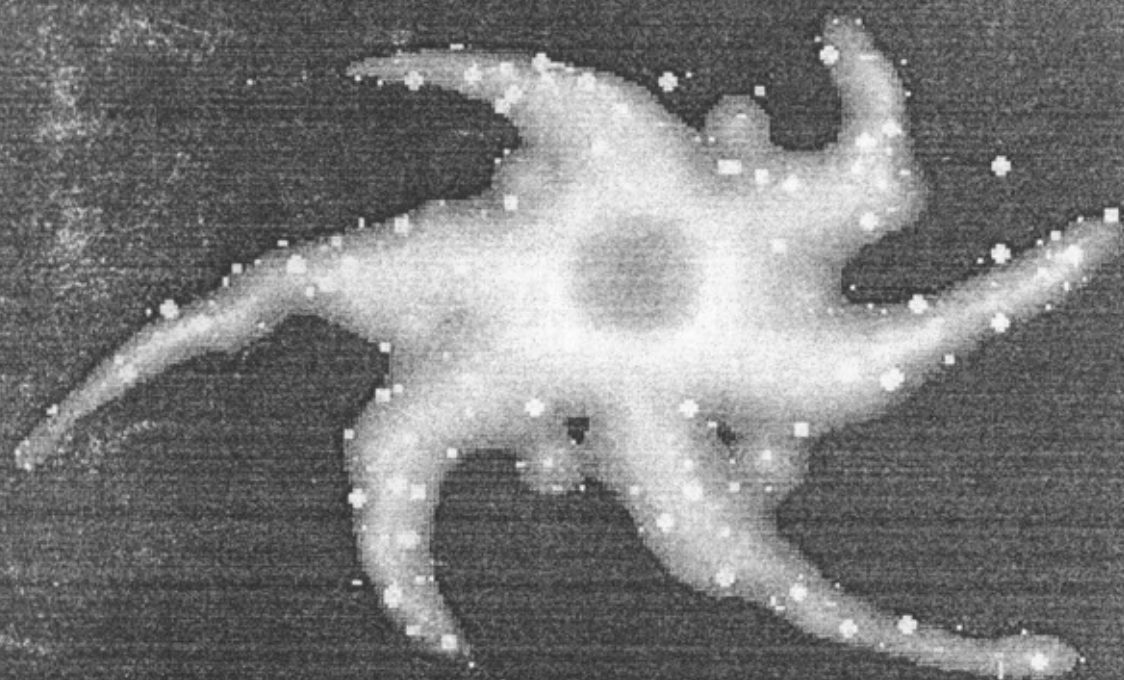


6 MAD BASTARDS

PRESENT

THE NOVEL
EXPERIMENT



CHAPTER 1

DJS

“Clouds were gathering in the skies; a roll of thunder; clap of lightening. It would rain soon, not now, but soon. This is my favourite time, a time where if I’m still enough I can hear my own heart beating. I like to look up, close my eyes and just wait for that first drop and in that instant it’s like all my problems just fall away. I can forget for just one second all of the terrible things that I have done. It’s almost time now, I can smell it, that sweet smell the one you get just before the storm breaks. It’s funny I’m trembling now like a little girl, this is so silly but I can’t help it, I just have to forget, I have to clear my mind and be innocent one last time. There’s tough times ahead but if this moment could be just right then I could make it, I know I could, I could see it though.” Rain.

The rain fell and a light breeze blew across the hillock near the old farmhouse. It was cool for this time of year, the leaves were all but gone from the trees and Sarah stood very still, looking up into the sky the weight of the world on her shoulder’s or so it seemed. There wasn’t a sound except for the rain and a distant rumble far off in the heavens. Sarah stood there for a time, motionless, the rain falling upon her face. It masked a single tear that slid anonymously down her cheek hitting the ground at her bare feet. Sarah opened her eye’s looked over her shoulder for an unseen assailant, there was nothing, nothing but the world around her, the world that was ever so slowly closing in and choking the life from her breast.

“It’s happening, I knew it would, the past always catches you up. You can never get far enough away. The relative calm of the past two years are coming to there end. It had been good for a while living the quite life, the simple life, but that was all finished now. It is time for me to move on, I have spend the next couple of hours erasing any sign of my existence. I have to go or put those around me in jeopardy and I can’t do that, they were so understanding and so good to me. Hell they brought me back from the dead, well what seemed like death anyway.”

They will be back soon, I better go now or I might not get another opportunity again for a couple of days she thought to herself. Sarah left the old farm wiping the handle of the door with a cloth as she exited, looked around cautiously then under her breath she muttered a quite goodbye. She lifted her backpack a little higher and headed off into the murk of the moonless night. Slowly she walked at first wishing that this was all just a dream. A quarter mile down the road she stopped and looked back at the tiny light that was the farmhouse off in the distance. A tiny smile came across her face as she remembered the good times that she had had, the smile faded as quickly as it had came and she turned and continued on down the road into the night.

CHAPTER 2

WC

The rain had set in now but Sarah hardly noticed it as she strode along the unlit track. It was only half a day's walk to the spaceport but in her two years here Sarah had never felt the urge to travel this path before. The coming and going of the off-planet transports felt so incongruous to the simple life of the planet's farming community that it reminded her of a past that she would rather forget. The storm was coming, however, and to not leave now would put the entire community's lives in danger.

Rumours that the Unity were coming had been spreading for months. Sarah had known the truth of the rumours but had ignored them for as long as she could. Undoubtedly they had agents watching the spaceport by now, but hopefully they wouldn't recognise 'Sarah' the farmer. Christ, Sarah hardly recognised herself each time she looked in the mirror. Sarah chuckled softly under her breath as she thought of how much pride she had once felt of her luxuriant black hair, now only slowly growing back after the crash.

Sarah crested the hill overlooking the spaceport just before dawn. It was hardly a true spaceport in reality, just a few launching platforms, a collection of shops and houses and a small marketplace, but it was a focal point for the various farms in the area. Farmers would travel to the market to trade and to share their stories. Sarah hoped that by getting here this early she would avoid running into anyone that might know her, but already she could see people setting up their stalls in the marketplace. Pulling her cloak a little closer she slipped quietly into the spaceport and made her way to the passenger transport.

The transport was more crowded than she had expected, and Sarah found herself wedged between an overweight man and a young girl. The man gave off the pungent odour of someone who hadn't showered in a while, and for a moment Sarah thought of her past when she would never have condescended to travel with such filth. The transport ferried out to the platform and Sarah could tell that the girl was frightened by her first time in a transport, but her parents were arguing about something and Sarah couldn't bring herself to say anything encouraging. It was hard enough to look out for yourself without having to worry about everyone else in the world. The transport pulled up to the platform with a jolt and Sarah silently cursed fate for giving her an incompetent pilot, but then shrugged resignedly. What could you expect in a backwater like this? At least he got the thrusters going smoothly and in no time they were shooting up through the atmosphere. Sarah pulled her hood over her face and shut her eyes, not bothering to look at the view screen showing the planet slowly fading into the distance.

Sarah awoke instantly as the transport turned awkwardly and her first thought was that the bloody pilot must have run into an asteroid field. Suddenly there was an explosion to starboard and Sarah knew what it was. Not asteroids ... Unity, and by the sounds of it they were aiming to take them alive with concussive explosives. Panic broke out in the cabin but Sarah turned her attention inward, the calm eye in the middle of a

storm of terrified passengers. It seemed unlikely that Unity would waste their time capturing a simple transport, so they must have found her. Another explosion shook the rear of the ship and something nagged at Sarah's consciousness. She shrugged it off and tried to think how she could get out of this mess. Subterfuge? Bribery? An appeal to their consciences? None of the alternatives seemed all that viable. The world suddenly came crashing in, the transport taking the full brunt of an explosion, and just before Sarah fell unconscious she realised what was nagging her: Unity ships didn't use concussive explosives.

CHAPTER 3

AHHYHH

There was only the stillness of space now. The *Lamorak* transport drifted lazily into the shadow of the larger craft, gas venting into space. Captain Ilse Martinez, looked through the forward view screen and sighed. Things would never be the same after this. This was naval crime, and technically treason, but they'd all come a long way already. But piracy was something that she never thought she would have to resort to.

"Scanners report that the hull's intact. Superficial damage only. Life support functional and nav jets ok. Are you sure this is a good idea, Captain?"

"We've no other way of resupply, Riggs. Unity control all the nearby systems that could be of any use to us. I don't like it either, but we'll leave them enough to last until they get picked up, their rescue beacon is already broadcasting. Now get the boarding team ready, Riggs.

"Ahr, aye-aye Cap'n."

Ilse glared at the sandy haired combat marine, who half smiled, half saluted and trooped all the way out, humming some ridiculous old earth sea shanty.

"Keep our fighters on long range scan duty, we don't need any surprises." Growled Ilse, as she sat back in her chair, glaring at the monitor.

The boarding went smoothly, with little resistance, and soon they were moving supplies back to the *Gryfalcon*.

Ilse waited on the bridge reading inventory reports hacked from the *Lamorak's* computers. Riggs' voice crackled over the comecog units.

"Uh Captain, I've found something.. um interesting, that you should have a look at."

"So who or what am I looking at?" Ilse demanded, as she entered the Med Bay.

"We picked her up on a passenger scan. The hardware gave her away." He doffed his helmet and scrubbed at his hair. "She doesn't look familiar to you?"

Ilse looked again. An attractive woman certainly, except for all that gleaming metal, replacing her arm and part of her torso. Threads of filament spider-webbed her skin up through her neck to just below the jawline. She had a pretty face for her age, but her identity remained a secret to Ilse.

Riggs regarded the inert woman gravely, and sucked air through his teeth. He raised an eyebrow as Ilse shook her head.

"Imagine her without the metalware. Longer hair? Perhaps Sendrine ambassador finery?"

Ilse blanched.

Sarah groggily raised herself up on her elbows. She looked at military duo before her. The unshaven sandy haired man in light combat armour and the tall raven haired fleet officer, with Captain stars on her well turned collar.

"Well at least you're not Unity." She said running her fingers through her cropped black hair.

“No, no we’re not,” replied the woman, “And you’re a long way from home aren’t you? Senator? Ambassador?”

“Well, that depends on where we are, doesn’t it?” Sarah retorted, sitting up. “How long have I been out? I notice I’m the only one from the transport here. I assume you’ve figured out who I am.”

Before either of them could answer, claxons rang out, and an urgent summons came from the bridge. “Unity craft, incoming!”

“I don’t care who she is, she stays here!” Yelled Ilse as she ran from the room. “Riggs! Take care of it.”

Sarah watched as Riggs exited the room, punching in the lock code on the way out. Easily replicated, she thought. So getting out of here would be no problem. She was a little surprised that she’d been unrecognized, but then two years spent on an entirely agrarian planet, was hardly going to bring her into contact with anyone who might recognize her from her former life. She had hoped that her injuries would afford her at least modicum of disguise, but alas, it seemed not. The injuries had been just that, injuries and there was little to draw from them that was positive.

CHAPTER 4

RIC

Barely a minute had passed when Ilse breathlessly arrived on the bridge- she had felt the sharp staccato of shudders indicating a volley of weapons fire on her way up- no doubt the Unity craft would be recharging for another salvo. Dropping heavily into the command seat, she scanned over the various holographic status summary and view screens arrayed before her- there, barely 3K off the starboard bow, was the Unity ship. The ID reader identified her as the *Path of Light*; she gritted her teeth- the *Gryfalcon* was no match for a *Stigmata* class cruiser. The damage displays read malfunctioning to the nav jets- fore and aft- there would be no fancy manoueuvering here, if any at all. The *Gryfalcon* was a sitting duck.

“Quack, quack.” came the wry voice of Riggs from behind her as he casually sauntered in as if the situation was a Sunday stroll. The marine was annoyingly at ease- then again, she thought, he’d faced death thousands of times. She’d seen the scars up close.

Ilse barked orders to her bridge crew- “Beutron, get a bead on that ship pronto. Donner, get me command on the horn. Blake, see if you can get any lateral movement.” She tapped her comm. “Engineering- Sandhurst, I need me some of those nav jets operational yesterday!” She turned to Riggs “Get your marines in position to the airlocks”

“They’re already there, I dropped into the barracks on my way up here.” He replied. “Awl ready to repel boarders Capt’n Martinez. Ahhr.” he added with a boyish grin, before exiting to join his troops. Ilse promised herself that if they got out of this alive she would have to give him a talking to. In private, of course.

“Incoming!!” interrupted the sensor officer. “looks like torpedos, Captain- unknown designation. They’re coming right for us!!”

“Fire the starboard lasers at them, full mesh coverage”

“Yessir!”

Ilse watched the little blips on her display disappear one by one as they were destroyed by the *Gryfalcons* laser mesh net. All but one.....

“Dammit- sound the collision alert! Brace for impact!” Ilse quickly snapped her seat restraints shut, and involuntarily closed her eyes as the sensor officer counted down.

“Impact in 5-4-3-2-1-”

The *Gryfalcon* shook violently as the torpedo slammed into the hull. Ilse shook her head to clear it and then realized that there was no explosion.

“Status!! What the hell happened??”

“Looks like it didn’t blow Captain, though its sticking in the side of the hull”

“Get the damage control teams down there now!”

“Captain I have a target lock!”

“About time- fire then dammit, fire!!”

The jarring of the first hits from the Unity craft were also felt by the lone occupant of the med bay. Pausing only to punch in the door code that she had appropriated from the marine named Riggs, Sarah crept into the corridor outside. What had been the chances of being recognized she thought?? Very little, and yet Riggs had

when she was picked up from the transport she had been traveling on. Her past life had seemed blissfully lost for these happy last two years in hiding, but it seemed that it was going to catch up with her. And since it was a Unity craft out there, she had to get away. Her secrets could not die with her. Flexing the metalware which now comprised her left arm and part of her torso, she was reminded of how close it had been, and why she had chosen to go into hiding.

Riggs walked down corridor A3 in the direction of airlock 2. He was aware that Ilse was irritated by his ahhr ing and pirate comments- he knew as a dedicated fleet officer she took the forced boarding of the *Lamorak* for supplies a lot deeper than he. No matter, he chuckled- he was sure she'd let him make it up to her in one of their special debriefing sessions after they got through all of this. They always did.

Rounding a corner, he was surprised to see Sarah padding carefully down the corridor toward him not more than a few metres away. Her eyes widened at the sight of him and then all hell broke loose as the hull blew inwards behind her.

Riggs came to dazedly- how long had he been out? 5 seconds? 30? An hour?? He glanced down and saw that his wrist was at an odd angle and he had a large gash in his thigh. "That's ok, I've had worse" he thought. He surveyed his surroundings- Sarah was lying a few metres from him, face down. She didn't look too badly hurt. She was breathing at least. There was twisted metal where the hull had blown in but oddly there was no biting cold of space, and they were both still alive. As he watched combat troops in Unity uniforms came through the rent and advanced with weapons drawn on him and Sarah, who was by now coming to.

"Sendrine Ambassador Sarah Entchev? You are coming with us."

CHAPTER 5

CJW

'Bridge to Sandhurst, do you copy?'

'Sandhurst here, Captain, we're in hell and cooking quickly – what do you want?'

'The nav-jets – when are they going to be up and running...?'

'Waiting on a status report, coming in now.....we got 30 seconds.....'

'Not enough. Get them going.....NOW!'

Ilse strode the bridge, there was no more she could do – force of will alone would not save the *Gryfalcon* now, all she could pray for was a miracle.

Across the bridge, looking out through the viewport, she saw the *Path of Light* mockingly bring itself broadside to her position and begin to rain fire upon her own weapon systems. Her laser-mesh system had protected her craft initially but fallen silent under counter battery. Presenting itself as broad a profile as possible, the Unity cruiser maneuvered slowly, training its weapons banks onto the *Gryfalcon*'s own in an effort to silence all opposition.

As she stood there, finally the *Gryfalcon*'s weapons responded in defiance, lancing out at the cruisers frame – explosions framed the ship, and targeting displays recorded hits to the shield systems on its port side.

With after-explosions rocking the cruiser, Ilse entertained thoughts of a surprise victory, or even at worst a forced stalemate.....and then the hull shook.....

Down on Sub-level 3, the Damage Control team approached the position of the unexploded torpedo cautiously, emergency vacuum procedures in place.

Team leader Bryce Jontix was by command, a standing Environmental Biologist (secondary Planetologist) on board and damned good at his job thank you very much. One tour after another and he had had nothing to show other than some interesting photos ofspace.....WOW!

His job was to determine the nature of new systems and best prepare boarding teams for new conditions as well as getting the most out of any new resources they should discover, primarily a role suited to remaining on board in his office and analysing through the ships sensors. Bryce however loved his hands on role as Damage Control and strode purposefully to explore what had happened to the otherwise meaningless section of the ship...

Turning the corner, he was immediately struck by several facts

Firstly, the wall of the hull had ripped inwards, probably by physical impact (perhaps even a localised, small impact explosive?) and there was one hell of a localised hole in the hull.

Secondly, the sensation of no reduced atmosphere, in fact there was absolutely no real evidence that the *Gryfalcon* had been opened up at all

Thirdly, half a dozen heavily armed Unity personnel were standing in the corridor and spotted him and his crew immediately. They fell into position and it was all he could do to dive down a narrow junction nearby before fire raced out towards his small group

Cries fell behind him and sickeningly he turned to see his team fall down one by one to accurate fire by the highly trained Unity force. Even as further explosions rocked the craft, he heard the Unity forces preparing to retreat

‘Alpha Squad, fall back to the shuttle. Prepare for hot-launch and make sure the Ambassador and her guest are suitably....comfortable...’

‘Marines, where are you?!’ cried Bryce over the intercom and even as his voice croakily died, he heard heavy footsteps race along the corridor.

As the marines positioned and fired, the Unity forces withdrew to their craft and jettisoned, venting the passageway to space. Emergency bulkheads secured the corridor with a violent crashing and silence descended on the craft, emergency lighting flickering in the corridors.

‘Captain, Unity forces have boarded us on Sub-level 3 and have appeared to have taken two prisoners. Captain Riggs is one and I believe the passenger we picked up is the other to have been taken. Corridor A3 from Airlock 2 to 5 are vented to space and sealed’

On the bridge, Ilse almost collapsed – not Riggs, her strength when she needed it most, her balance always. And if it was to be believed Sarah Entchev, the Sendrine Ambassador – she would not be a welcome guest of the Unity for sure.....but why were they captured, and why were they captured together....surely the past had not come back to haunt her now, not now? Despite the need for supplies, boarding the *Lamorak* was becoming less consequential and now downright costly. And Sarah had looked as though she was hiding something, not surprising really.

Bracing herself she spun round

‘Beutron, if you do not have a lock on that ship, I’m firing you after it. Blake, where is my lateral control, and Sandhurst, where are you now? I need my nav-jets! We’ve got an emergency Rescue Op to perform and we’re not going to fail!’

Crew members raced around the craft obeying the string of orders pouring out from officers, displays scrolled vital information to the few available to read it and finally again, the *Gryfalcon* responded to battle. Its laser batteries lashed out towards the *Stigmata*-class cruiser, pounding its shields. Missiles raced out, heedless of a lack of targetting lock they pounded the nearby craft. A battery of torpedos emerged in a wave

and struck strategic points of the craft, damaging vital systems, yet even so the Cruiser weathered the storm, and having allowed the smaller boarding craft to dock once more with its hostages, it rotated in space and prepared a hyperspace jump, presumably back to its home-world.

Even as it manoeuvred to get a final defiant, perhaps crippling blow on its opponent, alarms rang out throughout the *Gryfalcon*, proximity klaxons blaring across the bridge. The entire power system fluxed and as the main power systems of the craft died, so to did the chances of the crew to save the hostages.

Watching impotently through the view-port, Ilse watched the Path of Light manoeuvre and accelerate towards hyperspace....only to come to an abrupt halt, its own power systems struggling for some reason.

In its path, a bright vortex appeared in space, a localised anomaly oft referred to as a wormhole. As the phenomena stabilised, several alien craft emerged and immediately began to pound the *Path of Light*. With little room to manoeuvre and absorbing terrible damage, the Unity vessel spun around and raced back toward the *Gryfalcon*, drawing the alien vessels and their fire with it!

