since the Pkunk could breathe the same air as humans, it was convenient to dock their ships in the hangar with the shuttle.

The armament of the ships was somewhat shrouded in mystery, since the Pkunk were either unable or unwilling to demonstrate their offensive capabilities. Apparently the Pkunk are so full of love and joy that their ships don't have any conventional weapons. Instead they claimed that when they must fight, they whip themselves into an emotional frenzy and throw the resulting negative spiritual energy at their enemies. The more they are able to generate hate, the more powerful they become.

*Then we unleash our fury, often with the popular and deadly spinning blossom attack! It is so intimate that you might mistake it for love, such as when a caring mother embraces her children. In fact, the sheer beauty of it sometimes touches our own pilots so deeply that they forget their hate. And when they do, they become unable to fight and are reunited with their ancestors in the eternal dance of the cosmic light.*

Gruber was not pleased with the explanation. He had said it before, but had to say again that an unreliable weapon was no weapon at all. The Furies would be valuable scouts and decoys, but they couldn't be relied on to take down enemy ships.

The Pkunk didn't mind Gruber's negative remarks and changed the topic entirely. The Pkunk individual they were conversing with put one of her\* wings on Zelnick's shoulder and pretended to whisper to him, making sure that everybody heard her.

"I can sense the fear in you," she said. "But do not worry. For you, death is not the end. No, I can sense that you are too important to go away."

"What do you mean by that?" Zelnick asked, looking somehow relieved.

The Pkunk looked closely at Zelnick as if reading an open book.

"Did you know," the Pkunk joyously began, addressing everyone in the room, "that this man has lived many lives and that in one of his previous lives he was Duke Franz Ferdinand?"

Nobody confessed that they had known.

"It's true!" the Pkunk declared as if revealing a big secret. "And before that, he was the Egyptian god-pharaoh Atum-ta the sixth!"

Zelnick looked exactly like Gruber felt – awkward. Then Gruber remembered that the Kohr-Ah had had similar ideas about reincarnation. The Kohr-Ah had viewed reincarnation as a lottery where the ultimate jackpot was to be born as an Ur-Quan. Some human cultures on the other hand had believed that the vessels for one's soul could be ranked, with human at the top of course, and that one's actions in the previous life affected the rank at the next life. And now the Pkunk also had a similar belief. A strange coincidence if you believed in coincidences.

"This is amazing, just fantastic," the Pkunk excitedly said while measuring Zelnick from tip to toe. Then, reading the

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\* Without any explanation, the translation computer insisted on referring to all Pkunk as "she".

atmosphere in the room, she continued in a more restrained way:

“Well, to be frank, this is not all that unusual. It just so happens that almost everyone’s past lives were as famous, rich or interesting people. It seems that if you are a turnip farmer, a salesman, or something boring like that, you aren’t reincarnated. When you die, you just kind of... cease.”

The Pkunk looked around, but saw nothing but confused people with nothing to say.

“We Pkunk are of course special,” she continued. “But don’t feel down, you are special too! Even the Ilwrath are special in their own hostile way. But we, the Pkunk, are known to sometimes do the undoable, break the unbreakable and reborn as the unrebornable.”

“What is the unrebornable?” Zelnick asked, obviously a lot more interested in this metaphysical conversation than Gruber was.

The Pkunk seemed overjoyed at the question.

“It is of course the one entity that the dying one holds most dear,” she explained, probably not meaning to say it as a riddle. “As you know, fighting does not come naturally to us so in the heat of the battle we are known to experience strange revelations – feelings of the spirit leaving the body. Then, when the body is killed in battle, and if the spirit chooses so, it can be reborn as itself!”

Zelnick scratched the top of his head.

“Okay, so is that, er... good? Or is it bad?” he asked.

“That depends on whether you were good or bad yourself,” the Pkunk answered.

“Like with Santa Claus?” Zelnick inquired.

Once again Gruber had to bury his face in his hands.

“Exactly!” the Pkunk cheerfully replied. “Isn’t the universe a wacky place?”



In some more formal conversations the Pkunk had explained their view on what was happening with the Ilwrath. About eight years ago the Ilwrath had suddenly invaded into Pkunk space and ever since then they had ceaselessly attacked Pkunk ships and planets. During these years of war the Pkunk had learned that the reason behind the sudden hostilities of the Ilwrath was a hyperwave signal the Ilwrath had received, supposedly from their dark gods of death and pain, Dogar and Kazon. The Pkunk were a bit skeptical about these gods since they had never seen them on the fourth astral plane where, according to the Pkunk, most gods\* like to hang out. But then again, who else would send such transmissions on hyperwave channel 44?

Now the entire Pkunk population was down by two thirds and at the current rate they would become extinct in just a few years. But the Pkunk still refused to join the alliance. They appreciated the concern, but assured that they were already making preparations for a *Final Migration* which was supposed to solve all problems, and not just theirs. They were unwilling to discuss their plans further at this point, but assured that once they were ready, it would be no secret.

Four days later the Vindicator was ready to jump to hyperspace again. The Arilou had delivered and the Portal Spawner was attached to the storage bay module. Externally it was a rather strange device, a mixture of Arilou and Ur-Quan design. Internally... who could say? Nobody aboard the Vindicator really understood how it worked and the science team had to figure it out with only the technical data. They didn't have time to wait at the starbase for Chu's and Fredriksson's official seal of approval. Skeates was eager to open up the device for study, but Zelnick didn't permit that for the device's virgin voyage.

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\* And one of them, the Pkunk mentioned, was Santa Claus.

The use of the spawner was supposed to be extremely simple. Once they were in hyperspace, they would just press the one and only button attached to the device and then they were supposed to appear in quasispace, in the same *location* they appeared through the natural portal several months ago. Although the Arilou had originally claimed that they couldn't say where each portal in quasispace would lead in hyperspace, they had now provided a map of all portals and their target destinations. Unfortunately there was no exit anywhere near their first destination, Alpha Cerenkov, so testing of the spawner would have to wait. Via hyperspace the trip would take roughly nine days.

## CHAPTER 14

# VERY UGLY XENOFORMS

**November 13<sup>th</sup> 2155, Alpha Cerenkov, 422.1 : 198.6**

*November 7<sup>th</sup> 2155: There had been an alarming number of those red probes in the asteroid belt. We neutralized all we could find and signaled the starbase to send a scavenging team. No doubt there are still more probes somewhere in the system, and even more are bound to come here. Trent has to come up with solid defenses soon.*

*Our current plan is that after our business with Admiral Zex, we will try to locate the source of the red probes in Vega and Beta Corvi – unless, of course, if we acquire the Shofixti maidens we must get them to Captain Tanaka right away.*

*With traditional hyperspace travel the trip to Beta Corvi would take over a month, but conveniently there is supposed to be a quasispace exit at 011.1 : 940.9. Using that, we could get there in just a day or two.*

*Captain van Rijn seems businesslike and effective. Not that it matters, but she lines her ship “upside down” compared to the rest of the fleet. According to Samusenko, who had fought alongside her in the past, that’s what she always does. She had spent many years in the space debris team in Earth’s orbit and that experience allegedly had toned her spatial perception skills to a superhuman level. How that is related to flying “upside down” is beyond me.*

*The Pkunk Furies turned out very ineffective against the probes, whose electrical discharge was obviously too fast to dodge. What’s more, the Pkunk pilots reported finding it*

more difficult than usual to reach an operative battle rage when fighting against a non-biological opponent. The *Fortune*, one of the Pkunk ships, received serious damage early in the battle and all the *Furies* were soon recalled back to the *Vindicator*. The *Vux* might be better suited opponents for them, but I still doubt the battle abilities of the Pkunk.

November 8<sup>th</sup> 2155: Captain Tanaka's report from Beta Brahe was very interesting. We happen to have friends who could use some extra solar power and if the Mycon really have a device that can simulate a star... It would definitely be worth stealing. After all, we stole the *Aqua Helix* rather smoothly.

November 12<sup>th</sup> 2155: It has been a long time since humanity's last encounter with the *Vux*. Captain Rand made a memorable first impression and I'm afraid there is little hope of ever making peace. It is rumored though that Admiral Zex is different. A diplomatic solution might be possible with him. On the other hand, he is unlikely to be alone in the system, and we will probably have to break a few nose-equivalents to get to him. And that is the sunny day scenario. If Zex would be commanding a large fleet with no intention of negotiating, we might have a hard time making it out alive, even with the *Vindicator*'s speed. In the Great War, Zex always had something sneaky and unexpected up his sleeve, just like Trent.

Everyone very well knows that encountering *Vux* Intruders in hyperspace is an extremely bad idea. And for those who don't know, here's a reminder: Because of their superior mathematics, the *Vux* are able to calculate their hyperspace jumps with the accuracy of a few meters, enabling them to jump directly behind enemy ships and often win their battles in a matter of seconds.

Upon entering Alpha Cerenkov the Vindicator immediately received a broad-beam open transmission. The signal was simply an invitation to come to the first planet of the system where, according to the message, there was an amusement park. Surface coordinates were included, along with an advertisement video that kept repeating what a *fun* place the park was. There was also a disclaimer saying that the footage on the video might not exactly represent every visitor's experience.

In Gruber's opinion the signal smelled of a trap, but the content was so ridiculous that he was more curious than cautious. They briefly acknowledged the possibility of a trap, but since there was still many hours before they would reach the first planet, they let their guard down for a while.

Of course one rarely steps into a trap one expects. They had been flying straight towards the given coordinates for a few hours when Captain van Rijn reminded everyone of one of the basic lessons in military strategy – the *plus one* rule. To put it simply, it means that finding one does not mean that you can stop searching. When you see one trap, you easily get so focused on that one that you forget to check for others. That's why a basic strategy of trap setting is to make one trap quite easy to spot and set another well-hidden trap somewhere between the obvious trap and where the prey would most likely notice the obvious trap. And what was the Vindicator's fleet doing? – Flying carefree towards the "obvious trap". After realizing this and getting over the embarrassment they quickly took a more cautious formation.

It came almost as a disappointment when they finally reached the first planet without knowingly setting off any traps. The Vindicator's energy scanner then picked up something at the given coordinates, as expected.

As they got into position in orbit, they observed the area more thoroughly. There were lots of hits on the bio-scanner all around the planet, but there was a heavy concentration on

the given coordinates. The telescope revealed that there were several buildings, some of them quite large, but on the outside there was nothing of particular interest. So far it could very well be an indoor amusement park.

Then they received an incoming transmission without any identification signature. The signal was coming from the surface, from the given coordinates. Not answering the call was not much of an option.

*“Ah, human visitors, what a treat!”*

As the visual link was established they saw that they were conversing with the Vux. The grotesque sight made Gruber think that whatever Captain Rand had said to offend the Vux on the first encounter must have come straight from his heart.

*“I have many pictures of your species,”* the Vux continued. *“I keep them on my walls to... inspire me.”*

“Uh...” Zelnick searched for words. “That’s nice, I guess. I wish I could say the same about you, but, er...”

*“Oh, but where are my manners,”* the Vux continued. *“Allow me to introduce myself. I am Admiral Zex. You may know me by my reputation from the war with your alliance, but I assure you that beneath all that I am a kind and gentle being. Please be welcome! We can get to know one another... expand our interspecies relationship!”*

Zelnick blushed a little.

