

status quo



**DREW
WAGAR**



**A NOVELLA BASED ON THE
SPACE-TRADING GAME 'DOLITE'**



COVER COMPOSITION BY NEIL A. BADMAN



**THANKYOU TO THE COMMUNITY FOR
THEIR FANTASTIC MODELS, ALL ARE TAKEN
FROM IN-GAME SCREEN SHOTS, TAKE A LOOK!!**

Status Quo

A novella based on the space trading game Oolite.

Part 1 of the Oolite Saga, by Drew Wagar.

Second Edition

More ebooks available at

<http://www.drewwagar.com>

*Dedicated to Giles Williams, for creating Oolite, a remarkable tribute version of the original
Elite game.*

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Thanks to:

My Wife, Anita - For believing I could write a decent story, then reading and critiquing the manuscript.

My two sons, Mark and Joshua - The next generation of Elite Combateers.

My Mum and Dad – For buying me a ZX Spectrum 48k Computer for Christmas 1983 (rrp £175 inc. VAT), and following up with a very expensive computer game in 1984. At £14.95, Elite was pricey, but it was arguably the most influential Christmas present I ever received.

Giles Williams – For creating Oolite, a modern incarnation of Elite, utilising the capabilities of modern machines whilst retaining the charm of the original. Its design also fosters collaboration, as many aspects of the game can be modified by freely available tools. If only all software was like this.

David Hughes – David has written a significant amount of chronological back story connecting all of the ‘*Lite’ games.

Simon Ellis – Simon edited the final document, providing a huge number of improvements in syntax, grammar and style.

Ian Bell and David Braben – The authors of original Elite game.

Robert Holdstock – For the original ‘The Dark Wheel’ novella, that came packaged with Elite. This novella was an inspirational ‘scene setter’ for the original Elite.

Can you read?

If so, you're one of the lucky ones.

My Oolite books will always remain free to download and read. I deliberately make no financial gain from them. However if you enjoy them and would like to show your appreciation, I would like to suggest a donation to a charity local to me: the Ashford Dyslexia Centre.

Dyslexic children and adults find it very difficult to access the written word, particularly in the traditional 'black text on white background' format adopted for most printed material. This can cause acute 'visual stress'. It's been estimated that the dyslexic brain has to work around four to five times as hard to process text when compared to a non-dyslexic. Imagine trying to read a block of text when the words keep shifting position, change size, re-order themselves and go blurred at whim – that's what traditional books look like to a dyslexic person.

In children this can lead to behavioural problems as they are not able to understand why they can't access text as easily as others. Schools are typically unequipped to detect or deal with the needs of dyslexic children. As a result children are frequently labelled as 'stupid' or 'slow' despite overall high intelligence. Given that most teaching and testing focuses around the written word (clearly you have to be able to read the question in order to answer it) dyslexic children are disadvantaged on all sides, unable to demonstrate the abilities they do have. Writing is also problematic.

Often, dyslexic children have far superior non-verbal reasoning, logic and sequencing abilities. They often demonstrate higher degrees of musicianship, creativity, entrepreneurial and empathic abilities. Crucial to getting support to help people with dyslexia is an expert diagnosis and the subsequent recommendations. There are many ways to help; ebook readers, special glasses, additional time for exams and so on.

The Ashford Dyslexia Centre exists to advise, diagnose, support and provide specialist teaching for those affected by dyslexia in my home town. People with dyslexia may have a problem with traditional books, but they still love stories. Please consider helping them to access what we take for granted as book-lovers.

You can donate at <http://www.wagar.org.uk>

Thank you.

Prologue

Simply put, a Q-bomb (or to use its proper name, the Tyley-Feynman Quirium cascade mine) is a chain reaction device. Although it is physically very small, its effect has been described as being 'like a miniature supernova, and just as deadly'. The gravitic shockwave it emits causes any matter caught within its range to be annihilated in another gravitic flash which expands in the same way as the original detonation, resulting in a domino effect. The upshot, then, is that the initial Q-bomb explosion is only the start. Secondary explosions (the strongest caused by the destruction of its victims' hyperdrives) progress in much the same way, catching further objects and causing them to explode, until there is no more significant matter to be consumed by the expanding waves of destruction.

The explosion expands in a sphere from the point of initial detonation. It is accompanied by the emission of high-energy photons (from gamma rays to visible light, mostly in the blue frequency range of the spectrum). The expansion of the sphere is easily observable (from a safe distance) and travels relatively slowly. The word 'relatively' is key here:- most ships are unable to outrun the effect sphere without witch space fuel injectors, and should a ship not make good its escape early on, even injectors may be insufficient for the craft to reach minimum safe distance.

– Extract from the Elite Webcon Interactive Knowledge Institute (Elite-Wiki)

Galcop strenuously denies having anything to do with the bomb, and have unofficially supported the call for it to be banned, stating that it should never have been invented. So they were obviously involved from the start.

Tyley and Feynman were never interviewed, never received any public accolade. It was said they were merely research scientists who shied away from scrutiny and the media spotlight, not proud of the device they had created. No photos exist and no records of life events can be found. They have never been heard from since.

– Extract from the Unofficial Galcop Conspiracy Theory Archive, Tianve

Flight license denial for Rebecca Weston and James McKenna overridden. Presidential approval.

– Extract from Lave Space Licensing Authority Log

Chapter One

The Python class cruiser was a vicious looking ship. Lean, angular, fast and deadly, sporting a shark-tooth livery, it was the nemesis of many an unhappy trader. Its jutting fuel scoop granted it an eerie resemblance to the fearsome marine hunter that inspired its design.

True to form it was chasing down its prey, a battered Mk3 Cobra, the traders' seminal ship. The Cobra was a versatile vessel, and was often seen in fully loaded battle readiness – an 'Iron Ass' to use the vernacular.

This particular one wasn't so well endowed. It was attempting to flee the Python, in vain.

The Python triggered its forward weapons array again, the Cobra rolling drunkenly in a hopeless attempt to escape. Its rear shields failed and tell-tale plasma began to leak from its overworked drive units. A couple more hits and it would succumb.

The Python's owner, a pirate of some notoriety, savoured his victim's last moments. The cargo had already been stolen, and he didn't feel in a merciful mood today, he had his reputation to maintain.

His gloved hands closed over the firing controls as he rotated his ship to bring the unfortunate Cobra back into the cross hairs.

'Thank you, and good night...'

The Python lurched, then lurched again, throwing off his aim. Cursing, he adjusted his scanner. A new red blip had appeared, a hostile ship, targeting him! The Python lurched again, his rear shield now fully a third gone.

Quickly he targeted the newcomer. He was surprised to see it was a lone Sidewinder. A small lightly armed vessel. It had no witchspace drive, no way to travel between the stars. A simple interplanetary ship, usually used as a cheap and cheerful escort. The signature of the hits on his shields indicated it was armed with the basic pulse laser common to such a simple ship. It was unusual for a Sidewinder to be journeying alone, even in a safe system like Tianve.

Sidewinder. Mass 52 Metric. Speed .375 LM. Legal Status Clean, Bounty 0 Cr.

He flicked on the narrowband comms and sent out a hail to the new ship.

'Stand down. This is a legitimate kill. If you don't want to join him, I suggest you reverse course now. You're outgunned. Leave while you still can.'

The answer was another double hit on his rear shield.

'You have been warned!' he growled.

Another blast.

Can't really be bothered with this, your funeral fool.

He locked a missile on target, choosing one of the the ECM proof 'hard heads' – expensive, but effective. He'd make an embarrassing amount of profit on this trip, he had money to burn. He thumbed the coder release.

The missile shot away with furious speed, immediately homing in on the Sidewinder. To his surprise there was no futile burst of ECM energy attempting to remotely detonate the missile. The Sidewinder didn't even turn aside in an attempt to avoid the missile. Instead it headed straight for it. The two objects converging at a terrifying speed.

At the point of collision the Sidewinder jinked aside, twisting around its centre axis abruptly, the missile passing mere metres below its hull. Deprived of its target the missile veered around. The Sidewinder then turned itself...

...in pursuit of the missile!

Laser fire flickered out, once, twice. The missile detonated a second later, the Sidewinder coming about in a wide arc and homing in once again on the Python. Two more impacts registered on the shields before the Python's Captain reacted.

Shot down a missile? Impressive...

He recovered quickly. He was a veteran of space borne combat. His ship was more than a match for the Sidewinder. Fore and aft military lasers packed a punch that would decimate the smaller ship. The Sidewinder stood no chance. Quickly he cycled up the engines to full power, rotating his ship to face his assailant.

'Very clever.' he taunted across the comm, 'But you'll have to better than that.'

There was no answer from the incoming Sidewinder. Hits registered again on his shields as the Python lumbered around to bring its weapons to bear.

One decent hit and it'll be toast.

The Sidewinder jinked again on its approach, short bursts of laser fire still emanating from its pea shooter of a gun. It passed through the gun sights of the Python.

Goodbye...

He triggered the forward military laser.

The Sidewinder wasn't there. It had ducked aside, radically changing its speed and approach vector, anticipating his move. Two more bursts of fire hit the shields.

He fired again, with the same result. He turned the Python, leading the target. The Sidewinder twisted aside, reversing course. Each twist was accompanied by a blast from its feeble gun.

Forward shields failed.

The Captain stared in surprise at the readouts, the shields were gone, and he'd yet to hit the interloper. He concentrated back on the Sidewinder again, still ducking and diving in front of him. The military laser splashed forth again and again. Each time he came close the Sidewinder would roll aside, twisting and rotating in an unpredictable way, managing to pull in behind the Python and treating it to yet another light blast of fire. He fired again, failing to hit the elusive smaller ship.

Forward weapon overheated!

He launched his remaining missiles, watching in astonishment as the Sidewinder targeted each in turn and shot them down.

With increasing concern he began to run through a wide variety of evasive and counter moves. Regardless of what he did he was unable to land a shot on the darting Sidewinder, yet at every turn it managed to score a hit on him. It was like being pecked to death.

Who is this? I've never seen flying like this before! No evasive pattern is effective! I've taken down Elite combateers before! I'll not be defeated by a mere Sidewinder with a feeble...

Another blast of fire hit the Python, tearing through the weakened shields and striking the hull of the ship. The screech of tortured duralium hull plating sheering and fracturing echoed through the fabric of the ship.

Cargo Hold Damaged!

Fuel Injectors Damaged!

Missile Launch mechanism Damaged!

Energy Low!

Plasma was now leaking through a breach in the hull. The pirate captain starred in amazement and disbelief as his ship began to come apart around him. Another laser blast impacted, rocking the ship hard. A crack appeared in the bulkhead, accompanied by the terrifying rush of air venting abruptly into space. The interior of the cockpit became a whirl of spinning debris in the sudden vortex.

Taken down by a Sidewinder with a pulse laser...

The Pirate realised with fury that he'd left it too late to run, unable to believe the predicament in which he found himself. He locked the witchspace computer onto the nearest system and hit the engage code.

Hyperspace to Anle in 15 seconds...

The Sidewinder turned and faced him directly, laser fire flickering across space between the two ships. The pirate instinctively ducked as the forward viewer shattered, raining debris across the fractured cockpit, grabbing a remlok survival mask and diving for the escape pod.

This can't be happening! Who is this?

Hyperspace motors damaged!

Escape pod release mechanism damaged!

Structural integrity failure imminent!

The pirate grabbed the narrow-band transmitter, one of the few pieces of equipment still functioning.

'Who the prak are you?' he demanded, furious at his own impotence.

'Don't mess with the best, 'cause the best don't mess.' came a light, cocky voice across the comm.

The pirate's last words died furiously on his lips as his ship disintegrated about him.

'A girl? A girl!'

Chapter Two

James Feynman was from the planet Onrira, thirty-something, tall, thin and dark-haired, with a hint of premature grey around the temples.

He was also a something of a genius.

His parents had used specialized, and costly, genetic engineering techniques to improve his brain capability. Hours of intensive sim-training had given him the edge over the best pupils that a tech level fourteen planet could throw at him by way of competition. Close to the pinnacle of his career, he was a successful ship systems designer, ex-Cowell and MgRath consultant and a rising star in the technical design team of Faulcon De Lacy. After graduating top of his class in astrophysics and applied quantum mechanics, a string of successful projects had followed, culminating in this, his current research.

He peered through the double strength plexiglass and shield-reinforced windows of the test lab. Suspended on a gravity sled in the middle of the room was a miniature engine, its engine flux glowing a bright blue. Of course, the engine design was beyond secret: this newly-built Faulcon de Lacy lab at Onrira dealt in technology way beyond state of the art: there was stuff here that wouldn't be mainstream until long after he was dead.

He turned to his colleague, Geraint, a small, almost emaciated man distinguished mostly by a mass of white hair, two huge ocular implants and a quick, almost abrupt manner. He was from Diso, and about as dull. Perhaps that was what made him a good assistant.

'All clear?' he asked.

'Standard engine burn at full power, holding steady.'

They could both hear the tiny engine humming from inside the lab.

'Quirium injector?'

'Ready.'

'Stand by to inject at point five grams per second, continuous flow. Throttle set for auto-cut on overheat.'

'Ready, Jim.'

Everyone called him Jim. A nicely innocuous name, he preferred it to the slightly snobbish sounding James.

'You know, if this works, it will be one awesome ship. I might even take a flight myself.'

Geraint laughed. 'You? Fly? You threw up constantly on the sub orbital flight, never mind a test flight at injector speeds!'

'I think I'd be all right if I could be at the controls rather than a passenger.'

'You think they'd even let you near one? You can't even handle those old wireframe simulators they used to train pilots on.'

'I managed on the Z80A.'

'Pah, cheap knock-off copy. The real classic sim was the 6502.'

'The Model B? That old hunk of junk?'

They always argued over classic tech. With the easy familiarity of a middle-aged couple, a lot of their conversations degenerated into nostalgia for things past. Strange how so many people their age seemed to want to revisit the past, as though it were comforting in some way. Jim cut off Geraint's spluttering response.

'Let's run the test, eh?'

The tiny engine under test was a prototype for a new fighter Galcop was designing under contract with Faulcon. Top secret and ultra-classified, it was planned to be the basis for an augmented injector technology. Witchspace fuel injectors were a relatively new technique of drastically increasing the speed of a ship, without resorting to the rather cumbersome hyperspeed, or torus drive, fitted as standard to all ships through the last fifty years.

The problem was that hyperspeed drives only worked in clear, open space. If there was another significant mass nearby – a sun, a planet, or another hyperspeed equipped ship, say – they were useless, relying as it did on unhindered gravity lensing. There was no way to block out the effect of another gravity field, which rapidly became a major nuisance if you wanted to fly in formation with other vessels.

Injectors were a promising tech, but there were a few bugs to work out.

The big problem with fuel injectors was that they were notoriously inefficient. They burnt fuel direct from the Quirium hyperspace tanks and the conversion efficiency was appalling: less than one percent. You burnt out all your hyperspace fuel in scant minutes if you used injectors constantly.

'Burnt' was, of course, totally the wrong word to use. Jim sighed; it had been the only way the marketers could find to explain it. There wasn't a spincorp in existence that could get 'Quirium quanta radial decay phenomena' onto a glossy and make it stick, let alone sound sexy.

What Galcop wanted was a witchspace injector which was at least ten times more efficient than the current versions. This would provide a ship so equipped with virtually unlimited high speed flight, making the old hyperspeed drive obsolete overnight. giving Galcop the ability to lock down the Thargoid menace and drive a hard, sharp, Viper-shaped wedge into the anarchies.

The exhaust flux of the engine lengthened and changed from blue to deep magenta.

'Injection at point-five grams per second. Heat within normal tolerance,' Geraint reported.

The Galcop techies had worked on it for a year and said with equal parts of annoyance and smugness that it couldn't be done.

Galcop then issued a closed, invitation-only, highly confidential tender. Only three companies were invited and none knew who the others were. Faulcon de Lacy was selected only on the basis of Jim's previous work. It was top secret, highly classified. Jim had to go through a series of lenslok mind probes to make sure he was the right type of individual to be trusted. He'd passed.

Six months of research and development had produced a number of dead ends. Jim and his team and created a number of engine variations and injector modifications, altered pressure, combustion ratio and management settings. Nothing had worked. It proved to be a far more difficult problem than even he had anticipated.

Then he had a breakthrough. The engine wasn't the issue, neither was the injector itself. It was the fuel that was the problem.

Quirium was odd stuff. Discovered by accident during solar surveys over two hundred years before, it was a bizarre, stable molecule able to contain high energy plasma within its structure which, defying the established laws of physics at the time, happily existed at room temperature. It defied explanation for many years until some of the more esoteric quantum mechanics boffins figured out how it worked. In a nutshell you had the most potent fuel imaginable, which you could, if you so desired, carry around in a bucket or, more practically, pump into fuel tanks. Better still, you could scoop high energy native hydrogen plasma from the sun and through a relatively straightforward catalytic reaction, produce Quirium. Hyperspace travel, once the exclusive preserve of the fabulously rich, became mass-market commonplace almost overnight.

Quirium worked well as a high-demand, short-duration energy source. This was exactly what you needed for hyperspace travel. For injectors, of course, you wanted the opposite. To make it work required a very inefficient reaction setting. Most of the Quirium injected during operation in normal space was wasted to prevent the injectors cooking themselves. It was this inefficiency that gave the engine flux its distinctive magenta hue. Jim viewed it as a kludge; there had to be a better way. Like most engineers 'good enough' wasn't for him.

He thought he'd found the answer.

His 'eureka moment' came when he wondered whether or not he could use a Quirium isotope, rather than 'natural' Quirium, which would be more suitable for injector usage. It had not been tried before. The wireframe sims looked promising. Today's test was the first real version, albeit on a very small scale.

The engine note had increased in pitch with the Quirium injection.

'Right. Stand by to switch injection fuel to test isotope.'

'Set.' Geraint replied.

'This is it then.' Jim said, taking a deep breath, 'switch fuel and cut injector rate to point-one grams per second.'

Geraint hit a switch and they watched the engine.

For a moment the magenta hue flickered back to the normal cyan, before the new fuel was injected. The engine sound had dropped and returned back to normal.

'It's stable,' Geraint observed, after a moment's pause.

'Power output?'

Geraint smiled. 'Ninety-six percent of standard.'

That was promising; not enough yet, but definitely promising. At a stroke the injected engine was producing the same power output, at one fifth the fuel cost.

'Slowly raise the injector levels back to point five grams per second. Let's go for full power and see what we've got here. If we can get to five times standard power we're doing well.'

Geraint programmed in the sequence and they watched as the magenta plume lengthened slowly. The engine tone rose commensurately.

'Power output at three hundred percent of standard. Temperature high, but stable.'

'Keep it going.'

'Four hundred percent, temperature borderline.'

'Hold it there for a moment. What's the temperature rating?'

'We're at ninety percent of recommended maximum operating temperature on the engine.'

'What's its burst capability?'

'Overburn at one-twenty percent for two minutes.'

'That should be enough. Let's do it, let's go for broke.'

Geraint allowed the injector procedure to complete. 'We're back to point-five grams per second. Power output is... four-hundred-and-eighty-two percent of standard!'

'Temperature?'

'One-hundred-and-five percent of tolerance.'

The engine was whistling loudly now, but still seemed to be running well.

Jim let out a breath. A major breakthrough after all! The engine cooling was an easy problem to fix. With a bit of refinement on the isotope they should be able to hit that ten percent efficiency mark. Hyperspeed drive manufacturers were not going to be pleased.

'I work the efficiency at about eight percent,' Geraint commented, 'Not bad for our first outing.'

'Log the results, let's purge the tank and go again. They'll be loads of unburnt quirium in there by now, we don't want it contaminated,' Jim said, looking across at the display. He frowned.

The digital readout had changed. The sound of the engine was rising, increasing in volume dramatically, its tone growing fiercer, rougher.

Power output: 490% ... 492%... 494%... 498%

'Geraint, shut down the injector!'

'Done. What's the matter?... Prak! Look at that!'

Power output: 512%

'How can the power output be going up with the isotope supply shut off?' Geraint demanded. The engine noise was now a scream.

Jim shook his head; this didn't make sense, 'Shut down the engine completely. All off! Now!'

Power output: 620%

'Engine off!' Geraint called.

Inside the test lab they could see the magenta flux was undiminished. Something else appeared to be happening, sparkles of white light visible in the flux.

'Is that engine off?' Jim demanded, struggling to make himself heard over the noise.

'Yes: no standard or Quirium fuel going in at all now!'

'Then how the hell is it...'

Power output: 845%

The tiny prototype engine was glowing now, heated way past its nominal operating temperature. The engine flux was changing too, moving from magenta up-spectrum to a deeper blue colour. The engine noise was hammering around them, ringing in their ears, making the plexiglass windows vibrate.

'We're getting some gamma ray emissions!' Geraint shouted, holding his ears, staring at the environment scanners in alarm. 'High frequency, upper end of the spectrum! Gravimetric emissions too!'

Jim was looking at the scanner readouts, trying to figure out what was happening. The whole lab was shaking around them. The fuel supply was off, standard and isotope both. Some kind of self-sustaining reaction was occurring, but what the prak was fuelling it?