‘Commanding Officer of the *Gryfalcon*, this is Unity Vessel *Path of Light* – prepare a run oblique to your current course and double your port shields. Couple your navigation computer to the co-ordinates we are transponding...now!’

Ilse took in the sight of the battle cruiser racing from its new foes and even now their own shield began to record hits.

‘Make the manoeuvres Blake, give them a lifeline. Donner, inform command immediately of this development, Beutron what are these new ships coming out at us and where in the hells did they come from. Sandhurst, where the HELL are my nav-jets?’

Sound crashed across the bridge

‘Captain, why are we doing this?’

‘Sir, vessels are alien in origin, shields are reading at 100% or more, our shield at 30% and dropping rapidly....coordinates from the *Path of Light* received, course set awaiting your command’

‘Nav-jets back on line and operational, power being diverted to the shields Captain’

‘Command not acknowledging Captain, requesting repeat of last orders’

‘New targets at Mark 3, 4 and 5, 40 vessels on inbound vectors and firing on us. Return fire with minimal effect, mostly lighting up their shields.’

‘Shields 15% Captain...’

‘*Path of Light* has left Captain, on expected outbound vector’

The craft rocks as explosions ripple through the portside weapons banks, emergency lighting flickers onto the bridge

‘Where’s my laser mesh – stop that fire and give us some time!’

'Laser systems down, missile systems off-line, torpedo systems not responding, helm responding sluggishly...sir, we're back to square one'

'Where the hell is our support?'

More explosions, more craft emerge from the vortex, bigger craft, all turn towards the *Gryfalcon*

'What the hell is going on here? Who are these guys, despatch an emergency beacon relaying all sensor data now, broadband spread of all sensor data now, dump the memory core and prepare for hyperspace'

'Shields gone sir, hull at 50%'

'Main hyperspace engines off-line sir, reverting to back-up systems'

'Forward thrust gone sir, we're caught in some sort of tractor beam – portside only, being rotated now..... coming about....'

Caught on her command console, Ilse despaired at the sight in front of her

'All craft to the lifeboats, prepare for immediate evac. Nav Systems trained to the nearest M-class star system. Engineering give us everything you've got on forward shields then get off to your despatch points. Computer, prepare for automated system self destruct on my mark, profile Captain Ilse Dejonovich Muralaeyev, password Omega Mu Gamma!'

'Automated self destruct commenced, you have 5 minutes to reach minimum safe distance'

Ilse raced for the life craft towards the aft, her mind racing far before her... where had it all gone so wrong? Why had they boarded the *Lamorak*, sure supplies were the immediate answer but everything had gone wrong since that point. Why did Sarah appear now of all times and why were only she and Riggs captured without a widespread boarding of the vessel (Why were they together, surely not...)? Riggs troubled her most of all, where was her strength when she needed it most, she needed him....

'Self destruct initiated, t-minus 2 minutes'

A desperate longing to remain with her craft poured over her and she stepped back looking around. Barrelling into her, Bryce dragged her up and took her into the final life boat and sealed the door

'Captain, we've gotta go and we gotta go now – the blast will shield us, perhaps, but there's no guessing – we gotta leave'

Ilse looked out the transparisteel window as the shuttle shot off, the remaining hulk of the *Gryfalcon* was largely on flames and listing badly, the alien craft pounding it and engaging strangely in vicious close combat. Tears streamed down her face and her fists clenched, but no word passed her lips. She looked to the point that the *Path of Light* had escaped to and would not be moved.

As the shuttle approached the gravity well of the nearby planet, designated Thycessa IV, the *Gryfalcon* exploded in a last act of defiance, appearing to taker with it several of the alien vessels, the remainder withdrawing out of the blast zone.

Entering gravity, the shuttles propulsion systems kicked in and commenced an automated program towards landing, the incessant and not-so-reassuring voice of Bryce pointing out various facts of their descent and chances of survival.

Looking back on her last 10 minutes dazedly, Ilse looked at her lone companion, someone she knew so little of, Officer Jaunt apparently

‘Two questions.....who are you and where are we going?’

‘ Bryce Jontix , Captain, I am your...’

‘Heres some news for you Bryce Jontix, I’ve lost my ship, I’ve lost my lover and if you don’t help me get down in one piece, keep us alive, get revenge on whoever that is back there and rescue those people, you will be very , very sorry....’

CHAPTER 6

SAB

Six hours had passed, and Commanding Captain Ilse Dejenovich Muralaeyev was standing before her department heads, awaiting their second status reports. She brushed her hair back, and wiped some dust from her face, as the dozen or so officers took their seats under the lightweight temporary shelter that had been erected in the centre of the ring of 'lifeboat' shuttlecraft, where they had landed in a dormant volcano's crater. Forty nine of the fifty escape capsules had survived the entry into the M-class planet's atmosphere: one capsule containing three Marines had burnt up, killing all on board instantly. It was thought that it had suffered some damage when the Gyr Falcon had self destructed, being as it was the last capsule to leave the ailing vessel.

Captain Ilse and officer Bryce Jontix had been in the second to last one. She shuddered.

The preliminary status reports delivered by department heads via radio comlinks had told her all this, plus the salient facts that this planet, Thycessa IV, had a breathable atmosphere, H₂O/Carbon based life, and a gravitational constant of 0.86 earth standard. Now, as the murmur and hustle of their arrival died, Ilse looked into the eyes of her support staff for some hint of good news to come, and felt her heart sink. Grimly, she turned to the first of her officers, and gave the command, "By departments, report."

Sergeant Gao stood, and addressed the group. She was an experienced soldier, but unused to command, having been suddenly thrust into her current position not only by the accident with the escape capsule (her Lieutenant had been one of the men killed) but by the unexpected abduction of Captain Riggs, along with the Sendrine Ambassador, Sarah Entchev during the Battle with the Unity Cruiser, Path of Light. Ilse swallowed at this reminder of her dilemma, both personal and strategic, and focused on the young woman's report.

"Officers, I am currently transmitting a set of three images to your personal Comms Units. The first is a localised map of the interior of this crater, created by one of our scouts from the highest point on the craters rim, and rendered into three dimensions. The second is a similar rendering of the surrounding eighteen kilometres, and the third a Mollweide's interrupted Homolographic projection of the planet's surface as a whole, compiled from various images taken by the 'lifeboats' during their descent."

Ilse felt her flat wrist mounted Comm device vibrate, and heard several of the officer's units beep in tandem.

"I have taken the liberty of transmitting the information to all one hundred and thirty nine crew members Mam'."

"Excellent work, Sergeant. Continue."

"As you will see, we have come down in the equatorial region, and approximately thirteen kilometres from an ocean shore. The area is moderately vegetated, and temperate in climate. However, the Polar regions are dramatically colder, and the livable region of this world is only a few thousand kilometres thick, around the equator."

At this point, Bryce Jontix spoke up. He was the crew's Environmental Biologist and Planetologist, and Ilse had already had one run in with the man, sharing her lifeboat down with him. She found him irritatingly correct, and a little self important, and his interruption here did little to further her good opinion of him.

“Much like Earth during a heavy ice age, then.”

Several of the Crew nodded in understanding, and the Marine continued. “There appear to be no immediate geological, cosmic, environmental, or native threats to our current position. However, I must inform you Captain, that the planet is inhabited, and contact with an apparently sentient species has already been made.”

“What!?”

Everyone was surprised, but the outburst had come from Jontix. “That is unconsionable!”

Gao was taken aback, and replied to the Planetologist, “The contact was, I can assure you, inadvertent.”

“How did this happen? Why wasn’t I informed? What level of development are they classed at? How do you know they are sentient?”

“Bryce!” Captain Ilse cut him off, “Sit down and Shut Up! Sergeant Gao, finish your report.” The steaming Environmental officer subsided, glaring at his Captain, who returned his stare with no less ferocity.

“Upon scaling the rim of the crater, and performing a foot sweep of the surrounding kilometre of ground, our Beta squad happened upon a native. It fled before we had time to react, but we could ascertain that it was carrying some simple tools, notably a spear. It left the carcass of another mammal, partially butchered, lying where it was, under a small tree. Basic description, sixty centimetres in height, moderately furred, backswung knee joints, long arms, capable of both standing, and running on all fours: we saw it do both.”

There was a low murmur around the group, and Bryce was shaking his head.

“If you look at map two, we think that the atmospheric discolouring and topographic patterning approximately ten kilometres to the East, near that river delta, may suggest a village site, and possibly primitive agriculture. That’s the end of my report Captain, I can brief the relevant officers more fully later...”

“Yes very good, Gao. I intend to keep this brief as possible.” Ilse saw Bryce, who had been bracing to interrupt again, clench his teeth and sit back. Technically, she should ask him for his report next, to give them a more thorough picture of where they had found themselves, but she decided against doing so. Partially, she had to admit, because of her irritation with him, but also because she wanted to set the tone for the next step of their endeavours. She turned to the other officers.

The Weapons/Sensors officer, Beutron, informed them that their descent to Thycessa IV had been completed unobserved: all lifeboats were equipped with moderate stealth fail-safes, for evacuation during a fire fight such as they had performed earlier today. Also, an interesting development: The squad of forty or so small ships which had been involved in the sudden attack on the now destroyed Gyrfalcon, would appear to have been Drones, or robot controlled fighter ships. That would explain why they had continued such a vicious attack on the foundering ship, even when it had initiated its self destruct procedure.

What remained unexplained, was who had sent the Forty drones (and a possible command module) hurtling out of the generated wormhole to intercept the Stigmata Cruiser Path of Light. Why had they done so immediately after a boarding party had captured both the Sendrine Ambassador, Sarah Entchev, along with Captain Riggs, and what connection did the two have? Ilse was confused, in no small way because of the

involvement of the man who had been so important to her for so many reasons. Had Riggs simply been accidentally involved? Was he attempting to protect the Ambassador, or had there been some other motive? Was he possibly a second target for the Unity soldiers, and if so, why?

And what the hell was Sarah Entchev hiding? Ever since they had boarded the Lamrock in a desperate bid for supplies, taking the ambassador on board, things had gone from bad to worse for them.

Whatever the answers, Ilse had barked an order on the bridge of the Gyrfalcon just minutes before it had been destroyed: they had a double rescue mission to perform, and they were not going to fail. The Path of Light had been moderately damaged in its firefight with the them, and it was unsure whether or not the vessel had the wherewithal to fully complete its homeward jump. There was yet hope for the Ambassador and Captain Riggs, and Ilse meant to fully utilise that time.

Helmsman/Systems Officer Blake reported that all crew had converted their lifeboats into Standard temporary shelters, and broken out their survival kits. The small lake that collected in the basin of their crater held some invertebrate life, but no fish, and drained out the eastern end of the crater, through a fissure, providing them with a small but reliable stream of apparently drinkable water. Some crew had already constructed their contained ration culture modules, to produce edible fungi, and fast growing legumes, alfalfa and the like, to supplement and eventually replace their week's worth of rations. However, they would have to find a local source of food if they were to subsist for longer than a few weeks.

On that note, Communications Officer Donner began his report. And with it ended all of Captain Ilse Muralaeyev's hopes for fulfilling her hastily spoken objective.

The Gryfalcon had managed to deploy an emergency beacon containing all sensory data, and had also dumped the memory core into it. That beacon was heavily protected from hostile detection, but transmitted powerfully on a Command frequency. The crew could receive data from it, and once a simple transmitter dish was constructed (in approximately one hour) could communicate with it. Essentially, this meant that they would have their Ship's Computer back online, including their personal, reference, and Command databases.

However, Thycessa IV had been automatically chosen by their collective life craft's computer systems for biological and survival reasons only. As it turned out, Thycessa, the star around which it orbited, had a large and unusual coronal effect. This, combined with the beacon's location in relation to Command's system, made it unlikely that anyone back at their home had received the distress call. Nor would they, until the beacon had completed half an orbit of Thycessa: in approximately five hundred and sixty days.

Ilse looked away from her officers, and tears sprang to her eyes once more. They were trapped. And with no help able to locate them for more than a year and a half... She would not be able to complete her goal; would not even be able to find out the fate of Riggs, the man she had to admit she loved, wisely or not, until a Command vessel was dispatched to pick them up, God alone knew when.

Someone cleared their throat. She looked back at the noise, and saw the last of her Officers, Environmental Biologist (secondary Planetologist) Bryce Jontix standing, waiting to give her his report. Hardly noticing, she waved her hand for him to go on.

Bryce cleared his throat again, before beginning. All the other officers were barely looking at him, and all seemed sunk in a kind of shocked daze. But the Captain was clearly in the worst state. For one moment he remembered her threat to him, after he had pushed her bodily ahead of himself into the escape capsule. Then he began.

“Right, well I have some good news: This place is, in fact, a better planet to have crashed on than Earth.”

All of the down turned eyes in the tent looked at him askance.

Chief Engineer Sandhurst drawled at him bitterly: “We don’t really need you to tell us that we’re going to survive. We were hoping for a little bit better than that.”

“Hmm? You’re not thinking broadly enough, people.” Bryce kept his voice cheerful. “Gao, does this planetary map contain only visual data, or more comprehensive scans?”

The Marine Sergeant indicated that within the file were available all the possible gathered data.

“Excellent. Very good work. Right then, Chief Sandhurst, I assume from those scans you could locate a suitable site for the mining of titanium and other ores?”

Sandhurst grunted a reply, which Bryce took to mean ‘Yes’.

“Excellent. And how long before your team can have the beginnings of a universal metallurgical smelting facility set up?”

Several of the Officers uttered cries of disbelief, but eventually Sandhurst replied, “Well, if we cannibalise some of the laser systems from the craft, we could have a basic one up and running by tomorrow.”

Once again, the reaction of most of the crew was surprise, but the Chief assured them that it could be done.

“So,” continued Bryce, “would you rather set that up at the mining site, or here at base?”

“Hmm? Oh, well transporting the ore by shuttle would be less energy efficient, so if we were mining I would rather do the refining there. But wh-”

Bryce cut him off. He was not sure whether he was suggesting something completely ridiculous, but if not, then he might just save them all from being stranded, possibly forever. “And Blake, given access to all facilities, could you construct a small scale Cold Fusion Generator?”

“Well, once the metallurgical refinement begins, I suppose so. But I would need a little help manufacturing the ‘heavy water.’”

“We could help there again, Blake.” Offered Sandhurst, and he began explaining the modifications required to his refining rig that would allow such a procedure. For a few minutes there was excited conversation along these lines, during which Beutron announced that he had found a heavy metal ores deposit site approximately two hundred kilometres from their current location. The prospect of having a reliable source of energy production greatly improved everybody’s mood, until Donner brought them all back down to earth again, by pointing out that even with an abundance of energy supplied to make their stay more comfortable, they were still looking at a year and a half before the emergency beacon had any possibility of transmitting in the clear. Then, Bryce dropped his bombshell.

“Unless we can tow it into the clear.”

There was a moment of stunned silence, and then Donner burst out with “What? The coronal effect of this star is six million kilometres across! Even at full velocity, a completely charged escape shuttle couldn’t pull it that far in several months! And no pilot could survive that long in a lifeboat anyway.”

“No, that is true.” Conceded the Environmental scientist, “But I wasn’t thinking of towing it with the shuttles.” Bryce swallowed, and looked into Captain Ilse’s eyes as he spoke, “Why can’t we build a warp ship to tow the thing?”

The silence that followed this remark was almost worse than the outburst of derision he had expected. Then Donner said quietly, “Will that be all, Captain?” Bryce hung his head.

Ilse looked at the scientist, standing with his head down, and thought rapidly. “Officer Jontix, when you said before that this planet was a better one to have landed on than earth, what exactly did you mean?”

“Well... just that it is not only unspoilt, but that it has a smaller gravity well than our home planet’s. And if I remember my basic Einsteinian Physics, escape velocity is a logarithmic function of gravitational pull, so...”

Blake chimed in, “It’s not just fourteen percent easier to get off world, it’s more like twenty!”

“Counting air density and resistance,” offered Beutron, “which will be less, due to the lower gravity as well, maybe twenty five.”

“But what could we use to get the damn thing up, anyway?” objected Gao, “I mean I like the idea, but we are talking about building a Warp ship here!”

Sandhurst stood at this stage, and the grizzled Engineer took charge of the conversation. “Actually, Marine, it’s not as ridiculous as it sounds. Every member of my department had to construct a working experiment of a Hagenfield Envelope Generator, in order to gain their engineering degree. Now granted, the larger you make the craft, the more difficulties you encounter, but if we kept the crew size down, to say two members...”

“What about the Lasers, and field generation chambers...”

“Argon’s going to be impossible to get...”

“Yes, but gem deposits shouldn’t. A ruby laser isn’t as good, but would it do?”

“...I mean essentially any space craft is just a double hulled airtight bucket...”

“...and we could tow the thing up with six of the Lifeboats, providing we can recharge them.”

“Oh, power. I guess you’ll need to build two Cold fusion plants, Blake.”

“Hell, why not? Hey, could the escape capsules form part of the finished vessel? They could manoeuvre it when in orbit. Possibly detach for the beacon capture operation.”

“I wonder if Medical could grow us a simple atmosphere scrubbing culture?”

“Alright, hold up!” Captain Ilse had to shout. “Two hours. I want another Officers meeting, containing a full feasibility report on the construction of a simple Warp capable vessel. However, there are a few modifications I need.” She did not make eye contact with Bryce as she listed them, “I want a crew of six or seven, and some basic military capability: a couple more of your ruby lasers ought to do it, and some simple design mods to lower its already tiny radar signature. We still don’t know what is out there, folks, and we need to be ready for anything. The facilities can be basic, and we can

probably do without artificial gravity, but the crew might find themselves on board and in unexpected situations. Let's give them every option we can think of. Chief Engineer, how long are we talking?"

Sandhurst mused, then "Well, essentially you are talking about a very small light scouting, or recon vessel, captain. I guess a basic model, maybe a week?"

"Fine," she said, "I want it up in four days. Dismissed."

Everyone was a little stunned at her abruptness, but scurried off to continue figuring their tasks. It would probably take longer than she wanted, but with one hundred and thirty nine highly trained Command Starship crew working twenty four hours, Ilse might have herself a ship again, and much sooner than she had dared hope. Then she realized that someone was still in the tent.

Bryce Jontix stepped closer to her, and she stiffened.

"Captain--"

"Well done Jontix, I knew you would help me get back on track."

The scientist frowned. "Captain, I also remember the word you used for that track you needed to get back on to: Revenge. Are you sure about this? You can't seriously be thinking of trying to hunt them down..."

She rounded on him: "Bryce, somewhere out there is the Unity Stigmata Class Cruiser, Path of Light, and on it are the ambassador who is somehow responsible for me losing my ship, and my lover! And some horrible connection between it all that I am the closest Command Officer to figuring out! It was limping away from a firefight when we last saw it--"

"You can't ask us to do this for you!"

"Who said you were coming?"

He rocked back on his heels. She looked away from his eyes. Damn it. She had called Riggs her 'Strength'. Was Jontix now playing her Conscience?

He turned and walked towards the door, the man who had saved her life seven hours ago, his broad shoulders held with immense dignity.

"Bryce!"

He turned, and his glittering blue eyes were steely as he set his jaw and raised an eyebrow.

"Ah... I was wondering what we should call the ship?"

His face softened somewhat. He realized that this was as close he was going to come to getting an apology from her; or a heartfelt thanks. His inventive, quick mind turned over, and from his own background found the perfect answer:

"The Peregrin." He said simply, then turned and left the tent.

CHAPTER 7

RIC

Darkness.

Silence.

Then there was a sound, so faint that it was debatable whether it was there at all or just an artifact of consciousness yearning for an end to the sensory void. A low whisper, vaguely indiscernable but every now and then a snatch of something that could be a word, a syllable, a meaning. The consciousness listens ever more intently, turning its attention outwards in an attempt to validate this perception. Scanning around it sees an anomaly in the sea of shadows, a patch of something that isn't darkness, no more than a pinprick. The consciousness moves hesitatingly towards it, and the sound grows imperceptibly louder. Slowly it gains speed, ever more hungry for stimulation. The darkness fades to the edges of awareness as it gets closer, and the sound grows with it, the whisper a roar and the pinprick a radiance until all is.....

“Are you awake??.....”

“Whuh??”

“About time.”

“Hoositwaschappen.....” Riggs trailed off and stumbled to his feet, finding a wall to lean forward against. He shook his head to clear it. Then he did it again just to make sure. With cartoon sound effects. He hadn't taken stock of his surroundings yet, but he was fairly sure that it would put whomever was around slightly off guard.