“I am Captain Robert Zelnick of the starship Vindicator,” he replied. “You know, you really caught me off guard there. Why are we so welcome? I thought all Vux hated humans.”

Admiral Zex seemed like he had heard this before.

*“No, no, not all Vux,”* Zex replied. *“Most, but not all. It is true that when the majority of my people view one of your species they are forced to regurgitate. But there are those among us who have grown beyond such childishness to take a more liberal view. We, the few sophisticates, are not*

*subject to the whims and fads of current fashion. Our likes and dislikes are strictly based on personal preference.”*

A tongue-like body part protruded from the creature’s mouth to moisten its lip-equivalents.

*“We see the... beauty in you Humans,” it continued. “We see the value in a long-term... relationship. You are different, yes, but personally I like difference. In fact, I **adore** it. Your physique is so wonderfully varied! Your multitudinous rigid appendages, your tiny double eyes, your varied skin coloration, and the delightful patchwork of hair covering only parts of your bodies, leaving other parts bare and smooth! Mmmmmm...”*

Zex closed its eye for a moment before continuing.

*“I value your species. I see you as just ‘people’... like us Vux.”*

Zelnick turned to Gruber.

*“Is he some kind of a perv— ...you know?”*

Gruber found the question justified.

*“For the sake of diplomacy,” he suggested, “let’s go with aesthete.”*

Zelnick turned back to the communications screen.

*“Are you at the amusement park?” he asked Zex.*

The question seemed to amuse Zex.

*“Amusement park? \*tee-hee\* Not quite. Calling this place an amusement park would be such an understatement. What I have here is the finest menagerie of creatures in all space.”*

*“Ah, so it’s a zoo,” Zelnick said. “Sorry, that was lost in translation.”*

Zex was even more amused.

*“Hee-hee-hee, still not quite. My menagerie contains only the most **beautiful** creatures in the galaxy! Each of my children, as I like to call them, has a wonderful set of traits which make them unique and special... especially to me! I have a complete variety of beasts from as far away as*

*Procyon and Alcor. So no, this is not your ordinary zoo. I have worked diligently for many years to craft my menagerie, to gradually improve it. Perhaps you can't tell, but I am rather proud of it."*

Gruber and Zelnick had agreed that it was always a good idea to keep others talking since you never knew when some crucial piece of information was slipped out.

"Why is your... menagerie... here instead of your home system?" Zelnick asked. "This seems like a rather remote place with few visitors."

"Ah, such a good question. But you always were a bright species," Zex joyously commented. "After the Great War, in which I played some small part, the Vux high council faced a dilemma. They could not tolerate my behavior, nor could they accept my desires as natural, but they also could not refuse my military genius and could not ignore the many victories I gave them."

"I see," Zelnick commented. "So you had to be silenced."

"In a way, yes," Zex agreed. "They had to reward me, but could not let me 'poison' the minds of youth with my 'bizarre' ideas and 'perverted' lifestyle. So the high council granted me this planet and sent me out here so that I might pursue my... hobby in peace."

"A hero's exile," Zelnick remarked.

"A splendid way to put it, yes," Zex agreed. "Oh, listen to me rambling on and on. You want to see my collection, don't you? It would be my **privilege** to give you a guided tour personally."

Zelnick turned to Gruber.

"I guess we should confirm that the Shofixti maidens are indeed here and alive, don't you think?" he suggested.

"That is correct," Gruber agreed. "Even though the Melnorme have been a reliable source of information so far, we can't rely on them blindly. We don't want to show all our



cards to Zex, so let's not tell him yet what we're really after."

Zelnick turned to Zex again.

"We are very eager to see your collection, yes," he admitted. "Do we have to pay something, or...?"

Zex seemed terrified of the thought.

"Dear me, no," Zex quickly replied. "I would never charge anything from my **dear** friends. You just land on the shuttle bay and me and my team here will take good care of you."

A few hours later Gruber found himself on the surface of an alien world again. He was greeted by several Vux individuals who seemed a lot less enthusiastic than Admiral Zex. In fact, he got the feeling that he and his team were as welcome as an itchy nose in a space suit. Their hosts didn't look at them in the eyes and instead focused their gaze on an imaginary point somewhere above the left shoulder.

They had landed with a full surface mission crew and this time they were all carrying weapons. The atmosphere was close enough to human preference that they didn't need any extra equipment.

All Vux looked the same in Gruber's opinion. So far nobody had claimed to be Admiral Zex and it felt like their hosts were waiting for something – probably the admiral. Gruber checked their surroundings, but there was nothing out of the ordinary in the landing site. Jenkins remained in the shuttle and Ahmed stayed with her. Alongside Gruber were Rigby, Witherspoon, Belov, Cuvelier, Kilgore, Hawthorne, Robinson, Shoji and Keller, whose place Skeates had taken on their last surface mission. As Gruber looked at his team he noticed something strange about Belov. At first it was hard to say what it was exactly, but then he realized that the man looked fat. He hadn't seen Belov in a few weeks, but had a hard time believing that

someone could gain such a remarkable spare tire in such a short time. He was about to ask if there was something he should know, but just then the door to the landing bay opened and an important looking Vux appeared.

The other Vux made way for the important looking one. Gruber's team formed in a relaxed double line.

"No need for formalities," the important looking Vux said.

"Admiral Zex, I presume?" Gruber checked.

"Indeed I am," Zex replied. "Welcome, welcome... My, don't you look just adorable. Is your captain coming?"

"Unfortunately, no, not this time," Gruber truthfully explained, ignoring the compliment. "I'm sure you understand. I am First Officer Adam Gruber."

Zex seemed a little disappointed at first, but cheered up quickly.

"The pleasure is **all** mine," the admiral assured them and winked, which was quite impressive for a being with only one eye.

Then Zex motioned everyone to follow him.

"Right this way please," Zex said. "I will give you the tour of a lifetime!"

Zex indeed had a commendable collection and did a fine job presenting it. Some of the life forms were extremely alien and probably could not be classified as animals, plants or fungi. At some times Gruber felt like watching a freak show and he didn't like enjoying it. Sometimes it was like laughing at a guy in a wheelchair. At other times it was like laughing at prisoners in Auschwitz.

*Prisoner* was definitely the right word to use at times. Some of the creatures were screaming and waving as if begging for the humans to rescue them. The translator didn't notice anything worth translating though, but Gruber preferred to trust his own instincts over a computer program.

Admiral Zex assured that none of the creatures were sentient, but in Gruber's opinion there was nothing else Zex could have said. He found himself contemplating why being sentient or not would matter if creatures were kept in captivity against their own will merely for the amusement of the captor. Humans had started to respect animal life only about 200 years ago, when life was still abundant on Earth. Maybe the Vux did not share that respect. At least the Vux in general had very little respect of humans.

Whatever the case was, however badly the creatures were treated, there was little the landing team could do about it right there and then. They had to prioritize their own mission and acquire the Shofixti females – with force if necessary and possible, but preferably through negotiations.

Not all of the creatures were *alive* per se. The rule of thumb seemed to be that if the creatures could reproduce, they were encouraged or forced to do so and live out their natural life-spans. However if they could not reproduce and their expected life-spans were short, they were kept in deep freeze, suspended animation or some other similar form of preservation.

After a while Zex ominously said that there was one more attraction to show them. They hadn't seen any sign of the Shofixti yet and Gruber had a feeling Zex knew very well what they were after.

And Gruber was probably right, since the *last attraction* was a set of 12 transparent portable cryogenic tanks, each containing a single Shofixti.

"Magnificent," Zex proclaimed. "Simply magnificent, don't you agree? To the best of my knowledge, these are the last Shofixti females in existence. If you had a Shofixti male in your pocket, you would probably pay **anything** to get your hands on these critters, am I right?"

Gruber saw no reason to hide the fact.

“You are right,” he admitted. “What do you want for them?”

This was obviously what Zex had been waiting for.

“If you’re thinking about ships, weapons and resources, perish the thought,” Zex proudly declared. “All my material wishes have already been granted.”

Zex obviously wanted Gruber to be the next to speak.

“Everybody wants something,” Gruber said.

Zex gave a girlish giggle and looked around as if to check that no outsiders were around.

“Do you believe in love at first sight, Mr. Gruber?” Zex asked, sounding awfully sincere.

Gruber was always prepared for stupid questions. The thing was that if the question contained options, you immediately chose one at random and answered so that the conversation could move on.

“Yes,” he answered, hoping that he wasn’t the target of Zex’s affection.

“\*Tee-hee-hee\*, how delightful,” Zex commented. “Then I’m sure you understand that after I set my eye on this one specific **person**, that **person** has been the only thing on my mind. I would give **anything** to be with that **person**, even the Shofixti maidens.”

“Who is this lucky person?” Gruber asked, still hoping that it wasn’t him, but now he was a bit more worried.

Zex giggled some more.

“Oh, I don’t dare say the name out loud,” Zex insisted.

Then the legendary admiral looked around again and seemed to make up its mind about something.

“I’ll whisper it to you,” Zex said and approached Gruber.

*“Absolutely not!”* Zelnick declared over the radio.

“Sir, please relax,” Gruber calmed down the captain. “Nobody expects you to surrender yourself to Admiral Zex. I’m just doing my duty reporting the situation.”

*“There has to be something else,”* Zelnick insisted. *“Ask the admiral. I’m sure Zex’s collection is still missing a unicorn or something.”*

It was worth a shot so Gruber asked Zex, after relaying Zelnick’s refusal.

“A creature of the legends?” Zex repeated. “Hee-hee, what an interesting proposal... There **is** one gorgeous animal which I do not yet possess. If you were to deliver that creature to me, I would definitely give you the Shofixti maidens.”

Something fishy was going on, Gruber thought. Zex didn’t react at all to being turned down by his *loved one*. Surely Zex didn’t expect Zelnick to agree to the proposal, but the admiral was still way too cheerful.

“What creature are you talking about?” Gruber cautiously asked.

“Obviously I have never seen it,” Zex replied and was suddenly holding a small piece of white crystal, “but I have studied it thoroughly from an ancient wildlife handbook, written millennia ago by some unknown alien author.”

Zex’s motions made it evident that the handbook either was inside the crystal or was the crystal.

“I will give you a quick presentation of what I know of the creature,” Zex continued. “Follow me please.”

They were led back to the elevator, one floor up and through a narrow corridor where there were cages on both sides, like in a kennel. All the cages were empty. At the end of the corridor there was an important looking door through which they entered a large room.

The room felt comfortable. A gentle natural light pushed through windows of different shapes in the ceiling. Several types of armchairs were laid out in groups. One wall was completely covered behind a dark red curtain. In one corner there were ten ordinary looking chairs in a circular

formation. Somehow the room seemed a bit retro in human fashion, but fashion was only for those with no style, and Zex obviously had style.

“Feel free to take a look around and make yourselves comfortable,” Zex suggested. “I will set up the presentation over here.”

The admiral entered the ring of chairs and started tinkering with some kind of a device. Gruber observed Zex for a while and took note how completely the admiral’s attention seemed to be on the device. If they wanted to steal something without Zex noticing it, this was the time. Unfortunately, Gruber saw no reason to steal anything at the moment.

Instead, he saw a small gap in the curtains covering one of the walls. He was too curious not to look behind the curtain. He pulled the curtain slightly, but saw no wall – only darkness. The room they were in was obviously a lot larger than it appeared and some other section was separated by the curtain. Gruber tried to listen, but the dark side of the room was quiet.