Suddenly he realised. His eyes widened in horror.

The unburnt Quirium inside the test lab tank!

Somehow it was sustaining the engine flux. The power output was increasing, he could see from the graph measuring the engine. It was continuing to grow exponentially. The noise was unbearable.

'Prakkin' hell!' He shoved Geraint roughly towards the exit. 'We've got to get out of here! It's gone into a some kind of reaction cascade!'

Before the two men could reach the door, without warning the engine flux in the test lab suddenly contracted. There was a flash of blue non-light and the shields surrounding the lab flickered brilliantly, followed a split second later by the plexiglass windows shattering into a million pieces and showering them with fragments.

A shockwave blew them off their feet and across the floor.

Water sprinklers snapped on and red warning lights turned the room into a vision of hell. Sparks blew out from overloaded and shorted consoles and smoke billowed into the air.

Just as suddenly as it began, the noise stopped abruptly. Silence crashed, punctuated only by the tinkling sound of bits of plexiglass.

Jim crawled over to Geraint.

'Are you ok?' he managed. Neither of them were seriously hurt, just minor cuts and bruises,

'Yeah, I think so. What the prak was that?'

Jim looked at the shattered lab. The prototype engine was gone, presumably vaporised along with the injector rig. The gravity sled was still there, but looked slightly odd.

They both approached it cautiously.

In the middle of the sled, centred exactly where the engine had been, a hole had been cut. It was neater than the most accurate and advanced laser machining could have produced, absolutely, excruciatingly spherical, about two feet in diameter.

Everything inside that space simply wasn't there anymore.

Chapter Three

'... Unofficial reports of Thargoid craft in Galcop system space continue to increase. Sources close to the Galactic trading guild have reported that horrifying numbers of independent trading ships are going missing in various sectors and claim Galcop are losing control of the situation. We tried to get an interview with Galcop but were told a Galcop representative was not available for comment. Is a major Thargoid invasion imminent? Truth is, we don't know. This is Anna Mereso, for the Tionisla Chronicle, Wideband channel three-eight-five-point-two...'

Reet Tyley screened out the news broadcaster and watched as the automech droids loaded the last of the cargo aboard his battered old freighter. The *Eclipse* was something of a family heirloom now. A first-generation Boa, over forty years old and with more light years under its engines than a generation ship. It wasn't the prettiest of ships, Reet hadn't bothered with a repaint in over five years. He rather liked the 'rat look'. Made the ship look down-at-heel and less of a target for pirates. Anything that helped with that was a bonus.

His father had bought it years ago, then quite a modern ship, the replacement for his aging Python. He'd always been a stickler for having things tidy, what was it he used to say?... 'Everything ship-shape and Bristol fashion.' Some old prak like that.

It had been something of a relief to the whole family when he finally snuffed it.

Nobody had bothered with cleaning much since. Reet's view was that as long as everything worked that was fine by him. Occasionally it drove his daughter mad. She'd shout them all down at the family table and storm off, vigorously reprogramming the mechs to tidy up, but after a couple of days it would all calm down again, only to be repeated the following month. It always seemed to be once a month or thereabouts. Go figure.

They were docked at Tianve, a high-tech, touristy system, in the far north-east quadrant of galactic sector one. All the tourism was due to the fact that Tianve played host to the only known pulsar in accessible system space, other than that there wasn't much else to remark on. Like many locals, Reet had never actually visited his home planet's most famous sight.

He grinned slightly. In the old days they really thought there were eight separate galaxies, until some bright spark had figured out that they were just eight different sectors of the same old place. That had caused a bit of embarrassment, coming on the airwaves just two short days after a major speech given by the then Galcop president about how marvellous it was that humanity now had dominion over half the Local Group. Still, presidents always said dumb things. That's what they were paid for. He'd resigned shortly afterwards.

'Cargo manifest is complete,' the mech reported.

'Seal her up,' Reet acknowledged. It was time to leave. He was already getting station sick anyway. These Tori stations always seemed to spin just a little too fast for him.

'We set?'

Reet looked up at his son, Red.

'Yep, round up the troops and we'll be on our way. One hour 'til our dock slot.'

'Who's got the escort duty for outbound?'

Reet looked at the roster, 'Looks like Jante, Lance, Rebecca and Coran. You're with me on the barge alongside Jenner. Rebecca will want the Krait, of course.'

'Naturally. I'll go get the family.'

'Whoever isn't sober, no rations for two days!'

'Yes, father.'

'That was a joke.'

'Yes, father.'

Reet watched his son go. Red was such a straight arrow; he took after his grandfather a bit too much. Tall, elegantly built and with immaculately brushed black hair, white teeth and an erect stance, he was a guy born a hundred years too late. He'd have been right at home in the chivalrous old days of space exploration. He had visions of being a bounty hunter, but an honourable one, striking down the bad guys and helping out the poor honest ones. Reet didn't have the heart to disillusion him. There was no way it was going to happen. They started out as traders, and traders they would always be, eking out an existence ferrying anything of value between sellers and buyers. It wasn't much of a life, but it was a life.

A lot of people didn't see how it could be so hard. You had a big ship, you loaded it up with cheap stuff, flogged it at a profit and made loads of cash. Reet had promised himself he'd kick the living guts out of the next person who asked 'So why aren't you rich then?'

Fuel was cheap, and you could scoop it anyway, but the running costs of five ships were huge, and that was before wages, food, air recyc, maintenance, insurance, tax, docking fees, berthing fees, flight permits, space lane tolls... it all added up. You had to trade damn smart to turn a profit. Sometimes you lucked out. Once, a market crash had cost them almost three months worth of credits. Many of their colleagues went bankrupt, some ended up, in desperation, as pirates. They were already dead. It was a tough life, with little in the way of certainty or security.

Red piloted their best ship, though 'best' was, like all things, relative. Red's ship was their only Krait, pretty well tweaked up, with a beam laser, shield boosters and an extra energy unit. Everybody else got the Sidewinders, which were – now what would be a polite way of putting it?... - basic. Beginners' all-purpose space instruction craft.

Jenner and Lance were Reet's nephews, Jante his niece. They'd been working with him ever since their father bought the business end of a missile back on Riedquat. He'd had this crazy idea of flogging Leestian opex computers into an anarchy. He'd been a good pilot, with a dangerous rating, and flew a tough ex-military Asp. It hadn't been enough. Reet had taken them under his wing when his brother didn't return.

Rebecca was his daughter, as different from his son as she could possibly be. Eight years younger than Red, she'd spent most of her teenage years undergoing 'attitude readjustment'. The loss of her mother early in her life had skewed her personality. Reet had done what he could, but he wasn't one to wear his emotions on public display. The lack of the softer side of family life had shaped his daughter in a way he regretted, but could do nothing about. Life was life, no point in complaining about what you couldn't change.

She was wilful, often reckless, but she was a damn fine pilot, clearly inheriting the ability from her mother. She was way ahead of the rest of them, already meriting a strong Competent rating, despite only having held her licence for two years. Virtually all the kills credited to the family were hers. She was vicious and tenacious in combat, her crowning moment to date was chasing down and killing a marauding pirate in a Python class cruiser on her own in one of their battered old Sidewinders, with nothing but a pulse laser. She'd achieved some notoriety at the Tianve station for that, even got on the news.

Some muttered she might even make Elite, providing she didn't get herself killed first. She was a risk-taker and notoriously selfish. Reet wouldn't be surprised to see her simply cut off and run on her own one day without notice. She was utterly self-dependant and always had been. He suspected she did minor trading operations on her own, but she was admirably discreet. Some of the things she managed to acquire hinted of a credit balance more significant than her wages might suggest. He knew she was saving for her own ship. He'd caught her looking at Mamba flight specs at the last station.

She was by far the youngest member of the crew, the others were fiercely protective of her. Reet didn't get the impression it was reciprocated. Rebecca cared about Rebecca.

Coran, the final member of the team, was a hired hand, bought into supplement the fighter escort. He had his own Mk1 Cobra and kept pretty much to himself. You paid him, he did the job.

He was a good enough pilot. Not spectacular, but reliable. Bald, with a jagged scar running from the back of his head to the temple and bright green eyes, he looked quite intimidating, but they'd never heard him raise his voice above a whisper. Even Rebecca at her most irritating couldn't get much of a reaction out of him. He always seemed to be thinking of something light years away. Jante reckoned that he'd suffered some major trauma in the past and part of his brain had been hex-edited to allow him to cope. No one had ever had the nerve to ask him. That was about as much of a relationship as they had.

Red found Jenner, Jante and Lance in one of the null-gee bars close to the station's central axis. Red didn't care for these places much, but his cousins seemed to find them entertaining. Drinking dangerously spiked chemical beverages in free fall wasn't his idea of a good time, particularly when some of the patrons overdid it. Gave a whole new meaning to 'wall to wall projectile vomiting'. The place was noisy, heaving with life forms, most of them not humanoid: felines, lupids, grubs and even a few insectoids jostled for space.

Fortunately the crew were in pretty good shape, having only recently emerged from cram sleep.

'Can't be time to farking go already?' Jante asked. She was a short and slightly dumpy ginger haired woman. A great mechanic. She had a special ability to swear like a Galcop trooper. Red didn't find it particularly attractive in a woman.

'Fraid so. We're due out in under an hour. Dad's waiting.'

'Fraggin' long haul this time.' Lance commented, knocking back the last of his decanter. He was their technician. A wizard on the computers, keeping most of the high-tech stuff running well. He was usually to be found hanging out of access ports tweaking the systems, his head and torso buried in wires. There always seemed to be another tweak. Lance was tall and gangly, he stood taller than Red at over two metres. He'd spent a lot of his youth in null-gee environments, which explained a lot.

Red nodded. They were heading down towards the south-west, towards Galcop central. There were lots of reasons. Reet was worried about the Thargoids, having no confidence in the repeated Galcop denials that outlying systems were in no danger. He said he could smell them coming. Economically, pickings had been thin in the Pulsar Worlds, and the systems were richer in the South. Right now they were barely making ends meet. The Boa's maintenance service was already overdue. They didn't need a witchspace misjump to add to their troubles.

It would take them a few months to get there, but barring any unforeseen issues they should

be okay. Rebecca had already plotted a complete route via the Corporates and Democracies; there was no sense in taking any unnecessary risks.

'One for the road then!' Jenner cried, signalling to the barman to float down to him. Jenner was very similar to his sister, Jante. A significant beverage gut was developing. He'd nicknamed it his 'passenger airbag'.

'You don't need anymore with that gut.' Jante teased.

'This?' Jenner stretched impressively, his tunic straining to contain him, 'This is the awning over the toy shop, darling.'

'Gross.'

'No time for this; we've got to go.' Red said, irritated. 'Where's Rebecca, by the way?'

There was no sense in interrogating them as to where Coran was: nobody knew, nobody would know, and nobody asked. He always appeared thirty seconds before departure, accurate to the millisecond. Weird guy. Rebecca, on the other hand, was not quite so reliable.

'Haven't seen her, I think she was down in the docking bay.'

'Yeah,' Jante added, rolling her eyes, 'she was hanging out with the boy racers again.'

Red sighed. 'Wonderful. You lot get back to the ship immediately. I'll get her.'

'Prak off!'

The lad was all attitude and spiky hair. He was with his mates, leaning nonchalantly against his bright orange racer. It was a classic boy racer vehicle, one of the new Hatchling VTS models, and customised at some expense. Plasma blue running lights, flared gun housing, custom chrome arch work over the engine exhausts. It was lowered on its undercarriage to such an extent that the nose of the ship actually touched the ground. That counted for a lot with boy racers apparently. Nobody outside their particular sphere of influence understood why. For the cost of the modifications he could have bought a decent ship, like a Mk3 Cobra.

Rebecca told him so.

'It's fragging stupid!' Rebecca didn't bat an eyelid.

'Yeah? You think you know better? Cobras are pish, this is where it's at.'

'All you've got is a fuel injector with a paint job. No grace, no style, and the handling is just totally smirched by all that chrome hanging out the back. You guys just don't get balance, do you?'

She was stirring and she knew it, but it was fun to wind these rich kids up. They thought they were so tough, but it was all talk and no trousers.

'So, what you got then?'

'My ride is a Sidewinder. But I'm saving for a Mamba.'

The lads laughed at her, Spiky in particular.

'A Sidewinder? What, your grandsire give you that, did he? What does it run on? Fusion power?'

The lads behind Spiky laughed. One of them whispered in his ear. He laughed.

'Yeah man, I reckon so.'

Rebecca eyed them aggressively. 'What's the joke?'

'Serge here wants to show you his Sidewinder.'

Rebecca looked around the hanger area; there were only three of the orange Hatchling ships present, 'Where?'

The lads were jostling each other now, laughing.

'Anywhere, honey girl, but here is right fine,' said the one she identified as Serge. He thrust out his hips and wiggled them suggestively.

'Very funny,' she gave him a disdainful look, 'I bet you've only got a worm down there.'

The other lads thought this was funny, but Serge didn't. He glared at her, trying to intimidate her. 'No one frags my rep,' he growled.

She glared back, 'Yeah?'

'...What you staring at?'

She raised an eyebrow and pouted, 'Nothing much.'

Serge pushed forward, 'You want to back that up with something more than words, trader pish?'

The lads clustered round her, chanting. 'Fight! Fight! Fight!'

'I'll race you,' she said.

'When?'

Rebecca looked at her interval timer. 'Thirty minutes.'

Serge laughed, 'What, in your Sidewinder? Give me a cram!'

'No, in my Krait.'

'Krait?' Serge laughed even louder. 'I'll dust your ass, trader girl.'

'Try me.'

The chant had changed to, 'Race! Race! Race!'

'Hyperspace marker and back,' Serge said, staring directly into her face.

She shrugged. 'Yeah, s'pose. If you don't want a real challenge.'

'What?' Serge's face was mask of confusion.

'Any son of a 'goid can do a sprint. I'm talking real flying, with turns.'

'Yeah? Doing what?'

Rebecca picked a name out of the air. 'Any of you ever done the Kessel run?'

'Kessel run? What the parsec is that?'

'Undock, sprint to the marker, through the ad-boards, thread all four station struts at ten metres. No injectors.'

'Ten metres?' Serge looked a lot less comfortable now. He had reason to be. The station was a dangerous thing to fly close to. It was a pair of huge wheels over five miles in diameter, linked by four struts to a central hub. Each strut rotated around the hub faster than many ships could manoeuvre, particularly near the outside edge. The station, along with its astronomical mass, was protected by enormously powerful shields. An impact would be fatal.

'Go outside that and you lose automatically, checked with range finders.' She paused, and then said sweetly, 'Of course, if you want to forfeit, I'll understand.'

The lads were silent, looking at Serge. Spiky nudged him. Rebecca was only a little over five feet tall and as slim as they came. Serge towered over her. He felt unsure of himself. She simply wasn't being intimidated. Nobody had ever faced up to him like this before, particularly not some little trader girl. What was her game?

'No way!' Serge spluttered. 'Race on, girl! What's the stakes? I got one thou says you lose.'

Rebecca shook her head. 'I don't have that kind of cash.'

Serge paused and then sneered. 'No prob. If I win, you get introduced to my *personal* Sidewinder.'

The lads laughed uproariously.

Cheaper than a thousand credits! But I never lose!

'One thing,' interrupted Rebecca.

'What?'

'I need a small favour...'

Red found Rebecca leaving the hangar bay. He could see a group of obnoxious boy racers hanging around on the lower level. What a nuisance, rich kids with nothing better to spend their money on than harassing decent folk. He wished Galcop would take them seriously and penalise them. There was so much worthy stuff they could do rather than wasting their lives on this stupid trash.

'Are we ready to leave?' Rebecca asked sweetly.

'We are,' Red acknowledged.

'My turn in the Krait, I believe.'

'Just until we get to the next system, then your hours are up.'

'That's fine.'

They walked back towards the opposite hangar where the larger ships were housed. The *Eclipse* was moored there with its escort fighters, alongside a number of other large vessels. Red looked at his sister. She was shorter than him, with delicate, attractive but not particularly remarkable features. She easily got lost in a crowd. Her mousey brown hair cut in a simple medium-length style and matching eyes allowed her to blend in anywhere. She dressed casually, looking for the most part like a normal deckhand. Red knew when she tried she could look quite alluring, but she hardly ever bothered. Most of the time she liked to be able to up and go without any fuss. 'All go and no show' was her own summation of herself.

She also looked like Weeviloid relish wouldn't melt in her mouth, but he knew she was as tough as a Mk2 Wolf. She had a sparkle in her eye, one that he was familiar with. It had gotten him into a lot of trouble as a kid. She'd always been a schemer, and he'd always copped the blame.

She was also biting her lower lip, a clear give-away she was thinking about something.

Red stopped walking. There was no alternative with Rebecca but to confront her head on.

'Stop right there, sis. What are you up to?'

'What?'

'Don't play innocent with me, I know that look.'

'I swear I'm not up to anything.'

'You listen to me,' Red said severely, grabbing her arm. 'No messing, no games. We fly straight and true. No spins. You know our situation. We can't afford any extra problems.'

'Ease up, bro! You don't need to worry about me,' Rebecca snapped, pulled away and walking off in a huff.

It had been like this in the last few months. They were no longer as close as they had been. Rebecca used to confide in him, now she was insular, detached from the family. She clearly had plans that didn't involve them. He too felt the urge to break away from the families routine drudge around space, but he knew his father needed him. Rebecca knew this too, but clearly didn't care.

She's grown up now. She's not just my little sister. She's a woman, and she's going to do her own thing. We have to be ready for that...

'I know that,' Red said to himself, 'it's the rest of us I'm worried about.'

Reet watched them entering the hangar where their ships were housed. Two minutes 'til the docking slot. Lance and Jenner were having one of their interminable arguments.

'I tell you man, the Mk1 Cobra is a design classic.' Lance was always going on about Cobras, the man was one-subject encyclopaedia. 'First multi-purpose design, first compact hyperdrive, first injector fitment. It's a piece of history. We should preserve them, there aren't as many left flying as people think!'

'Maybe it was good once,' Jenner generously admitted, 'but it's trash now. It's totally outclassed by, well, everything.'

'You're missing the point, they don't make ships like that any more —'

'Thank prak.'

Jante came into the hangar behind them, rolling her eyes.

Reet grinned at her, 'Have they got to the fistfight yet?'

'Give 'em twenty. They're just warming up.' Jante jogged over to one of the nearby Sidewinders.

Rebecca and Red came in together, Rebecca heading directly for the Krait.

'All set?' Reet called to Red as he jumped aboard the *Eclipse*.

'I think so,' Red replied reservedly.

'What's up?'

Red shrugged, looking around. 'Don't know. Keep an eye on Rebecca: she's up to something.'

'What else is new.'

Reet looked at his interval timer. Forty seconds. He counted down to thirty.

Coran walked into the hangar and headed for his Cobra Mk1.

Reet shook his head. 'Spooky.'

He punched the airlock seal control, the big hatchway closed up and locked in place. The Boa was ready to leave.

The *Eclipse* launched first, followed by the Cobra Mk1, the two Sidewinders and finally the Krait. Behind them Reet saw a small formation of Worm landing craft lazily heading towards the planet. A formation of the Tianve Liners were queued up in the distance. Passengers would be boarding the opulent ships, anticipating a pleasurable and excessively virtualised trip to the distant pulsar. Reet could see it eerily spinning in the distance.

Really must go and see it some day.

The Boa slowly cruised past the enormous floating ad-boards that marked the approach lane to the huge station. Reet flicked on the rear viewer and watched the enormous Tori station rotating slowly behind them. It really was a beast, far bigger than the more familiar Coriolis or Dodecahedron stations of yesteryear.

Reet waited until they were all clear of the station. He angled the ship away from the witchspace marker and increased the engines. It wasn't like the old days, thank prak. Time was when you had to drive all the way back out to the in-system witchspace marker, halfway out in deep space, before you could witchspace! Nowadays you only had to drive in after your witchspace entry. Maybe one day they would crack how to witchspace directly into station space. That would stuff the pirates and save a hell of a lot of time. Today they only had to clear the immediate range of the station before they could trigger the jump.

'Fleet form up,' Red said into the narrowband, looking at the astrogation console. He was mildly surprised to see that Rebecca was behaving herself. She'd lined up in formation immediately and was keeping station. Normally she mucked about on the way to the jump point. Red counted five ships. He'd only expected four. He quickly targeted the ident computer.

'What is it?' Reet asked.

Red frowned at the readout. 'One of those boy racers. Look at that ship.'

There was an orange Hatchling racer rolling about behind their neat formation, looping and twisting.

'Just ignore him; he'll go away if we don't react.'

The comlink buzzed on wideband. 'Hey! Krait girl! Why don't you get yourself a decent ship rather than that old piece of trash?'

Rebecca, rather uncharacteristically, didn't react. She maintained comm silence, exactly as she should. Red looked at his father in surprise.

'You sure that's Rebecca flying your ship?' Reet said sardonically.

'Why don't we do a few rounds, Krait girl, or are you syntho pish? I hear you took down a PCC, why don't you prove it?'