“Well I see you haven't grown up much since we last encountered each other” chimed the female voice.

Riggs paused, a thoughtful look on his face. He considered his next move. Looking down he saw that the floor beneath him was metal, inlaid with intricate swirling patterns and the insignia of Unity, a four-pointed white star. That meant he was likely on a starship, probably the *Path of Light*. The edge of a thick midnight blue rug was just behind his feet- he judged that he had been lying on it when he came to. Private quarters, he reasoned. Probably the captain or another high ranking officer with fittings like that. He shook his head, this time in disbelief, and with a purposely audible sigh turned around.

“Is it that much of a chore to see me again? I was sure that after last time you'd be over the moon to catch up with me again.” lightly mocked the voice again.

Before Riggs lay a large ornate sleeping pallet, curiously out of place in the large room in which it dominated. The walls and roof were metal, with similar swirling patterns to the floor, and there was a view screen and panel on the wall opposite. He noticed that the midnight blue rug on the floor was matched by the bedcovers and the upholstery on the lounge chair that sat beside it. Reclined upon the lounge was a woman of about 30 years of age, her auburn hair lush around her shoulders. She wore a Unity uniform, its white breeches and crimson tunic tight fitting enough to not leave any doubt of the desirability of her lean, taut figure. Considering the conservative religious beliefs of the Unity movement, Riggs had always thought it ironic that their officers were attired thusly. From where he stood he minded not at all, and besides he'd seen worse excesses of hypocrisy in the so called Church-of-the-Stars. The woman before him was Dana Morgante, a woman who used the Unity movement as much as it used her. Riggs was

familiar these days with that aspect of her personality- in a far away time and place he had loved her. That time was long gone.

“You tried to kill me Dana” Riggs replied.

“You can hardly blame me, dear Emile. We were both victims of circumstance beyond our control, but bricks in the wall. Cookies crumbling. You know the way it is“

“You did give the order though”

“Details, mere details” she responded airily, rising from the lounge and pacing over to where Riggs stood. She ran her fingers lingeringly over his broad torso as she circled him slowly. “The rest of that interlude was enjoyable enough though, wasn’t it?”

“Enjoyable sure, but in the end just another mere detail.” A throwaway line sure, but Riggs could not suppress an inward grin as Dana sharply withdrew her hand from him and strode purposely back to the lounge, back turned.

At length Dana turned, and studied the man before her through narrowed green eyes.

“How much has Ambassador Entchev told you?”

Riggs took a punt. “Everything, she told us everything when we took her on board the *Gryfalcon*. “

“So you know about the Attica Project?”

Riggs paused, and took a calculated risk. “No. I don’t know what you’re talking about”

The set of Dana’s jaw clenched slightly, and Riggs knew he had guessed correctly. There was no such project.

“So what did she tell you?”

Riggs went for broke. “Come now, we both know that what she told me and Captain Martinez has the potential to break Unity apart- I’m sure the Captain is on her way to the Plutiarchy as we speak.”

Dana smiled and looked straight at him. “Ah yes, the erstwhile Captain Ilse Martinez. We’ve been monitoring them down on the surface of Thycessa IV. It seems that her and the remains of her crew are deconstructing their liferafts. Probably looking to construct a makeshift ship and chase after us. How very tenacious.....”

Riggs considered the response. She hadn’t refuted his assertion of the potentiality of whatever it was that Entchev knew. That lent weight to it being correct. Of course Dana might have guessed that he was bluffing, but he figured that she hadn’t. She hadn’t seemed to at least. Internally he winced. He’d much rather someone was trying to shoot him. It was so much simpler.

“So then why stick around with so much at stake?”

“Oh you are perceptive today- its just so much more fun this way Emile, you’ll just loooooove it I’m sure. We’ll be ready for her when she comes, don’t worry your pretty little Marine head about that.”

Riggs had a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach.

CHAPTER 8

CJW

Thycessa IV is an ancient planet with a mysterious past. Galactic scouts first chartered the system over 10,000 years ago and mapped the solely survivable planet in it extensively, noting its breathable atmosphere and temperate climate as ideal for colonisation. Yet the system lay off the major trade routes and so interest in the planet was restricted to the ranks of Academia – chiefly for Planetologists and Archaeologists, intrigued in the history and disappearance of the planet's civilisation.

That the planet had once been populated by some race was beyond question. Dwellings cropped up in the most unlikely of circumstances, generally simple in design, carved from stone or constructed from brick-like materials. It was not these dwellings though that sparked the interest of the scientists of all fields though – it was the monolithic structures, the archaic monuments that had been built in the four corners of the world – forests, mountains, oceans, ice floes and lakes of the world, the enormous temples and their bizarre designs were to be located in all forms of terrain. Strangely, while the dwellings appear to have been constructed for figures of roughly humanoid shape or size, the temples were massive, curiously oversized structures and the objects of worship depicted on their walls were similarly disproportionately sized if the scale of the carvings and murals were to be believed.

The deities were strange creatures and the temples appeared to be directed towards several unique, utterly alien deities which appeared to be geographically specific, indicating at the very least that whatever civilisation had created these, had developed at least to a level of polytheistic worship of these alien entities. Certain deities had partial characteristics which were similar in appearance to creatures found locally, but of a vastly smaller size. Why one temple pictured a bi-pedal creature, hairy and big eared standing next to the temple itself, looming over it! Such lack of scale was inherent in other discovered ancient civilisations and art-styles, yet the workings of these people was so detailed and specific, that the viewer could not help but wonder how such a belief system could exist in such a rational and obviously talented a race.

Certain caverns in the mountain ranges contained well-preserved hieroglyphics, appearing to detail the history of at least the group in the region. Once again, the artwork was highly developed and ornate, coloured painting in some sections, stylised etching in another, occasional carvings and statues highlighting specific and apparently important periods of their past.

Theories about the Galaxy, scientists from both Unity and the Plutarchy have debated endlessly (within and without) about the mysterious race that once populated the world then apparently disappeared without trace. For not one member of the race that once inhabited the planet has ever been accounted for, no remains of any sentient creatures have yet been discovered on the planet. Radioactive samples of 'recent' constructions indicate they were somewhere between 9-12,000 years old, approximately the time the Galactic Scouts first entered the system. Geological and botanical samples indicate no

Extinction Level Event occurred within the last million years and there is no evidence that the civilisation ever developed space travel – in fact the only tools or constructions found appear quite crude yet effective in design. The only evidence indeed that whatever race had populated this world had even noted the stars were crude star shaped object of various sizes placed around or inside the temples and certain sections of mountains and clearings. They range from small sized green stoned objects to huge stone monuments chiselled out of bedrock.

This is of some small import to the figures that have crashed to the surface. The lifeboat of Captain Ilse Martinez and Science Officer Bryce ‘Jaunt’ Jontix had crash-landed on the mountain near several other groups and their craft. Even now the groups were jury-rigging their vessels into a space-worthy vessel, to pursue and regain the Ambassador as well as Marine Captain Riggs and then resume their mission in returning to the Plutiarchy.

The sun was slowly setting over the mountain range as Ilse mopped the sweat from her brow – with their equipment and personnel it would take possibly another day to have a vessel capable of housing them all and getting back to space-flight – only a short trip to be sure, but the *Path of Light* was still out there waiting for some reason and she wanted revenge...and she wanted Riggs. Exhausted she dropped to the ground near the engine feed, she began to mount a bracket to house another four engines and sighed – her day could not possibly get any worse...

Officer Jontix, normally happy enough with Damage Control and repairs, was delighted to be finally out of the spaceship and onto an unknown planet, to be fulfilling his primary role on the mission. Ofcourse he’d heard of Thycessa IV and its history before, but to see it first hand, to examine the hieroglyphics even for just a short time was overwhelming. Excusing himself to explore the locale for food and shelter, he strode up the mountain towards one of the temples to explore the surrounds and appreciate the vista. One of the shuttles had apparently crashed into one of the giant stone star figurines that had lay on the ground around the temple, destroying it utterly.

Initially he decided to ascend the outside of the temple and sat astride the head of a gargoyle creature which resembled the head of a bat atop of the body of a squatting ape or similar hairy creature. This statue was malevolently eating one of the horse-like creatures that roamed these hills, though it was holding it aloft in one hand. Marvelling at the complexity of the work combined with the naivety of scale, Jontix shook his head and gazed below. As he looked around the base of the temple, he noted the 5 star-shaped monuments on the ground, one of which was utterly destroyed now by the spacecraft. The star monuments themselves lay horizontal to the ground and formed a complete ring around the temple, which was interesting – perhaps this temple was an astronomical observatory after all? Looking around and noting the fading light, Bryce settled back against the rock wall and waited for the stars to appear.

It would be interesting to note how clearly he would see from here, 10 metres up the side of the temple, a mere quarter of the way up to the top of the building. Musing away about

ancient worlds, their peoples and beliefs was not his strong point, but he noted he ought to try to get into the temple soon and examine it to see whether there was a way up to the top, there being no obvious external means of ascending to its summit.

Inside the temple unheeded by those working outside, the ground trembled...

She walked along the darkened corridor, padding as softly as she could. She had to get to a lifeboat, an escape pod, anything to get away from that Unity vessel out there. The secret information that she carried, that was inside her head, could prove to be the un founding of the Church of the Stars, the hated Unity.

She was unsettled by the sequence of events that had transpired so recently; her knowledge of certain 'information' which could cripple the Unity, her last two years fleeing from her past, on board the Lamorak, its battle firstly with Unity vessels and their escape and then finally the 'chance' encounter with the desperate Gryfalcon and its crew.

'Chance.....sure thing,' she whispered to herself 'is there no escape from my fate? Here, in the periphery, why couldn't it have simply been pirates? They'd have taken our supplies and been on their way without ever knowing who I was, but no....it had to be that ship.'

That damned Marine had recognised her, Emile Riggs, a Captain or some such rank now by the look of it. No matter now, he was probably dead, but the other one might have recognised her too,...the ships Captain, Martinez? She had not heard her use that name in some time, surely it had actually been the notorious Ilse Muralaeyev? Yes, Ilse Muralaeyev.....now there was someone to be feared, why the name change though, was she similarly trying to hide....?.

She propped and looked around - she had come a long way down the corridor without realising it, had she been daydreaming?

'I've probably gone past a couple of pods already,' she hazarded, peering ruefully back along the corridor 'ah well...'

Turning back around and softly moving on she had seen Riggs approaching towards her down the corridor and her eyes had widened in shock – why, she frantically thought, why does he keep popping up?

Such was her stunned disbelief she did not notice the dull impact against the hull slightly behind her, the floor panels trembling slightly. It was only a momentary sharp noise, a brief flash of light behind her, but suddenly the hull behind her was exploding inwards, the wall peeling back, the explosive force picking her up like a rag doll and throwing her to the ground, striking her head....

Then no more...

Indistinct shapes, a noise...a voice perhaps, clearer now...the scene swam into focus now and the pain came with it. Men, combat troops...in Unity uniform...

'Sendrine Ambassador Sarah Entchev? You are coming with us.'

With a shudder she returned to semi-consciousness and tried to focus on her surroundings. Had it all been a dream? Images were playing throughout her mind, she didn't know what was real and what was imaginary – she honestly could not distinguish fact from fiction. Had she imagined all of that, could she possibly have dreamt everything, would she shake her head now and wake up in her bed safely, as a small child back on Sendra, jump out and run in the fields again when life had been so simple and carefree?

Consciousness rose in her, awareness grew and the comforting ocean of darkness she drifted in began to fade away. Her eyes remained partially closed and difficult to open, something caked her eyes together. Blearily looking around, she forced her eyelids opened and immediately groaned, the bright light penetrated her skull and sent searing shards of pain into her skull.

Gritting her teeth she forced them open again, memories flooding back and the dawning realisation that the pain was nothing new to her. As the moments passed, the pain subsided and eventually her surroundings cleared, confirming her worst fears.

Her arms and legs were pinned to the wall by metal restraints and she was utterly naked. It felt as though she had been brutally searched, as the pain started to shoot in waves throughout her once more it felt as though she had been internally examined as well. Her neck was stiff and she noticed rivulets of dried blood down her remaining breast, finishing at her taugt stomach. As she leant forward to examine herself closer, the metals restraints withdrew tightly causing her to return to her upright position against the wall, forcing her to examine her surroundings closer.

It appeared to be a regulation Unity Interrogation Room. To her left and right lay two benches, lined with equipment she was all too familiar with. Probes, electrodes, syringes, lashes and countless instruments of pain and suffering – such were the tools of the Church of the Stars. As she took in her dire predicament, began to catalogue every device and calmly estimate exactly how long she could withstand before she broke, a low chuckle rolled throughout the room, and as she looked straight up towards the source of the noise, she noticed him.

A bald, imposing figure loomed over her, but even as her gaze moved along his imposing physical stature, it halted at the face. It was a face straight from hell. Sheer malevolence played across it, his eyes completely jet-black examined her closely as an impish smirk spread beneath a coarse black moustache. Powerful arms reached out and grasped her normal arm, twisting it painfully, exposing the vein and a hypodermic slid in, releasing some unknown substance into her system. Even as Sarah tried to recoil from his reach and cruel visage, he playfully reached out and stroked her breast, eyes fixed to her own.

'Ah you awake again Ambassador Entchev. My name is Belos and I'll be your host for the remainder of your life. Please enjoy your stay. I will return shortly to have a little chat, you and I.'

Sarah tilted her head to watch as Belos turned and laughed, walking towards the door. As she gazed, her head became lighter, her eyelids drooped and her head slumped forward, her sight falling to her metallic replacement left torso...her *cybernetic* torso and arm....where her nipple would have been, a red light pulsed slowly in unison with the beating of her heart, distant memories tried to nag away at her mind, to grab her attention. Her eyes closed...

Three floors above, on-board the *Path of Light*, Riggs lay back on his bed. He was worried, infinitely so. While he understood strategy and general bureaucracy, these sort of galactic politics were beyond his level of comprehension. So, Ambassador Entchev of Sendra knew something that would affect the Unity on an enormous scale, a horrible truth that could change the galaxy forever if what he could gather from his exchange with Captain Dana Morgante had been correct.

Riggs lay back and stretched out. He knew better than to attempt escape from his cabin straight away – cameras and recorders were measuring his every move, armed guards undoubtedly stood outside the door and no doubts there were various stun devices in the room and outside just to make sure. He and Dana had enjoyed a past, it was true and it was probably why he, even now, entertained the respect of a cabin and not torture. Yet she was Unity first and foremost and he guessed that she would work on Entchev for now and once she was finished with her, well maybe she would come for him. More immediate though was his concern for Ilse, she would pursue certainly if she could, but could not possibly hope to achieve anything but her death against the Unity Battle Cruiser. He had to get some sort of warning to her, he had to get out of this cabin somehow....

He lay back, thought of Dana in her revealing uniform and a warm glow grew in his stomach...could he? Would she be so naïve as all that? Did he have another option? And Ilse, how could he ever explain this to her if everything worked out? Frustrated, thinking of options that might possibly have eluded him, he came up blank. Perhaps then....perhaps it would work, he shifted restlessly in bed, exposing just enough to make a point and started to shorten his breathing. Lying back, hoping like hell whoever was watching this was enjoying themselves, he stared sightlessly at the ceiling and stroked himself, hoping the sound recorders were good...

‘Oh Dana...’

CHAPTER 9

SAB

“Christ!” yelled Bryce, sitting bolt upright. Sweat was pouring from his every pore, and he was surprised to find that his torso wasn’t the only upright thing about his body. The... vision? No, it had been more than that: more visceral, more immersive. It had been more real than any full sensory interruption VR program that he had ever encountered. Whilst dozing on the outside dais of this bizarre Temple of the ancient Thycessan civilisation, he had lost all sense of self, of person.

He had actually thought himself to be the persons in his dream.

Rubbing his temples and shaking the sweat out of his eyes, the planteologist cautiously tried to review what he had just experienced. That woman... Sarah... Sarah Entchev! Yes, he had been aware of her identity, even though she had not said or heard her first name during the vision. And then it had changed... he had been Marine Captain Riggs. That Wanker!

Captain Ilse Dejenovich Muraleyev looked up as the commotion neared her, where she worked by a night-light on the engine mount of the jury-rigged space craft. Bolting at full speed across the basin of the extinct volcano, winding his way through the temporary shelters, and improvised smelting and light industrial machinery, was the crew’s planetologist, Officer Jontix. He was shouting her name.

An hour later the Captain, Bryce and the chief medical Officer, were reviewing Bryce’s report in the tent that served as the camp’s hospital. He had told Doctor Hart every detail he could remember of his ‘vision’, and far fetched as it all sounded, she had followed the captain’s orders, and run some basic tests on Bryce.

“Well, it’s interesting...” Doctor Hart conceded, “Officer Jontix does score a standard 34.5 on the modified Ganzfeld PsiQ rating-”

“Meaning?” demanded Ilse.

“Sorry Captain: the score is out of one hundred, and 25.0 is the success that pure chance would dictate.”

“You’re telling me I’m psychic?” gaped Bryce. The rational scientist in him found such ideas difficult to wrangle with, but in view of his recent experience, he had to concede a little doubt.

“It’s not uncommon, Officer. But I hardly think that proves the veracity-”

The Captain interrupted her, again: “Jontix, this vision: you say that at one point you were in the body of Marine Captain Riggs. Well I have worked with Captain Riggs for a very long time, and we are... close. Tell me something that you wouldn’t otherwise be able to know about what he was thinking.”

“Oh, well...” Bryce thought it an excellent suggestion, a kind of objective test of his subjective experience. “There was a woman.”

The Captain’s face might have stiffened momentarily, but she nodded for him to go on.

“Dana...? Yes, that was her name. She appeared to be the Captain of the Stigmata Class Cruiser that had captured him and the Ambassador.”

“Dana!?” Ilse couldn’t help but exclaim. Doctor Hart and Officer Jontix both looked at her askance. “Dana is the captain of a Unity Cruiser? The Path of Light? Well, it’s possible I suppose... Tell me, what was Captain Riggs thinking about her?”

“Well, to tell you the truth, Ma’m, there seemed to be some history between them.”

Ilse nodded, but kept her lips pursed.

“And, well... he was, ah, touching himself.” Once he had said it, Bryce had the good taste to look away from the Captain. Doctor Hart busied herself with a tray of surgical implements. When next Ilse spoke, she was all business.

“And you say the Sendrine Ambassador, Sarah Entchev, was being tortured?”

“Yes Captain. Horribly. One half of my- sorry, her body was completely replaced by artificial cyborg parts. Although that may have been from the boarding vessel’s incursion blast. But there was definitely a man... Belos.” Bryce took a drink of water from a canteen; he was clearly affected by the memory. “She seemed to believe that she had some information that could destroy the Church of the Stars forever, could cripple the Unity...”

The Captain turned away from them both. She too had clearly been rocked by the evidence that Bryce had offered. In a few moments though, she raised her head, and without looking at them, said:

“Measure him up for a suit, Amanda. Bryce, you’re on the team.”

And with that she swept from the tent.

Before returning to the almost completed spacecraft, Ilse paused in a dark section of the camp, and let the tears roll down her face. Riggs! Not Riggs.

But there was no way that Jontix could have known about Dana. Riggs had told her about the woman when they were alone. Alone, and naked. It had been a moment of vulnerability for him, or so she thought, and she knew that he would not have told another soul in the universe. And now, was she to believe the word of this man? Her officer, when he told her that Riggs was... no, she couldn’t even think it.

But what reason did Bryce have to lie?

Dashing the tears from her cheeks, she stormed out into the work area.

“Blake!”

He appeared from behind a bulkhead, with a paint compressor full of the radio-opaque black gunk that they were coating the outside of the Peregrin with in his hand. “Ma’m?”

“Get everybody out of bed! I want this crate in the air by morning!”

“Bu- Yes Ma’m!”

In the end it took eighteen hours to complete the spacecraft. It was little more than a airtight polyhedral bucket, as Beutron had quipped at the staff meeting when the idea was mooted by Jontix. It had no artificial gravity, no medical or recreation facilities, no mess hall, no separate quarters, or even beds: just sleeping bags tethered to the walls, and six shuttle seats, with harness belts bolted on.