He turned around to see what Zex was doing, and indeed the admiral was still tinkering with the strange device. Gruber’s curiosity was unnoticed at the moment.

Then he heard that something started to hum in the darkness. He turned back to the darkness and saw something so absurd that he immediately made up his mind: When he would tell someone about this, he would say that he couldn’t believe his eyes. But since that was such a cliché and he didn’t like clichés, he actually did believe.

There was a retro Coca-Cola™ vending machine in the middle of the darkness.

Gruber took a step back and checked who was nearest. Witherspoon was standing about two meters away from him, checking out a lamp that looked like it belonged to a middle class family in North America in the 1950’s. Gruber got her

attention and asked her to look through the gap in the curtains.

“What? I don’t believe it!” she unsurprisingly remarked and took an involuntary reaction step into the darkness.

Gruber suddenly remembered the earlier discussion about traps and reached out to stop Witherspoon. He took out a flashlight and checked the area. He was surprised to see large metal bars just a meter or so in front of them. There were also some objects behind the bars.

After a few seconds he had a pretty good idea of the big picture. There was a huge cage behind the curtains. It was roughly the same size as the room they were now in. Inside the cage there were swings, a treadmill and the Coca-Cola™ machine.

“Alright, please gather around here,” Zex announced just then and dimmed the lights before Gruber had a chance to discuss their findings with Witherspoon or anyone else.

Gruber decided it would be best to see what Zex was planning to show them before making a point about what was behind the curtain. He was keeping a close eye on the admiral now, though. He also wondered why Zelnick hadn’t said anything over the radio in a while.

The material Zex showed them was unpleasant. There was an animated version of the legendary beast so now they had at least some idea what it looked like, but other than that there was little information. According to some old fairy tale, the beast lived in yellow light in the constellation *Long, thin creature that has swallowed the huge beast*, whatever that meant.

Most of the footage felt like a Mr. Universe competition as the animated creature was doing tricks and poses. Zex seemed to be enjoying the show, based on the fact that the admiral’s tongue was hanging out.

After a while the show came to an end and the lights were turned back on. Unfortunately, Gruber then realized that something was constraining his movements.

“Thank you for your participation,” Zex said.

Gruber noticed that his entire team was tied up. Some kind of thin wires had come out of the chairs and entangled them.

There was a series of groans and grunts.

“What’s the big idea?” Belov demanded.

Zex walked behind Cuvelier and stripped him of his weapons.

“Do not worry,” Zex assured. “I will release you as soon as I have gathered your weapons.”

Zex picked up weapons from everyone one by one. Gruber made a great but futile effort to break himself loose and it seemed that everyone else was doing the same.

“Why?” Gruber asked after Zex had picked up the weapon from Keller who was the last in line.

“A change of plans, I’m afraid,” Zex declared. “Regrettable, but necessary. My collection could never be complete without you humans, but you, like many other aliens I have here, won’t stay here willingly.”

Zex walked towards the only door in the room.

“I’m sure you’ll find your *quarters* rather pleasant,” the admiral continued. “I have made great improvements since the previous cage I had prepared for your species.”

Zex opened the door and gave a final announcement:

“I’m sure you understand that I prefer owning pairs of males and females, so four of you are obsolete. In time we will come up with a fun game to decide who I dispose of.”

Then Zex closed the door and at the same time the wires holding them retracted back inside the chairs.

Gruber immediately tried to report to Zelnick, but the radio was completely silent. There was zero signal. He could



just as well try to contact the Vindicator by waving his hands.

There was a rising panic in the air. Many of the crew members said and did unnecessary things. It was understandable, as they had just become a part of the collection of some alien pervert, but now was the time for rational thought.

“Everyone quiet down,” Gruber ordered before everyone was lost in the panic.

At least Gruber had had training for a situation somewhat like this. He remembered a set of process diagrams that provided the arguably optimal way of handling any surprising situation. Each of the process flows started with *Keep calm and analyze the situation.*

Then a hologram of Zex was suddenly displayed in the middle of the room.

*“I wish to formally welcome you to your new home,”* the hologram said. *“There is no need to be ashamed; you are not the first creatures to walk into their containment areas voluntarily... You have probably noticed that you cannot communicate to your comrades outside. This is an exquisite feature of your cell, so do not blame your transmitters.”*

Everyone seemed to check their radios at this point.

*“I will give you more orienteering material in a short while. In the meantime, feel free to explore your quarters. You are allowed to play with whatever toys you can find.”*

The hologram disappeared as suddenly as it had appeared.

Belov was already banging the door and Cuvelier was with him, shouting something in French through a small hatch in the door.

“They only understand English,” Hawthorne reminded him, but Cuvelier’s message was probably not that important anyway.

“Now what?” Witherspoon asked Gruber.

Gruber looked at the door, then at the windows in the ceiling and then at the curtains covering the cage before replying.

“Now we figure out how to bust ourselves out of here.”

## CHAPTER 15

# PRISON BREAK

**November 14<sup>th</sup> 2155, Alpha Cerenkov, 422.1 : 198.6**

Every prisoner of war had one objective: escape. If one prisoner got away while all others were executed, it was a victory. Now all prisoners of the New Alliance of Free Stars were in a huddle, contemplating their situation and planning a perfect escape.

“We must assume,” Gruber began, “that the door is the only exit. Therefore our goal is to get the door open. After that we have to improvise.”

“Improvise our way to the shuttle,” Belov continued.

“Right,” Gruber agreed. “But if we have a chance to—” he stopped at mid-sentence as he just realized something obvious.

“Well, anyway, joke’s on them,” Maria Hawthorne said. “I can’t have children.”

“And we must also assume,” Gruber continued, preventing any more unnecessary pieces of information from leaking, “that they can see and hear everything we do.”

Everyone fell completely silent at once.

“So to sum it up,” Belov said after a while, “we have to break out of a prison, designed just for us, without any tools and without talking to each other?”

“And the captain doesn’t even know what has happened to us,” Cuvelier added. “The Vux might even be attacking them as we speak.”

“You are both right,” Gruber said, “but I’m sure our fleet can handle itself. We should just focus on our own situation.”

“Can anyone of you speak Japanese?” Shoji suddenly asked.

Gruber immediately realized what he was after.

“That’s right!” he joined Shoji on the thought. “We’re safe if we use any other language! Everybody, one at a time, what languages do you speak?”

Everyone named a few languages one at a time, except for Witherspoon, who could only speak English. The team then formed up in a web so that everyone could understand everyone after some number of translations – except Witherspoon, who would have to interpret expressions and pitches of voice or learn a new language really quickly.

Gruber, Keller and Robinson were the German-speaking core. Robinson translated German to Japanese for Shoji. Keller translated German to Russian for Rigby, Belov and Kilgore. Kilgore translated Russian to French for Cuvelier. Rigby translated Russian to Spanish for Hawthorne.

The situation was somewhat similar to a game Gruber remembered playing when he was a kid. In that game you passed on a complicated message in a chain of people by whispering it to the next player. The difference now was that instead of whispering you had to translate – and Robinson, for example, was not fluent in Japanese.

It was time to test the chain. Shoji said something in Japanese to Robinson.

<<Um...>> Robinson searched for German words. <<Soldier’s light er... turns blue when, uh... he is drunk.>>

So far Gruber was not impressed. Keller then said something in Russian, and afterwards Rigby said something to Hawthorne in Spanish.

“Alright, in English now,” Gruber decided.

“I said,” Shoji began, “Green light for drunk admiral.”

“What the **hell** does that mean?” Belov criticized.

“You said it could be anything,” Shoji defended himself.

“Alright, alright,” Gruber said to bring back order. “Hawthorne, what message did you get?”

Hawthorne gave a weird look.

“Blue man’s lantern is blue,” she said.

They quickly decided to keep communications minimal all together. Gruber then fully opened the curtains and showed everyone the cage he and Witherspoon had already found. The cage had very old-school vertical bars on every side. The space between the bars was quite wide, but still too narrow for anyone to squeeze through – not that they had any reason to enter the cage.

Suddenly Zex appeared on the hologram again.

*“I must say I’m a little ashamed of that old cell. I designed it a long time ago and back then I thought you were a much more primitive race. Luckily I acquired access to this network-thing of yours during the war and then I was able to learn so much more about you! Aah... the memories...”*

Everyone gathered around the hologram to listen.

*“I am quite confident that I was able to replicate your famous refreshment drink accurately. That machine in the cage was supposed to keep my human visitors happy. Unfortunately I forgot to leave the cage door open. If you will play nice I will let you have a taste in a few weeks. But now, if you’ll excuse me, I have some urgent matters to attend. Bye-bye.”*

Witherspoon threw her water bottle at the hologram just as the image disappeared. The bottle was open and a stream of water gushed out as it flew. The bottle hit the wall on a spot where there was some kind of a control panel. Upon impact there were sparks, the sound of a short circuit, and a set of lights went off in the room.

“I didn’t throw it that hard, did I?” Witherspoon asked.

Gruber and Rigby examined the broken panel. Gruber poured some water from his own bottle on another part of the panel and there was a similar response – apparent short circuit and the sound of a fan stopping.

<<This is interesting,>> he said to Rigby in German. <<Their technology looks extremely vulnerable to conductive liquids.>>

They both looked at the door. To their disappointment there was nothing that resembled a control panel there. Odds were that if there was a control panel to the door it was on the other side. They tried to locate it by peeking through the hatch in the door, but the hatch was so small that they only saw the corridor through which they came.

Gruber tried really hard to remember the scene when they entered the room. How did Zex open the door? Gruber tried and tried, but had to finally admit that he hadn’t paid attention to how the door was opened. And now he had a headache. He asked Rigby if he remembered.

<<Sorry, no,>> Rigby apologized, <<but I do remember that Zex was walking on the right side all the time. If there is some kind of a control device to this door, it must be over there.>>

He pointed left from where they were standing.

Gruber felt a sense of desperation as he thought how difficult this would be to translate to everybody.

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This time luck was on their side. Keller, who knew German, had been right next to Zex as the admiral had placed its hand-equivalent on some glowing surface to open the door. The control panel was indeed on the right side of the door, on the same wall as the door and about a meter away. There was a small hollow in the wall where the door was so they did not have a clear shot at the control panel.

<<There's no way we can pour water around a corner like that,>> Rigby stated the obvious. <<We can't throw the bottle either since the hatch in the door is so small.>>

Rigby looked at Gruber's arms.

<<Your arm would never fit through the hatch,>> he continued. <<I'm sure neither would mine. Or if it did, it would get stuck.>>

<<Who has the thinnest arms?>> Gruber asked and motioned everyone to start translating.

...

Who else would it be than Witherspoon, who had no idea what was happening. And to delight them even more, she was so short that she didn't reach the hatch properly. Gruber gave her a little boost and then they were able to confirm that her hand indeed fit.

The task at hand could probably be explained to Witherspoon rather easily with motions and gestures, but that would again most likely reveal their plan to the Vux as well. They had to rely on Witherspoon realizing it on her own. She was a clever woman so Gruber wasn't that worried. However he was rather sure that the task was impossible. And what's more, they had only ten water bottles.

Soon Witherspoon took one bottle, barely fit it through the hatch with her arm and tried to nudge it towards the supposed location of the panel. There was a sound as the bottle hit the floor, but that was all. The door remained closed. On that note, Gruber tried to open the door, since the first rule of breaking in was to always check if the front door was open. This time, unfortunately, the door was locked.