The boy racer ship came out of its loop. Then it fired on Rebecca's Krait. Reet saw it buck and shudder, the shields flaring red, repelling the blasts.

'Dad, he's firing on me! Permission to break formation!' Rebecca's alarmed voice came over the link on tight band.

'What the frag?' Reet exclaimed. 'Red! Get on the comm to the station! Rebecca's in trouble!'

Red keyed the comlink again, 'Tianve orbital approach control, this is Boa class freighter *Eclipse*. We have a Hatchling firing on our escort! Galcop response required!'

Red saw the Hatchling firing again. Still Rebecca did not react. She was showing amazing restraint. The last time somebody had done that to her she'd shot them up before he'd made the call. Perhaps she was finally growing up after all.

There was a pause on the comm and then a slightly slurred voice responded, 'Sorry *Eclipse*, no Galcop ships currently available. Suggest dumping cargo.'

'Prak you!' Reet shouted. 'Fragging useless, as always! What do I pay my frakkin' taxes for!'

It was a convenient fiction that there were Galcop Vipers poised ready to launch from every orbital station at the first sign of trouble. Truth was, more than half of the stations in Galcop had no police force at all due to inter-regional cost cutting and consolidation of the different police forces. Every year there seemed to be fewer police and higher taxes, regardless of what they did. Unless it was just about giving the top chiefs big payoffs to go and retire planetside. That seemed much more

likely to Reet. Nice work if you could get it.

Tianve usually had one or two Vipers about; apparently not today. Probably eating doughnuts.

The Hatchling twisted and fired again.

'Dad, my rear shields are fragged!' Rebecca called. 'Give me clearance!'

Reet looked at Red, who shrugged, gesturing with open hands.

'Break off and lose him.' Reet instructed, knowing she could cope with a boy racer easily enough. 'No missiles, and don't kill him. We'll get witchspace clearance. Disengage and run at thirty seconds; we'll keep you posted.'

'Copy that.'

Reet and Red watched as the Krait performed a loop and headed away from the fleet, the Hatchling in close pursuit, both at full throttle.

Red frowned, the Hatchling was no longer firing, despite having a clear shot. Maybe he'd overheated his laser.

'Copy that.' She flicked the wideband comlink to receive only and grinned. 'Race on!'

Rebecca immediately pulled the Krait into a tight turn and pushed the throttle to the stops. Then she triggered her own astrogation setting programs, the ones she kept secret from Red. The ones that she'd paid Lance to keep quiet about when he'd found them in the Krait's computer, the ones that increased the resolution of the scanner and pushed the engines into overburn.

The Krait's top speed was officially point-three lem, so not quite so quick as the Hatchling. With her tweaks the speed advantage was minimal, though it would mean they needed to replace the flux inverters a bit ahead of schedule: the overburn tended to coke them up good and proper. Red had never figured out what caused it. Rebecca had always played along with innocent bafflement.

It was a neat set of programs, she affectionately called them 'Peek' and 'Poke'. With the speed equal, it all came down to the flying. That was how she liked it.

'On your ass, trader girl.' Serge's voice came over the narrowband.

'So impress me,' she snapped back, dropping the throttle slightly as she neared the hyperspace range marker, ten kilometres from the station entrance. Serge shot past her, close enough that she could see him grinning from inside his cockpit. The Krait rocked in the Hatchling's engine flux wake.

'Witchspace approved,' her father's voice came over wideband, 'Witchout in two minutes.'

Serge had entered the corner too fast. As he turned the hatchling washed out in the turn, yawing sideways. The computers were programmed to automatically compensate for and dampen yaw immediately. They did, but only by cutting engine power. Rebecca executed the turn without triggering the computer, neatly sliding into the lead again.

The station was directly ahead of her, slowly growing larger. The Hatchling was back on her tail. She imagined Serge was spitting rivets in his cockpit.

'Very flash,' came his voice, 'but you ain't got the thrust, trader girl.'

'Guess you need that thrust when all you've got is a Worm!' she taunted in return.

The Hatchling was overhauling her, even with the overburn. At three kilometres the hatchling was in front again.

'Eat flux, trader pish!' Serge shouted as he passed her. He cut in front of her recklessly, causing her ship to buck wildly at the close approach. She steadied the ship out, keeping the thrusters at full power.

Ahead the ad-boards loomed. These ads were everywhere nowadays. They seemed to spring up almost overnight. The Your-Ad-Here company was backed by a huge cartel and seemed to have completely taken over the market. Rebecca could see one with the lurid advertising for the Pulsar, another board proclaimed some new book that had just been published. She squinted at the text as it blurred past her, the author's name seemed oddly familiar.

Serge had been forced to reduce speed to swerve in and out of the boards, these too were protected by powerful shield generators. A collision would have dire consequences. Rebecca kept the throttle at full, gracefully swerving, rotating and turning her Krait through the spinning boards. She passed him on the last turn, the station now directly ahead.

She saw the Hatchling's engines flare back up to full power and it roared past as they made the turn towards the spinning station.

'Launch in progress! Reduce speed and obey docking protocols! Launch in progress! Reduce speed and obey docking protocols!' an automated voice droned at them as they passed the outer marker.

The station loomed quickly in their forward views. It was horrifyingly large thing to be next to. Given its size, its outer rim was rotating at a dizzying speed, the grey duralium a blur of motion. Both of them pulled up at the last minute, the station's docking bay lights flickering past them.

'Witchout in one minute thirty.'

One of the Tianve Tourist Liners emerged from the docking bay directly in front of them. They were so close Rebecca could see the characteristic Murgh manufacturing ident plates.

Rebecca broke left and Serge broke right, directly into each other. The Krait and the Hatchling bounced off each other's shields, still on a direct collision course with the Liner. Streams of sparks from the interacting shields showered around them, illuminating the station front in a harsh actinic light. The Liner captain saw them, and stared horrified. The Liner couldn't navigate yet, still on auto-pilot as it cleared the dock. The passengers aboard on the starboard side got more than they bargained for as they looked out of the huge panoramic side panels of the Liner. They panicked and leapt away, screaming, as the trail of sparks headed by the two racing ships shot directly towards them.

'Stupid Goid, Worm boy!' Rebecca yelled, rolling and flipping the Krait over the Liner and then back down again. The Hatchling also just managed to avoid hitting the Liner by ducking to one side. Then the Liner was behind them, accelerating away to the safety of open space.

'Frakin' boy racers!' yelled the Liner captain over wideband. 'I'll get your idents next time!'

The delay had dropped Rebecca behind.

Ten metres was very close, almost close enough to scrape shields, and if you went beyond that you could kiss your ass goodbye in short order, iron or otherwise. Serge ploughed in recklessly but soon lost his nerve and decelerated. Rebecca closed the gap. They finished crossing the front surface of the station and dove round the side, beginning to thread through the spinning struts. The enormous station completely dwarfed the two tiny ships.

'Witchout, one minute.'

Serge weaved past the first strut of the station, rolling his lithe little ship around to match both course and the rolling surface of the station. Having made the first loop, his confidence returned and he pushed the throttles as far forward as he dared. Another strut was approaching, tilting crazily towards him due to the rotation. He chanced a glance in the aft cam.

'Match that,' he shouted gleefully seeing the view was empty. He'd smoked the smug little bitch.

'That the best you can do?'

Serge looked behind him again, and then off to the right and left. The Krait was alongside him. He pushed the throttles back up to full power. The Hatchling screamed ahead once more.

He was more careful this time, reducing speed before taking the turn across the second strut. He still overshot a little, the Hatchling class being particularly prone to yaw in the tight turns. It cost

him speed and time, again. The third strut was dispatched in the same fashion. Yet each time the Krait was right next to him.

As they came out of the shadow of the third strut the two craft were side by side. The station seemed to be rotating even faster now.

Rebecca could see that the fourth and final strut of the station was sweeping towards them. Neither had an obvious move, they were blocking each other. It was a game of chicken: whoever cut thrust first would lose. It all came down to nerves and *cojones*.

Serge rolled and turned his Hatchling, trying to cut Rebecca up. Their shields touched again, sparks flying, illuming the darkened rear face of the station as the two generators fought each other. The Krait was the more massive ship and it stood its ground, but the Hatchling inched slowly ahead.

'Witchout in thirty seconds. Rebecca, where the frag are you? You're off scanner!'

'Give it up!' Serge shouted. 'You've lost!'

'Not me,' Rebecca whispered. The strut was close now; both of them were in danger of being splashed across deep space. Rebecca saw an opportunity and took it.

She cut thrust, twisted and turned, then hammered back to full throttle.

Serge whooped in delight. She'd bottled it!

The Krait nosed behind the Hatchling, Serge saw it and tried to block across, thinking she was trying to sneak past on his port side. His movement was too jerky and he was going too fast.

Serge's astrogation console lit up with warnings.

Excessive yaw! Abort manoeuvre! Excessive yaw! Abort manoeuvre!

Serge tried to correct, and the Hatchling yawed back the opposite way, the computers automatically trying to reduce power. He'd overcompensated, way overcompensated. The Hatchling went into an uncontrolled spin. That was the thing about Hatchlings: the handling was marginal to start with and those additional chromed exhaust ports might look good but they ruined completely what little handling there was to start with. The ship was way too twitchy. The back end flipped around, engines stuttering. Rebecca's Krait roared past.

Serge saw the huge strut of the station flicker past the side view.

'Oh prak!'

The Hatchling almost got away. But the spin put the rear end of the ship a few centimetres into the rotational path of the station's fourth strut. The strut rolled past, slicing through the Hatchling's shields and overloading them immediately. Then it slammed into the engine housing,

neatly trimming off the custom chromed exhaust housings that had cost a small fortune to put on. They span indolently off into the void, glittering in the sunlight.

Serge was lucky. The Hatchling's engine shutdown immediately to prevent a complete reactor blowback. Fortunately the ship had enough inertia to carry the Hatchling away from the immediate environs of the station.

Rebecca was waiting for him.

'Give me my credits, Worm boy.'

'Prak off!'

Rebecca had expected that. She targeted a missile on the tumbling Hatchling and locked it on. Serge's console lit up like a solstice celebration.

'Witchout in fifteen! For prak's sake Rebecca, get your ass over here!'

'You want me to use this?'

'You can't. I heard your Dad say you can't kill me!'

Rebecca could hear the fear in his voice.

'Oh...' she breathed, putting on her sweet and innocent voice, 'you're right; so he did... But in ten seconds he won't be around to know, will he?'

'You'll be marked as a fraggin' fugitive!'

Rebecca had worked it all out, 'You fired on me first, remember? I got legal on you. Kiss your little Worm goodbye, racer boy.' She tweaked the attitude of the Krait, bringing it around to an optimal firing position. There was no way she could miss.

'Goidson bitch!' Serge realised he'd been set up, 'All right, all right! Don't fire!'

Rebecca watched as her credit balance credited by a thousand.

Another step closer to my own ship! Another step closer to freedom! Another six months at this rate and I'll be free! My own boss! Stuff Dad and Red. They'll never be more than barrel-bottom traders. I know I can do better. I want more, I want money, the best that life can offer...

'Sweet. See ya, Wormy.' She turned and headed away at full thrust. She couldn't afford to get left behind. The Krait had no hyperdrive subsystem.

'Hey! You've got to help me back to the station!'

'Says who?'

'I could be stuck out here for hours! I'll miss my educlass!'

'And this concerns me how exactly?'

'You bitch! It's open season on you now, you got that, bitch!? You're fraggin' storage meat. I'm going to hunt you down and —'

Rebecca switched the frequency on the comlink. 'Yeah, whatever.'

She tilted the Krait around and headed back behind the station to where the Boa and its escorts were readying for the hyperspace jump.

'Dad?' she called, switching back to her girly voice, 'I'm in the clear.'

'Where the prak were you?' Reet yelled,. 'We couldn't scan you at all. Where's the wide boy?'

'He's taken a tumble.' Rebecca replied smugly.

'Get over here, we're witching out in... now!'

Rebecca watched as a blue flash obscured the Boa and it vanished, leaving behind a witchspace wormhole. She saw the two Sidewinders and the Cobra enter it and vanish, leaving circular turbulence marks in the flickering sphere.

She set the autopilot and ranged in. The Krait flickered, dropped into witchspace, and was gone. The witchspace wormhole flickered and collapsed in on itself behind her.

Chapter Four

The system operative checked the logs. It was a dull job, but someone had to do it. Today it was his shift; fifteen more minutes and this ten-hour period of tediousness would be over. A cold beer awaited in the null-gee bar.

The standard automatic backup of all data in the research wing had completed slightly behind schedule. There was more data than expected. The operative frowned and checked the integrity of the backup files.

It all seemed to be in order.

Maybe some important work had completed today, but who cared? More importantly, it would look good on his record if he dispatched this data to the archive on time, making up for the delay. He flagged it for immediate transmission to Faulcon headquarters on Reorte. Job done.

The lab explosion proved to be a turning point in Jim Feynman's life, and not a particularly auspicious one. He sat, looking dejectedly out of the window of his apartment, watching Onrira rotate silently outside.

Gardening leave.

Two words no professional ever wanted to hear.

He could imagine some of his colleagues, jealous over his meteoric rise up the ranks, laughing up their sleeves at his sudden failure. Jim, the 'golden boy', had failed. Failed to create a better injector, blown the contract with Galcop, and had nothing to show for his efforts.

That was the official version of events, of course. Naturally, it wasn't true.

It turned out both Geraint and he had been very lucky during the lab explosion. They'd stumbled across a previously unknown and unique property of Quirium isotopes. A very dangerous one. When combined with normal fuel at the correct ratio, pressure and temperature, the isotope reacted in an unexpected fashion, causing a gravimetric explosion.

The gravimetric bomb had been another project Galcop had given up on years ago. They had been trying to find a replacement for the aging Energy Bomb, which was losing effectiveness as shield strengths and ship capabilities continued to increase. Thargoid warships, in particular, were shrugging off multiple energy bomb deployments without harm. A gravimetric bomb would penetrate current shield technology with little difficulty, theoretically at least. But no one had ever

managed to make one.

Until now.

'Not much of a bomb. It's not going to cause much damage by making two foot holes in things.' Geraint had initially observed.

They had postulated that the gravimetric effect had a self-limiting radius, but this turned out not to be the case. They had calculated fairly quickly that the size of the destruction circumference was proportional to the amount of Quirium available. Fortunately the test lab was only using miniscule quantities, otherwise the boundary might have been a lot bigger.

That was bad enough, but that wasn't the half of it.

To figure out what had happened they ran some more wireframes. The first thing they encountered was the staggering power of the gravimetric effect. Unlike the inefficiency of the injector test, at best five percent, the gravimetric explosion showed a ninety four percent conversion rate. The explosion had converted almost all the Quirium available directly into gravimetric shock waves, ultraviolet and high-spectrum blue light. There was virtually no residual after-effect or waste product. Quirium really liked to go off in a one big hit.

But it was worse than that.

It turned out that the gravimetric shock wave did something odd to 'natural' Quirium and normal Hydrogen fuel. It denatured it, turning it into more of the very same isotope, now dubbed the C64 isotope. This, to be poetic, added fuel to the fire. This is what they had seen as the faint sparkling in the engine flux.

C64 was further heated by the passage of the shockwave, reaching and exceeding the critical temperature and resulting in further gravimetric explosions, thus expanding the gravimetric envelope further. Every time the shockwave hit more Quirium or condensed Hydrogen the process repeated. It had a name now.

Jim had dubbed it, the 'Quirium Cascade'.

They had been luckier than they knew. Had more Quirium been available in the lab, the shockwave might have been much bigger than two feet: it could have breached the Quirium canister they had been using to fuel the prototype injector. The canister was standard ten-litre barrel about five feet from the gravity sled. If that had been affected, they calculated that it would have made a gravimetric shockwave about five hundred yards in diameter, big enough to obliterate a huge section of the Tori station. The rest would have disintegrated due to the structural stress of losing a huge part of its hull. Six hundred billion credits worth of space station, four and a half thousand life

forms.

Even then it wouldn't have been over.

The calculations had pretty big error bars by this point, but in worst case all the docked ships and the fuel stores aboard the station would have been within the sphere of effect and added to the cascade. The shockwave might have propagated still further out into space, encompassing ships in and approaching orbit and potentially even hitting the planet's surface. Condensed Hydrogen fuel was used planet side to power virtually everything. It was possible that the entire surface of the planet could have been erased by the chain reaction. The loss of life could have been incalculable and complete.

The entire Onrira system could have been purged within fifteen minutes.

The wireframe sims continued to replay their simulation of the effect. As they terminated, the original programmer's personal in-joke marking the end of the sequence appeared in subtle and bitter irony.

GAME OVER. Press space, Commander.

Jim and Geraint had stared at each other for a full five minutes whilst the enormity of what they had discovered sank in.

A planet killer.

A doomsday device.

An über-bomb.

A device powerful enough to obliterate the entire population of a planet, deployable from orbit by a small ship.

Neither Jim or Geraint was a weapons specialist; that was handled by a different team in Faulcon. But they could immediately see the potential for destruction that this technology presented.

'We can't let this happen.'

'Jim, this is big, this is significant!'

'We mustn't develop this. We cannot, *must not* allow it to be created.'

'What? Jim, we could be famous! This bomb could annihilate the Thargoids! Close down piracy forever, give Galcop the power it needs to stand against the Federation and the Empire. It would make us the significant military power in the galaxy!'

'Yes it would.'

'Well, your problem is?'

'Any culture given this kind of power will use it to conquer and subjugate. It's inevitable. It's history.'

'Nonsense! We can trust Galcop!'

'Can we? Maybe today, maybe tomorrow. But organisations change, people are replaced, age, move on. History teaches us that absolute power corrupts absolutely. Yes, we might defeat the Thargoids and that might be a good thing...'

'No pish!'

'... But how long would it be before Galcop realised they can hold unaligned worlds to ransom? Embargo space lanes through the anarchies? Make strategic gains across Federation and Empire Territory? This bomb would totally change the balance of power. It would be all out war within days of the first deployment, everyone vying to possess the technology. Billions will die on all sides, on their tombstones the words 'We can trust Galcop'.'

Geraint looked shocked. 'Prak. I didn't see it like that.'

'Karella-Feynman. It could be the worst swear word on a thousand systems. Cursed names, remembered for the destruction we allowed.'

Their conversation halted again and they stared out of the windows. The view outside was calm and tranquil. How different it could have been.

'Some one else will stumble on this one day, you know,' observed Geraint.

'Yes, but not for years. The C64 isotope is beyond the capabilities of anyone outside this lab. We know that. We can surreptitiously contact our peers in the Federation and Empire. We can take this to the President, maybe even the Federation Council and the Duval Dynasty. Get unilateral agreement for this technology to be banned.'

'And in the meantime?'

'We can't allow this to be created. This knowledge must be hidden. Our choice today affects the lives of untold millions of people, races, planets, even whole systems and civilisations.'

'Taking the secret to the grave and all that? How will we explain this?'

'We say we failed. We affirm it can't be done. Galcop was right, injectors can't be enhanced further. End of story. We destroy our notes, our research findings, the remaining isotopes, the lab recordings, the wire frames, everything. The sneers won't matter, as long as this doesn't get out.'

'Are you prepared to do all that? Make that sacrifice? Do anything to stop this?'

'I am. Are you?'

Geraint stared at him for a moment.

'It will blow our reputations out the airlock, our careers will be over,' Geraint said with a sigh. He was only commenting; Jim could see the understanding in his eyes. They were going to give up a lot, but the stakes were immeasurably higher.

Jim held out his hand. 'You swear?'

Geraint took his hand and shook it firmly, 'I swear.'

The fuss died down remarkably quickly. The project was top secret, so few knew about it. Galcop requested the results, but Faulcon reported that they were destroyed in the explosion. Geraint provided a faked wire frame that 'proved' that the modified injectors were unstable and not practical to implement. The Galcop techies enjoyed their moment of superiority and didn't even bother to check the wire frame: it was a classic case of seeing what you wanted to see. The techies enjoyed gloating over both Jim and Geraint for their audacity in trying to succeed where their best minds had failed. The public and private sector competition was as strong as ever.

Six months passed quickly. Jim and Geraint were separated, put on different projects and achieved some minor successes. Jim worked on some new flight control systems for Cowell and MgRaths latest ship, the Cobra Courier. Geraint had transferred to the weapons division, working on a brand new replacement for the much-reviled Faulcon de Lacy HM3 Homing Missile. They met occasionally, usually off-station on restaurant junks nearby, to talk about their progress on making overtures to the other political organisations.

'So. News? How's life treating you?' Jim began.

'I've spent the last three months blowing up cargo canisters for fun. Life is good. Well, good enough.'

'Sounds like more fun than Astrogation.'

'Have you heard about the new SuperCobra?'

'Only in rumours, I heard it was a story put about to keep the shipyard workers amused.'

'Oh no, it's real enough. They've put together a prototype already. It will make the Cobra Courier look like a bathtub.'

'Yeah?'

'Get this, they've managed to cram in seven energy banks and upped the speed to point-four-five. It's our revenge on the Imperials.'