But it did have twelve manoeuvring engines (including the two detachable escape pod/ come excursion shuttles), and a Haganfield Envelope Generator, to enable it to go to warp. They would be able to tow the distress beacon out of Thycessa’s inhibitory coronal

effect, which would mean that the crew of one hundred and thirty six on the ground could expect rescue any time within the next two weeks, depending on the location of the nearest Plutiarchy Vessel.

Bryce swallowed, and noted several other things about the 'Peregrin'; yes, it had officially been christened that, and de-facto registered as a Plutiarch Scout Ship.

The Peregrin had no rounded surfaces, and was coated with some reflective, but black substance, to keep its already minimal radar signature low. The number of engines to its weight would provide for a remarkable acceleration in sub-warp conditions, and the size of its Warp generator compared to its mass was unnecessarily large, which would make it a fast little bugger in a warp contest, too.

But perhaps most worryingly, it was equipped with two mirror-focused ruby crystal lasers fore, and one aft, of weapons grade power. They accounted for much of the weight of the ship, and Bryce couldn't think of a justification for them, on a beacon towing mission.

He swallowed as he held onto his harness straps, and fought motion sickness as the craft strained to escape the planet's gravity well: no kinetic suppression, either, he thought. The other five officers on board were feeling uncomfortable too, but all seemed buoyed by the shared secret of their mission. He himself had been included at the last minute, and explained by the captain as the Damage Control Specialist.

The last of the shuddering fell off, and they felt the pressure of the lift off fade, as their engines cut out. Then Captain Muraleyev spoke.

"Right, Communications: Donner, find me that beacon. Weapons/ Sensors: Beutron, start a sweep for warp routes following the last known trajectory of the Path of Light. Blake, how's the Helm and Systems check coming? And Engineering: Mr Sandhurst, you are happy with the Peregrin's performance so far?"

"Well, Captain... so far so good. I'll let you know how we are doing once we've tried her at a Warp jump."

"Very good, Officers." She turned in her seat to look at Bryce over her shoulder. "Sorry, Mr Jontix, but we may be a little delayed in our return to Thycessa IV. We are going to see if we can't hunt down The Sendrine Ambassador, and Marine Captain Riggs, after we have towed the beacon clear of this star. You just tell me if you start having any more 'feelings' about their location, O.K?"

The other Officers laughed amongst themselves as they got on with their various tasks.

Bryce shook his head. Dr Hart, still safely back on the planet, had only just finished heat sealing his airtight emergency suit, and released him in time to see the 'Christening ceremony' for the craft he was now strapped into. No champagne was available, however one of the Ensigns from Catering had already set up a contraband still, and produced several litres of sour beer, in various canteens, tins, and hardened glass medical containers. One of these was substituted for the bubbly.

How appropriate: Christened in beer, thought Bryce. For surely, this had to be the most ill conceived venture any of the six of them had ever embarked upon.

CHAPTER 10

DJS

“We should reach the drop point sometime around zero one hundred hours captain” Blake said whilst double checking his calculations.

“Excellent” replied Captain Muraleyev.

“Beutron, we need that warp route, once we have dropped off this beacon I don’t want to waste more any time”.

“You’ll have it captain” replied Beutron awash with a pale light from the sensors upon his face.

The Peregrin and her crew relatively crawled threw space with the beacon in toe, once the they had set it in place they could begin there hunt for Marine Captain Riggs and the Sendrine Ambassador, Sarah Entchev who had been taken captive upon The Path of Light.

“Mr Jontix, anytime you might like to let me know where the Path of Light is headed would be fine with me” Captain Muraleyev said with a rye smile upon her face.

“I’m sorry captain my newfound psychic ability doesn’t seem to have an on/off switch, well not yet anyway” Bryce replied with an overly broad smile.

“We’ll have to do it the old fashion way then won’t we, Mr Sandhurst I want the Peregrin prepped for warp ASAP”.

“Yes Ma’m”.

Captain Ilse Dejenovich Muraleyev unbuckled herself from the command seat and floated up a little with a light push, she shook her head and thought to herself, at least this bucket of bolts is almost undetectable by radar and fast, dam fast.

The repair’s to the Peregrin were rushed and the most annoying thing about this was the lack of an antigrav system onboard. This made your everyday run of the mill exercises like walking and sleeping a real pain in the ass.

*

“The time of prophecy is upon us, as it was foretold so it shall be” Garfnd, high priest of the Nuk-Tar expressed to the gathering of the high council in a withered old voice.

“It is time for Nubble, young of Fanik hatched upon the eve of the Bayon-Tar to fulfill his Min-Tuk and journey to the Menitar system and seek out the Sarraa N-kev”.

There was a deathly silence in the grand chamber, all new of the prophecy, it had been passed down from young to young for almost all of time, the Nuk-Tar hatched on the eve of the ‘Bayon-Tar’ a ceremony which occurred every 300 years was too leave their world and seek out the Sarraa N-kev a weapon that would bring an end to the Erok. The Nuk-Tar and the Erok had warred for a millennia, the origins of the war have long been lost but the innate hatred of one race to the other is as strong today as it was in the beginning.

“I do not believe that Nubble, young of Fanik is capable of this task, he is not half the warrior of any of the young” said Symbiluk, Warchief of the Nuk-Tar. “Symbiluk,

you must have faith in the prophecy, so it was foretold so it shall be” replied Garfned wisely.

“We cannot leave a Min-Tuk of such importance to the weak, I am against it, prophecy or not” growled Symbiluk whilst standing up and slamming his fist upon the table.

“That is enough Symbiluk, our future is in Nubble, young of Fanik’s, none shall oppose him, he is the one” said Hiktar chief councilor of the Nuk-Tar coolly. At this Symbiluk stormed out of the meeting of the high council, Hiktar chief councilor of the Nuk-Tar looked at Garfned and said “I hope you are right about this, Nubble Garfned, the fate of our kind is in his hands”.

“All I can say Chief councilor is believe in the prophecy, too have waited this long and abandon it now would be folly, so it was foretold, so it shall be”.

*

Sendrine Ambassador Sarah Entchev and Marine Captain Riggs sat huddled together in a tiny cell, it was cold and Sarah’s partially cybernetic body offered little warmth to Riggs, however he held her close anyway. There was a long silence between them, it was finally Sarah who broke it.

“This is all my fault”

“Sarah, we have been through this already, its not...”

“If only I had turned myself in, in the beginning” cutting him off.

“You know power isn’t all its cracked up to be, look where it’s landed me, I’m not even human anymore” tears began to roll down her face.

“shhhh” comforted Riggs “It’s alright”.

“I’ve killed Riggs, I’ve killed lots of people, good people”. Riggs closed his eye’s and his grip around Sarah tightened a little.

“It’s alright” he muttered softly “It’s alright”.

Dana, Captain of The Path of Light watched this little heart warming moment upon a view screen in her private chambers on board the Stigmata Class Crusier. Her feelings for Riggs were strong but there was a hatred building inside of her. How could he sit there and listen to what the Ambassador had just confessed too and still comfort her.

*

Ilse motioned to Jontix to follow her, they retreated to the combined living quarters. “I think it would be a good idea if we recorded your dreams from now on assuming you have no objections of course” Bryce indicated that he didn’t have a problem with it.

“Good, we wouldn’t want to miss any information hinting at a more precise location of The Path of Light” said Ilse smiling.

“Captain?”

“Yes”

“With all due respect you could have asked me about this on deck.” Ilse nodded in agreement with Bryce.

“Is there something else you want to say to me?” Bryce had a glint in his eye which was could not be confused, he was flirting with her.

“Mr Jontix” she replied beginning to anger.

“You are a new member of this crew and on MY ship”

“I’m sorry Ma’m” rushed Bryce cutting her off mid-speech.

“I didn’t mean anything by it, I just...”

Donner’s voice came over the com system cutting him off, captain we are approaching the drop point.

“You just keep your thoughts too yourself Mr Jontix” Ilse said sternly while leaving the room.

Captain Muraleyev floated into the command room and buckled herself in, she was closely followed by Bryce who did the same.

“Mr Sandhurst, are we ready?”

“As ready as we’ll ever be captain” he replied.

“Good, Beutron punch that course into the warp drive, release and activate the Beacon”.

Within a few minutes the beacon was pulsing quietly in open space, it wouldn’t take too long for the rest of the crew left on Thycessa to be picked up and taken back home.

“OK lets see what this piece of junk has left in her, take her to warp”

The Peregrin speed out of sight at a remarkable speed in search of The Path of Light and their friends Marine Captain Riggs and the Sendrine Ambassador Sarah Entchev who were captives upon it.

CHAPTER 11

WC

Ilse paused to suck in another breath then raced after Bryce Jontix. She didn't know how far she could trust his newfound psychic powers to guide them but right now she didn't have many other options. Added to that it was kind of hard to concentrate with this bloody alarm system going off. He paused at a corner and glanced back at her, his brow furrowed in concentration.

"I think they're somewhere around this corner, Captain. There might be a couple of guards there too"

"Oh well, no point in sneaking around now" she replied matter of factly, unslinging the blaster from over her back.

Stepping around the corner she opened fire on the two guards stationed outside the holding cells. They had no chance, and Ilse grimaced at the smell of charred flesh as she stepped over the bodies. She looked around to see Jontix eying her strangely, but didn't have time to explain it to him. If his psychic powers were all they were cracked up to be then he ought to understand anyway. She turned back to the holding cell door and fired a blast at the lock.

*

Sarah held onto Riggs and stared at the smoking holding cell door. She hadn't wanted to stay locked in here forever but the list of people that might hunt her down was a long one so the alternative might well be worse. The door crashed in and she breathed a sigh of relief as Captain Ilse Dejenovich Muraleyev stepped through the opening brandishing a large blaster and decked out in a full combat outfit. The Captain looked them over and nodded at each of them.

"Riggs. Sendrine Ambassador. I hope that you're both feeling up to it cos we're going to have to fight our way out of this one."

The captain threw them each one of her blaster pistols and Sarah eyed the weapon cautiously. It was interesting how Muraleyev would now trust her enough to offer her a pistol when only a short time ago they had been fighting on different sides.

The sounds of gunfire suddenly began in the distance and a head poked around the doorframe. Sarah instantly recognised it as belonging to Bryce Jontix – he had developed a funny way of looking at her lately so she distrusted the man, and she had a hunch that the feeling was mutual.

"That'll be the docking bay, Captain. The Peregrin can hold them off for a while but this Path of Light is a fully crewed cruiser, give them time and they'll be swarming all over us"

Sparing a glance to check that the two of them were following after her, Captain Muraleyev stepped back out the door and began moving quickly towards the sounds of the gunfire. Sarah shared a quick look with Riggs as they moved through the door and he gave her a reassuring smile before checking the charge on his pistol.

*

Ilse was happy that Riggs and the ambassador were safe but now her thoughts turned towards her ship and crew. This was always going to be a risky mission, but she had hoped to slip in and out undetected. She cursed Beutron inwardly. He had promised that he could reroute the intruder sensors for one of the unused docking bays of the Path of Light, but no sooner had they stepped off the Peregrin than the alarm had started sounding.

As she backtracked along the corridors that she and Jontix had entered through she saw the light flash on the comm unit of her helmet.

Grunting in frustration she received the call from the Peregrin and barked into the mouthpiece "I thought I said maintain comm silence you fools."

"Ss ... sorry Captain" replied Blake, his image slowly materialising in the head-up display. "They've breached the Peregrin ma'am. Sandhurst and Donner went down in the first wave and then Beutron was cut in half ..." an explosion cut him off and he looked fearfully around. "I'm sorry Captain, we're done for ... but we'll go down fighting".

Another explosion sounded over the comm unit and the image of Blake faded all too quickly. Ilse admonished herself for snapping at him. Blake, Beutron, Sandhurst, Donner ... the whole crew ... all gone. People that she'd known for years and others that she should have got to know better.

Jontix ran into her from behind and she realised that she had stopped moving. Suddenly her whole body felt leaden.

"Captain ... Ilse ... we have to keep moving" he said, encouraging her with a tug on the arm. He was starting to get all too familiar with her.

She met eyes with him and a horrified look of understanding came over his features as she knew it would. She pushed the emotions down and buried them, the feeling all too familiar. Holding her arms out she brought Riggs and the ambassador to a halt.

"Okay, the Peregrin is down, people" she began, with a calmness of voice that surprised even herself, "any ideas how we can get off this flying fortress? Marine Captain Riggs? Sarah Entchev?"

*

"Umm ... maybe I can help" said Nubble, poking his head up somewhat sheepishly. He had ducked behind a maintenance locker when he heard footsteps approaching along the corridor. A true Nuk-Tar warrior would meet any such challenge head on, but, as Warchief Symbiluk was fond of reminding him, Nubble was no true Nuk-Tar warrior.

Suddenly four blasters were pointing straight at him and Nubble began to doubt the wisdom of having spoken up. He'd only done so because he'd been thinking about how Symbiluk always called him a coward and then about how high priest Garfned said that courage was a matter of perspective and opportunity and that Nubble was the chosen one and would be brave enough when the time came ... and then he'd heard the name Sarraa N-kev...

“Umm ... what I was going to say is that I just landed in that other docking bay over there and if you wanted then maybe I could offer you a lift in my spaceship ... that’s all”

The human with the big gun looked around at one of the others, an eyebrow raised underneath her visor.

“I think it’s telling the truth, ma’am” the other one replied.

Trying to not show his fear too much Nubble floated around from behind the maintenance locker and gestured for them to follow him down the corridor. He snuck a quick glance at the one called Sarraa N-kev, and wondered how she could possibly be the object of his Min-Tuk, the weapon that would help the Nuk-Tar to fight the Erok who they had fought for millennia without being able to defeat. She didn’t look much like the object of an ancient prophecy, at least not in Nubble’s opinion, and she certainly wouldn’t be what chief councillor Hiktar had expected when he set Nubble this mission. He shrugged his shoulders and thought to himself that maybe this would teach the priests to be so damn vague with their prophecies.

CHAPTER 12

AHHYHH

Nubble liked his ship, it was the first thing he'd really ever owned, as everything else was pretty much the property of the tribe, or the prophets or the military. He was a little house-proud. And he was worried about the humans and what they'd think. He'd never met free humans before, but all the literature pointed to them being untrustworthy, capricious, avaricious and bad tempered. However, there was nothing obviously about them in the Prophecy apart from the sacred name of Sarraa En'kev, so he didn't think that it would have hurt to have helped them out, and anything he could do to upset the Erok would have to be a good thing. He would be rewarded in the afterlife, if he didn't make it back in this life, he added. Plus he was getting lonely.

He floated down the steel corridors careful not to touch the humans, after all you never quite knew what you could catch from these alien creatures. Perhaps even their vices, after all they always seemed to be more troublesome as their numbers grew. Nubble was confident that he would be able to shed enough of Mishtari's sacred light from his own pious nature to perhaps help these four.

*

Ilse slowly slid to the ground. Her patience with Bryce Jontix was running out. The failures of his apparent psychic powers were getting more and more on her nerves, and the loss of the *Peregrin* and it's crew had robbed her of so much and every now and then she found herself stumbling and unable to focus her eyes, she'd tossed her helmet aside as the dearth of input from her ship caused her constant disorientation.

She'd been bound to that ship for six years now, and it had moved and responded to her like a lover, and now it was only willpower that kept her going. She'd been one of the first naval officers to be bound to a ship in the initial series of shipbindings, and now she had lost it, she wondered how much she had become like an amputee, with feelings and sensations in a phantom limb.

Ilse looked across to Sarah Entchev, the Sendrine Ambassador-in-exile with her gleaming metal arm and torso and spiders web of filaments that disappeared under her tanned skin, *she'd* lost an arm, and her entire people come to think of it, yet here she was still standing with pride, and poise trapped in a fight that had only become hers by accident.

*

"Is she going to be alright?" Asked Sarah as Riggs took a blood point from the weary looking *Peregrin* captain.

"I hope so," he said scratching with worry at his stubbled cheek. This was a difficult moment for Riggs, while he was quite keen not to ruin his chances with the Sendrine Ambassador, he was concerned for Ilse, someone who he'd been carrying a torch for for a while. "I really dunno what's wrong with her, shock maybe, the '*Grin*'d

been hers for a while, we lost a lot of good people on board that thing, these readings are a bit odd, anaemia? I dunno. Something's not right. Fuck it, I kill people for a living, I don't know much about making them better." Their eyes met for a moment, he gave her a sheepish little boy grin, before looking away. "Oi, you, Jonty! Got anything yet?"

"Jontix, Bryce Jontix" the thin man corrected, looking up from the nearby terminal, "and you'd do well to remember that Mr Riggs. You're going to need me to get off this cruiser, so I suggest that you get Captain Muraleyev up and lets get moving, I believe that I can get us through to the little creature's ship providing, of course, that it's not all some sort of trap." He said leveling his blaster at the little floating alien.

"No. No, Nubble not lie to you. Nubble want free just like humans. No friends here." It said looking around, and spreading its five arms innocently, as it drifted towards Sarah an imploring look on its round face.

"That's Marine Captain Riggs, Jonty." He hauled Ilse to her feet, and looked at Sarah. "You ready?" She nodded, hefting her pistol and setting her jaw. He grinned as he ducked his head and looped Captain Muraleyev's arm over his neck. "Alright team, let's move out."

*

Riggs followed behind the others half carrying Ilse, who was mumbling what sounded to him like orders to something, but her comms unit was gone, wherever her helmet was, and he put these mumblings down to shock. She still had her blaster in a white knuckled death grip and occasionally waved it menacingly at empty corridors, and ship fittings. They could all quite easily get killed here, but all he really wanted right now was a cigarette and a cold beer and to be somewhere else far from here.

*

"Right, we're almost there, I believe the hangar is empty apart from the alien ship, so we've got clear passage through." continued Bryce as he strode into the hangar control room. Looking through the windows down to the hangar, they could see Nubble's alien craft. It was egg shaped and lay on its side. Probably big enough to accommodate the five of them well enough for a short trip, and certainly not as alien in comparison to the strange little fellow who floated behind them.

Nubble couldn't contain his excitement at the sight of his ship, and it brought out a reddish flush along his pale blue skin.

"Come, we go. Safe there." He chirped as he accelerated down the stairway.

The hangar certainly seemed empty as they reached the ground level, and they cautiously passed from cover to cover wondering exactly when the *Path of Light* crew, or more importantly the troops on board would rumble them. There were a few technicians on the further side of the hangar, busy at work on other craft. Riggs looked at Bryce a moment who momentarily looked confused, but he straightened and strode after the squealing alien. Riggs hefted his carbine, and steadied Ilse on her feet as much as he could. She

batted his hands away irritably, as she had done a couple of times before, especially after that time on Sec-ID with the Dkovnik's and the twins...

The giggling alien reached his ship and let out a wail, which got everyone's attention, friend and foe alike, which was really the last thing they needed.

"What the hell's wrong with you?" snarled Sarah as she took cover beside the distraught alien.

"Ship broken, nasty, nasty, erok-darkan." He wailed arms flailing in distress. Sarah followed the general line of the flailing and saw three massive clamps that extended from the hangar deck up over the ship holding it securely at three points. She wondered if they had even pierced the hull, rendering it unspaceworthy.

"Riggs, we've got a problem," She called back.

"No shit," He called out returning fire at the hangar crew now approaching, the claxons had started up again. "Ask the goo-ball if he can get us out of here NOW!"

The claxons had roused Ilse, who now fired and swore fiercely at the scattering Unity technicians. They had about three minutes to come up with something before the troops arrived and things got *really* bad.

Sarah poked the now blue-black alien with the muzzle of her pistol as he quivered and gibbered. "Can you get us out of here?" The arm waving and gibbering continued, and shots rang out, and sprayed across the ship's hull which sent Nubble into a dervish of spinning hysteria. Sarah weighed her options, ducking as part of her cover rained down onto her cropped black hair. She swung back and slapped him with her cybernetic arm. The impact tore the remaining synthskin from her hand, and sent the creature sailing into the ship a few metres away, a shrieking blue shape hit the side of the ship, spread a little from the impact and sank to the floor in the rough shape that it had before.

Riggs crawled over the Sarah. "What's going on?"

"I sent Nubble to go check out his ship."

"That was brave of him, there's no cover between here and there." He eyed the ten or so metre distance.

"He was very concerned for his ship."

"Yeah, I can understand that."