Witherspoon made a universal hand gesture which clearly indicated that whatever she was doing was impossible. Gruber acknowledged the gesture and started thinking aloud with Rigby and Keller.

<<We need some kind of an extension rod,>> he said.

Keller immediately shook her head.

<<A single straight rod won't help us,>> she shot down the idea. <<It might work if it was curved in just the right angle.>>

They looked around the room. Gruber couldn't imagine any piece of furniture becoming a curved rod. He walked to the other side of the room and put his hands on the bars of the cage. He casually thought that there were chains in the swings, lots of perfect rods in the treadmill and possibly lots of bottles in the vending machine. If only they could get inside the cage...

Gruber called the team together again and asked if anyone could figure out a way to get inside the cage. Cuvelier immediately said something in French, which Kilgore translated to Russian and Keller to German:

<<If we had a rope, we could bend the bars.>>

Belov suddenly unzipped his uniform and took out a rather large coil of rope from underneath. He then said something in Russian, which Keller translated to German:

<<You always need rope in difficult situations.>>

There was laughter.

The only thing holding Gruber's triumph back was the fact that they still needed a rod or something as a lever for the rope. They hadn't really gotten anywhere, but regardless of that, Belov started knotting the rope around two bars and the rest of them started trashing the room, trying to find anything that could work as a lever.

*Act like you got a purpose*, Gruber thought as he tried to tear off the cloth from an arm chair with his bare hands. *At least morale is high at the moment.*

Some minutes later Hawthorne triumphantly declared something in Spanish while holding a thin metal object in her hand. Apparently it had been some kind of a protective



casing where the wall met the floor. The object looked like it should do the trick.

Hatwhorne handed the metal object to Keller. She put one foot over it and tried to bend it, almost as though she was trying to load a crossbow, to no avail. Gruber then took it and after a while of applying brute force to it he had to admit that they could never bend it by hand. But on the bright side, it should work all the better as a lever for the rope.

Gruber handed the object to Belov who combined it with the rope. Belov then turned the lever several times until it started to get difficult. Gruber could see the bars bending slightly and helped Belov turn a few more rounds. A human of reasonable proportions\* could now fit through the gap. They carefully released the tension, but the gap in the bars remained.

With great pride Belov was the first to go inside. Gruber took a moment to appreciate the great effort they had put into breaking into a cage rather than out.

After the moment was over he joined Belov at the Coca-Cola™ machine. There was a very small and simple display that could only show a few letters at a time. The text *ice cold drinks* was scrolling on it. There were several buttons where you could choose which drink to take, but they were all labeled Coca-Cola™. Gruber pushed the top button.

Nothing came out of the machine. Instead, for a short moment, the display showed 2.50.

Belov said something in Russian and made a gesture that could be interpreted as handling money. Gruber took a closer look and indeed there was a coin slot in the machine. It was unlikely that anyone in his team was carrying cash, since the use of physical money had ended some 100 years ago.

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\* not Dave

Gruber gently tapped the front of the machine with his fist a few times, thinking how they had solved a ridiculous problem with ridiculous equipment only to face another ridiculous problem. He then noticed that Belov wasn't with him anymore. He turned around and saw him approaching while holding the universal key.

Gruber stepped aside and Belov took a few swings at the machine with the metal object they had used to bend the bars. An unpleasant clanging sound echoed in the room. After a little bit of pounding the machine gave up, and its front panel came loose. Gruber moved the panel aside and chuckled at the sight. There was indeed Coca-Cola™ inside the machine – in original glass bottles, which were quite possibly valuable collector's items.

Rigby joined them at the machine and took one bottle in his hand.

<<You know, I just got an idea,>> he said and took a breath mint from his pocket.

After some Boy Scout engineering, they were all at the door again. They had armed themselves with everything they found in the cage – including the chains from the swings, metal poles from the treadmill and glass shards from the vending machine. Witherspoon was holding a metal rod that had an unopened Coca-Cola™ bottle strapped to its other end with pieces of cloth torn from the furniture.

Cuvelier lay on his stomach in front of the door and Witherspoon was standing on top of him so she could reach the hatch. She pushed the rod through the hatch bottle end first and then pushed her hand through as well. The tricky part was now to open the bottle without spilling too much of the contents and dropping one of Rigby's Sotnem-brand breath mints into the bottle while pointing the bottle at the door's control panel – all with one hand.

The hatch was so small that Gruber and the others could not see at all how Witherspoon was doing. She made a lot of funny faces one makes when one is trying very hard to concentrate.

“I think I got it,” she said after a while.

Immediately after that there was a loud gushing sound, followed by the sound of liquid dropping on the floor.

There was also a *clack* from the lock on the door.

Gruber tried to push the door and it actually opened. It was the silliest moment of his life. For a second the only thing he wanted was to tell this story to someone, anyone and everyone. Too bad they still had to fight their way out of an alien complex armed with only melee weapons. It kind of ruined the moment.

Gruber soon snapped back to reality and took command. Most of the team had had very little combat training, and the little they did, involved using firearms. Then he remembered that they might be able to contact the Vindicator again.

“Captain, do you copy?” he said to the radio.

“*Gruber, what the hell, man?*” he heard Zelnick’s voice. “*We thought you were all dead. What happened?*”

“It was a trap,” he put it simply. “We were captured and put in a radio-shielded room. We just managed to break out. Nobody seems to have spotted us yet, but they took our weapons.”

“*We had to call back the shuttle,*” Zelnick explained. “*Can you make it back to the landing bay?*”

“I don’t know yet, but that’s what we’re trying to do,” Gruber replied. “And we confirmed that the Shofixti females are here and alive. There are 12 of them in cryogenic tanks.”

Everyone was out of the room now. They took positions next to the walls so that they couldn’t be seen from the main hallway.

“*Why did they show you the Shofixti if they were going to capture you?*” Zelnick justifiably asked.

Gruber thought about it for a moment. As he did, he also wondered why it was so quiet. It felt like there was nobody except them in the whole floor.

“Zex is a collector,” he answered to Zelnick. “Collectors want to show off their collections.”

He motioned the team to keep still and silent for a while.

*“You do whatever it takes to get to the landing bay,”* Zelnick ordered. *“We’ll send a shuttle to pick you up as soon as we know it can land.”*

“Roger that,” Gruber copied. “I’ll keep you posted. Out.”

They had two possibilities now: Backtrack their way back to the landing bay or take what was behind door number two. The door in question was right next to them, very close to the door they had just broken through.

“Did you notice,” Witherspoon began, “that Zex was talking to us via the hologram only seconds after leaving the room with our weapons? He couldn’t have gone far. I bet he went through that door.”

Belov was standing next to the door.

“Our weapons might still be there,” he continued the thought and started examining the door.

Gruber had no objections. Witherspoon’s logic was sound. They most likely needed weapons to get to the landing bay so they should check every possibility of finding them.

Belov was already holding an opened Coca-Cola™ bottle over the door console.

“Here goes,” he said and tipped the bottle.

There was the familiar sound of the panel shorting out and a *clack* from the door. Belov then tried to push the door and it opened. Belov peeked through the doorway, motioned that it was safe and then entered the room, followed by Gruber.

It was a weird room. The only piece of furniture was a desk of sorts in the center of the room. Tens of small

monitors were integrated into the desk and a few bigger ones were mounted on the walls. But what really stood out were the countless printed photographs that decorated the walls – and most importantly, all their weapons lying in an unorganized pile in one corner.

They all quickly grabbed their weapons and checked that they were operational. Then Gruber had time to pay closer attention to the photographs, which all seemed to portray humans. Gruber immediately recognized a few – Jason MacBride, Albert Einstein and one basketball player whose name he couldn't remember. Then he noticed a few pictures on the floor. There was one bigger picture above them, which had probably recently replaced the ones now on the floor. The big picture portrayed Zelnick and Zex together – closely. Zelnick's picture was obviously captured from their communications link earlier and Zex was even more obviously added into the picture afterwards. Gruber took the image down, folded it, and stuck it in his pocket for later use.

“Check this out,” Shoji then announced. He was tinkering with the screens on the desk. “We can see the whole base from here.”

Indeed the small monitors showed many different areas of the base. Shoji played with them some more and soon he was able to rotate the cameras. While Shoji was doing his thing, Gruber examined the bigger monitors more closely. They all seemed to display the room they had just broken out of.

“There doesn't seem to be anyone in this entire floor right now,” Shoji soon declared. “There's a big crowd at the hangar. They seem to be boarding their ships.”

“There are lots of guards at the landing bay,” Witherspoon noted, looking over Shoji's shoulder.

Gruber also walked behind Shoji who was rapidly changing images on the screens. It looked like they would have a hard time getting to the landing bay.

“What do we have here?” Shoji suddenly said and pointed at one particular screen.

The monitor displayed the area where the Shofixti were. There was one Vux crouching behind the cryogenic tanks, obviously doing something to them. Judging by the robes, the individual had to be Admiral Zex.

“There doesn’t seem to be anyone else in that area,” Shoji observed.

Gruber got an idea and immediately shared it with the others: If they took Zex as a hostage, they might be able to negotiate their way out of there. They had the floor to themselves at the moment, but there was no telling how long that would last, so they had to move out right away.

“Lead the way, sir,” Belov encouraged Gruber and motioned that he was ready to shoot enemies.

The only problem was that Gruber was unsure where to go. When Zex had showed the Shofixti to them, they had taken the elevator to an unknown floor which was probably just below their current floor. Gruber remembered that the elevator controls were similar to the door controls, but pouring liquid on them would probably not help this time.

“Shoji, is there a stairway?” Gruber asked.

Shoji looked for a while.

“It looks like there is – something like that,” he replied, leaving Gruber guessing what could be something ‘like a stairway’. “It’s right next to the elevator we used.”

“Great, let’s go,” Gruber ordered. “Shoji, you stay here and give me a call if the enemy is about to surprise us. Robinson, you stay with him and stand guard.”

Gruber carefully led the team through the empty corridors towards the stairway-of-sorts. Shoji occasionally

reported that the course was clear. They soon reached the room where the elevator was and indeed right next to it there was another doorway. Gruber poured some Coca-Cola™ on the controls and the door opened. Then Gruber realized why the stairway couldn't be called a stairway.

It looked like a slide – quite a steep one. It went several stories up and only one story down, but humans could only go down with it.

*\*zzzt\** “If you go down, you’ll end up where Zex is,” Shoji instructed over the radio. “The hangar and the landing bay seem to be on the top floor.” *\*zzttt\**

Gruber felt a bit uncomfortable going down when their ultimate goal was to get out, but he couldn't see any alternative. He carefully sat down and pushed himself over the edge of the platform to the slide.

After a few seconds of unpleasant sliding on the rough surface, Gruber was at the bottom and signaled the others to follow him.

*\*zzzt\** “There’s one room between you and Zex,” *\*zzttt\** Shoji reported, but Gruber knew that already, assuming that they ended up next to the elevator.

After everyone had slid down, they quickly secured the next room and took positions behind the door to the hall where Zex and the Shofixti were.

“Remember, we need him alive,” Gruber reminded everyone. “Don’t shoot unless it is absolutely necessary. Once we open the doors Keller, Cuvelier and I will secure Zex. The rest of you secure the area. Ready?”