'Speaking of which,' Jim said, changing the subject, 'how are our fine Imperial colleagues?'

'Funny you should mention that. I have a meeting with Zerz Furvel two days from now,' Geraint said, *sotto voce*, despite the fact that they were the only two present.

Jim blinked in surprise. Zerz Furvel was the chief Galcop technician. He was reputed to be working on plasma weaponry, currently a source of some pride to Galcop. A coherent beam of accelerated plasma could potentially make a military laser look like a peashooter.

'How did you manage that? And what does he have to do with the Imperials?'

'A rare opportunity. The Imperials have invited a select group of Faulcon engineers to be awed by their latest RamJet technology at a political conference. We're going to put the fear of God into them in return with our plasma work. No actual data exchange, of course, and the usual no-scanners drill. It's part of a peace and goodwill overture. Not likely to get us anywhere, but, crucially, Zerz is giving a keynote address. I've arranged to meet with him. I expect he wants to gloat over our failed injector test.'

'He knows about that?'

'One of the privileged few apparently.'

'Can we trust him?'

'Not on your life. But we've got to start somewhere. I'm hoping to make some contacts with the Imperials while I'm there. How are you doing with the Federation?'

Jim shrugged, 'Nothing like as good as you. I've made some contacts over there, but it's proving hard to be noticed without revealing too much.'

'We have to be careful about Galcop too. I think our movements may be being monitored. We should probably stop meeting like this.'

'We'll arrange message drops using our codes. Text only.'

'Agreed.'

'When's the conference by the way?'

'I leave tomorrow and will be gone for a month or so. The Imperials are sending a ship to pick us all up. Another gloating opportunity.'

'Why?'

'Guess which ship.'

'Not the...'

'Oh yes. One of the Royal ones too. An Imperial Courier.'

'You lucky Goid!'

Galcop's military Chief of Staff was very much *primus inter pares*. *De jure* he was part of an elected council, including the chiefs in the areas of Commerce, Judiciary, Health, Diplomacy, Science and Governance. However the military position held huge gravitas, and so *de facto* he was second in command to the real *primus*, the Galcop President himself.

He was a tough, determined man, a veteran pilot, commander and Admiral of the Navy. A man who saw all things through a lens of determination focused on one thing: keeping Galcop together, whole, powerful; resisting anything that might detract from its continuation.

If that included elected members of the council, then so be it.

His office was located on a heavily fortified Anaconda Cruiser, usually in orbit about his home planet of Aesbion, escorted by a fleet of Mambas.

He sat at his desk, studying the reports on his desk. The contents of the plain manila folders were complex, difficult and inflammatory documents. Capable of starting wars, or ending them, making legends, debunking myths. Virtually everything that was known was accessible to the military Chief of Staff, and what little that wasn't probably didn't matter.

The folders were labelled in a baroque, old fashioned text. They looked like paper, but that was a deception. They were composed of neuro-cartilage, genetically keyed to particular individuals, which would simply evaporate if handled by the unauthorised.

He sorted through the items one by one. The first few were mundane.

Plasma acceleration, Imperial progress.

Slave trading quotas, Galactic Discrepancies.

Narcotics Sting Operation: Riedquat

The next one was more esoteric.

Raxxla. Classified.

He picked up the folder and placed his thumb over the DNA clip. The file stat indicator showed a comprehensive set of documentation was enclosed. He was keen to read up on the latest

developments, apparently there had been some quite interesting activities of late.

He put the document down. Perhaps later. A more pressing issue required his attention.

Galactic Navy. Operation Manhattan.

He knew about that one already. He'd masterminded it.

INRA. OXP.

He frowned. OXP. An abbreviation that always meant trouble. Usually a new and different kind of trouble. In this case an Obligatory Execution Permit.

A request for assassination.

Never something to be taken lightly. It always implied a very serious state of affairs.

Quickly he thumbed the clip and the document opened, projecting a hologrammatic wire frame image. A voiceover accompanied the image.

'It is a very small bomb, with the destructive power of a miniature supernova, and just as deadly. The gravitic shockwave causes any matter caught within its range to be annihilated in another deadly gravitic flash...'

Fifteen minutes later the military chief of staff closed the folder and stared thoughtfully at his desk. Assassination wasn't a skill practised by Galcop. On the rare occasions it became necessary, it was... outsourced. This particular request was most unfortunate, but absolutely necessary.

He touched another corner of the document. It glowed green and a single word appeared for a brief interval, before fading away.

Approved.

The file was transferred back to the storage module and the Chief of Staff paced his office floor for a few minutes before returning to his desk and the remaining files. Time to read up on the Raxxla developments.

Jim had watched the Imperial Courier dock and later leave with Geraint and the Galcop team aboard. It had been quite a sight. The Courier was unlike pretty much any other ship in space right now. A product of a less-than-honourable war over a hundred years ago, the twin-hull catamaran design was still revolutionary now, and unequalled.

Life resumed as normal. Jim received text only messages from Geraint on a regular basis.

They were simple and contained little information. They had assumed the Imperials would be closely monitoring all transmissions from the conference. Geraint and he had long ago collaborated on some basic symbolic language so that they could communicate covertly if necessary. Mostly they had used it to keep each other informed on research activities across departments which were supposed to be separate. They had never really had much call to use it for anything else.

Jim finished his early morning coffee and as expected another text dropped into his console. For the most part it was the normal conversational letter, except for a series of sentences about two thirds of the way down.

Trumble infestation awful by the way. Zerz likes the little critters; I can't clean them out because the scanners aren't working.

Trumble was their code for trouble, 'infestation awful' meant something really bad. The next sentence implied Zerz was the cause. 'Scanners not working' meant Geraint was investigating but didn't have the answers yet.

What the hell was going on?

Zerz Furvel knew about the failed injector. Was Geraint implying that Zerz knew more than this, maybe about the cascade reaction? Zerz was a brilliant technician: if someone was going to understand it, he would be able to.

The message had been sent almost twelve hours earlier, according to the marker, and a lot could have happened in that time. He decided to give Geraint a call. It would cost a small fortune at that distance, particularly over to the Imperial side. The conversation wouldn't be direct either, but at least Jim would be able to get a clearer idea of what was going on.

It took some time to get a comlink to the Imperial Systems. The operator called back when it was established. A woman appeared, frowning at him from across almost fifty light years of space. Her accent was the strange drawn out tones of the Imperials.

'Yeah?'

'I'm trying to contact Geraint Karella. A guest at the Duval conference centre.'

The woman looked at him with distaste, immediately picking up his Galcop accent by return. She sighed and rolled her eyes, as if his request was directly causing her life to be unfairly disrupted.

'Who's calling?'

'My name is Jim Feynman.'

'Stand by.' she said rudely and put him on hold. Jim watched his credit balance ticking down steadily.

After three minutes she came back, without an apology for the delay. 'I'm sorry; Mr. Karella is unavailable to speak to you.'

The line was abruptly cut.

Jim wasn't able to believe that. Geraint would have taken a call from him regardless of whether he was asleep, drunk, or in the throws of ecstasy with any floozy you cared to mention. Something wasn't right.

Something wasn't right at all.

The Chief of Staff received a blip on his console. He glanced at it briefly and then resumed his speech to the council with virtually no hesitation. It was good news. The text was simple, sparse, to the point and told him everything he needed to know..

One, complete. Two, proceeding.

Jim was at lunch when the next text message from Geraint came in. The marker showed it had been sent just an hour before Jim had tried to contact him directly. This time the letter was shorter. There were some typing mistakes, as if Geraint had been in a hurry. Again there was a coded set of sentences.

Zerz brought the trumbles aboard. He had a backup supply apparently and he thinks there will be a population explosion once there are enough of them. Navigation is terrible here, though it looks clear your end. Use the lower docking bay for sightseeing if you come for a visit. See you in witchspace.

Jim stared at the text. It implied Zerz knew about the cascade effect. The inference was clear: '...explosion...'. The reference to backup supply wasn't clear though. 'Navigation terrible' meant Geraint didn't know what to do. Jim didn't understand the reference to lower docking bay either. It wasn't part of their code.

'See you in witchspace' was clear though.

It meant get out.

It meant get out *now*.

It was their panic code: mortal danger; immediate threat; life in danger. They'd never used it

before.

If Zerz knew about the cascade reaction, what would he do? How had he got hold of the information? Jim rescanned the text and then swallowed in fear.

Backup supply.

He wracked his brains, trying to remember all the steps they had taken when they had discovered the cascade reaction. All references had been destroyed. There was no evidence, no copies, no backups. They had purged everything.

Hadn't they?

Unless a generic automated backup had been running during their investigation. It was possible. They had taken almost four hours to clean up, figure out what happened and delete everything. Enough time for the data to have been harvested. If someone had monitored that, they would have seen everything. That was over six months ago, long enough to build the real thing.

'Stards!' Jim muttered to himself. 'Galcop already has the bomb.'

Zerz must have been able to build a bomb from the information in the backup. Geraint had somehow discovered this and was warning him. He couldn't do anything at that end, but there was something Jim could do here? What was it?

Use the lower docking bay for sightseeing if you come for a visit. See you in witchspace.

The Torus station had a lower docking bay. Jim keyed the vid link from a tablet console. The tablet beeped and prompted him for more information.

Specify Bay.

Jim keyed in 'One'. A Cobra was parked there. It looked perfectly normal, a standard trading model showing the scars of a hard life.

Two. A squadron of four police Vipers, Fuelled and ready to launch.

Three. A Krait, in for long-term repairs. Parts were hard to get nowadays. It looked like the carcase of another one was alongside, being striped for parts.

Four. Two Ophidian-class yachts. Classy retirement vessels for drifting through space in.

Five. The tablet buzzed in annoyance..

Vid link unavailable. Error 443: Camera Maintenance.

He left the apartment at a run.

Docking bay five appeared deserted, the internal bay doors closed and locked. Outside there were two Galcop officers, both loosely cradling laser rifles. They looked bored and fed up. He approached as close as he could without being seen, just within earshot.

'We can't leave our duty station.'

'It's only five more minutes, it's not like they're paying us overtime or nothing. It's just a new ship. It's only those tech journalists who give a frag anyway. Who cares? We've been here for eight hours and seen no-one.'

'Aint right. Duty and all that.'

'Frag that. What are we going to do? We got no fraggin ammo anyway! Fake powerpacks, fraggin insult! Cost cutting cheapskates. I heard they're sending Viper pilots out without food packs now, bring your own fragging food, for praks sake!'

'I still don't think —'

'Tobius is up on duty next and he's a mate, he won't crag us upstairs.'

'We shouldn't.'

'I'll buy the beers.'

'Yeah? What, all of them?'

'Yeah. You in?'

'Well, if you put it like that...'

The two officers wandered off. Galcop security at its best! Jim couldn't believe his luck.

Jim looked around carefully, moving over to the hanger doors. The next crew would be here in minutes, he didn't have long. The bay doors were locked by simple pin security code. It was a device Faulcon themselves had designed, thus having the standard backdoor access codes when it left the factory. These were supposed to be deleted once the unit was in place of course. Jim was only a little surprised to find all the original codes were there. Even despite this, it was poor security to use a Faulcon device to guard a Faulcon lab! He'd heard Galcop standards were slipping, he hadn't realised by how much.

The door slid back. He closed it behind him, relocking it.

He ran into the bay and hid behind a rack of Quirium canisters and sneaked a look at the ship within.

It looked to all intents and purposes just like a normal Mk3 Cobra. Only a slightly lurid

colour scheme gave it away on first glance. To the practised eye, though, there were some subtle but noticeable differences. Jim picked up on them straight away. The engines were completely different, the same dimensions for sure, but the exhaust flux mechanisms were not standard fare. There were also twin outrigger engines on either side, rather than the blanking plates on the standard ship. The ship was also balanced differently on its landing gear, implying a major mass change or internal realignment. It had to be the SuperCobra prototype Geraint had mentioned.

The bay appeared deserted. From his vantage point he saw two guards arrive outside, presumably 'Tobius' and colleague.

The docking ramp was down, implying somebody was aboard the ship. Jim approached cautiously. He climbed aboard as quietly as he could and found himself in the ship's main hangar. It was completely empty.

The faint sound of voices propagated from the bridge area. Somebody was giving a speech. He moved forward until he could hear clearly.

'... important covert mission Galcop has ever undertaken. A pre-emptive strike at the heart of the Duval Empire. Your mission is simple: destroy the Duval Dynasty. This ship is carrying a pair of unique and highly classified weapons. They are one-shot devices, and there are no duplicates. Deployed from low orbit, they should vaporise the entire surface of the planet. You must evacuate the area immediately. The blast radius is significant. Fuel injectors are mandated, the coordinates are locked into your autopilot. Gentlemen, you launch in one hour.'

Jim heard the sound of booted footsteps. Whoever was up there was coming back down towards him. Quickly, he secreted himself in the only place he could, the null-gee toilet, his ear pressed up against the door, trying to hear what was happening outside.

He heard the footsteps pass and the hangar door seal up. He was trapped inside! He waited a further ten minutes before opening the door. The cargo hold was empty and silent, the door closed as he'd heard. He made his way to the bridge.

The astrogation console was already live.

Ship Ident: *SuperCobra*

Ship Name: *Enola Gay*

Hyperspace: *Achenar*

Astrogation: *Planet Orbit*

Ordinance: *4x Loaded*

Jim shut down the log in horror and flipped up the ship's inventory, scanning down the list.

2x ECM Hardened Naval Missile

2x Quirium Cascade Mine

He staggered, collapsing into the pilot's chair.

The stards had done it. They'd really done it, built the prakking bomb! His prediction was already a reality. The display flashed up, as if mocking him. He blinked, staring at it. A snatch of conversation drifted back into his memory.

'Are you prepared to do all that? Make that sacrifice? Do anything to stop this?'

'I am...'

There were two bombs aboard; there were no duplicates. But Galcop obviously had the knowledge, so they could make more bombs. Even if he destroyed these there would be more. He couldn't stop it. The bomb technology would already be in a hundred Galcop databases. The Trumble was out of the airlock, the balance of power tilted, inexorably. He couldn't undo that.

'... Do anything to stop this?'

He checked the onboard databases. Yes, there were the bomb schematics. The techs would have had them online in case the bombs had any bugs. The schematics were the answer.

It would mean the end of his life as he knew it. His accounts would be trashed, seized, frozen. He'd almost certainly merit a fugitive rating. But he didn't need to survive for long, just long enough.

Jim jumped into the pilot's chair. He had a vague plan, not much of one, but enough to be going on with. The mission of destruction had to be stopped first. That meant this ship had to be removed.

He hated flying, but he was a qualified pilot. It would have to do. Fortunately it was a quiet time of day. He switched off the transponder, impersonated a weary trader over the comlink, excused the lack of transmission for a minor onboard computer glitch and requested clearance.

'You'll get Offender status in the next system if you don't fix your transponder, you know that?' the traffic officer responded.

'I think I can cope with that,' replied Jim drily, activating the launch routine.

He fired up the engines and roared the SuperCobra out of the hangar.

The Chief of Staff was not a man to raise his voice, shout or exhibit much in the way of emotion. It was distraction from the task in hand and unnecessary; it interfered with getting the job done. His disapproval was nonetheless stark and terrifying to those in the room.

'Define 'missing', ' he said slowly.

'It was stolen.'

'By?'

'We assume it was Jim Feynman. He's also missing. The ship was unoccupied for only a couple of minutes. The witchspace flux appears to indicate Oresqu as the destination.'

The Chief of Staff shook his head, 'More Galcop incompetence. What prevents him from jumping again?'

'Nothing, sir.'

'Then this is your definition of missing, is it?'

'Sir.'

'Can we track the ship?'

The men looked anxiously around, until one of the techs stepped forward.

'Sir, if I may.'

The Chief of Staff waved at him, 'You have something to say?'

'Sir, the mines gives off gravimetric radiation in their quiescent state...'

'Quicker...' The Chief of Staff drummed his fingers on the desk.

'We can track the mines in a given system. I can give all Galcop vessels the necessary signature.'

'Do it. What do we know about this Feynman? What is he likely to do?'

'His psychometric profile is on record. He is a man of integrity, independence and high intelligence.'

'Sufficient to outsmart all of you, I see.'

'He believes the bomb should never have been created. We believe his most probable course of action is to try to broker the bomb technology to either the Federation or the Empire, probably both.'

'How?'

'We don't know. We have made it virtually impossible for him to get even close. Both he and the ship have been listed as fugitive and we've informed both organisations that we have a rogue ship with a psychopath aboard. We have informed them they have permission to shoot on sight if they encounter him. They will undoubtedly do so. Outcome: he has nowhere to go.'

The Chief of Staff nodded.

'Gentlemen, this is now a Navy operation. We must end this intolerable farce. We have no idea of this Feynman's intentions. If that ship falls into the hands of a civilian we will have a disaster on our hands; if it falls into the hands of the Federation or the Empire we will have a war which we will not win.'

He stopped and glared at them.

'Find that ship. I will deal with its destruction. Dismissed.'

The men filed quickly out.

The Chief sighed deeply and then keyed his comlink.

'Dana, secure channel, Imperial frequency five-one-one-zero, no record.'

His secretary, a genetically-engineered and hex-edited girl designed specifically for this unique role, carried out his instructions immediately without question, without intuition, without thinking..

The image of a man appeared on the screen, the face darkened and invisible. To the man at the other end, the Chief of Staff's image appeared similarly obscured.

'Agent?'

'Yes.'

'There has been a change of circumstances.'

'The second target has changed?'

'No. the target remains. However, the target is mobile. I have sent you ship details, markings and ident along with this message.'

'Where is the ship?'

'We are locating it now. Tracking information will be forwarded to you shortly.'

'Desired result?'

'Target must be terminated, the ship destroyed along with any potential witnesses. I will keep Galcop forces away from your position.'

'Understood. I will need an appropriate ship. Payment will need to be renegotiated.'

The Chief of Staff pressed a button on the console.

'I think you will find this adequate compensation.'

The Agent paused, considering.

'The target will be terminated as requested.'

The communication closed.

No time was wasted. The Agent put the necessary wheels in motion. Prepared as he always was, many things were already close to completion. It was actually gratifying to be able to further other plans as a result of the Chief of Staff's request.

He stood surveying the work as it progressed, awaiting the moment he could take possession.

The accommodation was basic, unpleasant and would normally have been considered beneath his contempt; yet the rock hermit provided anonymity, immunity and untraceability without compromising location. Achenar was not a world that Galcop citizens frequently visited, particular not for clandestine dealing. The Empire was not a friendly place to anyone from the 'Aligned Worlds'. To those with certain requirements though, their advanced technology made them a necessary evil.

One of the techs approached him, nervously trying to assess the correct protocol for addressing what he thought was an Imperial Lord from out-system.

'It's ready, sire.'

Sire! You fool. I'm no Lord of the Empire! I have a higher purpose than the promulgation of your execrable royal family...

The Agent allowed nothing of his contempt to show, it was just another role to play. His face was narrow, aquiline, sharp and aggressive. His eyes scored the brand new vessel, admiring its distinctive sharp lines. It was a surprisingly elegant ship. He usually found ship design offended his sophisticated sense of aesthetics; this one was different. An elegantly symmetrical twin hull design, space enough for a long campaign, agility and speed which belied its size and enough weaponry to make it by far the most formidable ship to grace the space lanes. It sat poised in the hanger, as if impatient to leave, awaiting its chance to rend, rip and destroy like the bird of prey it so strongly resembled.

'Excellent. Equipped as to my specifications?'

'To the letter, my Lord.'

'Payment has been received, I trust.'

'Everything is in order, yes, no problem. Indeed.' the man stuttered over the words.

'Its name?'

'It has no name, my Lord.'

The Agent frowned. Perhaps not having a name might be beneficial, all the better for illusiveness, yet he considered the machine deserved an identity of its own. It would doubtless further his plans beyond the immediate requirement, perhaps even become the instrument that would bring about the downfall of the Empire itself.

The Agent almost laughed at the irony. Then it came to him.

He drew a weapon from within the heavy cloak he wore. On first glance it appeared to be a sword, clearly an ancient weapon from a time long past. For the few who had studied the ancient arts of warfare, closer inspection would reveal it was a particular type of weapon, combining the weight and power of an axe with the cutting edge of a sword; brutal power coupled with precision damage infliction. It seemed a fitting match for the new vessel.

The tech took a nervous step backwards as the Agent held the weapon aloft and examined it in the dim light of the hanger bay.

'Sire?'

'A name.' The Agent whispered, gesturing at the ship with the weapon, 'Name it – Falchion.'

Chapter Five

The SuperCobra's hull flashed, reflecting light from Tionisla's star. Jim drove the ship immediately away from the hyperspace inbound marker. Once again he was lucky: there were no other ships around. He'd imagined that police Vipers would be soon be arriving at every exit point and checking the ships coming in-system, but it looked like the usual organisational inertia was slowing down their efforts. Even if they did appear the SuperCobra should be able to outrun them without much difficulty. Jim thought that Galcop might even shut down the witchspace markers completely, but the chaos that would cause would need some seriously extreme justification. They hadn't even done that when they found out that Thargoids were piggybacking on the witchspace system.