Nubble regathered his thoughts, and his limbs, and raised himself up. His glorious ship was in the grasp of some nasty human construction and was getting shot at, this would not do. He passed in and began to check the systems, everything looked fine, it was just he had no way to break the shackles that robbed his little craft of its freedom. He poked his head out of the entrance.

"Ship ok. Thanky. Make claws let go, we go."

Riggs nodded. "I've got this, get everyone on board ok?" He looked at Sarah.

She nodded, and touched his hand. "Good luck."

He winked, "I'll be right back."

Riggs bolted for the stairs, hurdling over things, dodging shots, tumbling, and sliding his way from cover to cover. He composed himself at the base of the stairs and

checked his carbine. 'Locked and loaded' he thought to himself. He vaulted up the stairs taking two at a time, making it up to the hangar controls. He could see troops arriving at the other end of the hangar, and scanned the control deck for the release mechanism.

He heard the doors on the other side of the room slide open, and he fired without looking. Screams as a response were a good thing as the only people not likely to kill him were below him somewhere. He fiddled with the controls trying to get a feel for the unfamiliar system.

Downstairs, the techs had given up shooting and stayed down leaving the firefight to someone else. Troops were starting to arrive and for the moment there was a lull in the ways to die. Bryce climbed out of the spare engine housing that he had taken cover in and surveyed the situation. The blue thing waved at them agitatedly from its egg. The naval woman fired on the troops coming down the stairs, the marine was nowhere to be seen, and the ex-ambassador lay behind cover, not far from him and the eggship. He didn't need to be psychic to figure out that if they didn't move now then they never would.

"Now! Run you fool!" he hissed as he passed Sarah at full pelt and dove for the open hatchway.

She looked at him with some shock, before scrambling to her feet and after him. Nubble had retreated into his ship, and assumed the controls, firing up the systems and checking for damage. He might not have been much of a Nuk-tar warrior as WarChief Symbiluk used to remind him constantly, but he was a hell of a pilot and now with the blessing of Mishtari, the faith of the High Priest and as the child of the Prophecy he was confident that no harm could come to them. Mishtari would smile on him and his piety and enable him to bring to his people the ultimate weapon with which to vanquish their eons old foes, the Erok.

He turned to see Sarraa En'Kev, the one described in prophecy, clamber her way in, alongside the thin quiet one who had already wriggled is way into the craft.

"Nubble, is everything ready to go?" asked the element of his destiny.

"Yes. Much so." His hands continued flicking switches and he slid two arms into the control board.

"Then close the door and let's go." came a quiet voice from the back of the craft. Sarah turned only to be staring down the muzzle of a blaster.

Riggs continued to fumble his way down the panel.

"I blow things up," he muttered. "If I needed to work a computer I'd get a fucking tech." He saw the hangar slowly filling with Unity Troops, and wondered exactly how he'd get out of this. There were shots from over his shoulder and he ducked and rolled as screams rang out from more troops entering the door. He looked up to see Ilse standing over him, pistol in hand. She moved to the keyboard, gesturing for him to cover her, and tapped away at the computer. From the corner of his eye he saw the landing claw begin to release its grip on the alien ship.

"Right, let's go." Riggs grabbed her arm and pushed her towards the stairs, before stopping and leaving a long fused grenade on the counter. "We've got about twenty seconds." The duo slid and jumped down the stairs and dove for cover as shots started ringing out, and snapping off the deck near them. There was a mighty explosion as the control room above shattered in a fireball that blew the hangar's occupants from their

feet. As molten metal and shattered plasteel rained down around them Riggs and Ilse rose to a crouch and gained their bearings. Unity personnel ran about in panic putting out fires and barking orders at each other. Fires burned behind them and the only way was forward. Riggs looked up to where the ship was and through the smoke and haze he saw it free and clear of the locking claw, and shooting out of the mag field and into space.

“Fuck.”

Ilse followed his gaze to the retreating dot as it mingled with all the other pinpricks of light in the starscape. She slumped to the ground as the adrenaline rush wore off.

A few minutes passed as the sounds of the damaged *Path of Light* continued on around them. Riggs stared at the floor, tossed his helmet over his shoulder, and wandered over to a fallen technician, going through his pockets. It was on the third one that he found what he was looking for, and Riggs lit up two smokes on a burning maintenance droid as he returned to Ilse, sitting sullenly on the floor. He passed one to her.

“I don’t smoke.”

“It’s never too late to learn.”

“Right now, it might be.”

“Well it’s not as if it’s going to kill you then is it?”

“Point,” she conceded reaching for the cig.

The damage and fires were slowly coming under control, and crews were starting to lose some of their earlier hysteria. Riggs drew back, and blew a stream of smoke in the air. Ilse’s eyes watered a little and coughed from the unfamiliar smoke, but the smoke and flames from the last few minutes were probably contributing to that as well.

Riggs flicked the butt expertly at a passing clean-up droid, which regarded him for a moment, sucked up the butt and moved on. He hauled himself to his feet.

“Let’s go. We can’t stay here.”

She nodded and took the proffered hand up. They calmly walked across the hangar bay. He’d already slid out of his combat armour, and she was already in Unity colours so they blended in for the moment, and with the amount of chaos around them no-one gave them a second look.

“I really want to do something about this, you know,” she muttered. The lightheadedness of earlier was coming back to her, and she missed a step and staggered, “Give me another of those.” They both took another cig from the pack and lit them from a small spot fire from a wall terminal.

CHAPTER 13

WC

Sarah awoke to a splitting headache. Maybe it was the fact that someone had hit her on the head with a blaster or maybe it was that she was hog-tied and lying awkwardly with her head pressed against the floor. Rolling over she bumped into another body, and the grim visage of Bryce Jontix flopped in front of her face, its eyes turned up and blood still trickling from the blaster hole in the side of his head. He was a repulsive effeminate man, even in death.

Struggling in her bonds Sarah managed to release the catch for the blade in the end of her boot and slowly cut through the main cord tying her hands to her feet. Sarah then slipped her hands over her feet and paused only as she heard a soft clapping behind her.

“Very good, my dear” said that same quiet voice in a patronising manner.

Sarah turned and was greeted by the sight of a large shadowy figure, hard to make out in the darkness at the back of the vessel. Slowly her eyes adjusted to the light and Sarah let out a gasp. “But it can’t be ...” she murmured, “You were on the transport ...”

The fat man fixed his beady little eyes on hers, “You should know better than that, Ambassador. At Unity even death is only a minor impediment. Pieter Le Beuf is the name, but most people just call me Piggy” He bent forward as if to bow then just shifted his weight off the box on which he was sitting, the metal groaning as it bent under his colossal weight.

He waddled over until he face was inches from Sarah’s and once again the reek of unwashed flesh assaulted her senses. “You may have got rid of my earlier clone but don’t think for a second that I’m going to be caught napping. One false move and I’ll blow a hole through your head just like your pal over there”

“Hey, Pig man, you be leaving the Sarraa alone” piped up a small voice from the front of the vessel, “she be the one from the prophecy. She be the weapon that will destroy the Erok, foes of the Nuk-Tar since the dawning of time and bane of great god Mishtari!”

Sarah let out a groan.

“Oh, this is just too delicious, my dear” the fat man chuckled, his entire body wobbling with amusement, “won’t you tell our jelly-like friend all about the Erok?”

The little Nuk-Tar, Nubble, turned his hovering blue body, leaving only two of his many arms to control the craft while the others fluttered around nervously. His innocent round eyes fixed on Sarah’s and she quietly muttered an oath under her breath.

“Umm ... Nubble ... it’s been a while since the Nuk-Tar have seen an Erok, hasn’t it?” she began, pausing only long enough for Nubble to screw his face up in consternation. “Well ... the thing is ... they were kind of in the way. Unity decided that their planet would be perfect as a reprogramming centre, with its location and all, and well ... the Erok weren’t so keen on that idea. As ... err ... the person in charge of that sector it was kind of up to me to get rid of the little problem of the Erok. Do you understand, Nubble?”

Nubble was clearly having a hard time taking all of this in. He was letting out a soft squeaking sound while his arms waved around maniacally. Piggy, however,

obviously found all of this very amusing, “Ha, Sarah Entchev, weapon of prophecy, scourge of the Erok, champion of the great Mishtari!”

“Oh shut up, you annoying man!” screamed Sarah in exasperation, and suddenly something occurred to her and her shoulders slumped in dejection. “Oh my god ... Riggs ... Ilse ... we left them on the Path of Light ... they’ll be killed for sure!”

“Oh I wouldn’t worry about your little friends, my dear,” said the fat man, returning to his seat on the box, “they’re fine enough specimens - the One will probably just send them to a reprogramming centre.”

“Ha! The One” snorted Sarah, “Chancellor Ballac don’t you mean? And on that point, why aren’t we heading back to the Path so that I can get reprogrammed as well?”

Piggy shuffled uncomfortably on his makeshift seat and pulled a squashed piece of cake from his pocket. “Well we couldn’t have you spreading those despicable rumours about the chancellor, now, could we? He is but a servant of the One, as we all are”

“Spare me your false words, weasel.” Sarah knew that if she could just keep Piggy talking then she could get out of these bonds. She winced as he stuffed the whole cake into his cavernous mouth. “You know as well as I do where the true power lies now. I’ve seen the One and I can be pretty sure that she’s not up to managing a tea party anymore, let alone an intergalactic empire! Ballac and his cronies have locked her away from the world and have obviously done something to her circuits.”

Crumbs splattered from his mouth and Piggy grabbed for the blaster next to him and pointed it at her, “Shut your trap wench! The chancellor will deal with you and your slanderous lies just as soon as we get to Centris. Speaking of Centris ... jellyboy, are we there yet?”

Nubble spun his body around again to face them, and Sarah noticed how it was quite disconcerting the way his arms still all industriously plugged away at different tasks. “Me just hailed by ... Sentris Home Protekshun Unit ... they say rude things about my egg then ask who me is. What I say?”

Piggy pulled a small pair of spectacles from one pocket and put them on his stubby little nose. He squinted at a small scrap of paper that he drew from another pocket. “Give them the code Alpha 433509, and ask them to pass this message on to Chancellor Ballac: the pig is flying in. Get this right slimeball: the pig is flying in”

Nubble turned back to his controls and pressed a few buttons and Sarah returned her attention to her bonds – she had loosened them enough, but what could she do now that the Home Unit were escorting them down to the planet. She decided that the best thing to do would be to wait and see Surely there must still be some people left down on Centris who weren’t corrupted by Balloc and his lies. Besides, who else was going to save the One?

CHAPTER 14 AHHYHH

Ilse hadn't moved for a while, Riggs was sure she was sleeping. Even taking another blood point hadn't revealed any further clues about what was wrong with her. Tired and wan, paler than usual, and even her lustrous black hair had lost its normal sheen. This was not really where he wanted to be, stuck in the middle of space on a Unity cruiser without any obvious ways off, apart from being ejected out an airlock, after being captured and shot. Riggs lit his last cig and stuck his head out over the wreckage of the hangar.

Droids and technicians wandered around busily continuing extinguishing fires and bringing damaged equipment back online. In the end his plan hadn't been that good, he could quite easily have destroyed the mag fields keeping the hangar habitable, and that would have seen all of them flying out of the hangar and into space for a short but adrenaline filled trip. Shrugging he ducked back down and roused Ilse.

Ilse opened her eyes wearily, Riggs' unshaven and worried face swimming before her. It was somewhat of a relief to open her eyes to a familiar face as opposed to Unity interrogators. Riggs, much as he frustrated her, was all she had left now. With the *Gryfalcon* gone, and the cobbled together *Peregrin* also gone, she really didn't have anything left. The aching "missing" feeling swept over her again. The binding between her and the *Gryfalcon*, had already disturbed her normal biorhythms, and her heart was keeping an irregular beat, and it had nothing to do with the scruffy Marine Captain, gently prodding her. She'd managed to quietly re-seat what she could salvage of the *Gryfalcon's* AI that she'd been bound to, but the experience had been traumatic for both her and the AI, both of them spending much of the time on the *Peregrine* with feelings of clumsiness, perhaps the reason why the Unity cruiser had got the drop on them so easily.

She'd failed. She'd failed her crew. She had also failed the ancient Naval tradition of going down with her ship. So many losses. So many people and droids and ordnance. All gone. And the sense of the *Gryfalcon* that had been her sole companion for so many years.

"We should go," said Riggs, offering his hand. "They'll get their shit together soon enough and probably pick us up. We should probably come up with a plan." He grinned.

Ilse silently took his hand and rose to her feet unsteadily, he closed the distance to support her, and feeling his body against hers roused her from her ennui, and she saw him smiling at her, his face mere inches from hers. His lips dangerously close. She could smell the smoke on his breath.

Riggs crumpled to his knees from the short jab to the gut. Ilse looked down on him, and he gasped for air, and whined.

"Don't get any stupid ideas." She barked at him

“No fear... of... that happening,” he gasped. “We’re on the same side, remember?”

To be honest Ilse felt a little guilty, she had hit him a bit hard, but she knew he was capable of being such a complete jerk. And his timing sucked. So she ignored him and wandered to the nearest dataport and reached into her pocket for a datacable. She knew this was dangerous but it could be their only way out of here. Riggs approached her cautiously, and kept his distance, she plugged the cable into the port, ran the long lead up to the base of her skull beneath her lustrous hair, and steeled herself for what was sure to be an unpleasant sensation. She laughed to herself hoping that the astonishment on his face wouldn’t be the last thing she’d ever see.

*

The shiny egg descended to the planet, escorted by a pair of sleek and mean looking starfighters. Sarah looked over Nubble’s blue shoulder while trying to avoid the flailing arms that weren’t controlling the ship. She couldn’t really get much of a view while bound and being prodded by the malicious Piggy. It had been a long time since she’d been here.

While Nubble was cross at the way everything had panned out, was utterly fascinated by the planet before him. Even from a distance it looked weird to him. As they got closer and closer and the starfighters guided him down, he could see that almost the entire planet was covered in structures, gleaming plasteel towers poking into the sky. The ships sensor told him that the planet itself was some kilometres below and the city, just kept coming up closer.

The fighters peeled off, as the egg slowly approached the landing platform. Nubble checked the sensors and saw that they had stayed a respectable distance away, but were in the process of reconfirming their missile locks. He also saw a number of ground based weaponry was targeting his egg.

“Not friendly.” He muttered, receiving a prod from Piggy’s blaster.

“That’s because we’re not friends, you primitive life form. I’m wondering what you’d taste like deep fried.”

Nubble stiffened, “not good,” he said after a pause.

“You’re just disgusting,” said Sarah the apparent saviour of the Nuk-Tar.

“You’re just lucky that I have no interest in eating you,” leered Piggy, “I’m sure you’d love it anyway.”

Sarah retched, the mere idea of that stinking, sweaty, heaving mass close to her, especially being intimate with her, and naked, was enough to make her violently ill.

The egg landed a little heavily and rocked for a moment, as the troops outside, nervously fingering their blasters. A hatch opened and a blue shape flew wailing out landing heavily on the deck with an audible splat. They took careful aim as the shape peeled itself off the deck muttering to itself, it spun a couple of times, and then raised its five blue arms over it.

Vice Chancellor Golls, waved them to hold fire, and a figure was shoved down the gantry.

“Ah you must be Ambassador Entchev,” he said warmly approaching her and lifting her to her feet. “It has been such a long time since we have been graced with your presence.”

Sarah looked at him, a young man, and not familiar to her. “I don’t know you, get your hands off me.”

“Certainly, Ambassador. I would not want to breach any protocols and we hope that your stay will be an unpleasant one, and not lengthy.” He smiled, a thin red line that seemed to cut his face in half. He had rouged his lips as was the custom on Centris. At least some things hadn’t changed.

“I say, Mister Le Beuf, are you in need of assistance? It does seem to be a remarkably small ship for the likes of you to be travelling in.” He waved a couple of technicians who approached the ship and began cutting sections away from the hatch. Eventually, Piggy emerged sweating, and somewhat Pooh-like. How he’d managed to wedge his way into it in the first place was somewhat of a mystery to all.

“Welcome back, Agent Le Beuf,” The Vice Chancellor took Piggy’s sweaty paw and jerked it once before disengaging. “The Council and Chancellor Ballac will be very pleased with your acquisition.” He said nodding to Sarah. “As for this ship, see it is disposed of.

“As you command, sir.” One of the guard saluted him sharply, and waved for a waiting garbage barge to descend.

“Noooooooooooo.” Wailed Nubble, this was all too much for him. This planet covered in armoured buildings despoiling the land, the rude people, the completely accidental completion of his quest and fulfilment of ancient prophecies that had kept his people going for eons, the mocking of his ship, the noise, the traffic, the expanse of it all, and the multitudes of people who had been shooting at him, his wail reached an ear splitting and glass shattering pitch. It lasted but a moment, before he crumpled to the ground in a heap, under a hail of blaster fire.

“Not permanently damaged is he?” Enquired Golls.

“Not sure, sir, standard stun settings used, who knows what it could do to an amorphous alien like this.” Replied the guard.

“Oh well, pick him up and bring him with us will you Piggy?”

*

The lift descent was speedy, and with the air balancers that hummed quietly all over the planet, even Piggy’s stench was dissipated. Sarah looked out the glassteel windows at

Centris. Clear skies dotted with traffic, every facing window abuzz with motion, the machine that was Unity rolled on disinterested in her arrival. Except for the creepy VC Golls and the plodding mass that was Piggy. Down the lift travelled heading further and further into the bowels of Centris. Golls had at least had her released from her bonds and she rubbed to get her circulation flowing again. Nubble had not stirred, and Piggy eyed him greedily. Poor Nubble.

They left the lift and walked further down bustling corridors of uniformed personnel. Sarah suspected that there would be no visit to the council, and that she'd probably be jailed and executed shortly. As Golls led them down a corridor lined with leafy plants in pots she noted the gun emplacements situated in the far corners of the corridor at the security door. So a military audience, she thought sourly.

They checked past the security doors and into a lavishly decorated office with corridors leading away. A two marbled stairways curled down from above like bony arms, and between them a lady rose from a desk.

Golls signalled her to sit and passed by to a door behind her. Sarah stood stoically, wondering how long this would all take. Nubble has roused and now floated beside her, their escort of guards had left them at the door, and only Piggy and the officers in the room eyed them.

Minutes rolled by and Piggy had heaved his mass onto a chair uncomfortably and had requested food. The lady behind the desk had complied and refreshments were brought for all of them, which Nubble had idly played with for a while, a little lost as to what to do with them. Piggy naturally had cleaned up any scraps.

Finally, the door behind the desk had opened and Golls had signalled them to be brought in.

*

There was a rushing sensation, and Ilse shook and fell to her knees, and through gritted teeth snarled at Riggs

“Don't touch me.”

She struggled with the sheer weight of data that lay before her, and forced herself into composure and pressed on. Through the systems she flitted, herself steeled to the insanity inducing access. Driven by her willpower she forged on, searching for something that could help them.

Riggs stared helplessly, he saw blood trickle from her nose, and her eyes roll and her body spasm slightly, as she looked to be fighting herself. He looked around, things were slowly returning to normal around them, and as yet their labours had been unnoticed. Sarah reached behind her and tore out the cable.

“what was that all about?” Asked Riggs.

Sarah slumped to the ground, the flow of blood had gone from a trickle to a more irrigational creek. “I’ve found something. But I need a minute.”

*

Chancellor Ballac had not changed, his features still attractive despite his age and he still moved with a grace that Sarah had always admired. He smiled with genuine warmth, Ambassador Entchev had always been one of his favourites, one of his protégés in many ways.

“It has been too long, Sarah.” He said embracing her. “Is it a shame to see that you have come to some trouble,” he said indicating her metalware. “You really must tell me what happened to you. I am aware that you have obviously had problems with policy, which would have explained your absence all this time, but now that you are returned to us, perhaps we can come to some sort of arrangement. You have always been one of our most efficient agents.”

Sarah was somewhat taken aback at the warmth of her reception, no more so than Piggy, who seemed to almost faint his girth into a chair, before stuffing his mouth with a energy bar.

Chancellor Ballac dismissed Piggy and sent him elsewhere with Nubble and the guards and sat Sarah down, and looked keenly into her eyes.

“As you can probably guess, the One is unwell. She has been for a very long time, we are trying to find ways to restore her health but it is certainly no easy task, as she is quite resistant to our ministrations.”