Everyone was ready. Gruber motioned that Rigby could unlock the door the human way. Rigby did his thing, there was a *clack* from the door and Gruber pushed it open.

*\*zztt\** “Zex suddenly jumped up,” Shoji reported. “He must have heard you coming.” *\*zztt\**

The Shofixti weren't far from the door, but they weren't visible from the door either. They were around one corner,

some 20 meters away from their current position. Gruber started running, followed by Keller and Cuvelier.

*\*zzzt\* "He dashed in the opposite direction!" \*zzzztt\**

It wasn't a long run, but it seemed unnecessarily long, as they were in quite a hurry. If Zex got away, they were as good as captured again.

"Freeze!" Gruber shouted from behind the corner before even getting into position.

They were just in time. Zex was almost at the other end of the corridor, but immediately froze as was ordered. The admiral raised both its arm-equivalents in the air.

"Don't move!" Gruber repeated and approached Zex, pointing his gun at the admiral.

Zex turned around. Usually one could not read alien facial expressions, but Zex's face clearly showed surprise.

"I am astonished," Zex said in a commending tone. "I never expected you to break out so soon."

Cuvelier and Keller rushed to Zex's side and took control of its tentacleish limbs. Judging by Keller's face the skin of the Vux felt unpleasant.

"Remarkable," Zex said as its limbs were tied up. "Truly remarkable."

Gruber holstered his weapon.

"I'm sure you understand the situation," he said to Zex. "We want out of here and you are going to help us do that. If you don't, you die."

"But of course," Zex immediately replied. "My dear human, I'm sure you don't believe me, but I **want** you to escape."

Gruber was expecting Zex to start smooth-talking right away. Their host had already betrayed them once. The credibility of a proven liar was equivalent to someone selling hololenses from the trunk of a car at a highway rest stop.

"You are right," Gruber put it plainly.

The rest of the team caught up with them.



“There are too many guards at the landing bay,” Gruber said to Zex. “What can you do about that?”

Zex’s one big eye was wide open. It seemed as if the admiral was enjoying the situation, which worried Gruber.

“Landing bay?” Zex repeated. “Oh no, we will take my personal Intruder.”

“We?” Gruber grabbed the word.

“You can’t get away without me,” Zex explained. “My crew will never let your shuttle land, and you need me to pilot the ship.”

The last part was unquestionable. If they were to steal a Vux ship, they needed a Vux to fly it.

“And you obviously can’t fit these into your shuttle,” Zex continued, referring to the cryogenic tanks containing the Shofixti.

That was also true. If Gruber didn’t do something, Zex would take control of the situation very quickly.

“What were you doing here?” he asked, hoping that Zex wouldn’t have a snappy comeback.

“I was preparing these tanks so we could take them with us,” was Zex’s snappy comeback. “They are ready now.”

Gruber started to feel like he and his team were the hostages. He lost his composure and pointed his gun at Zex again.

“Why are you so eager to help us?” he asked.

Zex was unshaken.

“I assure you that pointing a gun at me is unnecessary,” the admiral replied. “If I don’t escape with you now, I’m as good as dead anyway. I can tell you all about it once we’re out of here, but now we have to move. If my countrymen find out that you have escaped, they will make sure that nobody gets into my ship.”

Zex tried to walk past Gruber, but Gruber put his arm in front of the admiral.

“Give us the short version now,” he demanded.

Zex sighed.

“I have been grounded here for years,” Zex quickly explained. “Recently the high council decided that I, with my open-minded lifestyle, am too dangerous alive after all, so they came up with all kinds of false accusations and summoned me to court. A squad is supposed to arrive any day now to pick me up, although I believe they would just shoot me on sight and tell the people I resisted arrest.”

*Don't trust him, don't trust him, don't trust him,* Gruber had to keep repeating to himself.

“So why would you go through all that trouble to imprison us?” Witherspoon asked.

The question was on Gruber's mind as well.

“I **had** to,” Zex assured them. “If I hadn't, my countrymen would have killed you. I was planning to let you escape when the timing was right, but I never imagined you would escape by yourselves – and with such efficiency. You really are a resourceful species.”

*Don't trust him, don't trust him, don't trust him...*

“Fine,” Gruber said, “we'll board your Intruder. But you are our hostage. If anything goes wrong, we will kill you.”

Zex sighed again.

“I am worthless as a hostage,” Zex explained really slowly. “Most of my crew want **me** dead almost as much as they want **you** dead. I assure you, there will be resistance. We cannot get into my Intruder without firing a few shots.”

“Where is this ship of yours?” Witherspoon asked.

“It's in the hangar with all the other ships,” Zex replied. “Mine is a bit modified so you can easily tell it apart. It's also closest to the cargo elevator so we don't have to cover that much open ground.”

Gruber forgot to repeat the phrase in his mind.

“The cargo elevator is right around the corner,” Zex continued. “We can take all these tanks with us and get up to the hangar before my crew notices anything.”

Zex looked anxiously at Gruber, who reluctantly admitted that their only chance was to trust Zex.

“Let’s move,” Gruber ordered. “Everybody grab a tank.”

It didn’t take long until all the cryogenic tanks were in the elevator, since they were designed to be easily moved around. Shoji and Robinson had also joined the others without incident. Zex appeared to do its best describing what to expect when the elevator reached the hangar floor. Zex also assured them that the entryway to the ship would be open. The only problem was that there was some 50 meters of open hangar between the entryway and the elevator. Their advantage was that there was nothing out of the ordinary about the cargo elevator being in use, so they were safe until someone actually spotted them.

They were as ready as they’d ever be. Gruber told Zex to activate the elevator and the admiral seemed to obey.

The giant double doors of the cargo elevator closed very slowly and as they did Gruber spotted strange marks on them as if made by huge claws. There was also a hint of red here and there. Judging by the size of the elevator, Zex had brought or at least had planned on bringing some impressive creatures here. Gruber wondered for a second whether a Tyrannosaurus could fit inside.

The doors finally closed all the way and the elevator started moving. There was little reference to tell how fast it was going, but at least it was moving upwards. Zelnick tried to motivate them over the radio, saying that if they all died, the Vindicator would do the Hellbore Cannon’s first surface bombardment test. He also assured them that the entire crew was listening to the radio communications.

There were ten humans, Zex and 12 cryogenic tanks. One person could easily transport two tanks at once, but then they couldn’t use their weapons. They had decided that Shoji, Cuvelier and Hawthorne would each take two tanks. Gruber

was in charge of Zex and needed two hands for it. All the rest of them each took one tank. Zex had volunteered to take two tanks, but he was refused the honor.

The elevator stopped moving. Gruber positioned Zex in front right at the center so that when the doors opened, Zex was the first thing anyone saw.

The doors began to slowly move out of the way. Gruber immediately saw that Zex had at least brought them to the correct floor. He was half expecting a platoon of enemies pointing their guns at the opening doors, but to his pleasant surprise, there was no such thing. Looking from behind Zex's *shoulder* he could see one Intruder-class ship quite close to them, its rear end towards the elevator, entry ramp lowered, just as Zex had promised.

The hangar was a giant artificial cave, stretching out several hundred meters before them, and the faint sunlight streaming in through its mouth gave the impression of the last light of the day. Zex's ship was close to the left wall, so all enemies were probably to the right. At least they didn't have to step into crossfire.

There was nobody between them and the target ship. Gruber peeked to the right and saw two Vux about 20 meters away. They were casually looking at the hangar so at least the team hadn't been spotted yet, but there was no way to get into the ship without at least these enemies noticing.

There was plenty of space between the doors now. Waiting could only make the situation worse.

"Let's move," Gruber ordered. "Don't shoot until we are spotted."

With that said, Gruber dashed towards the ship, holding Zex in front of him as a shield. Just then he realized what a bad idea that was, since if Zex died there would be nobody left to fly the ship. He didn't have time to do anything about it though, so he just focused on running forward and taking note when they were spotted.

The first few seconds felt promising. Nobody had looked their way yet. Gruber took a quick glimpse backwards and saw that the whole team was following him closely. And then shots were fired.

Gruber sensed a gush of air on his face, indicating a very close miss. He instinctively positioned Zex between him and the assumed direction of the shot and fired a snap shot at some random Vux he saw in the distance. From the corner of his eye he could see the two Vux he had spotted earlier pulling out their guns, and being shot dead right away.

He took half a second to get the big picture of the hangar. There were small teams of Vux here and there, everyone gradually realizing that there was something unusual happening.

More shots were fired at them. Several shots missed and hit the wall behind them, but at least one shot hit one of the cryogenic tanks. Gruber continued running, pushing Zex in front of him. The distance to the ship seemed a lot longer than it did just a few seconds ago. He didn't have time to take aimed shots.

Most of the team had run faster than Gruber and were now ahead of him, throwing random shots towards the enemy. He took a quick glimpse back again and saw that Belov hadn't gotten far and was taking aimed shots using the tank as cover.

The shooting was getting intense. Gruber noticed one Vux in a particularly dangerous position taking aim. He had to stop to take that enemy down with an aimed shot, but the enemy managed to get one shot in before him.

Witherspoon screamed in agony in front of Gruber and fell down. Gruber dashed towards her, but before he could help her, Zex had already put its limbs under her and lifted her up as easily as one would lift an empty bag. Not having time to think it over, Gruber took the tank Witherspoon had been in charge of.

Just then Gruber felt an incredible sensation of pain in his right arm, just below the elbow, and his weapon fell to the floor. He didn't have time to stop and pick it up. Then he saw Kilgore slump to the floor in a way that made it obvious he was beyond saving.

Gruber tried to take Kilgore's tank as well, but his right arm didn't move as it was supposed to. He then realized that there was a chunk missing from it.

He felt like the next few seconds were in slow motion. Looking forward he saw that the first ones had reached the ship. Zex was way ahead of him now, still carrying Witherspoon. He saw Zex taking a quick glimpse back as well and their eyes\* met. Looking backward he saw that Belov was still pinned down behind the tank in the same spot. Looking at the enemies he saw that some of them were boarding their ships.

One shot hit the tank Gruber was pushing, and that made his time flow with normal speed again. Those of the team that had reached the ship were now giving cover fire from good positions. Gruber concentrated on running the rest of the way as fast as he could and soon he too reached cover behind the ship's entry ramp.

He looked back and saw Kilgore's body next to one tank. There were two separate trails of blood starting from about half way to the elevator. He checked his arm and immediately realized that he was responsible for the other trail. He hoped that someone would tell him that he was bleeding so he could respond with the classic *I don't have time to bleed*. He got no such attention though. Instead Hawthorne took the tank Gruber had brought and pushed it inside the ship. Belov still hadn't moved and was now under heavy fire. The tank he had looked badly damaged.

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\* All three of them.

Gruber couldn't think of anything clever. He had had some basic combat training, but nothing too tactical. He wanted to rescue Belov, but had no idea how to do it. And what's more, someone was now shouting something in his ear. *Who would bother me at a time like this? Haven't they any common sense?*

"Sir! Get inside the ship! Sir!"

Rigby was shaking him from the shoulders.

"Sir, you are wounded! You cannot do anything! Sir!"

Gruber grasped the situation again and realized the sense in what Rigby was saying. He took one last look at Belov and cursed the difficulty of leaving someone behind. They had to take off right away. Waiting for Belov would put everyone in danger.