Perhaps they were simply having problems tracking him, as it was notoriously difficult to track a ship through witchspace. He'd seen designs for witchspace cloud and wormhole analysers, but they were more an art than a science at the moment. Perhaps one day they'd be perfected – perhaps sooner rather than later.

Jim had a thornier problem on his mind than the immediate evasion of the Vipers. He'd left without much more of a plan than the immediate prevention of the attack on Achenar, which he'd stopped with the theft of this ship, but it was only a temporary reprieve. Galcop would be able to build more bombs in a pretty short space of time. Months at best, weeks most likely; perhaps only days. Whatever he did he had to do it soon. He imagined he was currently being listed as Public Enemy Number One. He wondered how far up the ranks the knowledge of the bomb went. Was it a Presidential decree, or the Navy, or a Galcop official?

Brokering a conversation with the Federation and the Empire would take too long, even if they did believe him. He'd begun to feel it was more likely he'd cause an all-out war, rather than prevent one, by going down that route. He also felt it was more likely he'd be eliminated immediately after handing over the information. Not an enticing prospect.

He'd toyed with the idea of simply transmitting the plans on wideband. The SuperCobra didn't have a powerful long-range transmitter, so the best he could do would be system space. Potentially enough people would hear the transmission and relay it. It was likely it would be propagated quickly throughout the known worlds. Tionisla would be the obvious place to do that, what with the main newsfeeds like the *Tionisla Chronicle* being transmitted around the galaxy from their huge orbital wideband array.

Tionisla was a funny old world. In the old days it had won the Krik-Adams award for the

‘Dullest Night Sky in the Entire Galaxy’ due to its position near a dark dusty nebula which blotted out most of the stars. Offended, the Tionislans had invested in all sorts of projects aimed at making their night sky more interesting. The most famous was the now legendary orbital cemetery, though it was nowadays between the planet and the sun and no longer visible at night except at dawn and dusk. Apparently sensitive religious feelings were at odds with the thought of thousands of dead people looking down from above during the night. The government had invited huge orbital ship contractors and anyone with the requirement for a big rig to build there and now the night sky was full of blinking flashing shapes. One of the biggest was the *Tionisla Chronicle* Array, a huge transmitter now moored directly opposite the cemetery, permanently eclipsed from the sun in complete radio silence, serving newsfeeds across the galaxy. Twice the diameter of a Torus station, but not rotating, it looked like a small moon from the surface.

He tried to run the ramifications of a transmission through his head. If everyone had the bomb, would peace remain? Would the various governments form some kind of non-proliferation treaty, or a non-aggression pact, or simply stand off in their classic cold war stance? Jim wasn’t a politician.

What about civilians? The introduction of the energy bomb had been vigorously opposed in many quarters for its destructive power. This new bomb was far more dangerous. If the plans were broadcast, what would traders do with it? What about pirates? Even the parasitic boy racers would have access to it. The thought of hit and run strikes on populated areas by ruthless privateers or jejune adolescent teenagers out for a laugh made his head spin with fear.

How to stop this? How to win a game where the only winning move is not to play?

He could think of only one way.

His destination was Lave, seat of Galcop power.

He’d had to go by a long, drawn-out route. The obvious route to Lave was via Leesti, but Jim was sure that route would be closely monitored. The only alternative viable was a detour via the tech-mad Tionisla.

Tionisla was only just over nine light years away from Onrira, but it was just out of range from the nearby Oresqu system. In order to get there he’d had to choose a circular route via Zaaleta. It was taking longer than he’d hoped and it had been dangerous. Zaaleta was a feudal system. Not very friendly to Galcop – not very friendly to anyone in point of fact. He’d been fortunate. This time.

The SuperCobra was equipped with a fuel scoop so he’d been able to refuel at the star in each system rather than have to approach the stations. He’d veered away from the space lanes

immediately upon entry and been lucky enough to follow a Python Class Cruiser through its witchspace wormhole after overhearing where it was bound on the wideband.

Nor had he necessarily dived straight towards the stars for refuelling, either. He'd used his hyperspeed drive to navigate around to the far side, eclipsing the planet from view. He'd assumed that Vipers would already be patrolling the stellar surface facing the planet.

He'd risked an anonymous text to Geraint, but there had been no response and he feared the worst.

His Clean status had been wiped within hours of launching. He imagined the hunt was on, but had no idea what response he could expect from Galcop; they seemed sluggish, lethargic even. Fortunately, the SuperCobra didn't look like some outlandish ship: few ident systems would recognise it as anything other than an ordinary Mk3. It had exactly the same external dimensions as a standard Mk3; without any cargo aboard there would be no perceivable mass discrepancy and he'd paid particular attention not to exceed the speeds and capabilities of the older ship whilst flying around in view of other vessels. Only the quad exhaust plumes looked different. Finding one little ship out here in the void would not be easy for Galcop.

Fuel Tanks Full.

Time to move on. He set the hyperspace co-ordinates for Zaonce. One more stop and he'd reach Lave. Then the fun would really begin.

With a flash of eerie magenta light five ships emerged from witchspace into the Zaonce system.

Rebecca watched the astrogation console as the two Sidewinders, the Mk1 Cobra and her brother's Krait formed up behind and to the sides of the *Eclipse*. It was getting close now. Two more hops and they'd reach Diso, their ultimate destination, where some distant relatives awaited them. It had been a real slog across the galaxy this time. It took a lot of time, doing everything in seven light year jumps. Rebecca didn't understand why they couldn't extend the range of the witchdrives. There was some obscure technical reason which Lance had tried to explain by saying it was something to do with the particulate density of static witchspace fields but she'd lost interest long before the explanation was over. It had been worse than that time when Lance tried to explain how the astrogation systems on modern ships hid the complexities of Newtonian physics from the pilots. Rebecca had almost beaten him to death with a console tablet for being so anal about it.

They were heading station side this time, rather than refuel at the star. They were low on

provisions and one of the Sidewinders had a blown hull plate that was slowly leaking coolant. All in all though, they'd managed the ninety-odd light years in pretty good shape. There had only been a minor run in with pirates during a hop through Esusti and they'd pasted them, enjoying a fifty credit bounty. They'd even made a couple of thousand credit profit on the journey. Spirits were high and they all felt optimistic for the first time in months. Zaonce, a sophisticated world, offered the opportunity for some serious R&R.

'Ready for escort.' Red's voice came over the narrowband.

Reet leaned forward, eyeing the main scanner screen, 'How long 'til we make station-side?'

'I make it about three-and-half-hours, all being well,' replied Rebecca. That was the problem with having a set of escorts: no in-system hyperspeed drive. It was effectively jammed by the presence of other ships, which didn't matter if you were solo, but rendered it useless in a fleet. Of course, you could get rid of the escorts, but a ship as big and slow as the Boa caught alone would be effectively defenceless. It wasn't bad as a big freighter, but as a fighter it was slow and unwieldy: you might as well just paint a target on the side of the ship and lower the shields.

'I'm getting me some kip then,' Reet said, 'Wake me if anything interesting happens.'

Rebecca punched in the coordinates for system space and eased the throttles up to three-quarters power. The old ship didn't like racing along at maximum speed, and besides which it wore out the generators twice as fast. Maintenance was too expensive these days, particularly in the more advanced systems they were coming into now.

'Follow my lead,' she said into the narrowband, transmitting her plotted path.

'Lay on Macduff, little sister.' Red's voice came back to her. He always said that; she had no idea what he meant. She'd ask him one day. It had been a phrase her mother used apparently.

Rebecca looked wistfully out of the forward viewers. Her mother had been lost in space when she was only six. Reet and Red had gone looking for her when she failed to return from a trade mission in chart five. They found no trace of her at all, despite a lengthy search. Both eventually gave her up for lost, presuming she'd been shot down by a pirate. Rebecca could tell Red wasn't happy with the explanation. Their mother had been an excellent pilot, not one to lose a fight. Rebecca remembered her only vaguely, but she did recall some of the stories she'd been told. Her mother had a particular one Rebecca had loved to hear over and over again – the magical planet of Raxxla.

I wonder if she's still out there somewhere? I'd love to meet her. I wonder if she left because she was bored with the trader life? Wish she'd taken me with her!

The scanner pinged. Another ship had just popped out of witchspace almost on top of them. She flipped the ident computer over onto it.

'Busy system,' Lance commented. 'Mk3 Cobra by the look of it. Wish we had one of those. Look, it's trailing plasma, must have just been sun-scooping somewhere.'

Cobras! Boring! Look at me flying my ship, I've got no imagination at all!

The ident computer took a strangely long time to run the scan. Rebecca saw it was rechecking its findings. She looked at the result.

Cobra Mk3, 15% discrepancy. 100 Metric, .3 LM.

Gravimetric Radiation Detected!

Point-three LM, or 'lem' as it was usually referred to, looked fine to her. It was basically a speed measurement, LM stood for 'LightMach' or something similar. Lance would know. It was another technical thing Rebecca had deliberately chosen not to bother understanding. Point-two lem and under was slow, point-four lem and over was fast. Point-three was strictly average. The tonnage wasn't unusual either. It was the 'discrepancy' that confused her. She wasn't sure what the radiation warning meant either.

'You been fiddling with the computer again?' Rebecca snapped. 'It's got bugs.'

'Huh? No. What's up?'

'Look.'

Lance checked out the display, sighing with frustration.

'15% discrepancy? How can you have discrepancy on a Mk3 Cobbie?' Lance was furious. 'What is the matter with this thing? Maybe our whole ident computer is fragged. Ignore it. I'll pull it when we get station-side and flush its database, or maybe I'll just give it a good kicking. It's getting worse than those old Baud systems that took twenty minutes to load up.'

'What's gravimetric radiation?'

'Oh don't worry about that, one of the sensors must have a glitch. We really need to get some maintenance for this old bird!'

The Cobra over flew them, passing close by about half a kilometre away. It had an odd colour scheme and Lance made some comments about the engine flux not looking quite right.

'Looks like one of those new Cobra Couriers to me. Quad plumes.' He said, trying to sound knowledgeable. 'The ident computer should pick it up as such though. Oh well.'

Rebecca thought he was simply embarrassed over screwing up the ident computer and was trying to save face.

It wasn't long before the ship was out of range, apparently on a course towards the sun. It soon dropped off the scanner.

The Viper pilot was snoring, the autopilot slowly navigating the ship between Zaonce patrol waypoints. Earlier on they had received a priority update from Galcop central. A special scanning signature. If detected they were to issue a coded response.

The computer beeped.

Gravimetric Signature Detected.

The pilot woke up, stimulated by nerve inducers in the seat beneath him.

'Prak! Who the frag designed these things? Sadistic Goids!'

He was near the end of his patrol; he'd be approaching the witchspace in system marker within half an hour or so.

He looked at the readout and submitted the coded response. Within moments an audio only comlink became active.

'Report.'

'Lieutenant Davidson, sir, Zaonce patrol five. I have detected the signature posted earlier today. It's weak, but confirmed.'

'Location?'

'Two thousand kays from in-jump, vector one four three mark two.'

'Hold your position. A ship will arrive shortly. You are to leave it alone. Once it moves off, you will not approach within scanner range of it again, regardless of situation. This overrides all Galcop protocols. Is this understood?'

'Absolutely.'

'Congratulations, *Lieutenant-Commander* Davidson.'

The pilot looked surprised, 'Sir, thank you, sir! This is most...'

But the comlink was already hissing static back at him.

A quarter of an hour later Rebecca had almost dozed off at the helm. Flying in system was so boring. They'd seen a couple of other traders around and exchanged a greeting, but they had been in a hurry and accelerated past quickly, leaving the aged Boa cruising in their flux wake. A large convoy of Oo-Haul freighters was overtaken next, along with a handful of irritatingly enthusiastic Rickshaw owners plying for trade.

They were cruising at point-two, a pretty glacial speed by modern standards, but the Boa was a big and heavy old ship. Zaonce was still a fair way off, its pastel clouds scintillating enticingly in the distance. She could now visually see the Coriolis space station off to the right of the planet as a tiny glowing speck, illuminated by the sun. It flickered and flashed in the darkness.

God I hate this. I'd go outside the space lanes, torus drive it in fast and efficient. We could make three times as much profit if we just took a few more risks! Lone trading – that's where the money is, not this slow haul across the galaxy!

She looked down and saw the tell-tale mark of another ship coming into range, a single one on the right hand side of the scanner approaching from in front of them. That in itself was odd: there was no longer any need to fly out from a system. The indicator was yellow, indicating another neutral ship. Out of curiosity she locked the ident computer onto it. For a moment it chuntered through a variety of identification protocols before coming up with a response. The response made Rebecca sit forward.

Vessel type unknown. Mass 480 Metric. Speed .375 LM. Interrogating Galcop Astrometrics, please wait...

It was the first time she'd ever come across a failed ident; to have an unregistered ship was most unusual. Today was getting weirder by the minute. Either it was a new type – there were quite a lot of new ships coming on stream at the moment for some reason - or... a Thargoid.

Thargoids were mad insane dangerous insects. Nobody knew where they came from and nobody knew what they wanted, but everyone knew they were bad news. They attacked without provocation, explanation or reason. Their ships were fast, unpredictable and powerful. Their tech was more advanced than anything in Galcop. They'd been known to employ scanner jammers, cloaking devices, gravity wells and all sorts of jiggery-pokery to trap vessels before blowing them apart, usually with some obscure nonsensical insult in the bargain.

There was a competition running on the *Tionisla Chronicle* at the moment, totally devoted to finding the best Thargoid insults. Survivors of attacks would send them in. The top rated one so far was:

Eat bat, Discos!

Nobody knew if that was what the Thargoids intended to say, or simply had badly programmed translators, or whether they were trying to confuse people, or were just plain nuts. They were an enigma.

Rebecca shook her head. Not a Thargoid: they should show up green on the scanner anyway, they always attacked on sight and to encounter one here near the seat of Galcop power in a Corporate system was simply ridiculous. She was disappointed; she rather fancied a fight with a Thargoid as a test of her skills. She hadn't seen one yet. It had to be Lance's mucked up programming.

'Lance! Get your backside over here! What have you done this time?'

He came across and looked at the scanner, rechecking the ident. He whistled. 'Not me this time. Wacky. You checked for a transponder?'

'Obviously.' Rebecca rolled her eyes at him. 'It reads as a trader, that's all.'

'No registration?'

'Nope.'

'If the cops spot them, they'll get an attitude adjustment. Auto Offender status without ID.'

'We're not completely clean ourselves, thanks to your attempt to flog those space lice with that cat! What were they called? Tribbles?'

'Trumbles.'

'Trumbles, tribbles, whatever. Vermin. Galcop should nuke that whole planet.'

'That's a bit rough, isn't it?'

'They're ghastly things, they breed incessantly.'

'Well, that's the trouble with trumbles.'

'Just make sure we don't have any more trouble with trumbles, ok?'

Lance changed the subject back, embarrassed by his part in that misadventurous escapade. 'I wonder what they're playing at.'

'Maybe they're damaged.'

'Flying at point-three-seven-five? No way. At least we don't have to worry for long. He'll be past us and out of scanner range in five. Look at the prakker go.'

Already the unidentified ship was level with them. Rebecca hit the starboard viewer. It was at extreme range, barely larger than a dot. It was flickering slightly, as if it was changing shape.

'He's dropping speed and altering course,' Lance observed, double-checking the stats.

'I don't like this,' Rebecca said quietly, keying the comlink onto narrowband, 'Red?'

'You called, little sis?' her brother answered.

'We've got an albatross, twenty kays off the starboard bow.'

There was a pause. Presumably Red was having a look for himself.

'I see him, though he's out of range on my scanner. Funny looking ship. What's the ID?'

'That's just it. There isn't one; he's got no reg. He came howling up ahead of us and slowed to match our course and speed.'

'Don't see any need to bother him unless he bothers us; probably one of these hot shot boy racers again. We'll activate guns and be ready with a missile lock just in case. Suggest you do the same.'

'Will do.' Rebecca flipped the switches for the beam laser's prefire coil and the missile arming mechs.

'He's probably from in system and us just checking us over,' Lance agreed, 'Or maybe just sightseeing. This is a corporate system; what's he going to do? There's police every hundred kays from the planet to the jump point.'

'Yeah.' Rebecca still felt worried, a tightness in the pit of her stomach; something didn't feel right. Traders always kept themselves to themselves; you didn't follow other vessels around; you didn't do anything to cause alarm: accidents happened that way, people got nervous and started firing. Traders had to assume the worst, it was the only way to guarantee staying alive. Her instincts were screaming red alert.

It couldn't be a boy racer either, not at 480 metric! That was a pretty heavy midsized ship.

They waited an anxious five minutes before the other vessel slowly started accelerating away, changing to a course that would take it behind them. She'd been wracking her brains trying to think of any ships that could manage point-three-seven-five at that tonnage but she'd come up blank. She could see it a little better now: it looked almost like a catamaran, but nobody, as far as she knew, had ever gotten a twin hull design of ship to work effectively. Maybe it really was some new Galcop prototype; they were testing a lot of new ships at the moment, what with the Thargoid situation. The ship was too far away for any decent visual observation.

The ident computer pinged up again.

Ident remains unconfirmed. Galcop Restricted. No data available.

Rebecca bit her lip, 'Looks like a prototype of some kind.'

'And there he goes,' her brother's voice said reassuringly over the comlink. The strange ship was quickly accelerating away from them now. The exhaust flux was bright white with an actinic blue edge, unlike the cyan glow of traditional engines.

The agent opened the secure comlink channel, 'I'm closing on the target's gravimetric emission. However there is a complication.'

The agent had no idea who his employer was. Compensation was the only consideration. A hit was required; payment was made. A simple transaction. Identity was not required. In fact, anonymity was crucial to their relationship. It was all about plausible deniability.

'Define.'

'There is a civilian Boa and four escorts involved.'

'They interacted with the target?'

The agent looked at his scanner log, 'Affirmative. The target's trail intersected with the Boa about fifteen minutes ago at the jump point.'

There was a fractional pause from the other end of the comlink, 'This is... *unfortunate*. Orders remain unchanged. The area will be cleared.'

'Acknowledged.'

The agent switched on his attack computer and turned his vessel around.

Suddenly all hell broke loose. The astrogation scanner lit up red and the sirens went off.

'Prak!' Lance shouted. 'Someone's got a target lock on us!'

Rebecca looked at the console: it was the other ship, the one that had been pacing them, the restricted Galcop vessel. It had turned and was accelerating towards them, closing the range between them rapidly. Attacking from behind.

Prak! A pirate in Zaonce? How does that make sense? Surely he can see he's outnumbered? One ship against five?

'Red?' called Rebecca, her voice high with alarm.

'I see him; we're moving to intercept. Lock missiles, hit full throttle and sit tight. We'll handle this.'

'Copy.' Rebecca flipped switches and pushed the throttles forward. With a top speed of point-two-four the Boa wouldn't be able to outrun the unknown ship. They were relying on their escorts. The generators began to whine as they met the increasing energy demands. They were only carrying four missiles; one pylon was empty. They were also the cheap unhardened type.

'Here's hoping he doesn't have an ECM. Good shooting.'

Eclipse lurched slightly as her brother's Krait, the Cobra Mk1 and the two Sidewinders roared back past at full throttle. She wished she was at the helm of one of the fighters rather than stuck on the old barge. They all knew she was the best pilot. She targeted all four missiles.

I should be out there...

'And this is supposed to be a totally safe system,' Lance complained.

'No such thing,' growled Rebecca with feeling.

The incoming ship was rapidly growing larger. It was big, dwarfing their fighter escorts. It was nothing like anything she'd seen before. A mean, tough looking ship. Twin hulls, which appeared to be mostly engine nacelles, and a sleek modern profile quite unlike the blocky designs of the last fifty years. It's central section was very elongated, presenting a very slim frontal aspect. Clearly a ship designed for fighting.

'What the prak is that?' Rebecca stared at the newcomer, in awe of the design.

It's gorgeous... and scary!

The four fighters broke off into a standard engagement pattern, shooting out away from each other to attack from four different angles, combining their firepower into a simultaneous strike. Rebecca watched as the newcomer turned and began tracking one of the Sidewinders.

Whatever it was it was quick; even faster than the fighters. She'd never seen anything so big turn so quickly. It must have been souped up somehow, probably high gee bow thrusters or something. Their escorts' formation broke up in disarray, completely underestimating the new ship's performance.

'Frag! Would you look at that...'

Suddenly laser fire spurted from the strange ship's forward gun emplacement. A continuous high intensity beam. The laser fire streaked across space towards the targeted Sidewinder. Rebecca saw the beam splay across the Sidewinder's shields.

'Jenner, roll left. He's got a bead on you!' Rebecca called out.

Jenner's Sidewinder rolled drunkenly. Rebecca stared as she saw the attacking ship's laser

beam hitting duralium, sparks flying. Even the old Sidewinder's shields couldn't have gone yet surely —

Then Jenner's ship was gone. Nothing remained but a quickly dispersing cloud of debris.

Oh my God!

'You stard!' Rebecca screamed. 'No! Jenner!'