“You’ll forgive me, but I find this all very difficult to believe.” Sarah sipped her Mendalion wine.

”Sarah, Sarah, you misunderstand us. Me. Unity are very interested in original thought, it’s important and the only way forward. Your methods in dealing with the Erok problem are being taught in the academy. Your methods brought success, and your success brought prosperity, and prosperity of Unity is what we are all about.”

“Prosperity for Unity at the cost of entire civilisations.” Sarah retorted.

Ballac shook his head sadly.

“The Erok were a warlike race, they would never have accepted an invitation to join us.”

“You never asked them.”

“*You* never asked them Sarah. The negotiations were entirely in your hands. You were our delegate and Unity trusted you to give them best recommendation. *We are* a republic

after all, and everyone does get an even and fair chance to be heard and raise their concerns, both domestic and intersystem. With all the work you had done and their response, we were left with no recourse. They had to be removed. Look at your little blue friend, his people have been at war with them, for hundreds of years even before the establishment of Unity. We are trying to bring people together under one banner, not enslave them to one yoke. Please, I'd like you to consider returning to service, at very least lend us your skills as an instructor."

Chancellor Ballac rose, and gave his hand to Sarah leading her to the door. "Please, think on this."

*

Nubble had been placed before an information terminal, while Piggy ate another lavish meal brought to him. Nubble tried to concentrate on the terminal in front of him rather than listen to the destruction of food behind him. He scrolled through the history section hoping to learn about more about humans from their perspective. What he found horrified him.

Destruction, death and pollution seemed to be a reasonably good assessment of it. As he reeled through the lists of atrocities committed by humans, *against themselves* he was revolted. Moreso, when he turned away from the screen and saw Piggy greedily sucking down the remains from the bones of some small creature.

Turning back to the screen he tried his best to forget the grotesque monster behind him, who was beginning to epitomise the worst traits of humans. Engrossed in his reading, he failed to notice some minutes later when Piggy had crept up on him, until the moment that the fat human had stabbed him with a fork.

"I'm hungry." He bellowed, "I want jelly! You're close enough, you'll do!" Nubble saw the open stinking maw before him and felt it close on one of his arms. Terrified he whirled and spun to the ground. The horror closed on him, and Nubble screamed and prayed to Mishtari to save him.

Piggy recoiled as the little blue blob grew in size and form, becoming bipedal and growing over two metres in height. The blue tinge left and his rubbery skin hardened and became leathery. The Nuk-Tar let out a bellow which to Piggy, shook the room, and lashed out with one muscled arm, flinging the obese man across the room. As Piggy looked up, the terror now his, he saw the Nuk-Tar come to its full height, and it turned its red blazing eyes towards him, and stalked forward, muscles rippling across its frame, clawed dextrous hand reaching out. It grabbed him by his shoulders and raised him to his feet, his weight of no concern to this monster. Piggy gazed into Nubble's angry face framed by lank twists of thick hair, and the fanged maw opened revealing a cavernous mouth.

"I'm sorry."

Nubble's mouth engulfed Piggy's head and he tore away with a jerk. Piggy's body jerked and twitched and emptied his bowels.

Nubble looked at his reflection in the terminal screen. If only WarChief Symbiluk could see him now. He had become one of Mishtari's Avatars. So few ever survived the transformation to Avatars, and he had been wondering when the transformation would finally come to him, *if* it ever would. "Mishtari Avatar" the proudest and most revered of all the Nuk-Tar, and now Nubble stood among them. Or would if he ever made it back home.

He would need to get out of here now. There would be trouble.

*

Riggs peered around the wall. "Yeah, it's clear. Let's go."

Ilse and Riggs slipped into the empty control room. Before them was yet another hangar and this was the one they wanted.

"You're sure one of these things are jump capable, and can get us back home? They sure don't look up to much."

"Yes, they're all ex-pirates seized by the *Path of Light*. I just have to find one that's not completely fucked up."

"I suggest you hurry, Ilse."

"Shut up."

Riggs ran down to the flight deck and ordered some droids to follow him and get ready to prepare a ship for flight. They seemed a little puzzled, but did what they were told. Ilse scanned the ship reports for one that was still spaceworthy. She settled on a contraband smugglers craft, as it seemed the least damaged even though it didn't look up to much.

"That one," she yelled as she disengaged the docking locks and slid down the stairs, "let's go, they're on to us."

Riggs looked the ship she'd pointed at and hurried the droids to get the system checks and refuelling done. The ship had seen better days certainly, but also had something of that much loved and tinkered with charm, that he knew from his speeder back home. Anyway, if Ilse was sure, who was he to doubt.

The droids finished their work and backed away, while Riggs and Ilse ran up the gantry into the ship.

“Fire her up.” Barked Ilse.

Riggs started powering up the systems and the hum made him smile, this sort of craft was much more his style, than the large naval craft that he’d been serving on for years. Ilse slid into the pilot’s seat and stared blankly for a moment.

“It’s been a while, this thing is more ancient than I thought, give me a minute.”

“I don’t think we’ve got much more than that.” Riggs started playing with one of the other panels. There were Unity troops coming into the hangar now. “I’ve got the shields on, can we get moving sometime soon?”

Ilse reached for the controls and the ship lifted from the deck and spun a slow arc around, before slipping out into the dark sky.

“So now what go home?” Asked Riggs.

“I guess.”

The ship slid away from the *Path* into space. There was no reaction from the larger ship. Riggs looked back at the Unity cruiser. Ilse followed his gaze, and the cruiser rested there peacefully, there was no pursuit forthcoming. She caught sight of the *Peregrine* listing, painfully broken on the far side of the cruiser. She fought a tear.

“No. This thing got any weapons?” She looked at Riggs.

“Not much.” A laser cannon from what I can tell. Light missile launchers front mounted. Unless there’s personal modifications I can’t see. But they’re not going to be able to get through the cruisers shields, you know that right.”

“Yes. I’m thinking.”

Sorrow at the loss of everything that meant anything to her, had turned to anger at the sight of the *Peregrine*, and revenge now burned inside her.

“I’ve got a plan. Can you get over to that asteroid clump and give it a scan? I think it’s what we want.” Asked Riggs.

“Sure. What are you up to?”

“Get me there and if we’re lucky you might just find out.” He grinned “Trust me.” He winked.

Ilse growled to herself as he left.

*

The door exploded open as a massive figure forced it's way through, and flug out an arm catching Chancellor Ballac in the chest and hurling him into his liquor cabinet. The massive creature and growled "Let's go". Sarah recoiled and looked for something to use as a weapon. The creature blinked.

"Come on. No time. Must run." The creature grabbed Sarah under it's arm and ran.

*

"Ok we're the other side of the asteroids. Now what?"

"Composition?"

Ilse looked at the scan. "Mostly metal ores and ice. Usual stuff."

"I was hoping you'd say that." He grinned again.

"What is going on?" She demanded.

"I think I can do some damage to the *Path*."

"I've found a way to slow down the cycles on the laser cannons."

"So? Won't that mean a massive reduction in range and effectiveness? You already said that the cannons won't get through the cruisers shields."

"We're not firing at the cruiser. Look double check this for me. Asteroids are metal ore and ice, right? If we superheat the ice what's going to happen?" He looked up hopefully.

"Basic action / reaction stuff, the metal will...move." She blinked. "You're insane."

"That's why I needed to slow the cycles a little, so the asteroids wouldn't be obliterated. We're going to fling rocks at the ship like a catapult. Think it will work?"

"Probably not, the shields will keep them out." Ilse paused for thought. "But the *Peregrine*'s not got any shields and the engine core looks mostly intact."

"Cool." He grinned. "Let's do it. Just gotta figure the angles, just like in pool, it's a simple cannon shot."

*

It had been a long day for Commander Ryker, first the attack on the *Peregrine* which had gone more smoothly than ever before, and he toasted it's carcass floating just outside his viewscreen, then the explosion in the hangar, the clean up and the rest, what a nightmare. Still it had been a successful day, and bunch of recommendations had been posted for his

crew and he knew he'd be due one as well. Even if they had lost one of the captured pirate ships, it was still a good day. Then there was a thud.

"What was that?" he queried his navigator.

"Er sir, asteroids seem to be breaking off from the clump and coming towards us."

"How is that possible?"

"There seems to be a craft near to them that seems to be causing it. I'm not entirely clear how. Our shields should be able to withstand it."

Commander Ryker, stood at the viewscreen and looked out. "What the hell are they up to? What can they hope to achieve?"

He observed an asteroid spinning past the viewscreen and into the *Peregrine*. More small rocks were spinning in towards them. Idiots, he thought, we're a Unity Starfleet cruiser, we're not that hard to miss. He whirled.

"Full shields, come about and move this boat!" he barked.

"Sir?"

"Do it!"

*

Ilse and Riggs watched in silence as the asteroids drifted towards their target. She'd grabbed his hand at some stage and was squeezing it harder and harder. One hit and then another, and then a flash as the *Peregrine* became ground zero for a localized nuclear explosion, and the *Path of Light* was bathed in flame and debris. Small explosions began to tear holes in its hull, then it ripped itself apart in a flash of brilliance in the night.

Ilse looked at Riggs. "Thank you." She whispered. There were tears in her eyes.

"Let's go home." He gave her hand a squeeze, and she turned and fired the engines.

CHAPTER 15

RIC

Sarah kept her breath low as the security guard went past their hiding. Hiding Nubble in his present incarnation was difficult at best, and at times in the past few hours next to impossible. The shipping containers they were stationed behind presently were a godsend. Of course his (his?? She thought to herself idly- why did she automatically assume it was a he??) present stature was a big departure from before- no longer an amorphous blue rubbery blob but an 18ft bipedal tanned behemoth with glowing red eyes and claws. Sarah thought it slightly unsettling to have such an apparition with Nubbles general good-naturedness and goofy grin (albeit fanged), but there was no denying the capacity for wholesale destruction. The amount of property damage and med-bills caused before he'd calmed down would be extensive, not to mention the almighty thumping given to Chancellor Ballac. She smiled at the thought. As if she would return to service as he wished after what she now knew. She brought her mind back to the present and peered around the edge of the containers. They were at the landing port. A quick hit and run on the next ship to touch down and they were away. She figured on leaving most of the hitting to Nubble though.

Ilse bathed in the warm afterglow, Riggs' arms around her, his slow breathing reassuring on the back of her neck. She has lost her ship, her command, almost her life and in the blindness of revenge had forgotten how much she needed more moments like this, an oasis of security in the maelstrom of her life. She was glad she had the opportunity to enjoy it again. After programming the automatic pilot, they had retired to the sleeping quarters in the private stolen vessel, leaving clothing strewn down the walkway like the scattered debris of the *Path of Light*. They had found the quarters rough and unadorned, but serviceable. Much like us, she thought and let out a giggle.

"Now theres a strange sound" Riggs laughed as he lightly stroked her arm- "Sure you're not ill?? Maybe we should get you to the med-bay"

"No thnks dear" Ilse smiled and turned to face him "though the sentiment is appreciated" Riggs frowned comically- "Well then maybe I should go because theres definitely something wrong with my mouth"

"And whats that?"

"Well presently its about 10cm away from yours....."

"HmMMM I think we've got enough time to fix that" Ilse said and kissed him once again. There was 20 minutes or so until they arrived home on Centris and she planned to enjoy every minute.

At last Sarah took in the sight of a ship coming in to land, a rather beat-up looking Eagle-1000 light freighter and turned to Nubble to make sure he was ready. Nubble gave a thumbs up in reply and an expectant grin. Sarah braced herself to run as soon as the gangway came down.

Ilse fired the retros and glided the ship in to land. As it landed with a shudder, Riggs appeared in the doorway to the cockpit with that mischievous grin which she adored but always gave her a sense of foreboding- "I'll go and sort things out with the landing pad

manager, he owes me big time; we won't have any trouble with the security here." Seeing the sceptical look that Ilse was giving him, he leant forward and gave her a peck on the cheek and grinned again "Hey trust me" and he left for the loading ramp. Ilse shook her head and started the post flight checks. Halfway through powering down the various systems she looked up to see the security guards racing past beneath her canopy. Then heard shots. "Oh no, I should have known!!" Ilse rushed out into the walkway and stopped. In front of her was a large. Tan monster holding Riggs by the top of his head in one clawed hand.

"You're not gonna believe this Ilse....."

CHAPTER 16
DJS

Sirens were wailing all around the space port, security would soon be upon them.

“Five, four, three, two, one.” Sarah counted under her breath, she then bolted after Nubble towards the just docked Eagle-1000 freighter. Upon her approach she saw Nubble (who had moments before cleared the way for her) holding the owner of the ship by the head off the ground with his clawed hand. As she neared she saw who it was he held... Riggs.

“Don’t hurt him” she yelled.

“Put him down now!”

Nubble spun his head around in a questioning manner, he saw the look in Sarah’s eyes and let go of Riggs.

“Hey Riggs, were taking you and your ship” greeted Sarah as she easily shoved Riggs back up the loading ramp and into the arms of Ilse.

“What’s going on” Ilse said with a shock on her face.

“I thought you said you knew the manager here? Who is she?”

“Change of plans love were being hijacked” Riggs said with a smile on his face.

Nubble growled and shoved them all further into the ship as the sound of lazar fire began to fill the already noisy air. Sarah after being momentarily dazed by seeing Riggs was back down to business.

“Nubble lets get out of here” They both rushed to the cockpit to fire up the ship.

“Who is that?” demanded Ilse,

“And why are you so happy about being hijacked?”

“That is the Sendrine Ambassador, Sarah Entchev” replied Riggs

The retros fired on the Eagle-1000.

“Great, so now we are aiding and abetting a known fugitive and you’re happy about it!” Ilse said.

“...Are you jealous?” Riggs said with a smirk.

There was a jolt as the ship lifted of the ground, both Riggs and Ilse raced to the cockpit to strap themselves in.

“This isn’t finished” she said while strapping herself into the bucket seat behind the pilot’s seat.

The Eagle-1000 speed towards the slowly closing port bay doors, Sarah had to turn the ship on its side to be able to make it through the ever narrowing gap. They shot out of the port with only meters to spare on either side, lazar fire trailing them the whole way out.

There had been an uncomfortable silence in the cockpit for some time, until finally Riggs spoke.

“So who’s your big friend Sarah?”

“This is...”

“I am Nubble, young of Fanik” said Nubble cutting of Sarah mid speech.

“Oh so it speaks” said Riggs surprised.

“Yes I speak” Nubble replied.

“So how do you fit into this little saga?” asked Riggs

“My Min-Tuk was to seek out the Sarraa N-kev a powerful weapon prophesised to bring an end to the Erok”

“Right... So I guess you’re the Sarraa N-kev?” Riggs said gesturing towards Sarah, Sarah nodded

“And it seems that I have already fulfilled Nubble’s Min-Tuk. I destroyed the home world of the Erok years ago, back in my Unity days” Sarah said matter’o’factley.

“Speaking of Unity, won’t they be looking for you after the destruction of *The Path of Light*” Ilse interjected.

“Yeah, and I don’t think Chancellor Ballac back on Centris is too pleased with Nubble and I either!” Sarah replied.

“Great so not only do we have Unity on our tail we’re also goona have this Ballac looking for us as well”

“I spose” Sarah said shrugging.

*

Chancellor Ballac lay upon his bed in the private wing of the grand hospital of Centris fuming. He had just been informed of the eventual escape of the behemoth and the Sendrine Ambassador. How dare she refuse his offer of service and let that creature loose upon him. He swung the video monitor around in front of him and tapped upon the screen a couple of times. The face of his first officer, Kennal Black appeared.

“I want them found, spare no expense. Dead or alive I don’t care, do I make myself clear?”

“Sir” replied Black dryly.

Ballac ended the transmission and shoved the screen away from him with disgust.

*

“I have to return to my home world and inform the high council of the destruction of the Erok” Nubble expressed to Sarah. She nodded and he punched in the coordinates of his home world into the navigation systems.

“This is only a freighter if we are being pursed it will only be a matter of day’s before we are caught” Ilse said to Sarah

“I know, you really should have acquired a better ship” Sarah replied. Ilse was about to retort when she felt Riggs’ hand upon her arm, she looked into his eyes and she understood that he wanted her to let it go.

“Nubble can we get a better ship upon your world?” Sarah asked.

“Yes but in my present incarnation I am unable to fly it” Nubble answered.

“Then you shall have to remedy that then won’t you” she said.

*

“The Freighter that illegally left Centris two days ago has been tracked, it’s headed towards the outworlds commander” the officer said.

“Trying to hide in dead space, you can’t escape Unity that easily” the Commander muttered to himself. “Right, we have them, monitor that freighter and any other ship out there, there’s never much activity that deep in space!”

“Sir” the officer replied.

Commodore Hanson Gail, Commander of the Unity Cruiser *The Rail of Tears* one of the most recognized, respected and ruthless commander’s of Unity, ordered his crew to the outworlds, dead space. This part of the space is scattered with the dregs of the universe, space pirates, criminals and entrepreneurs alike. There are still thousands of un-chartered planets in the outworlds, most of which uninhabitable, well for humans anyway.

*

Kennal Black assembled his crew and left Centris fully armed and ready to deal with any unpleasantries met in the outworlds. He would do as ordered or die trying.

*

The Eagle-1000 entered the atmosphere of the planet Linnek. Nubble now back in normal incarnation, an eight armed amorphous blue rubbery blob which hovers above the ground, was eager to exit the freighter and greet his home world and bring news of the end of the Erok to his kind.

“Sarah, friends the gravity upon my home world is very strong, I am uncertain that you will be able to move unaided, if this is the case I will have a transport brought to you and have you moved to the craft we will be leaving upon. I must consult the high council, I will see you as soon as I am able”.

Nubble left the Eagle-1000 and headed towards the Ancient temple in which sat the high council. The council was in session and were present, Hiktar, Chief Councilor of the Nuk-Tar, Garfnd, High Priest of the Nuk-Tar and Symbiluk, Warchief of the Nuk-Tar amongst the other lest significant members. Nubble entered the temple and was greeted by hushed voices.

“As I said, we should not have entrusted a Min-Tuk of such importance too the weak, see he has returned already” Symbiluk mooted.

“Patience Symbiluk, we are yet to hear from Nubble, young of Fanik” Garfnd offered.

“It is plain he failed...” Symbiluk growled.

“Let him speak” Hiktar decreed.

Again a hush came over the council, it was broken when Nubble spoke.

“I Nubble, young of Fanik, have completed that which I was prophesised to complete. I located the Sarraa N-kev and the Erok are destroyed”.

A commotion erupted amongst the council members, which was finally abated by Hiktar, Chief Councilor of the Nuk-Tar.

“Do you speak the truth young? The Erok are no more?”

Nubble nodded but remained silent.

“This young lies, how...” Symbiluk demanded.

“I speak the truth” Nubble said forcefully cutting of the Warchief.

“Now that I have completed my Min-Tuk, I am to leave with Sarraa N-kev and aid her in her Min-Tuk”. With this Nubble turned and left the High Council, which again erupted in furious conversation upon his departure.

As Nubble had figured Sarah, Riggs and Ilse were unable to move after leaving the artificial grav on the ship. He organized their transfer to the craft which they would be leaving upon. They were all very surprised to find that it was a very large egg which required all of Nubble’s eight arms to pilot.

CHAPTER 17
CJW

As debate raged endlessly in the High Temple after Nubble's revelation on the planet of Linnek, and after acquiring supplies for the long trip ahead, the ovoid-shaped craft piloted by Nubble streaked towards space. Sitting in a small cabin behind the cockpit, the passengers studied their pilot with a mixture of wonder and awe, with the exception of Riggs who chose to sleep in the padded corner of one of the lounges.

'So who is this Nubble?' asked Ilse, eyeing the eight armed blue mass curiously
'Towards the end of my Unity days, he came and spoke to me of his Min-Tuk,' replied Sarah 'his quest as it were. He's a determined figure and harassed me considerably about aiding him in completing it – little did I know I had completed it sometime before...'
'Interesting, I've never seen a creature like it before – a shapeshifter is it?' Ilse peered into the cockpit once more, obviously not listening before turning to Sarah 'Clawed reptilian one minute, hovering rubbery mass the next...I don't trust them. What is its natural form, how can it change like that? And where are we going now? Seeing as you so callously hijacked us back on Centris, its only fair you...'