And then he felt a sense of relief as Belov was hit in the head. *Great, now we can leave without any regrets.* Then he realized what he had just thought and mentally kicked himself in the butt. *I'm seeing Vargas right away when we get back to the Vindicator.*

He dashed up the entry ramp, followed by Keller, Robinson and Rigby who had been giving most of the cover fire. As soon as they had all reached the inside of the ship, the entry ramp closed. Zex was probably already in control.

"Sir, you're bleeding," Witherspoon commented with a hole in her thigh.

It was too late now, Gruber thought.

"*Gruber, report, dammit!*" he suddenly heard Zelnick's voice over the radio.

He wondered how long the captain had been demanding an update. He then reported two dead and at least two wounded.

"*What about the Shofixti?*" Zelnick asked.

Gruber realized he had forgotten the Shofixti entirely. As he started counting the cryogenic tanks he felt the ship take off.

There were ten tanks on board. A quick examination revealed that one of them had been shot inoperable and, based on the holes in the tank, the Shofixti inside could not have survived. Two other tanks were in bad shape, but he couldn't say whether the inhabitants were okay. The rest of them were in relatively good condition. He reported seven alive and two unclear.

Then he counted his teammates. He could see Rigby, Witherspoon, Hawthorne, Robinson and Keller. Witherspoon noticed the first officer making a head count and assisted him.

"Cuvelier and Shoji went to the bridge with Zex," she explained.

*\*zzttt\* "That's right," \*zzttt\* Cuvelier said over the radio. \*zzzzt\* "Admiral Zex instructs everyone to strap themselves in as best as they can since we are about to make a quick ascent to orbit." \*zztttt\**

Gruber looked around for something to cling on to. The cryogenic tanks came with a mechanism to latch them firmly to the floor so they wouldn't have to worry about those. Finding nothing better Gruber grasped one of the tanks – with only his left hand.

Then he remembered that the hangar had been full of Vux ships.

"Cuvelier, have we cleared the base already?" he asked over the radio.

*\*zzzzt\* "It appears so, why?" \*zztttt\* Cuvelier responded.*

"I'll tell the captain to bomb the hell out of that place," he said.

Witherspoon gave him a strange look.

"Sir, the place was filled with all kinds of life forms," she reminded. "There were lots of creatures that appeared sentient as well – prisoners like us. If we fire the Hellbore Cannon at the base they will all die by our hand."



Gruber gave it some thought. Witherspoon was of course right, but on the other hand if they fired now, they could destroy a large number of Vux ships before the ships could even take off.

“That is a decision for the captain,” he replied and reported the situation to Zelnick, along with Witherspoon’s concerns.

“*Understood,*” Zelnick plainly responded.

Gruber looked at Witherspoon who looked back at him. Hawthorne was tending to Witherspoon’s bleeding leg and Rigby just came over to Gruber with some bandages. After just a few seconds Cuvelier shouted to the radio.

*\*zzzt\* “A friggin’ large ball of fire just came down from the sky.” \*zzzzt\**

Gruber’s eyes met Witherspoon’s again. He then reached for his belt, grabbed a Coca-Cola™ bottle, opened the cap and tasted home.

## CHAPTER 16

# TIME TO WRITE

**November 14<sup>th</sup> - December 8<sup>th</sup> 2155, away, home, away again**

*November 14<sup>th</sup> 2155: At the medical bay. Dr. Mehul is about to fix my arm and... Screw it. I'll just continue this tomorrow.*

*November 15<sup>th</sup> 2155: Where to begin? From the beginning, I guess...*

*There is now nothing but a big hole in the ground where Zex's menagerie used to be.*

*The wounded, Witherspoon and I, were transferred to the Vindicator right away. Belov's and Kilgore's bodies could obviously not be retrieved.*

*Vargas already visited me here and I'm glad he did. It took me one night's sleep and one psychologist to realize the great emotional stress our latest mission put us all through. I didn't know Belov and Kilgore that well and now I feel like I should have known them better. They were good men.*

*From what I hear the reason we got out with as few casualties as we did was Belov. He gave up on running to the ship and concentrated on defending the rest of us. He made a great sacrifice. When all this is over, I'll set a coil of rope next to his tombstone, no matter how suspicious that might look.*

*There were a few Vux ships in orbit that tried to stop us, but from what I hear the Pkunk Furies took good care of them. Apparently the Furies are very effective against an easily-hated race such as the Vux.*

*All things considered I should see our mission as a great success. We lost two, but rescued at least seven – and an entire species at that – not to mention the valuable prisoner we got... Although I sometimes still feel like we're the prisoners and Zex is pulling the strings behind the curtains. As a precaution, not to show all our cards to Zex, we're flying home without jumping to quasispac.*

*November 16<sup>th</sup> 2155: The folks at the starbase haven't been idle either. We had a lengthy discussion via the ansible before leaving the system.*

*Captain Tanaka was given a heads up on the things to come. He has the ultimate duty – or reward, depending on how you see it – in front of him and he must be in top shape when the time comes. He has ten days to prepare himself.*

*The Arilou have returned from their diplomatic mission at the Druuge central trade world at Zeta Persei. They were able to confirm that the supposed last piece of the Ultron – the Rosy Sphere – was indeed in the possession of the Druuge, but the Druuge were unwilling to part with it at a reasonable price. Apparently slaves are their primary currency, so we might have a hard time bartering.*

*So far our attempts at fixing the Ultron with the Clear Spindle and the Aqua Helix have been futile. The Ultron remains a piece of scrap metal and the two artifacts seem completely unrelated to it. The good news is that neither of the artifacts appear to be mere ornaments.*

*The Aqua Helix is composed of a homogenous super-hard material which rated Mohs-13. Laser scanning revealed that the shape of the helix is perfect. Focused ion and nucleo-magnetic scans on the other hand revealed nothing about the object's interior, probably due to some unknown attributes of the substance. To sum it up, Chu and his pals claimed that the Aqua Helix was definitely built for*

*a purpose, but they didn't know what that purpose was, or who had built it, or when it was built.*

*The Clear Spindle was found to have super-conductive characteristics between 18 and 22 degrees centigrade. It had no clear use or means of activation, but the science team suspected it was of Precursor origin and actually a part of a larger device, whatever that was.\**

*Then there was the rock the Orz had brought – the supposed Taalo mind shield. So far nothing had distinguished it from an ordinary rock, but it was still undergoing tests and Dr. Chu assured he had a good feeling about it.*

*In other, more serious news... The starbase has been attacked several times by the red probes. So far the attacks haven't been too serious, nothing but lonely probes randomly approaching and being blown to bits. The starbase is actually getting a lot of valuable materials from them. But, let's not get carried away and forget that the number of the probes seems to be growing geometrically. Locating their source must be our next objective.*

*November 17<sup>th</sup> 2155: Zex is still cooperating. I can't say whether it's because Zex is willing or because there is constantly a gun to Zex's head. (Zex's pronouns piss me off so I'll just ditch them and use his— ITS name instead.) Zex is piloting the Intruder-class ship to the starbase with us. Zex must know that Zex will be imprisoned upon arrival, so Zex might still try something sneaky. We must not trust Zex, even though Zex's official explanation is very convincing. Here's the long version of Zex's story:*

*Zex's obsession with bizarre alien life-forms was well known amongst the highest ranking Vux, but the general*

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\* Dr. Chu made a very clear point here that the parent device in question was most definitely **not** the pile of junk called the Ultron.

*populace saw Zex only as a godsend savior of the people – a charismatic military leader of unquestionable value. The high council was indeed afraid that if Zex was allowed to return home as a celebrated hero, many would understand and even adopt Zex’s perverted lifestyle. It could have brought an end to the current Vux way of life and greatly diminished the high council’s influence, which was mostly based on upholding hatred and disgust against all other races – most of all humans.*

*The high council had to get rid of Zex, but they understood that they couldn’t simply kill Zex, nor could they put Zex in prison. In both cases there would have been riots of unacceptable magnitude. Instead they decided to put Zex away for a while until things had calmed down and the worst Zex-mania had come to an end. Officially Zex was given a great reward – an entire planet – while in truth Zex was just given a very big cell. The high council allowed Zex to continue expanding the alien collection, thinking that Zex would then be less likely to stage a revolt.*

*It took longer than the high council expected, but at last some 20 years later they considered the timing was right for getting rid of Zex. What they didn’t expect was that Zex had spies close to the council and was prepared to escape. What Zex didn’t expect was the arrival of the Vindicator just as Zex’s own plan was supposed to be put in motion.*

*Zex immediately saw an opportunity. Instead of forcibly breaking out and possibly getting a lot of negative publicity, Zex could get captured by the ones the people hated the most. Zex had prepared a getaway-kit, which was stored in Zex’s own ship. The kit, which was now aboard the Vindicator, contained frozen embryos and complete data on most of the species in the collection. Zex assured us, sounding sincere, that it was the greatest pleasure of Zex’s life to show off the collection to humans just before having to let go of it.*

*So how is getting captured supposed to serve Zex's interests? That Zex hasn't told us yet. It makes me worry to see the one I'm pointing my gun at smiling at me.*

*November 18<sup>th</sup> 2155: In my opinion we are placing too much weight on the word of the Melnorme. We now have two of the three objects they said the Ultron could be repaired with, but at the same time we have made zero progress. I have a hard time believing that the Rosy Sphere can be the key.*

*But of course the captain does not share my lack of faith. If I'm not careful I fall victim to his innocent optimism and start believing that the Rosy Sphere has a slot for the Aqua Helix and the Clear Spindle. Then we'd just insert the modified Rosy Sphere into the Ultron and voilà.*

*November 19<sup>th</sup> 2155: I forgot to mention that I was released from the medical bay three days ago. I now have to wear this stupid metal casing over the wound and wait for the nanobots or whatever to do their thing and make my body repair itself.*

*On another note, I had another session with Vargas, who has been very busy the last few days. We killed countless of alien creatures who were helplessly imprisoned in Zex's menagerie. We might have even wiped out the remaining population of entire species. It hadn't bothered me earlier, but last night it was the only thing I could think about and couldn't sleep.*

*It was one of those moments when I was really glad I wasn't the captain. Zelnick is a young lad who constantly has to make life-or-death decisions in a matter of seconds. And to make it worse, there are those who question his every move. I don't, though. For the record, Captain Zelnick has my complete support. He had to act to protect his ship and its crew. Sadly Witherspoon, for example, doesn't see it like*

*that. In addition to being bitter towards her captain, she suffered worse injuries than I did and we will probably have to replace her once we get to the starbase.*

*Zelnick puts up an admirable front, but I fear he is suffering inside. I just hope he doesn't end up like Yallah Rangoon, the first captain under whom I served. He was one of those legendary tough captains you see in movies and such – those who eat oranges without peeling them. The problem was that it all ended with the war. When he didn't have to fight anymore, he collapsed mentally. I visited him several times over the years at his peaceful and beautiful home in Bengaluru where his daughter, who was also peaceful and beautiful, took good care of him. He never recovered though, at least not before I was assigned to the starbase and lost all communications with the surface.*

*I sincerely hope that Captain Zelnick is attending all his sessions with Vargas.*

*November 20<sup>th</sup> 2155: I had a quick talk with Admiral Zex who assured me that if we hadn't wiped out the base, the Vux would have killed everything within anyway. It made me feel a bit better. I discussed it with Witherspoon, but her opinion didn't change. It might be that she has reached her limit.*