The wash from the explosion rattled *Eclipse*. Rebecca steadied the resultant roll. She'd never seen a ship killed so fast.

'We're in deep frag!' Lance said, hitting the comlink. 'Red, he's packing military! I repeat, military!'

'I saw it. Stand by.'

'We've got to help them!' Rebecca said, killing the autopilot and bringing the old Boa about on an intercept course. The Boa's beam laser was pretty powerful; despite the low manoeuvrability they might get a hit or two in. It might make the difference.

Red, Jante and Coran had manoeuvred in behind the attacking ship and were hitting it repeatedly. Red's Krait had a high powered beam laser too, but it seemed to be no match for the attacker's shields. The pulse lasers on the other two ships were virtually inconsequential. The newcomer accelerated to high speed, outrunning and leaving the fighters behind, then it turned and came back on the attack, targeting the other Sidewinder which Jante was flying.

Jante saw the attack coming and skilfully flipped her ship neatly out of the way. The newcomer tried to turn, but was behind the curve, unable to match the rate of turn. It slipped past at close range. There was a burst of light.

'Prak! Missile!' Lance cried, stabbing the ECM button.

The ECM worked by sending out a halo of charged particles, they triggered an auto-detonation in standard missiles. They were fast, but not instantaneous. The expanding invisible cloud from *Eclipse* took a crucial two seconds to reach out to the range of the fighters.

Jante's fighter was hit by the missile one-point-four seconds after it launched.

Lance stared at the expanding cloud of gas that was all that remained of his sister, the ringing tones of the ECM system mocking him. Too late.

Jante...!

'What the prak is going on!' Reet made his entrance from the rear cabin as *Eclipse* rocked from the second explosion.

'We're under attack!' Rebecca screamed at him. 'We've lost Jenner and Jante!'

'Lost?'

'They're gone. Killed. Dad, this is serious.' Rebecca had never felt out of control like this before, it was like a dream, a game, not real. It couldn't be happening.

'Witch-space status?' Reet demanded, snapping her attention back.

'No chance. We don't have enough to make a jump!' Lance replied, his voice trembling.

Her father looked up at the screen and Rebecca saw his jaw go slack, 'Goids!'

He's seen one of these before. What is it? What does he know?

'What is it?' Rebecca demanded. 'Do you know what type of ship that is?'

'You don't want to know.'

'Tell us.' Lance cut across Reet's hedging.

'I saw one of these three years ago, out on the frontier. It was a genuine first encounter, and almost my last.'

'The frontier? You mean the Empire?'

'It's an Imperial military ship, it's called the Imperial Courier. It's the most deadly ship ever built.'

'What do we do?'

'Send out a distress call, wideband. The police aren't far away: they'll get this stard for us.'

It really troubled Reet to call for help; he regarded it as the cry of the inadequate. This was something else though.

Call for help? Us?

Rebecca hit the comlink sequence for wideband, 'S.O.S. To any vessel in range! We're being attacked by pirates, please assist!'

To her surprise and fear, there was no immediate acknowledgement from the police.

What is going on? Where are the cops?

The Courier was close now: it had accelerated past the two remaining fighters and loosed a burst of laser fire directly at them. Rebecca ducked instinctively as the fire flared across the shields. She threw the lumbering Boa into a dive, trying to roll away, watching in horror as the forward shield collapsed almost immediately, severely draining the energy banks. Sparks flew from an

overloaded console above the main screen.

'Prak!' her father spat. 'The ECM is out!'

'We're taking hits!' Rebecca called out, completing the turn. The Courier was ahead. She lined up the targeting crosshairs, firing the Boa's beam laser in return, striking four solid hits on the Courier without apparent effect before it out turned them once again.

Red's Krait was behind the Courier too. Rebecca saw him hit the ship continuously with his beam laser until it overheated and cut out. Then, both his missiles launched simultaneously at close range, hoping to copy the devious trick the Courier had pulled on Jante.

The Courier pilot was too smart, anticipating the move, its ECM already activated as Red's missiles launched. The Courier was framed by the twin blasts, but emerged unharmed. Rebecca was stunned to see the Courier's shields still seemed to be completely intact.

We're losing! We're being cut to scrap! This guy is too good... an Elite Combateer maybe? But why is he attacking us? We're all going to die here!

The Courier turned, its rear gun mounting tracking Coran's Mk1 Cobra. Fierce energy fire burst out. The Mk1 Cobra was sent tumbling.

There was a whisper on the wideband, 'My God, it's full of s—'

The old Cobra exploded, pieces of hull and equipment dispersing into the darkness. Further bursts caught Red's Krait. Rebecca saw the Krait's shields collapse and a burst of fire drive straight into the hull near the plasma conduits. A plume of leaking plasma splurged out at high pressure, leaving a glow yellow trail behind the stricken Krait.

Red! No, please, not Red!

Her father grabbed the comlink, 'Red, get the hell out of here. There's nothing more you can do.'

'No fragging way. I'm going to ram the goidson stard.'

'You'll be killed!' Rebecca shouted, hysterically.

Don't do this. You can't do this!

'Next hit'll take me out anyway sis, the laser's burnt out and I'm leaking plasma. Life support's offline. Nothing else left to do.'

'There must be something...'

The Krait angled up, twisting away from the Courier. Red's voice came over the wideband.

'Mine is not to wonder why...'

'Red!'

The Krait turned, spun and angled itself towards the Courier. Rebecca could see that the Krait was badly damaged, its drive exhausts flickering, barely sustaining forward thrust.

'Red...no! Please no. This can't be happening... Dad, stop him!'

'Mine is but to do...'

The Courier seemed unaware of the approaching Krait. Red was almost up to full speed. It was seconds from impact.

'... and – die!' Red's final words echoed out of the comlink as the Krait barrelled in at point-blank range.

The Courier suddenly rolled along its central axis. Laser fire spat from its side, washing over the Krait. It disintegrated, metallic fragments flying off in all directions. Military lasers front and rear, and on both flanks. Unreal.

'REEEEEEED!' Rebecca screamed, her fists clenched and slammed down on the console in pure frustration at not being in out there in one of the fighters, glaring at their attacker, 'You 'stard! You utter 'stard!'

'Fire the missiles!'

Lance launched the missiles in sequence, one after another. They spun around, closing on the Courier, which made no effort to avoid them.

Maybe it was damaged, maybe we might survive this...

The characteristic ringing tones of an ECM system buzzed through the bridge. All four missiles exploded harmlessly. The Courier came on.

'Get us the frag out of here!' her father shouted.

'We're already at full throttle.' Lance replied, his voice oddly calm in the midst of all the carnage.

'Where are the cops?' Rebecca cried desperately, 'They should be here by now! Why aren't they here?'

'They aren't coming,' Lance said, his voice bitter. It made no sense: the police were duty bound to help any ship under fire, particularly traders, 'They must have been killed too.'

All-out war with the Empire? There'd been nothing on wideband, and why attack civilians?

They watched the Courier turn behind them. It was in range once more.

Please God, no. I don't want to die!

The Courier was tracking them now, looming larger in the rear display. Laser fire sprayed out again. There was a lurch and the sickening sound of laser fire directly hitting the hull, puncturing, scything into vital components. The stricken Boa was leaking plasma, five energy units drained in mere seconds. The drives were failing; one of the generators had blown; the shields were down. Their ship – their life, their home – was dying around them. A console exploded, and the main viewer crackled and went out.

'Eject the cargo!' Her father shouted.

'But that's our whole credit balance...'

'Do it, now! There's a chance he might take that and let us go.'

Lance worked the controls and they saw their precious cargo being ejected out into space on the rear view, the huge one ton canisters tumbling haphazardly behind them.

The Courier ignored the canisters completely, driving onwards at full speed, smashing through them with total indifference, canisters exploding into atoms as they were crushed against its shields. It was seconds from hitting them again. The canisters had bought them a few moments, nothing more.

Merciless! Why? What did we do to him? What can this be about?

'What does he want?' Rebecca cried, fighting back tears, 'We're not fugitives, there's no bounty on us...'

'Get in one of the escape pods now! Move!' her father shouted. 'We'll follow!'

'No Dad! Let me stay and fight!'

'Rebecca, that's no pirate! And you can see as well as me we're beaten. I want you safe first. We'll be right behind you!'

He picked her up bodily and threw her into the escape pod, slammed the hatch down and hitting buttons on the adjacent keypad before she could scramble back across the pod.

'No! Dad! Let me out!' she screamed, clambering up and battering the implacable hatchway.

There was a terrific lurch and Rebecca found herself thrown hard and then pinned against the wall of the Pod. The Boa was tumbling drunkenly; the internal grav had failed. Suddenly she was weightless, her stomach lurched and she felt nauseous, disoriented, unable to tell up from down. She could see the eject timer counting down rapidly. If she wasn't strapped down...

She managed to use the netting hung around the walls of the pod to pull herself down towards the reclining couch and buckle herself in just as the escape pod was jettisoned at high speed from the rear of the ship. She'd never been ejected in a pod before and the acceleration was fierce and terrifying. She caught a brief glimpse of the hull of *Eclipse* overhead before the pod spun round and angled itself towards the planet, its miniature engines roaring at full power.

She craned her neck around to see what was going on. She could see the Courier, the stricken Boa, cargo canisters tumbling around them both. The Boa seemed to be completely out of control. Reet and Lance would be being thrown around the bridge by the inertia. The Courier appeared to have overheated its forward laser. She watched, terrified, as it turned aside and lined up to trigger its flank lasers again.

'Launch the escape pods for Prak's sake!' she yelled, 'Get out, get the frak out! What are you waiting for!'

The Boa exploded, showering the Courier in metal fragments which flared against its shields. The escape pod bucked and rang with the force of the explosion. Rebecca was knocked unconscious by the shock and never saw the Courier bearing down on her escape pod.

Jim heard the distress call over the wide band, a woman's voice, high with fear. The Boa was way off his scanner, but not that far away.

'S.O.S. To any vessel in range! We're being attacked by pirates, please assist!'

Bloody pirates! In a corporate system too, what was the universe coming to? Maybe Galcop was losing the plot after all.

He looked at the aft view and saw a flash of light against the darkness, the remote signature of the destruction of a ship. He sighed, he couldn't in all conscience ignore them. He had to try and help, despite the risk. The SuperCobra was a strong vessel; it should be all right.

He turned the ship around and triggered the hyperspeed drive, almost immediately arriving back in the vicinity of the Boa.

To his surprise, a lone ship was attacking the Boa. Two of the escort fighters he had seen earlier were gone, and as he approached another one went down, leaving a solitary Krait battling away.

He locked the ident computer onto the attacking vessel, hardly able to believe his eyes.

'That can't be a ...'

It was.

Rumour had it that Seldar Shipyards in the Tionisla system were trying to reverse engineer a Imperial Courier hull with Galcop technology after suspiciously receiving one 'off the back of a Towmaster' three years ago. It was also rumoured they were, by now, close to releasing it. Despite the fuss and anticipation, it would be a pale imitation of the real vessel.

But this one was indeed the real thing.

Hardly ever seen in Galcop space, the profile of a genuine Imperial Courier was confirmed by his access into the Galcop security archive. The premier Imperial navy fighting vessel. Jim remembered when he worked at Cowell and MgRath when the spy shots of the ship first appeared. It was a remarkable craft, getting grudging, but deep, respect from the Faulcon de Lacy design teams. Nobody knew how the empire techs had got the twin hull design to work, or exactly what the engine configuration was. The lateral stresses had doomed all Galcop and Federation attempts to an early scrapyard. Not only had the Empire cracked that, they had produced a superb fighting ship, with style as well as substance. It looked stunning.

But what was it doing here? An Imperial pirate? And where were the police? Some thing was very wrong.

The Courier was obviously well equipped and superbly piloted. It appeared to have military lasers on all four mountings, a hugely costly adaptation even for a well-heeled fighting ship. Its shields appeared to be able to shrug off the combined effects of the two beam lasers on the Krait and Boa and the feeble pulse laser of the Mk1 Cobra and Sidewinders without any difficulty whatsoever. That implied the Imperial equivalent of military enhanced shielding, boosters and maybe even a naval energy unit. Serious stuff. Jim wondered how that kind of tech had gotten into the hands of what he assumed was a rich and powerful pirate.

The remaining battle was swift and one sided. By the time he was pulling into laser range it was pretty much over. The Krait attempted a brave but futile suicide run. The Courier turned on the Boa, mercilessly pounding at the hull until it was leaking plasma from multiple rents.

Jim watched as the Boa dumped its cargo. The pirate had what he wanted: would he finish them off or let them go? There was a pirate code of sorts, which many adhered to: a worthy adversary was let go if they fought well, once the cargo had been stolen of course.

The Courier surged onwards.

Well, perhaps not a code, more a set of guidelines really.

Then he frowned, remembering the tech specs he'd seen on the original Courier's design.

The Imperial Courier didn't have a fuel or cargo scoop. It wasn't even an option due to the twin hulls and monocoque design. It didn't need one, the Imperials used a complex type of military fuel rather than traditional hydrogen.

Not a pirate then.

As if to confirm this, the Courier ignored the cargo. It continued bearing down on the Boa, lining up for a finishing strike.

Jim checked the bounty on the Boa.

Offender status, 2.5 Credits.

Nothing, basically; certainly not enough to warrant an attack of this fashion. The Courier had used a missile. That was over thirty credits worth burnt up in a flash, not to mention any battle damage suffered.

Not a bounty hunter either.

The Boa's drives failed and it began to tumble out of control. Jim saw a single escape pod jettison from the rear end. Only one? The Boa usually needed a crew of at least four or five. The lone escape pod spun for a moment before stabilising and heading away towards Zaonce.

The Courier obliterated the Boa with a blast from its starboard gun emplacement. Then it turned, heading directly after the lone escape pod.

Jim couldn't believe his eyes. No-one ever shot down or scooped escape pods, *ever*. It was one of the unwritten rules. You just didn't, no arguments. You never knew when it might be you in a Pod. Blasting a Pod would give you fugitive status across a hundred-light-year range. You'd never eat again.

Scooping was as bad. The poor occupant would be sucked into your cargo bay where the hold automata would 'stabilise' them, effectively turning the escape pod into a cryogenic freezer. When the occupant awoke they'd find themselves a slave on some remote outworld. Galcop was hot on the practice and since everyone had ident chips it had been pretty easy to spot a slave who'd been scooped. Unless the captor employed the increasingly common tactic of surgery, both to remove the chip and make the subject much more... compliant. Slavery remained illegal, of course.

You didn't blast or scoop Pods. You just didn't. No one did.

The Courier looked like it was going to. The escape pod was being overhauled fast. Definitely not a pirate, nor a bounty hunter.

An assassin.

Invisible, silent, anonymous, swift and deadly. No, not Deadly, probably Elite.

Why would anybody pay to assassinate a down-at-heels trader with no bounty and a time-ravaged old freighter?

Then he realised.

Jim cursed and triggered the injectors, reacting instinctively rather than thinking. The SuperCobra surged ahead.

The Agent showed no emotion as the Boa exploded in front of him. There was no victory cheer. It was part of the job, unfortunate but necessary. They were unlucky enough to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. A million-to-one chance.

The Courier rocked slightly and the shields dipped as metal fragments from the doomed ship flashed against them, then space was clear.

Except for the three faint exhaust plumes. An escape pod.

The scanner had beeped. He saw the ident of the target SuperCobra. The fool pilot had responded to the distress call. The Agent realised had to be quick to take advantage of this fortuitous turn of events. He had to deal with the Pod immediately. If he engaged the SuperCobra first, he might lose track of the Pod.

The orders were clear. No witnesses. He angled the Courier to pursue the Pod and kicked the engines up to full power. The characteristic roar of the twin RamJet drives rose to fever pitch. He'd be in range in five seconds. Once the Pod had been dealt with it would be time for the main event: the SuperCobra. Now that would be a proper challenge, one to relish. More firepower and shielding than the traders combined in a fighter package. A proper fight, if the pilot had any skill. Killing the traders had been like shooting fish in a barrel. Pathetic Galcop vessels.

The Pod was ahead, now clearly visible. The agent felt no remorse as he adjusted the Courier's attitude and brought the tiny triangular ship into the crosshairs. He thumbed the laser trigger. A Galcop Fugitive rating would mean nothing to him. The forward military laser pounded out with a scream of pure power.

The screen went blank. The agent saw a flash of duralium, a blast of magenta engine flux and the sight of his laser hitting shields at point blank range. The SuperCobra was right in front of him, decelerating rapidly. The Courier rocked violently in the engine flux wake.

Instinctively the agent slammed the throttle closed but the ships were too close. They collided violently.

The agent heard the sounds of shields scraping across each other and the Courier was knocked aside. He was flung across the cramped bridge as the Courier tumbled out of control, its internal gyro wheels temporarily destabilised.

When he regained his position and steadied the ship, both the escape pod and the SuperCobra were nowhere to be seen. The scanner was blank.

Jim had broken the rules, performing a crazy manoeuvre no sane pilot would have ever tried.

He'd gotten in front of the Courier just as it triggered its forward gun. In a deft move he'd cut the injectors just in time, the SuperCobra decelerating directly in front of the Courier just as it was picking up speed. The rear shields absorbed the military laser at point-blank range, barely maintaining integrity.

He'd scooped the pod at high speed.

Unable to turn aside in time, the Courier had rammed him. Both ships had been spun apart but the Courier had taken most of the torsional stress due to its width and the angle of impact and had been spun out of control. The SuperCobra escaped with depleted shields and a two-foot-long scrape along the lower port dorsal hull plate. Lesser ships would have been pulverised.

In the brief moment of confusion that followed, Jim had hit the injectors and accelerated the SuperCobra out of range.

Chapter Six

Rebecca woke, her head pounding. For a moment she couldn't tell where she was, her memory blank. Then it all came back to her. The attack; Jenner, Jante, Red, Lance, her father's ship exploding into atoms. Her father...

The Imperial Courier! I'm not dead!

She looked up, trying to focus her eyes. She was still inside the escape pod. Had the Courier let her go after all? She couldn't remember what had happened after that final blast. Was she still en route to Zaonce? Or at the station already? She was still lying in the reclining couch. There was no telling how long she'd been out.

Without warning shock and grief caught up with her: her entire family had been destroyed by that ship. The realisation pounded at her mind, almost driving her into complete panic and breaking her down in tears. For long moments she was paralysed with sorrow, struggling to breathe, her heart racing.

Then she realised the Pod's engines were off; in fact, there was no movement whatsoever, no sound but the faint whirring of the onboard computers. She forced her eyes to focus enough to check the Pod's basic instruments, located above her. They were offline. The status indicators showed she was aboard a ship, docked.

She must have been scooped by the Courier. She could have sworn she hadn't seen a scoop on the ship...

Then she did cry, with terror and despair. She'd have been better off dying on the Boa, rather than face a life as a slave, a whore or an... experimental subject. Life as a slave was short, and brutal. They wouldn't take her, she swore; she'd fight to the death first. Anything other than surgery or hex-editing. To be a shadow of yourself, with all your memories intact, yet with neither emotions or will to express them. Doing whatever you were told without the ability to express your refusal, no matter how degrading...

But why was she awake? Escape pods normally put you into cryo-freeze to preserve oxygen and supplies. If they were scooped it stood to reason the pilot would do the same: there would be no danger of the would-be slave escaping. She shouldn't have woken up until...

She ruthlessly squashed that thought. Perhaps something had malfunctioned.

She wiped her eyes and resolved to get a grip on the situation. While there's life, there's hope, as Red might have said. Red; he'd died a hero. She guessed that's how he'd have wanted it.

She sat up and swung her legs over the edge of the couch, still feeling sick and disoriented. She peered through the Pod's small plexiglass windows and saw only an empty and nondescript cargo bay. Then, while she was looking, she saw a figure walk into the bay and head towards the Pod. She ducked down, looking around for a weapon, for anything she could use.

She'd been shoved into the pod quickly, with no chance to grab a handgun or even a stun stick. The emergency fire suppresser was about the only thing loose in the whole capsule. She grabbed it and squashed herself into the emergency suit locker. It was fortunate she was small, it meant she was almost able to close the locker door behind her.

The Pod's rear hatch opened with a hiss of equalising air pressure and the hum of the door mechanisms. A man entered, carelessly moving towards the central couch, leaning over and looking closely.

'Hello?' he said, squinting in the dim light. 'Is anyone here? Are you hurt?'

Rebecca jumped out as he passed her. He turned, sensing movement, just as she triggered the fire suppressor. A thick stream of white foam splattered all over the man's face, causing him to yell and stagger back. Rebecca gave no quarter, she hit him as hard as she could across the side of the head with the suppressor and he went down without a sound.

'Murderer!' she hissed, kicking him in the stomach for good measure. 'Goidson spawn of a fraggin' stard!' She kicked him again, and again. It felt good.

'That's for Jenner! Jante! Red! Lance and Dad!'

Revenge was sweet. The man on the floor was unconscious, a small pool of blood mixing with the fire goo from a cut in his head.

She kicked him one more time as hard as she could. 'And that's for Coran!'

She paused, gasping for breath and feeling dizzy, emotions overwhelming her, a heady mix of fear, rage, anger and terror.