Ilse reeled back, coming out of the cockpit, Nubble was shifting shapes once more, returning to the large clawed creature she first encountered him as. His body seethed, tissue rippling elastically, elongating before finally settling. Taken aback, Ilse breathlessly watched the face, glistening like a waxen mask in the bright lights. There was no movement from Nubble and Ilse leant forward, reaching out to touch it when the eyelids snapped open and eyes swivelled around to face her.

Hunched over in the cabin space, Nubble looked at Ilse

'Forgive me, but time is short. I return to my *natural* form shortly, but in this shape, you will be more comfortable with speaking to me. Sarraa N'kev has not all answers, yet she trusts – might not you? She helped me complete my Min-Tuk and now in honour, I help her complete hers – it is to that end we now travel. Now I must return to the cockpit and see to our safe arrival.'

With that, Nubble awkwardly moved into the cockpit and closed the door, Ilse picturing all too clearly the transformation going on behind the door and shuddered.

'Creepy thing, where did you come by it again? And what is this *Min-Tuk* he speaks of you about, we aren't heading back to Unity space are we? That's crazy, we'll all be killed! Riggs, what is going on here?'

Looking over at the blissfully comatose form of Riggs, she reached underneath the table and kicked him in the shins

'Wake Up!'

The craft shuddered and raced onwards

* * * *

As the craft streaked away, another object entered the system, initially it could well have been mistaken for a small meteorite. A minute explosion, a puff of dust and a small metal object appeared from the cloud. Small solar panels fanned out around the centre of its cylindrical body. The radiation of the solar winds struck the panels and immediately, two small ion engines on the back of the cylinder powered to life, rotating the cylinder to face the sun in the distance. Panels opened up on the surface and various astrogational, scientific and recording devices immediately began recording their position in space as the object began to move towards the distant star. The ion engines gained power and thrust the craft towards a nearby planet into a non-geo-synchronous orbit, recording size, relative distance to the sun and as it approached, more advanced sensors commenced recording atmosphere type, environmental conditions, signs of life and habitation. With initial scans of the system commenced, it sent a burst message off to the nearest Communications Relay Station and as it began to leave orbit of the planet, the sensors detected a small spacecraft on the planets surface. Capturing visual confirmation and sending off another message detailing the find, the object left orbit and moved towards the next planet in the system. The Unity Probe had found the planet Linnek.

* * * *

In the Coroides system in the vast space of the Outlier systems, *The Rail of Tears* plunged through space. The Unity Cruiser powered by its 4 Supa-Nova Engines was easily one the largest Battle Cruisers ever created, its array of weaponry unparalleled, its shielding and armour unsurpassed. In its docking bays, 2 wings of fighter and reconnaissance craft waited. The Cruiser could engage any foe, space or planetary-bound with little to fear.

Commodore Gail strode around the helm, taking in the sights. They had already engaged and squashed one pirate depot that had decided to engage them. Hapless survivors in their escape pods had been used as targeting practice by the gunnery crews.

‘Sir,’ reported Scanning Officer Turek ‘preliminary scans of the system are empty – the freighter has not been in this vicinity.’

‘Recall the fighters and have *The Scales of Justice* reform with us immediately’ cried out Gail ‘we will take the Outlier Systems apart piece by piece until we find them. Our probes will discover them soon enough and they WILL be ours!’

Officers raced across to prepare for their next jump to space, flight deck crews raced to get fighters aboard and the Unity Destroyer *The Scales of Justice* moved into a flanking position. Klaxons sounded, crews prepared for the next jump as the craft manoeuvred when suddenly a figure raced up to the Commodore, handing him a datapad.

‘Commodore Gail, we have them!’

Gail scanned the details of the datapad, stroked his chin thoughtfully as he perused their implications then spun around.

'S'Ryn' he snapped crisp instructions out 'prepare for immediate departure to the planet Linnek at maximum speed, H'tarh prepare the Manticore bombs...we have a planet to destroy.'

* * * *

Kennal Black ushered his ship onwards with grim determination, leaving Centris far behind him. His corvette the *Vindicator* lacked size but not speed and hurtled onwards, endeavouring vainly to catch up for lost time.

So, The Sendrine Ambassador chose to humiliate Chancellor Ballac did she, mused Black? Did she really think she could embarrass Ballac without retribution? She would pay the price in her own blood for that insult.

Assembled around him, the crew worked with equal vigour and purpose. Initially exiting the system on the same vector as the freighter, Black had chosen to jump to the border with the Outlier systems, check on any updates and prepare to engage the unknown. In the docks, two small shuttle craft awaited to board the fleeing Eagle-1000 freighter, its sluggish speed no match for his corvette.

Reverting to real-space, Black immediately turned to his video screen and his comms station sparked to life

'Intercepted message sir,' announced the officer 'Unity-band information. Looks like a data message of some form on a priority signal, posting it through to the viewscreen now.'

Initial footage is of the Dilek star system, not all that far from here sir,' intoned the Officer as he read of data scrolling up the side of the screen 'little in that system sir. Recorded visual information of the sixth most proximate planet coming through, the planet Linnek apparently..not much to it, standard high gravity world, evidence of habitation apparently but archaic from initial scans.....Sir! A star-ship, freighter-size to be exact...visual footage coming through now.....'

Black couldn't believe his luck, in front of his face now was the Eagle-class freighter they were pursuing, in a neighbouring star system...so soon? His preparation time aside, they had not travelled for long, yet the freighter appeared to be there, in the middle of a small clearing.

'Perhaps they were damaged in departure?' he mused 'Well no mind, prepare boarding parties, high-G environment people! We will be there shortly, certainly far sooner than any Unity craft'

He turned and laughed at the freighter and killed the footage

'This is a glorious day for us crew, the Chancellor will reward you beyond your dreams.
Prepare for boarding, dead or alive they return with us'

CHAPTER 18

SAB

It was an acolyte, from a small group of priests of the High Temple on Linnek who saw the disturbance first. Unsure what was going on, they hid in the scrub, and watched.

It appeared that the freighter that had brought Sarah Entchev to their world had been discovered. The priests had been sent out to look over the craft, and see what their Order could do with the vessel. Someone, however, seemed to have beaten them to it. Two shuttlecraft of some kind were hovering in the air nearby, and a small crew of men on the ground seemed to be busy securing magnetic towing clamps, for use with a tractor beam, to the sides of the ambassadors old craft.

The priests settled down on their haunches to watch the scene play out, for it was clear that their order would be finding a use for this shuttle no longer.

Above the heavy world, Kennal Black smouldered in his helm seat of the *Vindicator*. He was disappointed to have discovered the Eagle- 1000 Freighter apparently abandoned. However, understanding the necessity for good intelligence in an interstellar hunt, he was taking the time to have his crews lift the hulk off the ground and into the hold of his Corvette, there to undergo a thorough examination. He was pleased at having closed the chase so far so soon, but was now chafing at this necessary delay.

One of his officers reported, “We have the vessel, Sir. It’s leaving the atmosphere now. We should have her in the hold in another fifteen minutes.”

Kennal grunted, and his officers lowered their heads to work silently and quickly around him. Abruptly the proximity siren began ringing, and the same officer was shouting:

“Sir! It’s a Unity starship, a big one!”

Black was on his feet and tensed in an instant. “Shields to full, charge lasers! What kind of vessel?”

“She’s a... oh shit. She’s a Cruiser sir! By her size it can only be one of the Ships o’ the line! A fleet flag.”

One of the other officers interrupted, reading information from a separate I.D. program, “It’s the Rail of Tears!”

Kennal Black, the wolf of Chancellor Ballac, felt a hand of ice slide down his gullet, and grip his stomach in an iron grasp.

Aboard the *Rail of Tears*, Commodore Gail abruptly motioned, and the proximity klaxons ceased their wail.

“Report!” he screamed.

His officers muttered amongst themselves, and he screamed again: “Report!”

Scanning Officer Turek managed, “Sir, I- I have no idea how they got here so fast, but...”

“Who is it!? What is going on?”

“Sir! A Corvette Class interceptor is in low geosynchronous orbit over the site of the Eagle- 1000. Two landers are lifting the Eagle-”

“Charge forward Battery Towers! Shields to half, and H’tarh? Keep those Manticors on hold for the moment: We may not want to destroy the planet. Yet.”

Black’s hesitation was fleeting at best.

“Full Speed from the Ion Drives! Get us out from under them now! Kill the lasers, and divert all power to dorsal shields!”

Less than one second later, the electric fizz of magnetic shielding degrading as it rebuffed multiple laser blasts echoed around the ship. Kennal continued barking.

“Seal all internal bulkheads! Full countermeasures: interference beams at their sensors, the lot!” The sound of the sizzling decreased, as the *Vindicator* gained speed, and the Unity gunners had to fall back on their optical zoom sights. “Keep those shields superior and aft, and don’t bother charging the lasers until they send out fighters. We definitely have the advantage over a short run on these guys! Get me a holoprojection of all the major gravity wells in this system!”

His men began responding more quickly and inventively to his commands, and to think ahead. Certainly, it was only insane hope that a Corvette could win out against a Unity Cruiser, but Kennal Black was the commander of this Corvette, and a wolf is never more dangerous than when it is pinned down.

Commodore Gail gnashed his teeth in rage. So, he was quick, this rogue who flew in an unmarked Corvette. Almost as quick as the vessel he commanded. And it was a combat equipped ship, too. Pirates, then. And they were putting distance between them.

“Send out the fighters. Both squadrons. I want that dog taken out of my skies.”

“Fighters, sir. Four minutes to intercept.”

“Right,” said Kennal, “leave the guns off until the last minute. Give me full pace towards the systems center. Navigation, plot me the tightest catenary possible around that star.”

“Sir,” objected one of his officers, “we’ll lose shields in a major way pulling a stunt like that!”

“Of course we will, you dolt! But those fighters only have a very basic nav display, and will be too busy trying to shoot us to run the simulation. We’re heavier, and so can punch our engines and slingshot out of the well long after they can. They’ll fly like Unity pilots: fanatical, and scared of the punishment of their masters, and forget about the punishment that nature will be dishing out to them in around seven minutes.” Black turned and addressed his communications officer. “Are the shuttle crews still alive? Then get me an encrypted beam to them, I need to find out anything they discovered about the whereabouts of Ambassador Entchev. We still have an insult against our master to avenge.”

Meanwhile, in a small ovoid craft, Sarah Entchev was being taken to complete her Min- Tuk, her life quest, or destiny by a conveniently shapeshifting alien. With her were Captain Ilse, and Riggs, still sleeping. They were well on their way back into Unity space, and Ilse couldn’t help but wonder over the sound of Riggs’ snoring, what the hell she had gotten herself into.

CHAPTER 19
AHHYHH

Like streams of light the fighters streaked out toward the black painted corvette class *Vindicator*. Behind them the *Rail of Tears* glowed with an almost righteous light, reflected from the nearby moon. The fighters spread, a silvery trail like a spiders web strung behind them in the inky blackness of space.

Commodore Gail glared at the screen, “*who was this insolent dog?*” that chose to resist instead of holding fast and declaring intentions. Scanners largely bounced off the corvette’s blackened hull and no IFF requests returned any result. *This is Unity space and damn it, there would be Unity justice for all.*

“Not a pirate,” he mused. “No, there’s something else. Prepare the Manticors!” He barked, “There may be cause to use their power in any case.”

* * *

The Wolf of Ballac, listened to the frenzied calls of his crew around him, reporting statuses, speed, vectors and the dozens of various systems reports. They couldn’t outrun the *Rail of Tears* that much was obvious. While the *Vindicator* was good it couldn’t go toe to toe with a Unity Cruiser.

“Captain Black, what about the shuttle crews on planet?”

“I no longer care. Forget them.”

“But, Sir we can try to pick them up late – “

“You, off the bridge now. Now.” Growled Kennal Black, his red eyes gleaming. The Petty Officer backed away and fled the bridge.

Kennal Black spoke into his intercom, “Commander Skix, when P.O. Jools arrives below you are to have him shot. Understood. Out.”

A few of the crew members exchanged glances. So, little had changed.

“Sir, the fighters are splitting, one group appears to be trying to get around the planet.”

Damn.

There were explosions from the aft of the ship, and laser lights lit their path, and the dark hull of the Corvette, as it plummeted towards the star.

The fighters began to close on the Corvette, and a toothy grin began to creep across the face of Commodore Gail. The Corvette's hull was lit up with flashes, as laser fire from the fighters streaked out to paint it in pyrotechnics, behind them the cruiser mounted missile clusters closed on the wounded and fleeing black craft. "Now you die." He breathed.

"Almost there, sir." Reported the pilot.

"Right lose some speed to suck them up a bit, and be ready to swing wide and compensate for the pull, we're going to need to cut this really fine to hook all of them. And brace yourselves," Added Black.

Commodore Gail watched the fighters close with glee, then whirled, bellowing. "No, no. Pull them out of there, pull those idiots out." His comms officer gave him a helpless look. "Now you DOLT! Pull the fighters back. Dis-engage."

"Uh.. all craft, disengage attack."

Gail looked back to the viewscreen, the fighters began to scatter and turn away, but it was the only the stragglers who could pull out. The command crew watched as the others slipstreamed the corvette's plummet towards the star. One was trying to turn and only yawed badly, before breaking apart. The corvette itself had gained speed and began to fight its way out of the stars pull, slowly curving its way around the tighter orbit, other fighters raced after it, one impacting on the turning craft's rear flank in a dull flash. As the corvette slowly began its slingshot out of the gravitational pull, the other fighters continued in towards the centre of the star like bullets, unable to turn and not able to resist the intense heat. Small black shadows were etched against the star for a second or two and then were gone.

Commodore Gail was apoplectic. "Fool!" he railed lashing out his metal hand at his Comms officer, snapping his neck and smashing him over the back of his seat.

"Where are the other fighters?" He demanded red faced.

"Uh, they've intercepted and are escorting the corvette's shuttles back from the planet, Sir. "

"Destroy the shuttles and get them after this corvette."

"Yessir".

Gail stormed to the viewport. *Do not think you are so clever, pirate. You will not make it from this system.*

“Release the Manticors”.

The first officer looked at Commodore Gail for an instant before confirming the order to the rest of the crew.

“It is done.”

There was a cheer from on board the *Vindicator*, and the fighters were torn away from the craft.

“I want a damage report. Shields back to full, and turn us around a let’s have a look at this cruiser.” Barked Kennal.

“Already in progress, sir.”

“Good.”

The reports were good, they were still 100% functional and any damage was minimal, taking on a Unity Cruiser now, was still near impossible, but the odds had come down that little bit.

“Set us up for an attack run. We’ve got a fair bit of munitions to use on our Unity friends, before we leave, but keep us a clear path to either jump point, we may need to use them quickly. Now shields double front and go after the missile launchers first. *What. The. Fuck. Are. Those. Things ?*”

The “Manticor” as the Unity officers had called them, sailed out of the hold and into open space, their black skins like velvet against the dark skies, and their carapaces reflecting the stars light. They unfurled their massive wings and glided away from the cruiser, stretching and calling to each other. Each flap of their wings seemed to enhance their size.

Meanwhile, in a small ovoid craft, Sarah Entchev was still being taken to complete her Min- Tuk, her life quest, or destiny by a conveniently shapeshifting alien. With her were Captain Ilse, and Riggs, still sleeping. They were well on their way back into Unity space, and Ilse couldn’t help but wonder over the sound of Riggs’ snoring, what the hell she had gotten herself into.

CHAPTER 20
DJS

“Captain Black sir?” stammered petty officer Smith.

Kennal Black swung his head around from the new dilemma facing him on his view screen.

“What?”

“I think I know what they are sir, I have an older half brother who was a high ranking officer in Uni...”

“Speak now Smith or you can follow petty officer Jools downstairs!”

“They’re Manticor Sir”

Stories about the Manticor were legendary, some mysterious and powerful weapon used by Unity to destroy any adversary they deemed worthy. No first hand account of them had ever really been told due to the fact that no ship had ever survived an encounter with them.

“Fire!!!” Black barked.

A volley of missiles erupted from the Corvette class *Vindicator*, The Manticor targeted, ever so gracefully evaded the attack with a powerful beat of its wings. The Manticor called to each other, the pack was separating into three groups.

*

A hush had come over the bridge of the Unity Cruiser *The Rail of Tears*, Commodore Hanson Gail it’s Commander smiled with glee.

“We have them now; no one can survive against the Manticor.”

The Commodore already assuming victory turned his mind back to the task he had been charged with, locating and destroying the Sendrine Ambassador Sarah Entchev, Unity traitor.

*

“Get us to a jump point, Now!!!” Captain Black ordered his crew.

The bridge on the *Vindicator* all of a sudden became a bustle of commotion, her crew running here and there under the ruthless command of its captain. The *Vindicator* banked to starboard and looked for an ever diminishing escape possibility. One group of the Manticor now perfectly outlined by a distant moon could be clearly seen, a Monstrous

dragon like creature of claw and fang, harking back from some magical tale of old. The three pack's continued to wail and screech, informing the others of its own intentions, then the attack began.

*

Riggs woke with a start. Ilse was no longer with him in bed, he looked around and still felt a little uncomfortable on board the alien ship. Sarah stood at the door looking at him, her hands on her hips and a smirk on her face. She made a point of slowly looking down his body and back up to his face. Riggs repeated her action and noticed that he was completely naked. Riggs casually got out of bed and put a pair of pants on.

"Nice to see you slept well" Sarah said with an even bigger smirk on her face.

"Thanks" Riggs replied calmly.

"Always ready for action hey?"

Riggs looked down at his morning glory then back up at Sarah.

"You know me!"

Sarah smiled and enjoyed the fact that Riggs always knew the right thing to say at the right moment.

"So what's the big plan? Are you going to blow up Centris or are you going to just waltz into Unity headquarters and kill the entire board?" Riggs joked.

"They both sound tempting; however I think that option number two will have to do, of course we have to first get the necessary equipment to undergo such an outrageous offensive."

Sarah starts to get more serious "I am sick and tired of those unity basterds though, on my ass day and night, it's time to get back on theirs!"

"You're not serious are you?"

"Why? You scared?"

"Well yes!"

"Trust me I know enough about Unity to know that they will never expect a frontal assault, they think they're untouchable."

"It's suicide!"

“Not if you know what I know.”

“We can’t do it, not the four of us.”

“Who said it was only going to be the four of us?”

*

The Manticor Countered the sharp turn of the *Vindicator* by breaking of into a further three groups, there were now six groups of three Manticor which surrounded the Corvette. They closed in upon the craft in an almost single minded attack, continuously calling to each other. They were within 2000 meters of the *Vindicator* closing in from almost every vector at an ever increasing speed, countering every evasionary manoeuvre that her captain had attempted thus far.

*

“Commodore the fighters are returning from the planet after destroying the Corvette’s shuttle transports as you requested” reported the new Com’s officer.

“Good, I think that we will bring them in now, they are no longer required out there as the manticor often let’s say, get excited” Gail replied.

“Sir.”

“Be ready to sound the siren as soon as the Manticor have torn apart the Corvette”

“Sir.”

Commodore Gail sat back in his command chair and took a long drink from his glass of port.

“I will have you soon Entchev!” Gail said under his breath crushing the glass easily in his metallic hand, similar to Entchev’s own hand.

*

“Were dead captain there’s nothing we can do” Johnson the sensors officer wailed.

Kennal Black calmly removed his side arm and shot Johnson in the head.

“Any one else have a problem with my captaincy?” Black growled.

Silence was all that greeted his question.

“Good, now I want you to pitch and roll 180 full thrusters then bank hard to port, then jump, on my mark.”

“We can’t we might...”

Black raised his side arm again; the navigation officer who just spoke broke off mid speech.

“YES SIR!!!”

“MARK!”

CHAPTER 21

SAB

Black winced as he experienced the temporary discomfort of a short-hop warp jump unprepared. He sighed. Those Manticor, whatever the hell they were, were now half a light year behind them. If the Unity Cruiser wanted to gather them before pursuing, then his crew had a minute or two in which to decide what to do.

“Right, get me any information relayed to us by the landing shuttles before they were destroyed: we’re still on the trail of that bitch Entchev.” Kennal grunted and reholstered his side arm. “And somebody get Johnson’s body off my bridge.”