*I also questioned the Thraddash captive again, although it was more like a friendly conversation than an interrogation. He is an amusing fellow, but I get the feeling he knows nothing more that can help us. The folks at the starbase will have to decide what to do with him.*

*November 21<sup>st</sup> 2155: We have a problem with one of the cryogenic tanks – the one that suffered the most damage. We didn't notice it at first, but the tank's fuel cell has leaked and even though we were able to make the tank use Vindicator's power, it was too late. The process has already gone over*

*the point of no return and we have no choice but to try and wake the inhabitant. Dr. Mehul is in charge of the operation. According to him we should expect to see results tomorrow.*

*November 22<sup>nd</sup> 2155: It worked. We now have a young female Shofixti with us. She seems a bit rude and uneducated, high-born even, but I'm sure Captain Tanaka won't mind.*

*November 23<sup>rd</sup> 2155: Nothing important to report. I wonder how Lydia is doing...*

*November 24<sup>th</sup> 2155: We encountered and destroyed one of those red probes near Sol in hyperspace. I hope it was a coincidence and that they're not targeting Sol specifically.*

*November 25<sup>th</sup> 2155: We reached Sol! It's great to be back home.*

*November 25<sup>th</sup> 2155 #2: There was an alarming number of probes at the asteroid belt. Three of them attacked us at once, but posed no real danger. However, if next time it's not three, but 30, we might not get away without a scratch.*

*December 3<sup>rd</sup> 2155: It was fun while it lasted, but we have to take off again. I have been on a vacation, if you could call it that, and refrained from writing. Here's a quick summary on what has happened over the past week:*

*The rock – the supposed Taalo mind shield – turned out to be something special after all. In all our standard tests it performed just as any ordinary rock would, with one exception. When current was fed into it, anywhere along its surface, everyone who had esper potential got a bad headache. Curiously, so did Lydia, who obviously hasn't gone through esper tests.*



*Speaking of Lydia, I spent most of my time with her and really enjoyed it. We played football, conversed with lots of aliens, tinkered with electronics, pranked some people, talked about deep and shallow things... She's a great girl. I find myself eagerly awaiting our return just so I could be with her again. If we ever see peace, I'd like to make sure she gets a chance at living a normal life. I could take her with me to the place I grew up in and take care of her – until she could take care of herself. I would support her choices and always have a safe place for her to stay. I would raise my eyebrows when she'd wear flashy clothing. I would worry when she'd start dating some random guy. I would shed a few tears, in secret, when she'd finally move to her own apartment... I would live the adult family life I never had... I now have a personal motive to kick some Kohr-Ah butt.*

*On a more interesting note, Captain Tanaka took his new task very seriously – and joyously. Given their short gestation and maturation and the average litter being so large, the base should be swarming with little Shofixti when we return again.*

*We left our prisoners, Zex and the Thraddash, at the starbase. Zex has been extremely polite and cooperative, up to the point where I find it disturbing. I told Hayes to be careful. Zex is a manipulative genius and definitely up to something. At least we deactivated Zex's ship so Zex cannot escape, even though I'm sure that escape is not the thing Zex is after.*

*And the Vindicator... There is no longer a shortage of building materials, so we were able to outfit our ship as we wanted. We don't have to rely on one insanely powerful main gun anymore as we accompanied it with not one but two Fusion Blasters. We also built an additional Fusion Blaster which we mounted at the stern to protect us against enemies that get behind us. The down-side is that even*

*though the Fusion Blasters don't require as much energy as the Hellbore Cannon, they still require a lot. We had to build an additional Shiva Furnace for the forward guns and one simpler Dynamo for the rear gun. We also agreed that we needed more crew now that we have all these new modules and also since our fleet could use a portable pool of replacement crew. We built a new Crew Pod in slot 11 to provide life support for 50 additional crew members. We now have only one module slot available and we're saving it for future use. Here's the whole module layout:*

- 1 Hellbore Cannon*
- 2 Fusion Blaster*
- 3 Fusion Blaster*
- 4 Crew Pod*
- 5 Ansible*
- 6 Shiva Furnace*
- 7 Point-Defense Laser*
- 8 Shiva Furnace*
- 9 Storage Bay*
- 10*
- 11 Crew Pod*
- 12 Dynamo*
- 13 Fuel Tank*
- 14 Fuel Tank*
- 15 Fuel Tank*
- 16 Fusion Blaster*

*Now that the Vindicator is fully equipped, all the efforts at the shipyard can be directed to building new ships. Soon we might even be building Shofixti Scouts as well. I'm sure the Yehat would be happy to see their adopted race being brought back from the dead. Maybe we could get them to join our cause then.*

*As for our next mission... The Zoq-Fot-Pik had calculated that the source of the red probes was on the same*

line as Alpha Tucanae (400.0 : 543.7) and Epsilon Muscae (152.0 : 833.3). In addition, the Thraddash had blurted that the probes came from the direction of Vega (033.3 : 975.0), which is very close to the line. Another star, Beta Corvi (033.3 : 981.2), is right next to Vega so I'd consider them equally possible sources. Luckily there is a quasispace exit very close by so instead of wasting over a month in hyperspace travel one way, the trip should take us only about three days. We'll start with Vega since it's closer to the quasispace exit.

*December 6<sup>th</sup> 2155: We are approaching Vega. We don't know what it is we're searching for exactly. Hopefully it's one of those you-know-it-when-you-see-it things.*

*The Arilou mysteriously hinted that we should search for a "world with no surface". I can only imagine they meant a gas giant, but I fail to see how we can find anything from one of those.*

*December 8<sup>th</sup> 2155: After two days of searching we have finally decided to leave Vega and try our luck at Beta Corvi. There was one gas giant here, but we saw neither probes nor anything else out of the ordinary.*

*Searching for something is frustrating when you don't know if the thing you're searching for is even there. Say you notice at home that your wedding ring is missing. You have no recollection of when you had it on for sure last time. You could have dropped it somewhere outside your home, but it might just as well be somewhere in your home. You can never be sure, unless you find it. You first search all likely places, but can't find it. Then you move on to unlikely places, but still can't find it. If the lost object is important enough, you might start tearing down walls. And all this time you know that it might all be for nothing.*

*Let's just hope we get lucky at Beta Corvi.*

## CHAPTER 17

# SOURCE

**December 9<sup>th</sup> 2155, Beta Corvi, 033.3 : 981.2**

There were seven planets in the system, the fourth one being the only gas giant. No probes were on sight. The gas giant looked very similar to Jupiter.

Jupiter didn't have any artificial satellites though, whereas this planet had one, orbiting it at a geostationary point. And what was more, the satellite openly broadcasted instructions on how to use it to contact life forms in\* the planet.

"This is a first," Zelnick said. "We are the first humans, if not first overall, to contact beings living in a gas giant."

Gruber couldn't help pointing out the obvious.

"Someone had to set up that satellite," he stated.

Zelnick acknowledged the observation. Then he asked the communications officer to establish a connection to the satellite.

"Any last minute tips?" Zelnick asked Gruber while waiting for someone to answer their call.

"Follow the two basic rules and you'll do fine," Gruber reminded.

*"Hello, visitor!"* the computer translated in a friendly voice. *"We are the Slylandro. I am Content to Hover, a Slylandro speaker."*

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\* It seems inappropriate here to say *on* the planet.

The screen showed colorful gas swirling around several glowing bits – like jellyfish inside a tornado.

*“Your presence here fills us with excitement! We have gotten so few visitors over these many Drahn\*. We hope you can stay to talk with us for a while.”*

Zelnick was ready for the usual introduction.

“Hello,” he said in an equally friendly tone. “We represent the New Alliance of Free Stars. I am Captain Zelnick of the starship Vindicator. We have never seen creatures quite like you... Are you really living inside that gas giant?”

The glowing bits remained more or less stationary, but the gas span around them and rapidly changed colors.

*“Oh, this is so terribly exciting!”* the creature repeated. *“We will be happy to tell you about ourselves if you will please, please do the same.”*

The spinning of the gas slowed down somewhat.

*“You see, we Slylandro have been extremely interested in learning about the galaxy, but our physique makes us incapable of leaving our gas giant home. Therefore, we are totally reliant on our infrequent visitors to keep us informed about events outside this planetary system. And visitors usually only show up every few Drahn.”*

The gas didn’t change color anymore. There were now three glowing bits on screen, each having their own gas surrounding them. The color of the gas was a mixture of red and orange, very similar to the great red spot of Jupiter.

*“We hope that our newly deployed exploration probe fleet will not only gather information for us, but inform other races of our presence here as well!”*

“Bingo,” Zelnick quietly said to the people on the bridge.

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\* The translation computer stated that the alien used a word that meant four million rotations of their planet. Since one rotation was 14,2 hours, one Drahn was approximately 6480 years.

“Actually,” he then said to the Slylandro, “the probes are the reason we’re here.”

*“So they work! Wonderful!”* the speaker rejoiced.

“Er... I don’t think so,” Zelnick replied.

He then turned to Gruber.

“I don’t think these jolly guys would send out a fleet of bloodthirsty probes.”

“At least not intentionally,” Gruber commented. “The probes always did claim to be on a peaceful mission of exploration.”

*“What do you mean? Why not?”* the Slylandro asked, sounding a bit worried.

“We have encountered these probes several times,” Zelnick began. “Each time they first claimed to be friendly, but then attacked no matter what we did.”

All three of the gas creatures were now spinning around each other.

*“Our probes never attack!”* the speaker then said in an offended tone. *“They have only defensive capabilities. You must have our probes confused with someone else’s!”*

Zelnick scratched his head.

“Okay, tell us about **your** probes then,” he demanded.

The Slylandro calmed down again.

*“We got our probes just a few hundred rotations ago from a race calling themselves the Melnorme,”* the speaker proudly explained. *“In exchange for studying us, they said we would get 10 000 Gree-dots or something like that which we could use to buy stuff from them. Fortunately, 10 000 Gree-dots was exactly the price of their catalog item 2418 – Remote Self-Replicating Robot Explorer Probe!”*

So it would take 20 rainbow worlds to satisfy the Melnorme as much as studying the Slylandro did, Gruber calculated. They must be interesting creatures.

“So you bought only one probe?” Zelnick specified.

*“Yes, that was the really neat part!” the Slylandro replied, getting excited again. “We only bought one, but since it’s self-replicating, we should soon have hundreds, even thousands!”*

Gruber instructed the captain to ask about the probe’s programming, which he did.

*“It’s really simple,” the floating gas bags replied. “The probe was sent out to a random direction to collect information. It seeks out other civilizations, life-forms and all kinds of interesting places. When its data banks are full, or when it has replicated itself ten times, it returns here.*

*When it doesn’t have anything more important to do, it zaps rocks and similar space junk into their component parts and absorbs the debris. When it has enough raw materials, it fabricates a duplicate of itself. And that duplicate could self-replicate too!*

*We expect the first probe to return any rotation now with data banks full of interesting stuff!”*

So far all the pieces fit together in Gruber’s opinion. There was obviously some malfunction or a bug in the probe’s programming that made the probes attack. It also seemed improbable that the Melnorme would sell such a defective product. *But how could they know for sure?*

Gruber recalled the probe’s behavior. They approach, send out a friendly greeting, answer one question and then attack. But if it’s true that they only have defensive capabilities, they aren’t really attacking. *So what are they doing then?*

If their defensive program is somehow triggered, they have really deep-learned the saying about offense being the best defense. *If their defense trigger threshold was set too low, could that be it?*

Gruber suggested that Zelnick asked about the probe’s defensive capabilities, which he did.