'You stard! You complete and utter stard!' She whispered, rage boiling within her. She fell to her knees, grabbing the man's hair in her hands and jolted his head upwards, boiling with fury. 'YOU KILLED MY FAMILY!' she screamed at his insensate face.

For long minutes she sat there, unable to move, unable to do anything except sob scalding tears as the waves of hatred and sorrow kept washing alternately over her. The man didn't so much as twitch. Maybe she'd killed him. She hoped so.

Eventually she steadied her breathing. It was time to look after herself. She was alone yet, miraculously, somehow alive.

She climbed out of the hatch and jumped down from the Pod, sealing it behind her and locking it with a code. She looked warily around the cargo bay. It was virtually empty: there were no cargo canisters aboard, just a few crates. It also seemed deserted, but she was taking no chances. She ran across the cargo bay, immediately searching the crates.

She was surprised, yet delighted, to find an assortment of pistols and rifles along with emergency rations, body armour, and other assorted assault gear. A military ship then, but where was the crew? And were there soldiers aboard somewhere else? Was this some kind of invasion? She grabbed a couple of pistols, checking they were usable. Armers on, safeties off. The power packs hummed reassuringly.

More confident now, she looked around her with more attention to detail.

For an unknown Imperial ship it seemed oddly familiar. If she hadn't known better she'd have guessed she was in Coran's old Cobra, apart from the fact everything looked new and it was significantly bigger. The pistols appeared to be standard Galcop designs and so were the doorways, hatches and other cargo bay fittings. Even the labelling was in standard Galcop lettering. Maybe the Imperials had copied them. Maybe they had stolen them.

Whatever. She wouldn't find any answers down here.

She ran out of the cargo bay as quietly as she could, both pistols ready. She made her way forward, moving silently and smoothly.

A thorough search of the ship revealed no one other than herself appeared to be aboard. The living quarters appeared virtually unused.

She jumped up into the gravity well leading to the bridge, cautiously peering over the top. It too was deserted.

Weird.

The ship appeared to have only the lone pilot, and it was almost completely shutdown. None of the controls were locked out, however, and when she reactivated and moved them the ship obeyed her immediately. It wasn't booby-trapped like some of the ex-military Asps. What a dumb-ass the pilot was, leaving himself open to being hijacked. Not even a bio check or passphrase! What a Goid!

Still, his stupidity was her gain. Against all odds she'd got herself a ship! Her trader instincts automatically took over, egocentric nature and entrepreneurial mind moving swiftly to the fore. She could eject the pilot into space, claim salvage and sail this ship into Zaonce, flog it for whatever

someone would buy it for and still claim her father's insurance. She'd be made, with more than enough to get a big fat ship and give it an iron-clad ass. Grief could wait, she thought, pushing it all to the back of her mind; there were credits to be had.

She quickly familiarised herself with the controls and figured out the basics. Some of the controls were unfamiliar, but again she was surprised: the astrogation configuration was virtually identical to the standard designs she was used to. She'd always heard that the Imperials did things completely differently. She pulled up the schematics with the intention of checking the shields and laser config.

Huh?

She stared at the screen.

Where she had expected to see the schematic of the Imperial Courier, the screen indicated the familiar outline of a Mk3 Cobra. She'd not flown one before, but the hull shape was unmistakeable. As familiar as a dodec station. The most common ship in space. No wonder it all seemed familiar.

What am I doing on a Cobra? Whose Cobra? And who is the guy I brained down in the cargo bay?

<i>Commander</i>	<i>James Feynman</i>
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<i>Present System</i>	<i>Zaonce</i>
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<i>Hyperspace System</i>	<i>Lave</i>
--------------------------	-------------

<i>Condition</i>	<i>Green</i>
------------------	--------------

<i>Fuel</i>	<i>1.2 Light Years</i>
-------------	------------------------

<i>Cash</i>	<i>Suspended</i>
-------------	------------------

<i>Legal Status</i>	<i>Fugitive</i>
---------------------	-----------------

<i>Rating</i>	<i>Harmless (0)</i>
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That didn't make much sense either. A harmless fugitive, with no Elite rating? How could he be a fugitive without having killed someone? Cash accounts suspended too!

'Kicked your ass, James.' She muttered to herself.

She ran it all back through her memory, Courier attacking, Courier destroying, Courier pursuing. There had been no Cobra there at all. Yet, here she was. Now she felt confused, unsure and guilty. Had she jumped to the wrong conclusion?

She ran through the astrogation console. It appeared to be a heavily equipped ship, maybe a match for the Courier itself. The specification seemed very comprehensive, excessive even.

She frowned, rubbing her forehead. The headache was getting worse rather than better.

There were seven energy banks, not four. That wasn't right. Lance had known the Cobra specs inside out. He'd bored her silly with it many times and she could recite the stats. He loved quoting specs.

Had loved. Grief threatened to overwhelm her again as she remembered the sound of his voice chattering statistics, but she ruthlessly crushed the emotions she felt, reciting the specification like a mantra through gritted teeth.

'Dual Ziemann energy deflection shields. Four energy banks. Point-three lem. Four hardpoints. Four gun mountings. Twenty-tonne cargo capacity, unmodified. System space Kruger 'lightfast' motors. Irrikon Thru-Space drive.'

Definitely, she was absolutely sure of it. The spec on the console was different, even down to the system space drives. Nothing was making sense.

There was a small stylised plaque on the console, just below the main scanner.

Apocalypse Engineering is proud to present the SuperCobra. Your vision; our reality.

SuperCobra? A custom ship? The ship's manifest stated that it was called *Enola Gay*. Two of the missile pylons had ECM hardened missiles stowed. Handy. The other two had... well, something else. Two odd-looking disk-shaped devices according to the vid link. Both had labels. One read 'Little Boy' and the other 'Fat Man'. She had no idea what they were or what the names meant. She punched up the computer armament inventory.

2x Quirium Cascade Mine.

Still none the wiser. Sounded neat though. She toyed with the idea of setting one off to see what it did. She toggled the arming sequence. It was, as the name suggested, a mine. You just dropped it; there was no thrust, guidance or targeting system. What was the point of that? Nobody would hang around if you threw a static mine at them unless they were brain-dead. Mines were a throw back to the ancient wars of three centuries ago or more, when battles were fought with huge lumbering hulks of ships that couldn't turn for anything less than a moon; before injectors, before decent engines, before hyperdrives. Mines were obsolete, like missiles were fast becoming; particularly those prakky Faulcon ones.

Arming sequence complete. Deploy mine?

The computer was waiting for her input. Her hand hovered over the release coder.

Arming sequence complete. Deploy mine?

She decided against it. Not a very pragmatic thing to do. Maybe it would do something weird and backfire or something. There must be a reason why the mine was there.

This really was an odd ship. Then she realised.

Stupid girl!

She must have banged her head harder than she thought in that pod. It had to be the Cobra the ident computer on *Eclipse* had got all wrapped up over! A fifteen percent discrepancy would be about right. Lance hadn't screwed up the programming after all. Maybe the pilot responded to the distress call. Had he killed the Courier? Rebecca would be impressed if he had.

Could the Cobra pilot be in league with the Courier? A traitor, leading the Imperials into Galcop space? Maybe it had been a setup? Where was the Courier then? The scanner was blank. She searched for a ship's log, but there was nothing in the databanks at all.

Her father had said the Courier wasn't a pirate, and it hadn't scooped their cargo. It wasn't a bounty hunter either, and unless one of them had had some secret life they'd never mentioned, which seemed pretty unlikely, an assassin made no sense either. She smiled involuntarily at the thought of her father being an undercover member of the Dark Wheel. Hardly; not with that stomach!

None of this makes any sense at all!

She shook her head, explanations would have to wait. It didn't matter now, it was time to secure her claim to the ship.

Her second thoughts were that it was too risky to fly direct into Zaonce; she was sure she'd be arrested. She had some distant relations on Diso. If she could get there, with a bit of help she could buy a stock Mk3 Cobra with the insurance funds from the Boa, swap the transponders, clone the identities and leave the stock Mk3 adrift in space somewhere. Then she could fly around in this mega-machine with impunity. With this ship around her she could be Elite, she knew it.

Next she toggled the cargo log. It was empty save for a single entry of a few lines.

Cargo Manifest Addition: Escape Pod.

Beginning cryogenic freeze, please wait...

Manual override. Cryogenic freeze aborted by user command.

The pilot of the Cobra had scooped her but aborted the standard freezing process. Why? He wanted her fresh for some reason? She shuddered, not wanting to think about that.

She looked on the scanner for other ships. Still blank. She could see the Cobra was currently located some way off the main space lane running between Zaonce and its Sun, almost a whole AU off. They were pretty much out in the black.

What to do with poor old Mr. Feynman?

Her escape pod was still fully functional. She could eject it into space. He'd live, assuming she hadn't hit him too hard. She felt a pang of guilt. Maybe he was innocent? No, the profile said he was a fugitive. Nobody out here in space was innocent really. You didn't live long if you were innocent. Nobody was exactly who they claimed to be. He'd get back to Zaonce all right. He could claim on his own insurance. He might even lose his fugitive status. Everyone's a winner.

Of course, he might get scooped, shot, crash or just disappear out into the void because of a malfunction. Part of her didn't care; part of her felt shame and guilt. She'd rather not be responsible. Vague memories of her grandfather talking about moral fibre, honesty and integrity floated through her mind. She shook her head to clear it, and then wished she hadn't. She was sick.

She realised she was in no fit state to fight the pilot again. She'd got lucky once, no need to push it any further. Anyway, integrity was the first thing out of the airlock, or so her father had said. 'An expensive and wasteful luxury' was his other expression. On the whole, she agreed with him.

Prak it.

The pilot was a complete goid for getting himself caught by a sick girl with nothing but a fire suppressor. People that dumb didn't deserve any favours. She'd been worse off than him, it was the luck of the draw and that was all. She set a course for the star, triggered the hyperspeed drive and moved across to the cargo bay inventory controls, preparing to dump the pod.

'We've got him.' The Galcop officer reported. 'Remote scan has picked up the gravimetric emissions again.'

'Location?' The voice belonging to the owner of the strange unreported ship came over the comlink.

'Six planetary diameters, star-centric. Vector three one four, mark two. Estimated velocity shows as hyperspeed.'

'Good. Clear the area.'

'Copy.'

The Galcop cop shutdown the viewer and looked across at his colleague. 'So much for the

invincible one. I hate these covert ops.'

'You saw him take out five ships without a scratch. Let's not make him angry, eh? I want to enjoy my pension. No guarantee we aren't on his target list after the job's done. Fly casual and keep our distance.'

Rebecca had assigned her identity to the ship by standard DNA ID transfer. The ship would have automatically locked her out after a few minutes otherwise, as was standard flight procedure. Within a few moments she saw her credit rating and Elite status appear.

Cash: 65535 Cr

Legal Status: Clean

Rating: Competent (509)

At least that seemed correct. She used the consoles to access the cargo bay interface, selecting the magnetic cargo arms to move the escape pod and drop it out of the cargo bay. The cargo bay mechanism seemed much slower than the one on the Boa. It wasn't helped by the fact that the escape pod hadn't been secured properly in the bay. Whoever the original pilot was he must have been a complete amateur. She couldn't figure out how someone so dumb had come to own an über-ship like this!

The sun was quickly looming larger. She would be able to fuel scoop in a matter of minutes.

Cargo dump: 1x Escape Pod, ready. Confirm?

Rebecca breathed a sigh of relief. Finally!

The scanner pinged and the hyperspeed drive cut out.

Mass locked. Hyperspeed aborted.

'Damn!' Rebecca hissed, looking at the scanner. There was a slight feeling of deceleration as the old style Torus drive cut out.

Four dots appeared in close succession on the left forward quadrant. These weren't yellow though. These were purple. Police Vipers. Vicious little fighter ships, designed to shoot down pirates or Thargoids and anything else. Fighter ships that kept coming even if you killed the pilot, whose missiles kept coming even if you killed the ship. Vipers bit and then held on.

'Better late than never, I suppose,' she muttered, 'Not that it matters now. Let's see what this baby can do.'

She pushed the engines to full power. The noise was intense, even considering the speed. But her eyes grew wide when she saw the speed indicator jump to point-four-five.

'Awesome!'

'The target is going to overtake us.' The voice of the Galcop officer said in disbelief. 'It's running at point-four-five lem!'

The Agent frowned. At that speed interception would be tricky, the SuperCobra was clearly no ordinary ship. 'Harass the ship, but do not destroy it. Try to prevent it using its hyperspeed drive or injectors. I will arrive shortly.'

The SuperCobra was alone this time; there would be no witnesses this far from the space lane. He wondered what the pilot was doing. Even given the speed advantage, it was a stupid and reckless move, an elementary mistake: heading directly for the sun from the previous battle scene. Surely he knew he was being tracked by now? Disappointing. The Agent hoped for a multi-system chase. A chance to really earn his exorbitant fee. Now it would soon be over.

He anticipated the Vipers would weaken the SuperCobra, and he would move in for the kill. He'd be in range within minutes. This time he'd be quick.

Rebecca watched as the Vipers changed course to intercept her. They were between her and the sun, even with the extra turn of speed she couldn't avoid them without reversing course.

Damn! It looked like she wasn't going to get away with her plan after all. Maybe she'd just have to settle for the insurance alone. She couldn't afford to gain a Fugitive rating in a corporate system. She keyed the comlink, deciding honesty might have to be the best policy. She was conscious of her headache again; she was feeling dizzy permanently now.

'Police Vipers. I am a victim of piracy, I've incapacitated the owner of this ship and taken over the helm. Please advise.'

The comlink hissed and spluttered, but there was no response. The Vipers continued to close.

Rebecca frowned and keyed the comlink, 'Police Vipers, please respond.'

Nothing, maybe the comm system was broken. She'd better shutdown the engines and look passive. The police could board and then she could explain. Hopefully. Galcop officers were notorious for their 'shoot first and ask questions later' attitude.

'Sir?'

The girl on the ship was the ejectee from the Boa; this really was not her lucky day. She must have been scooped and somehow overpowered the pilot. The Agent almost smiled with the irony.

'Your orders remain. Engage. Be wary of a trap. Switch to defensive tactics.'

'Copy.'

Magenta beam lasers skittered across the SuperCobra's shields. The ship rocked and bucked.

'Prak!' Rebecca shouted and tried the comlink one more time. 'Police Vipers, please desist! I surrender!'

Their response was another volley of laser fire.

They weren't going to board, they weren't going to give her a choice! They were going to kill her! Maybe this ship merited a 'shoot on sight' rating. Either way she was in deep trouble. Four Vipers!

The forward shields were half down already. She couldn't just sit there.

Firing on police Vipers, though... I'll never be clean again!

Kill or be killed. There was only one choice.

Immediately she flipped on the arming switches for the missiles and the laser, swung the SuperCobra around and accelerated to full speed. She remembered the specifications had reported that the SuperCobra had a military laser on the forward mounting. It would be interesting to see how that performed.

She spun the SuperCobra around, impressed by how fast it could turn. She modulated the engine thrust, turned again and dropped in behind one of the Vipers. She was in her element, the SuperCobra feeling like an extension of her body.

'I've always wanted to blast one of you smug little Goids!' she snarled.

She had a perfect shot. She triggered the military laser as the Viper passed through the crosshairs.

Nothing happened.

What?

Frantically she adjusted course and thumbed the trigger again.

Still nothing.

Oh frak...

She targeted a missile instinctively and fired it. She saw the Viper activate its ECM and was grimly pleased to see the missile was unaffected. A moment later though, one of the other Vipers shot the missile down.

'Stard!'

She banked away from the Viper, giving up the chase. The others were angling for a good shot at her. The astrogation console flashed. Error messages were streaming up the console log.

Laser temperature exceeded. Auto shutdown.

Laser temperature exceeded. Auto shutdown.

How could the laser be overheated? She hadn't fired yet! She hit the button for a diagnostic of the onboard systems.

Coolant levels nominal.

Coolant divert in operation. (Warning: bypass of primary system!)

Mine circulation system in operation (Warning: bypass of primary system!)

'Oh prak!' Rebecca shouted. 'Idiot son of a goid!'

According to the diagnostic display, someone had jury-rigged a bypass of the laser cooling system in favour of the two stupid onboard mines. Why the frag a mine needed cooling was anyone's guess, but to send a ship out without an operational primary weapon was madness of an extreme form. Nobody went into space unarmed; it was suicide. She couldn't believe it.

One missile remained. Four ships. No maths in the universe was going to make that one balance. Four on one with no gun. Impossible odds.

She had to get out of here. She needed a distraction. She glanced at the armament inventory again. Laser fire bounced off the rear shields, rocking the ship. She turned evasively again. The Vipers struggling to keep up.

1x ECM Hardened Missile

2x Quirium Cascade Mine

'Time to see what you do, 'Little Boy'.' she muttered, selecting the first mine and keying in the arming sequence from before.

Arming Sequence Complete. Deploy mine?

She hit the coder without delay. There was a hiss of retracting cooling pipes and then, with a noticeable clunk, the mine detached. She saw it on the scanner, a flashing red and yellow dot. It drifted back towards the police Vipers. If they saw it they didn't react. They held close formation, their scanners probably showing it as a cargo canister. They were close now, approaching at full speed. All four would have a clear shot. She'd gambled on the mine working...

The Vipers went straight past it at point-blank range. The mine did nothing, merely tumbling uselessly in space.

It didn't work!

Rebecca cursed. The SuperCobra rocked under heavy combined fire as the four Vipers brought their weapons to bear, the rear shields collapsing and the energy banks struggling to replenish them. Her gamble had failed. Why the frag would you carry something which rendered your main laser useless when it did nothing whatsoever...

There was a burst of coruscating white light on the rear view scanner.

With shocking suddenness there was a writhing, twisting, terrifying ball of electric blue fire expanding behind her. She stared, awestruck, her hands falling from the controls, as it grew to encompass almost the whole of the rear view display.

Warning! Ultraviolet Radiation Detected.

Warning! Gravimetric Radiation Detected.

What the prak is gravimetric radiation?

The surface of the sphere crackled angrily with a billion sparkling lights. It looked like a million bolts of lightning had been harnessed inside a globe and then all that energy released in a single moment. On the scanner she could see an expanding magenta ring. It was growing at a fantastic velocity yet in complete and eerie silence. The threat warning lights were flashing double red.

The Vipers were directly between her and the mine.

She heard the calls of panic on wideband. All four Vipers turned and ran at full speed away in different directions from the mine detonation point.

One took a little more time to turn than the others.

Rebecca saw the leading edge of blue fire intersect with the Viper; it was expanding far faster than even the swift Vipers could manage at full power.

The Viper vanished, replaced by a second flash of light and another intense blue spherical shockwave.

'My God.' She whispered. 'What have I done?'

The Viper hadn't survived even for a few seconds, it had simply ceased to exist. Maybe shields didn't stop whatever it was at all. A weapon that could destroy ships regardless of shielding? Impossible, surely!

Warning! Gravimetric Radiation Detected.

The renewed shockwave caught the next Viper along, with the same result. Then the third one was caught by the original shockwave. The overall effect now looked like a huge distorted, discoloured and deadly amoeba.

Whatever it was it seemed to be feeding off the remains of the Vipers, each one going down due to the previous one, creating a new burst. Cascading from one to the other. The final Viper was caught. It was much closer to her, having been running on almost the same vector.

Warning! Range proximity. Impact in ten seconds.

Rebecca looked down. The nearest Viper had gone, caught in the blast and yet another sphere of blue energy was heading outwards. This one much closer to her, gaining on the ship at a terrifying rate.

It had killed four fully shielded Vipers. There was no guarantee the SuperCobra would fare any better.

The expanding effect was close now, filling the entire rear screen with hideous, sparkling light.

A blue screen of death.

She was at full throttle, there was nothing she could do. Wait! Maybe this ship had injectors? She scanned the various displays hunting for the controls.

Where are the prakking injectors?

Witchspace injectors could give her a spurt of speed, maybe enough to get her out of range. What a stupidly dangerous piece of kit that mine was! If you triggered it in a field of other ships you'd never get out of the way in time!

Warning! Range proximity. Impact in five seconds.

ECM, missile control, shield inverters, thrust monitors, hyperspace navigation, fuel status indicators, energy banks, astrogation compass... no injectors! Where were the fragging injectors?!

Warning! Range proximity! Impact in two seconds!

The SuperCobra began to shudder, a strange vibration building up through the bulkheads with a deep rumbling noise, making everything unsecured begin to rattle.

There! At last! The injector control!

She hit it hard and the SuperCobra shot forward, a blaze of magenta exhaust wake flaring against the outbound energy of the mine. For a moment the flickering blue light seemed to be surging up the exhaust flux, she was too late! The SuperCobra tilted and spun wildly, as if it were surfing the crest of the approaching wall of destruction. Rebecca watched as the ghastly blue light slowly receded behind her. Its dimensions were enormous. Would it ever stop? Or just go on expanding?

As if on cue, it slowly faded, and then there was nothing but the blackness of space once more.