As crew fearfully scurried to comply in silence, the Captain of the *Vindicator* sat in his command chair once more, and looked over the data from the lost shuttles. He had barely glanced at it when the proximity claxons sounded again.

“What the Hell!?”

“Captain Black, Sir! It’s the Manticor!” screamed Smith, “They’ve just appeared next to us!”

“What kind of *animals* can perform a warp jump?” cried another officer.

“Silence!” barked Black, as the claxons sounded again, and the Unity Cruiser, *Rail of Tears* followed closely by the Destroyer *Scales of Justice* leaped out of warp at some distance. Strange, thought Black, why have they exited warp out of laser range? Surely they would want to help those foul beasts to finish his Corvette off?

“We’re jumping again!” he shouted, “Helm, these co-ordinates!” He thumped his console, and shot over to the Navigation officer’s screen part of the read out he had just been viewing. He had an idea that may just save their skins, and pay back Ambassador Entchev all in one.

Commodore Gail chuckled, and reclined further into his command couch on the opulent bridge of his Unity Cruiser, and had an ensign re-fill his port.

“Mmmm. This is the part that I love to watch: when they try to run. And then, their horror, when they realise that our fell beasts can follow them through warp. Ahh, lad, such extraordinary pleasures you may well enjoy, should you continue to serve the Church of Stars as well as you currently do.” He patted the youth affectionately on his supple rump, and called out to his Navigation controller. “Do keep our distance, as we follow them: wouldn’t want the Manticor to become excited about our presence.”

The Winged terrors of Bio-technical invention were capable of decimating an entire planet if left unchecked, and would only respond to the Return Siren once there were no further objects in their immediate vicinity. And he had ordered an unusually large number of them released, in his rage at the captain of the Corvette before him. Yes, eighteen was excessive, considering that no ship had ever survived against even a pack of four.

“Commodore! They’re jumping again!”

“Of course. But don’t worry, our Devil’s spawn shall close the gap with each leap. Make sure we don’t loose them, navigation.”

* * *

Far off, the small ovoid craft, of alien design floated in a distant orbit of the Centris system's star. Inside, Ilse and Nubble had joined Riggs as he asked Sarah about her plan.

"But you can't seriously be thinking of attempting to destroy the Church of Stars?" Ilse demanded.

"I assure you, Martinez, Nubble believes it my destiny."

Ilse growled. "It's Muraleyev. The name Martinez vanished after Riggs helped me to bust the Unity Spy ring in Earth Command. The old name wasn't safe, and we've all gotten used to the new one now. But that was years ago: can we all just stick to the new one, and never mention it again?"

Nubble changed shape, just because he could, and because he knew it annoyed Ilse. When he was no-longer the Reptilian killing machine, and was once more a floating rubbery mass, he chimed in: "But I thaught ssome of your crew uzed to kall you--"

"Shut up Jar-Jar." The tired Ship's Captain without a ship barked at the frankly bizarre alien thing. "Just what is it that you 'know' about the Unity, Ambassador, that is so dangerous?"

"And what did you mean," questioned Riggs, the Marine Captain without any Marines, "when you said that it wouldn't just be us, assaulting Centris?"

In answer, Sarah turned to her shape shifting companion.

"Nubble, did you manage to plant these co-ordinates in the data logs of the Eagle freighter we left on Linnek?"

"Yess Sarraa N'kev. It will appeer that the data haz been erased, but can bee uncovered."

"And you are sure that the priests on Linnek scried aright, when they told you that Chancellor Ballac's 'wolf' was in pursuit of us, also?"

"Yez. Kennal Black, the Chancellor's sanctioned Pirate will have met with the two Unity Vessles."

"Kennal Black?" wondered Ilse, "but isn't he one of the most notorious raiders in the cosmos?"

Sarah just smiled.

"And you gave him our co-ordinates?"

"He has been pursuing me for some time." She quipped lightly enough for a woman who had suffered torture and the replacement of her left arm and torso with bionic parts as a result of that pursuit. "I believe it was he who sent out those robot drones which destroyed your ship, the Gyr Falcon."

"Goddammnit!" Ilse cried, "I knew we never should have boarded the *Lamorak* looking for supplies! All we got for our troubles was you, and getting mixed up in this insane venture which caused me the loss of my first ship, along with the stranding of one hundred and thirty six crew members on Thycessa IV."

"I wonder if they have been picked up by Earth Command yet...?" mused Riggs.

"Then," Ilse raged on "the loss of the second ship, the *Peregrin*, that we had built on that very planet, in a misguided attempt to rescue you!"

Sarah just sat, inscrutable, and smiled. Ilse would in all likelihood have launched herself across the cabin at the Ambassador, had a piercing chime from the bridge not claimed their urgent attention.

They all bundled onto the bridge and took seats, as the screens before them told of the arrival of nineteen distinct space-going shapes, very near to them.

“My God!” cried Riggs, “It’s the *Vindicator*! Black’s pirate Corvette!”

“But what in Space are those things around him?” asked Ilse.

“Manthicorr.” Buzzed Nubble quietly.

“How many did they send for him?” asked Sarah calmly, in the horrified silence that followed this revelation.

“Eitheen.”

“Hmm. I knew he was dangerous, but I never thought in my wildest dreams that he would warrant that much attention. He must have really pissed someone off.”

At that instant, two more chimes sounded, as the Cruiser and Destroyer erupted from hyperspace, several thousand kilometres off.

“Ahh, and here are the lion and jackal responsible. Come to gloat over their prey.”

“Christ! That’s the biggest star ship I’ve ever seen!”

“Yes, Riggs. The *Rail of Tears*. The largest one ever built, I believe. Nubble, are the co-ordinates for our next jump ready?”

Nubble nodded, as Captain Muraleyev (nee Martinez) leaned forward to object, “Hang on: you’ve already brought us deep into Unity territory. A further jump from here will be picked up by their continuum sensors: we’ll have the whole of the Centris home fleet descending on us if we try that!”

“Not yet Nubble,” Sarah urged “wait till he gets closer...”

Two of the Manticor had already latched onto his precious craft, and were playing merry hell with the outer hull when Kennal Black and the *Vindicator* leapt from the hyper jump a mere six kilometres from Sarah’s ovoid craft. The other sixteen Dragon-like things began to appear around him as he barked a harsh gasp of triumph, and ordered his crew to veer to port and descend, cutting a fine line across the other craft’s bows.

As the Corvette buzzed them, trailing pieces of hull and debris, the pack of remaining Manticor latched onto the new object in their field of view, and began to spill off in two directions. Almost a dozen of them peeled away, and began to hurtle towards Sarah, and her companions.

On the bridge, she smiled quietly.

“Now Nubble.”

“And to thee complethion ov your Min-Tuk, my friend Sarraa.”

Black laughed loud and long at the success of his ploy. He had been right: the Unity ships held off so far for fear of the indiscriminate tastes of their own weapons of greatest terror. The Manticor did not care what vessel they were near, but would attack, and tear randomly until all within their sight was destroyed.

“Ha!” He screamed “Helm! Get me over to those two Unity ships now! Let’s see if they can take the rest of these fiends off our case for us!”

“I can’t sir! They’ve just gone to warp!”

“Well follow them! I’m not going to lose my ship!” he screamed, smashing his hand down on the control panel nearby.

Indeed, the *Rail of Tears*, and the *Scales of Justice* had both gone desperately to warp, for on their helms Commodore Gail had just been given the report: The small, strange alien craft had just performed a warp jump, and it's vector had been calculated.

Sarah Enchev, along with a full dozen of the most blindly destructive creatures ever created, which were capable of decimating an entire planet, had just performed a hyperspace jump directly into the heart of the Unity homeland. Her exit point was calculated as being less than ten kilometres from Unity fleet headquarters, tethered directly over the space elevator, to the Capital and seat of all the power of the Church of Stars. And every Unity vessel within emergency hail range would be on route to the same location, and their doom....

CHAPTER 22

WC

A million thoughts raced through Sarah's head. These Manticor, monstrous though they were, touched something deep within her. Half animal, half machine - the products of Unity's biotechnology laboratories. Not so different from Sarah herself. Somehow she could feel them chasing through space after the ship, and while she did not share their hunger, something in their cries called to her.

The ship came out of warp with a jolt and Sarah took a moment to get her bearings. Looking out the porthole she could see Centris in the distance, with the Unity home fleet floating before it. A wry grin crossed her face.

"Good job Nubble, now comes the fun part. Take us to the planet, but make sure that you take us through the fleet - we've got some bogeys to lose."

A dozen dragon-like shapes popped out of warp around the egg-shaped ship. The ship jerked into action and the Manticor chased behind it, eager not to lose their prey. Moments later another ship arrived out of warp, badly damaged and likewise surrounded by Manticor, and immediately set out after them.

Sarah had to admit, grudgingly, that Nubble was truly the best pilot that she had ever flown with. Floating over the control panel his seven little rubbery arms shot every which way in a disturbingly hypnotic way. The egg was careering between the large starships at such a pace that even experienced space travellers like Riggs and Ilse had their hands clenched around the arms of their seats. The dozen Manticor seemed to have been lost amongst the fleet, their hunger for ships soon to be sated. If Chancellor Ballac's 'wolf', the pirate Kennal Black, had tailed them bringing the other six then it would most likely spell the end for the fleet and the planet afterwards. It was ironic to think that the cause of Unity's downfall would be monsters of their own creation.

*

Sarah sprinted across the tarmac and out of the spaceport, Riggs and Ilse following blasters at the ready. It was obvious that no one was going to challenge them, however. With the night sky lit up by the desperate battle being waged in the heavens everyone was too worried for their own safety, crowding the departure bays in a vain attempt to force themselves onto one of the transports evacuating the planet. Sarah was disappointed that Nubble had stayed to look after his ship - he had come with her this far on her quest that it seemed somehow disappointing that he wouldn't be there at the end.

The cathedral cast its shadow across the city, its structure intended to humble all who came before it. Sarah barely gave it a glance as she crossed the square and bounded up its steps. She had long ago cast of any faith in anything other than herself. Besides, she knew the truth about the 'god' of this Church of Stars, and soon everyone else would. Ballac had been manipulating The One for too long, corrupting her circuits and drugging

her brain. Just before the front steps Sarah pulled up suddenly, causing first Riggs and then Ilse to buffet into her.

“What ... what’s wrong?” Riggs asked, offering her a hand to help her up.

“It’s happened again. A glaring lapse in my memory. It’s been happening a lot recently. Lapses, inconsistencies. One minute I’m sitting on the ship evading the Manticor, the next here I am racing through the city. And you two ... you seem to have severe personality disorders that involve sudden changes in character, and I won’t even start on Nubble ...”

“Maybe you’ve got that rare Nuktarian mind virus. I hear that you can catch it from spending too much time in their eggs.” offered Ilse helpfully.

“Oh come on!” snapped Sarah, remaining on the ground and crossing her legs. “A Nuktarian mind virus? This has gone too far! Honestly! Not even I can believe in this reality ... which suggests that I am really in the clutches of some mind so alien that it finds it difficult to recreate a vaguely comprehensible facsimile of human experience. But when ... when did I fall into its clutches? When did my memories begin to go haywire? On the farm? That weird planet maybe? When Piggy brought us back here to Centris the first time?”

Ilse shot a quick look to Riggs. “I think that has Nubble has a ... err ... Memory Verifying Helmet in his egg. If you want to go back then we can ARRGGH!” Ilse screamed in agony then writhed on the ground for a while before stopping moving, smoke rising from a large hole in her chest where Sarah had shot her.

Riggs stood shocked for a second then made to say something. A quick glance at Sarah and the cocked blaster that she had pointed in his direction quickly changed his mind.

“Now” continued Sarah, “when might I have come in contact with creatures with such incredible power that they are able to alter a person’s very experience of reality?”

CHAPTER 23
CW

Silence descended upon the square outside of the cathedral. Riggs could only stare in horror at the body of Ilse, the hole in her chest opening up a very real one in himself

‘What are you talking about?’ he pleaded angrily, tears forming in his eyes as he collapsed to the ground clutching at her body ‘altering realities, memory changes? Don’t you remember anything, have you no idea why we’re here now? You brought us here, you caused this, this destruction up above, you killed her!’

Sarah stared coldly down at the body

‘No I refuse to listen to your lies any more, I’m not going to play these games – I’m getting off this ride now. There’s been too many alterations, its been nagging at the back of my mind, I feel when I close my eyes that I’m awakening and when I’m waking I’m losing consciousness. Its maddening, what does it all mean? What are you doing to me, you’ve been around me too often, could it be you causing this – whatever this is? How did you do it? Why here, why now, everything is so alien...’

Riggs, crying into the hair of Ilse whipped his head up

‘You’re insane aren’t you? Just some crazy person, a fanatic that completes their goal and realises the horrible truth, it was all just a lie. You’ve destroyed people, you’ve destroyed planets, even now those Manticor you lured here are destroying the Unity fleet and Black at the same time. Ilse never hurt you, you kill her without a moments thought, you will kill me and everyone else here and the answers still the same – this is you, here and now and you are the craziest bitch I’ve ever met’

At this Riggs snapped up the hold-out pistol he’d deftly removed from the small of Ilse’s back and whipped it towards Sarah. Discharging the flechette rounds in a vicious stream of needles towards her he screamed defiance, his eyes brimmed with tears

Sarah was struck firstly by surprise and then by some of the rounds to her shoulder, dropping her to the ground and out of the path of the remaining shots. Looking at her shoulder, she realised the wound was not nearly fatal, the majority of the rounds merely scratching at her cybernetic shoulder and causing little damage, but still there was some blood seeping from around metal. Dazed by the impact to the ground, she looked up at Riggs who even now was leaping across the ground towards her. With little time to react, she tried to line the Marine up with the blaster but he was too well trained and struck out his boot, pinning her arm to the pavement outside the cathedral.

Standing astride her, he lashed out with his other boot, collecting her on the side of the head, dazing her further still. Kneeling momentarily, he took possession of the blaster and carefully took aim at Sarah’s head

'You've killed me but you die first bitch...'

Sarah shook her head, the pressure on her arm increasing and felt the blaster removed from her grasp. She heard Riggs speak, heard the finality in his voice and blinked her eyes furiously, she wanted to know the truth, see it unfold before her...would she die, was this real?

Looking up into Riggs she noticed his finger tighten on the trigger, then with some surprise, the weapon swivelled in his hand and slid out. Focusing on his face, there was a look of shock, his eyes widened and unstarling, blood foaming out of corner of his mouth. He collapsed to his knees then slumped forward onto her, his final exhalation disturbingly bubbling blood onto her cheek. Struggling to release herself from beneath the body, she felt it lift from her and noticed Nubble, bloodied tentacles still entrenched in Riggs' corpse dragging it to one side.

'N-n-n-nubble?' stammered Sarah 'you followed us? You saved me? How can I ever thank you?'

Nubble stared contemplatively at Sarah 'You must complete your quest, finish it then we will leave this charnel place and never return. Why your friends sought to stop you is not for me to know, go now, I must return to the ship to prepare for departure'

As Sarah stared at Nubble as he floated away, she saw something...was it Nubble, was it a person, a trick of the light perhaps? Was he floating away or being drawn away by some force, was he even moving at all or was she sinking? Lightness and darkness began to play around her vision, flickering images, confusing her, weird sensations continued to plague her. Her head pounded and she fell to the ground, one of her hands grasping her head. Gritting her teeth she stood up and her eyes swam, for an instant before her was not the cathedral square and Nubble, but rather a strange room, small and boxy shaped, sparse in furnishings and sterile in atmosphere. A man was seated, holding some sort of board and writing furiously, rather than standing she found herself lying down? What was this? Who was this man, was he the cause of this pain, this madness? The image flickered, her vision swam and she felt herself rise again to Centris, disoriented she found herself facing Nubble as he retreated across the square.

Crying in rage, she opened her eyes and lashed out, firing furiously at Nubble's back, striking him several times in the centre of his tentacular mass. A deep, infinite sadness poured over her - what had she done? Nubble collapsed to the ground and as she raced over to its body and picked him up, she suddenly found herself not embracing Nubble but rather grabbing at the strange man she'd seen before. With a dizzying rush, her image cleared...where was she, was she indeed here at all? What was going on? Blood on her hands, blood on *her* hands.....she blinked to clear her vision of the tears and found herself once again with Nubble, her hands still bloodied and everything in her life gone...except the feeling, the voices in her head...was it the Manticor after all?

Lifting her head from this scene of desolation, she saw finally the Cathedral offered no solution, this was not the answer at all. It was in space, it was the Manticor...their significance in this was mystifying but seemingly the key – she felt a union between them, intrinsically on some level, she would go now, go into space, meet them and not flee, she would have her answers.

Nubble's ship rocketed into space, its entry into space solely guided by the ships computer systems. Sarah sat in the pilots seat, staring unblinkingly out of the front of the craft. The Unity Fleet was in disarray, the Manticor had wreaked havoc upon the fleet, remnants of vessels were strewn throughout the viewscreen.

As she sat back in her chair, Sarah closed her eyes and focused on the noise in her head, was it becoming clearer? How could she explain it? As she began to understand, her ability to express the truth, to express her feelings became duller.

Awareness dawned upon her, a sudden realisation, awakening to the truth at last, she exhaled.....

The craft soared into the gaping maw of the Manticor...

CHAPTER 24

RIC

Doris Walker had led a simple and largely uneventful life. Born into a loving family in a country town, she grew up surrounded by the love of her parents as did her 3 sisters and one brother. She went to the local primary and high schools and attended secretarial college after. Marrying her high school sweetheart at 22 and mother of three children by age 30, she had taken a job as a receptionist in a busy city clinic to help pay off the mortgage and bring up her children.

Doris was humming to herself and filing the previous days patient reports on this particular day. The weather til then had been horrendously hot and humid but looking out the window she could just see rain starting to fall- a welcome release from the incessant heat. That was when she heard the commotion from the next room. The screaming and yelling she heard was in itself not terribly unusual- Dr Nubb said it helped his patients to let it all out, "release the inner demons" as he put it. (Truth be told it had disturbed Doris the first time a client -one of the doctors euphemisms- had let loose, but she had gotten used to it. After all, the pay was good and the clients were always calm and well, normal, when they entered and exited his office.) The next sounds she heard were puzzling though- first a heavy thump, like an armful of books being dropped, and then a few moments later a shatter of glass. And then quiet, except for the sound of the rain coming down heavily now on the window across from her desk.

It was a few moments before Doris noticed that something else was odd. Normally she could hear the low murmur of either patient or doctor speaking in the background- now there was nothing to be heard coming from the door to his office and so she knocked tentatively. There was no answer from within. After a pause she turned the door handle and entered.

The first thing that caught her eye upon entering was the window opposite- a breeze ruffling the curtains slightly the only movement in the still room- the window itself was smashed, a few jagged slivers still clinging to the frame. Casting her gaze downwards, she gasped- Dr Nubb was lying face down on the lush burgundy carpet, a pile of papers seemingly held down on the back of his neck with a wooden block. Doris felt ill when she realised it was a note spike- and there was a dark pool spreading rapidly around his head and a dozen or more smaller ones across his back. His thick mane of hair was slick. Biting down the panic which was steadily risng in her, she rushed over and frantically searched for a pulse- she could find none. She stumbled to the phone and called for an ambulance while on the pavement far below the window the blood was swept away by the pounding rain.

Six young(ish) men, one cricket team, very little in the way of literary talent... One Dream.

To write and publish a novel without all that pesky bother of actually writing very much. The Rules? 4 chapters each, 500 word minimum, you are only allowed to read the chapter immediately preceding yours.

It sounded like a good idea at the time... You can imagine the results.



David John Stubbs: Microbiologist, Medium pace, Middle order batsman.

Will Campbell: Maths teacher, philosopher, Opening Pace Bowler, Mid-Upper order Batsman.



Aleksandr Yap: IT Support Personnel, Club President, Medium pace, Middle order batsman.

Ross Ian Campbell: Medical Scientist, Slow Bowling, Opening (stalwart) Batsman.



Cameron John White: Microbiologist, Computer Salesperson, Grade Captain, Medium Pace Legspin, Top order Batsman, Winner of the Good Sportsmanship trophy.

Stephen Andrew Brewer: Ex-Registered Nurse, Sometime Assistant Director, & IT Support Staff. Slow Nuthin' bowling, Middle to Lower order Batsman.



All offenders are identified by their Initials, at the head of their chapters.