*“That behavior was hard-coded by the Melnorme, we couldn’t mess with it,”* the gas creatures explained. *“The probe fires its missiles if and only if it has been attacked and it cannot communicate with the attacker.”*

“Missiles?” Zelnick and Gruber asked in unison.

*“Yes, the probe is armed with a battery of missiles and nothing more. It’s not supposed to be anything too devastating.”*

That piece of information once again fit nicely into the puzzle, Gruber thought. The probes have never fired any missiles at them, so it’s not defending itself. All that hassle about turning off all combat systems when encountering the probe had been for nothing.

“Did you do something to the probe?” Zelnick asked, “or did you just send it out as it was when you got it?”

Gruber gave the captain a thumbs up for coming up with a good question.

*“We only set some priority parameters, nothing more,”* the speaker replied.

“What parameters?” Zelnick kept on the subject.

The three gas entities calmly circled each other for a while.

*“We can tell you the basic outline of the probe’s program as it was explained to us,”* a new voice said.

“Please do,” Zelnick replied.

The new voice started reciting some logical clauses. Gruber couldn’t keep up with the flow and obviously neither could Zelnick.

After a few minutes the explanation was over.

*“That’s it. Simple, right?”* the new speaker said.

Zelnick scratched the back of his head.

“Can you give us a moment?” he asked and turned off voice transmitting. “Katja, can you run that by me again, a bit slower this time?”



The communications officer quickly replayed the last part of the dialog and added subtitles to it. Now they got a hang of the probe's programming:

*SCAN (for targets, as defined in Target List)*  
*IF (no current target)*  
*THEN (select New target from Current Targets list)*  
*IF (Current Position is AT Current Target)*  
*THEN (Set Current Behavior to New Behavior)*  
*PERFORM (Current Behavior)*

The Slylandro also provided them with the Target List table and the Probe Behavior table with default priorities:

*TARGET LIST (with associated default priority)*  
*Space Vessel (5)*  
*Transmission Source (4)*  
*Astronomical Anomaly (3)*  
*Planet Bearing Life Signature (2)*  
*Raw Replication Materials (1)*  
*PROBE BEHAVIORS (target requirements – default priority)*  
*Communicate (Space Vessel OR Transmission Source – 5)*  
*Record Data (Any target – 4)*  
*Analyze Data (Unanalyzed data in queue – 3)*  
*Prepare Replication Materials (Any Target – 2)*  
*Move to Current Target (Any Target – 1)*

Gruber wasn't a programmer, but to his eye the logic looked sound. He still summoned Shoji to the bridge just to be sure.

“So what parameters did you change?” Zelnick asked.

The original speaker continued.

“*We decided that since we had only one probe, we should crank up the replication priority so that there would be more probes sooner. That's the only change we made.*”

Zelnick had the program flow on a small screen and he put his finger on the *Prepare Replication Materials* row.

“What was the new priority you assigned to it?” he asked.

*“I don’t see why this interests you so much, but we’ll play along with you,”* the speaker said. *“I only know that the new value was supposed to be higher than the old one. I’ll ask the one who made the change. Just a moment...”*

One of the gas entities left the screen for a few seconds and then came back.

*“This is a bit extreme,”* it continued. *“I was told that the setting was changed to 999, which was the highest possible value.”*

Zelnick gestured for a time out and turned to Gruber who wondered whether the translation computer could relay the meaning of the captain’s gesture to the Slylandro.

“What’s your take on this?” Zelnick asked.

Before Gruber could answer, Shoji entered the bridge. Gruber explained the situation quickly and showed him the outlay of the program flow and told him what the Slylandro had modified. It didn’t take long for him to comment:

“Not good, not good,” Shoji said with his strong Japanese accent.

Few minutes later Zelnick was ready to reveal the grim truth to the sympathetic floating gas bags.

“Sorry for the pause,” he began. “We looked through the probe’s program and... Well, it is **your** probes that keep attacking our ships. Please understand that—”

*“Our probes **do not** attack!”* the Slylandro speaker cut Zelnick’s line short.

All the gas on the screen turned blue.

“I get it, I’ll rephrase that,” Zelnick apologized. “Your probes keep trying to **recycle** our ships... Think about what your probe does when it meets a ship, given its new priority settings.”

The blue changed to purple.

*“Fine, I’ll humor you this one last time, but then the accusations must stop, alright?”*

“Alright,” Zelnick agreed.

The purple changed to orange.

*“Like we said,” the speaker patiently began, “alien ships are the top priority target. Once a probe scanned a ship, it would instantly move toward it...”*

There was a small pause.

*“Then, when it got to the ship, it would initiate communication automatically...”*

There was another pause.

*“When communications were terminated, a new behavior would be selected. Then...”*

This pause was a bit longer.

*“Then...”*

Now the pause got intense.

*“Uh-oh.”*

There’s nothing quite like the moment when you realize you have made a critical mistake.

*“A new behavior would be selected. Since the replication setting was set to maximum, the probe wouldn’t get time to pick a new target... It would use the current target – the ship – for raw replication materials. It would process the ship, breaking it into \*sob\* component compounds with \*sob\* electrical discharges! What have we done?”*

A crying gas creature was not a pretty sight.

“Now that w—” Zelnick began, but was cut short again.

*“Traveler!” the speaker cried out while everyone and everything on the screen was spinning around wildly, showing all possible colors. “You must tell us what we can do before our probes destroy all life in the galaxy!”*

“Sue the Melnorme?” Zelnick suggested to Gruber.

*“We can’t do that,” the Slylandro replied, catching Zelnick’s suggestion by accident. “The Melnorme made us*

*agree to a formal Waiver of Damages in case something like this happened. We can't recall the probes either, since this model doesn't have a recall transmitter. Model 2419 would have had that, but it was out of stock."*

"Well, darn," Zelnick commented and turned to Gruber, this time making a point about not talking to the microphone.

"Could we deploy the entire alliance to hunt down the probes?"

Gruber thought of how few ships they still had.

"That would never work, given their pace of replication," he shot down the idea. "As soon as we'd destroy one, two would already have taken its place. No, we need a way to make them hunt down each other."

"Or a Mega-Self-Destruct-Code," Zelnick suggested, forgetting the microphone.

Suddenly the gas turned green.

*"That's it!"* the speaker rejoiced. *"You're a genius, traveler! Why didn't we remember that? There is a self-destruct code! We can reconfigure the probes to seek other probes and broadcast the sequence!"*

In Gruber's opinion there was one problem with that idea.

"How are you going to do that?" Zelnick put Gruber's thoughts into words.

Green changed back to orange.

*"Oh, right,"* the speaker calmed down. *"But at least we can give you the sequence for now. And the probes should all return here eventually. Then we can give them new orders."*

"That's a good start," Zelnick said.

The Slylandro soon transmitted the code to the Vindicator and afterwards it was quickly forwarded to the starbase via the ansible. Now that all the pressing matters

had been discussed with the Slylandro, they could finally talk about more interesting things like biology, culture, history, football and the glowy bits inside the Slylandro, which turned out to be their reproductive organs and taboo as a topic for discussion.

Zelnick had the crew quickly come up with an *introduction to humanity* package, which they shared with the Slylandro. Vargas and Rigby joined the conversation when topics relevant to their interests were discussed.

The Slylandro were ancient creatures. According to them, they had lived for thousands of Drahn on their planet, which they called Source. Similarly to life on Earth, they too gradually evolved from simpler beings. They became social and invented language so they could better cooperate when herding food into dense concentrations.

Their world consisted of a five hundred kilometer band of atmosphere in which they could survive. Below were the Depths, a region which grew darker and more hostile the further down one went. A typical feat of courage for Slylandro juveniles was to sink far enough into the Depths so that their gas bag was almost ruptured by the pressure. The tissue scars left by the trip lasted many rotations and were thought to attract the opposite sex. Above their world was the Void, a calm and quiet region. When the Slylandro travelled up too far into the Void, they got dizzy and started behaving inappropriately.

Currently the Slylandro had a perfectly egalitarian society – all were equal. That of course didn't stop anyone from being a jerk, but their world was huge and they had no barriers to restrict travel so when someone or something was bothering them, they simply went somewhere else.

As one might guess, the Slylandro had no physical technology. From time to time, in their long history, some of them had tried to work with objects, constructing weapons

and other tools from the carcasses of dead beasts. But eventually, whatever it was that they had been building, got too heavy and dragged them down to the Depths.

Their lack of technology raised a justified question. A single Slylandro could live for thousands of years, but they had limited memory. How could they so well remember events that had happened millennia ago?

The answer was History Chants. Since they had no permanent way to keep records, the passing of events were converted into long songs whose rhythms and patterns helped prevent the introduction of error into the records.

As they said in the beginning, they got very few visitors. Their History Chants covered about 40 Drahn, some 360 000 years, and during that time they had been visited by five other races before the humans. There were the Melnorme just a while ago, but before them the previous visit was about 20 000 years ago – by none other than the Ur-Quan.

At this point in the story there was some heated discussion. Zelnick told the gas creatures about the war between the alliance and the Ur-Quan Hierarchy, but the Slylandro insisted that the Ur-Quan had been really great guys, making frequent visits and telling them about all kinds of interesting things. A lot of what the Slylandro explained was in line with the Melnorme's history lesson: The Ur-Quan were brown back then and part of an alliance called the Sentient Milieu. The Slylandro also remembered the Milieu and that in addition to the Ur-Quan, there were five other core races in it – the Yuli, the Drall, the Taalo, the Mael-Num and the Faz. In addition to the Ur-Quan, the Yuli and the Drall visited the Slylandro frequently for over a thousand years. But at some point the visits suddenly stopped without warning and the Slylandro haven't heard from the Milieu since.

So what was the fifth race that had visited them?

A very long time ago, at the beginning of the Slylandro's chanted history, a race of shaggy giants had made frequent visits to the Source over a period of several Drahn. The Shaggy Ones were described as being worried, always hurrying from place to place, seeking knowledge as though they were in a desperate search for some important secret – some answer to a question they never shared with the Slylandro.

The last time the Slylandro saw them, the Shaggy Ones had come on a great circular starship, supposedly even larger than the Vindicator. They had discovered their Answer and were leaving to go somewhere. They never told the Slylandro where exactly they were going, but in this context the History Chants tell of a set of ten worlds that were unlike all others. The Shaggy Ones either discovered these planets or perhaps even assembled them – the true meaning has been lost in the ancient chants. These planets were organized in a pattern which in some way alluded to the Shaggy Ones' ultimate fate.

“Groombridge,” Zelnick triumphantly declared to Gruber and Rigby in the conference room.

They nodded.

“I dare say we can call this trip a success,” Zelnick continued.

“I dare agree,” Gruber said.

“Indeed,” Rigby also agreed. “In addition to tackling the probe menace, we got some important information – not to mention a vast amount of unimportant but highly interesting information. Oh, if only I could do an autopsy on one of those magnificent creatures...”

“How would that even work?” Zelnick asked.

Rigby laughed at his own idea.

“I don't know,” he replied. “That's the fun part.”