Rebecca took her hand from the injector control, it was trembling uncontrollably.

The console flashed up a message. She looked at it, uncomprehending for a moment, thinking it was a joke.

Right on, Commander!

Her Rating had changed too. For a moment the letters swam before her eyes before she could focus on them properly.

Rating: Dangerous (513)

Dangerous wasn't the word.

The Agent had watched the Vipers dropping into attack formation behind the SuperCobra as he drew into range. He saw a small object being jettisoned from rear of the vessel. He frowned. His scanner showed it as an active device, not a cargo canister. It certainly looked like a canister from his vantage point. Perhaps a missile decoy of some sort? Yet the Vipers hadn't launched missiles.

Then there was a flash and a huge bloom of blue energy. Within seconds all four Vipers had been destroyed, the SuperCobra injecting its way out of trouble just in time.

So... that's what it looks like!

The SuperCobra's heat shielding glowed a bright red already. Rebecca watched the cabin

temperature rise and the range drop. She'd always found solar skimming unnerving. The surface temperature just a few thousand kilometres down was over six thousand degrees. Enough to melt anything, even duralium. It was nerve-wracking, realising that only a few millimetres of nano-engineered heat shields were all that protected you from the inferno below.

She was diving at full speed, directly into the corona.

Fuel Scoops Active.

Slowly the fuel tanks were filling up; soon she'd have enough to reach Lave. She had to get out of here: this had all happened too fast; she was stressed and exhausted, both mentally and physically. She badly needed space and a rest. Time to think. She felt feverish.

The scanner pinged. She looked at it with trepidation. Another ship, it had to be trouble.

It wasn't a Viper. She flicked on the ident computer.

Imperial Courier. Mass 480 Metric. .375 LM

'No, not you again. This just isn't fair!' she whimpered, her heart thudding painfully. She wanted a fight with that ship, but not here, not now. It was too much. Her headache had become severe, almost debilitating, making her wince with pain.

She had nothing left to fight with. No laser, no chance.

The Courier was closing the range fast. It obviously intended to blow her out of the stars. That pilot wasn't going to fall for the mine trick either. He must have seen it. An explosion that big would have been visible planet-side. The escape pod was useless too: he'd simply shoot it down.

The Courier must have some way of tracking this ship; there was no other way it could have found her. Presumably its owner was after these terrible mines. Every government would want something like that. Maybe that was what this was all about.

If she hyperspaced out to Tionisla or Lave the Courier would simply follow through her witchspace wormhole. She'd be low on fuel and it wouldn't have used a drop. Without a working onboard laser she'd be killed in seconds at the other end.

She had only one option left.

It was unsafe, unrecommended and she knew it killed more than half of the people who tried it. At least, they never came back to report otherwise.

A forced mis-jump.

Enter on the wrong vector, use an improper speed, select a poor rotational attitude or position, muck up any one of a thousand variables and the witchspace jump could go awry. Hence

the reason they were all run via autopilot. Rumour had it that you might even accidentally trigger time travel, and you'd end up facing an irascible dinosaur in favour of the more common irascible docking staff. Accidental mis-jumps were bad news.

Forcing a mis-jump was the last act of the totally desperate.

But if it worked, the wormhole would lead to her planned destination, not to where she actually ended up. She'd tumble out of witchspace... somewhere else. There was a chance of escape. If she survived.

Oddly enough, she'd learnt how to do it from the boy racers, not that any of them had really had the guts to try it. She'd checked out the theory and it was valid enough. An extreme attitude adjustment during witchspace entry should do it. With luck she'd be thrown into deep and silent interstellar space between the Galcop planets, safely hidden. If she was unlucky she'd end up inside a planet or a star, next to the gaping mouth of a black hole, lost in the depths of a nebula, or right in the middle of a Thargoid invasion fleet.

No choices left. The Courier was bearing down on her again, doubtless watching for another mine. Military lasers hit the shields once again. A few more hits and even the SuperCobra would be finished. She locked the destination system onto Tionisla as it was nearer, activated the hyperdrive and watched the countdown. As it neared zero, she pulled the SuperCobra into a steep climb at full throttle.

The Agent could see the SuperCobra was fuel scooping. He was unconcerned. If the SuperCobra witched out, he could follow using the resultant wormhole. Once in range he triggered his weapons, watching as the military laser washed over the SuperCobra's shields. It ducked and weaved. It was a tough little ship, he had to give it that.

Suddenly it turned sharply and disappeared, leaving behind a telltale blue flickering wormhole. Superheated plasma from the star was sucked in as well, giving the wormhole an unsettling appearance, like a miniature black hole.

Desperate measures. A short reprieve. He'd simply follow and attack again. There was no escape.

He angled the Courier into the wormhole and was rewarded with the characteristic witchspace tunnel. He checked his navigation as he emerged. Tionisla. The pilot had made right choice. It would leave the maximum amount of witch fuel for injecting away. Not that it mattered. The system was irrelevant. He moved to the targeting scanner.

It was blank. The SuperCobra was nowhere to be found.

Rebecca all but swooned when the witchspace transit began. It was as if they were free falling into some uncharted depths. There was an awful sickening sensation and the world felt like it was dropping out from underneath her. It was frightfully different to the normal mild roller-coaster affect normally associated with a witchspace entry. Her vision blurred as she struggled to keep herself upright. The transit seemed to be taking far longer than usual. She managed to hold on, barely.

The exit was worse. It was too much for her. She fainted, collapsing prone across the console, banging her head and then slowly slipping to the floor. As she fell she knocked the wideband transmitter controls, switching them on. A faint querulous clicking noise issued from the speakers.

The SuperCobra tumbled in the darkness. Sickly, pale green starlight flickered from the slowly cooling hull.

Chapter Seven

'... Speculation about the unusual activity in the Zaonce system is growing. Early yesterday morning, Zaonce time, long range sensors picked up significant gravimetric emissions from Zaonce's sun. Telescopic surveys revealed some kind of unusual solar flare activity had taken place. Later observations appeared to show that the flare was some distance from the sun itself, giving rise to speculation it wasn't a solar flare at all but rather some kind of explosion. Four Galcop Vipers, known to be in the general vicinity, are overdue and concern is growing for the eight officers aboard. I have with me P'trik Moire, chief astronomer and solar specialist at Zaonce, for his reaction. P'trik, this is certainly unprecedented for any star, do we know what caused it?'

'Well, Anna. What we have here is a complete anomaly. At this stage we are still speculating as to the cause. We have a large solar flare —'

'What about the theory that it was nothing to do with the star?'

'I think that we can safely rule that out. It's always tempting to let our imaginations run wild, but there really is nothing else that could generate such an extreme surge of gravimetric radiation...'

'And can you tell us what gravimetric radiation is?'

'It's not radiation per se; in fact, what we call gravity is actually the result of the warping of space-time by the presence of mass, one can speculate as to whether this particular effect is a Higgs-Boson distortion or the more classical Hawking variety —'

'Are we in any danger?'

'More investigation will obviously be required. Zaonce's star may simply, to use the vernacular, have 'hiccupped'. Gravimetric radiation doesn't generally pose a health risk, so we don't need to be concerned there —'

'So you're saying we're safe then?'

'Well, further studies may indicate that over the course of time, with appropriate investigation, health risks may emerge. It would be complacent to say there are no risks at all and a more thorough examination of the evidence may indeed —'

'P'trik, thank you very much. In other news, unconfirmed reports appear to indicate the presence of Federation and Imperial fleets massing near Lave. Galcop reports this is a co-operative effort in response to the increasingly brutal Thargoid attacks on the outworld systems, which, as we know, they've been denying up until now. Is this real collaboration or another intergalactic military

stand-off brewing? Truth is, we don't know. This is Anna Mereso, at Zaonce for the *Tionisla Chronicle*, wideband channel three-eight-five-point-two.'

The Federation Ambassador glared across the mahogany conference table and slammed his fist down hard. Subdued lighting reflected from the laser cut and diamond polished surface of the table. The room was devoid of decoration, sparse and functional. Across from him sat the Galcop and Imperial Ambassadors, both, as was he, decked out in the full regalia of their respective governments.

'Galcop are a bunch of interstellar terrorists!'

He was grizzled old fellow, apparently always in a bad mood, his temper short, and prone to flaring up violently, much like the sun around which his home planet orbited.

'It was merely an accident. A fleet of Vipers were experimenting with a new engine technology. The test failed. A tragic accident.' The Galcop ambassador's voice was calm as he responded. He was a tall but well-built man, with a full grey beard, neatly trimmed, and green eyes looking out from under bushy grey eyebrows. On primitive worlds he might have easily passed as a wizard, despite the lack of a pointed hat.

'Engines do not give off gravimetric emissions! You've built a bomb!'

'It was a by-product of the engine failure. As I said, the test failed.'

The Federation Ambassador flicked his tablet towards the room's main view, stabbing at the tablet furiously. A fuzzy image of four Vipers being obliterated in a blue flash of fierce light appeared on the conference wall viewer.

Where the prak did they get that footage from?

'An interesting failure!' The Federation Ambassador yelled in his outrage.

'A handful of ships destroyed?' The Galcop Ambassador shrugged dismissively. 'Not significant. As I said, they were destroyed by the failure of their prototype engines.'

'Our scientists tell us this is some kind of cascade device. If you triggered it an area with high ship density...'

How much do they know?

'It was not a cascade reaction. All the Vipers were equipped with the new engine, and hence all were destroyed during the accident. Yes, they triggered each other's destruction, but any other ships present would not have been harmed.'

The Federation Ambassador looked unimpressed, looking across at the other man in the room. 'You're suspiciously silent. What is the Imperial position?'

'We admit nothing but mild curiosity,' drawled the Imperial Ambassador, examining his finger tips as if bored. He was a thin, unhealthy-looking man, dark hair slicked back into place, with pale watery eyes, dressed entirely in black. 'However, in the interests of equanimity we would appreciate a complete description and tactical breakdown of this new engine's capability. If it's not too much trouble, of course.'

'... or?' The Galcop Ambassador pressed, knowing that tone.

'We might have to consider other avenues of research into the accident. A fascinating technical subject, 'accidental gravimetric emission', don't you agree? Worth investigating thoroughly I would say. I'd even take a personal interest... you never know where it might lead.'

That was so ludicrous it was laughable: the Imperial Ambassador knew nothing of technology. He was a purely political animal.

'Meaning you'll simply take it by force?' the Federation Ambassador snarled.

'We have no such intentions.'

'In the same way you had no such intentions to attack our new colony on Rukbat?'

'That was merely a piracy response. McCaffrey and her group of Dragonic raiders had a base there.'

'So you say.'

'What about your Imperial Fifth Fleet, conveniently a mere six-point-eight light years from Lave?' interposed the Galcop Ambassador smoothly.

'Merely a training exercise.' The Imperial Ambassador's voice was indifferent. 'A battle drill for Thargoid invasions, you understand. A number of warships appeared to slip through Federation space unchallenged once again...'

'If you were more diligent about reporting incursions, we could intercept them.'

'You already knew about them. We leaked the information to your spies days in advance.'

'How dare you imply —'

'I imply nothing; I am merely stating facts. Just as I can state that you also have a fleet deployed close to Lave for some unknown reason.'

The Federation Ambassador spluttered for a moment. 'We... also believe Thargoid invasions

are likely... it's a drill... you can't be too careful...'

'Oh, naturally; it's always good to be prepared.'

There's no time for this.

'Gentlemen!'

Silence reigned for a moment.

'Galcop has stated its position. This was an accident. There is no new bomb technology. That is the end of the matter. Galcop is gratified that your enthusiasm for countering Thargoids remains undiminished, but respectfully requests that you move your fleets to more appropriate locations whilst performing your drills. We are confident our Galactic Navy can deal with any local trouble we might encounter.'

His tone was hard, edgy. The other ambassadors returned his look without flinching. His subtle wording had not hidden the obvious threat he'd made.

Unfortunately, the Federation Ambassador was not a subtle man.

'Not acceptable. You will hand over all information regarding this alleged engine accident...'

'Galcop isn't in the habit of releasing classified technical research to outsiders.'

'Then Lave will be blockaded until you do!'

'You would dare to invade Galcop sovereign space over this?'

'That and more! In the interests of self-defence! Galcop has broken the non-proliferation treaty. We have our rights under the Sotiqu Directive, article fifteen.'

'We have done no such thing...'

'Much as it pains me to agree with my Federation colleague, I feel compelled to provide assistance. It is disappointing that the Galactic Co-operative is unable to abide by the treaty.'

'This is not acceptable...'

The Imperial Ambassador looked at his tablet console, feigning surprise. 'My word! I've just been informed that there *is* suspected Thargoid activity approaching Lave! In the interests of mitigating this threat I shall have to mobilise our fleet. Unfortunately we may have to block some of the trading lanes... Unless, of course, you have something to tell us?'

'I'm afraid not.'

'A blockade it is then,' snapped the Federation Ambassador.

'Any incursion into Lave system space will be viewed as an act of war.'

'I suppose it would,' the Imperial Ambassador replied, with a wan smile, 'On a positive note, it will give you the opportunity to try out your new bomb again, won't it?'

The Galcop Ambassador pursed his lips, and rubbed his chin thoughtfully, 'Gentlemen, I don't think we have anything else to discuss. A pleasure as always.'

The Medivac unit finished its work and sat back idle.

'Radiation damage repaired,' its small vocoder croaked.

Jim Feynman surveyed the figure unconscious on the couch with some trepidation.

He'd awoken, injured, inside the escape pod he'd scooped. He'd been in a bad way. He could only just recall a vague figure emerging from the darkness. He'd been stupid, entering unprepared. He'd tried to contact the occupant of the pod on the narrow band comm, but there had been no response. He'd assumed the pilot was injured and unable to respond; a big mistake. He'd ended up covered in fire goo, a foul smelling ignition suppressant, and dried blood from a cut on his forehead. His chest and stomach were bruised and it was agony when he moved.

Looking around he'd seen the interior of the pod was damaged and smashed. He hadn't recalled that earlier. It appeared to have happened in the meantime. The pod's rear door was smashed and buckled. He was able to climb out, albeit painfully.

The cargo bay was a mess. There were huge scrape marks across the floor, apparently caused by the pod being flung around. Crates and their contents littered the floor. It was as if the ship had been involved in a fight.

He'd been dizzy from lack of blood and concussion. Fortunately the medivac unit was operational and he had managed to climb into the couch, lapsing into blissful unconsciousness while it took care of him.

On waking, his wounds and injuries had been fixed. The catalogue surprised him, cranial lacerations, skull fracture, broken ribs. Someone really had tried pretty hard to kill him. They'd almost succeeded.

Quickly he searched the ship, finally ending up on the bridge. There was a smell of charred circuitry. There had definitely been a battle of some kind. The main view was off, but he could see the astrogation compass was rolling wildly, apparently unable to get a fix. He activated the main screen.

Nothing but empty space. No sun, no planet, just faint stars. The hyperspace navigator seemed to show them out in interstellar space. Madness! The SuperCobra was adrift, slowly rotating

in space. The computers had shut down everything once they ascertained that no one was at the controls.

The ship had definitely seen some activity. He checked the console log.

Arming sequence complete. Deploy mine?

Arming sequence complete. Deploy mine?

Cancelled.

Identity transfer confirmed. Welcome Commander!

Cargo dump, 1x Escape Pod, ready. Confirm?

Cancelled.

Mass locked. Hyperspeed aborted.

Laser temperature exceeded. Auto shutdown.

Laser temperature exceeded. Auto shutdown.

Coolant levels nominal.

Coolant divert in operation. (Warning: Bypass of primary system!)

Mine circulation system in operation (Warning: Bypass of primary system!)

Missile lock confirmed.

Missile fired.

Arming Sequence Complete. Deploy mine?

Mine launched.

Warning! Ultraviolet radiation detected. Warning! Gravimetric radiation detected.

Warning! Range proximity. Impact in ten seconds.

Warning! Range proximity. Impact in five seconds.

Warning! Range proximity. Impact in two seconds.

Right on, Commander!

Fuel Scoops Active.

Witchspace to Tionisla in 15 s.

Witchspace engine malfunction!

Inactivity. Going to standby mode.

Somebody had almost dumped the pod, with him aboard! Lasers had been fired, missiles had been fired...

Jim was staggered. What in the name of Randomius Factoria had been going on?

A mine had been launched. In system space. In Zaonce. He scanned through the warning messages. Radiation and range proximity? From the mine? Right on, Commander? That was an Elite rating message for a significant number of kills in sequence. Who'd been shot down?

Who the prak had done all this?

<i>Commander</i>	<i>Rebecca Tyley</i>
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<i>Present System</i>	<i>Unknown</i>
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<i>Hyperspace System</i>	<i>Tionisla</i>
--------------------------	-----------------

<i>Condition</i>	<i>Standby Mode</i>
------------------	---------------------

<i>Fuel</i>	<i>3.2 Light Years</i>
-------------	------------------------

<i>Cash</i>	<i>Suspended</i>
-------------	------------------

<i>Legal Status</i>	<i>Fugitive</i>
---------------------	-----------------

<i>Rating</i>	<i>Dangerous (513)</i>
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He discovered the girl under the console. A dangerous fugitive?

She didn't look too threatening. A petite dark-haired woman dressed in sloppy and grubby engineering overalls. She was lying face down on the floor, also injured, blood seeping from a head wound. Obviously there was more to her than met the eye. She appeared to have collapsed. For a moment he assumed she was dead and there was another assailant aboard, but a quick check revealed a thin and reedy pulse. He turned her over.

The face was pale, with slight bruising. Her lips were blue, her breathing coming in short raspy gasps. Scattered around her were two pistols. She had to be the ejectee from the Boa, the one responsible for attacking him in the Pod and everything else.

For a moment he was furious, but then he decided he needed answers more than revenge. He dragged her to the medivac unit.

She was suffering from extreme radiation exposure. Not from the mine as was his first thought, but from normal space. The pod must have been damaged by the explosion of the Boa. Its shields had failed. She'd received a heavy dose of cosmic radiation. Untreated, in a few more hours

she'd have been dead. Fortunately radiation exposure was a common ailment, and easily fixed by the medivac.

'Radiation damage repaired. Please acknowledge.'

Jim brought his mind back to the present moment. He switched off the medivac and waited. It didn't take long. The girl stirred, blinked and slowly sat up, looking straight into the pistol Jim had trained on her. Her eyes widened in surprise.

'Welcome aboard, Rebecca,' he said sarcastically.

Rebecca was scared witless. She'd passed out! Now she was caught by the guy she'd hit in the Pod. This... who was he? The accent was tutored, refined; not the voice of a tradesman or buccaneer. She'd have marked him as an academic, possibly a politician.

'Don't kill me, please!'

He seemed surprised at that, 'I have no intention of killing you, Rebecca.'

She relaxed for a moment at the sound of her name, before thoughts of slavery ran through her mind again. 'You won't take me alive!'

She scrambled up from the couch, backing into the corner of the medbay, looking for anything she could use. There was nothing. She crouched behind the medivac unit.

'Calm down. All I want is some answers.'

'Who the frag are you?' she screeched, still looking like a cornered wild animal.

He put down the pistol and held up his hands. 'All right; look, I'm unarmed. Let's just talk. My name is Jim.'

Her eyes narrowed, she looked carefully at him, studying the eyes as her father had taught her. 'You're not going to hurt me?'

'Hurt you? You're the one who hurt me. Don't you remember?'

She paused. 'Well. Yes. Sorry. I assumed you were going to...'

'... sell you into slavery? It's illegal, you know.'

'Yeah? So is narcotic smuggling and everyone does that!'

'I thought I was doing you a favour. It was supposed to be a rescue, after all.'

Her eyes registered surprise, 'You're not in league with that Courier?'

'The Courier? No.'

She looked askance at him. 'You saw it? You heard my distress call?'

He nodded. 'I saw the Courier destroy your escort. A Pod ejected. The Courier was going to shoot it down.'

'Did you see any others?' she asked, a hint of hope creeping into her voice.

'No, just yours... I'm sorry. I intervened. I mean you no harm; you can trust me.'

'Trust you? I can't trust you! You're a prakkin' fugitive! The whole of Galcop is after you and this prakkin' ship. This ship is crazy, it's full of mad stuff that shouldn't exist! Couriers attacking me, killing my family; Vipers shooting my ass off! Mines that blow up half the sky! You're no innocent bystander! Who the frag are you and what are you doing?'

'Well, that's a tale I'm happy to share. But I'm asking the questions first. Who are you? You're not exactly innocent, are you? I don't know if I can trust you either.'

'What do you mean? I'm just an honest trader!'

'You're a dangerous fugitive too according to the log.'

'No prakkin' way!'

'Check it out if you don't believe me.'

He gestured to the gravity well to the bridge. She glared at him, walking past giving him a wide berth. She ascended the gravity well. He heard a cry of sheer outrage from the bridge.

'They've fraggin' marked me! They've crashed my accounts! Stars!'

Jim related the first part of his tale to her after they agreed to be civil with each other. They sat on the bridge, at opposite ends, warily watching each other as they ate some nutritionals.

He seems honest, maybe too honest...

'So you're a real fugitive, not just a legal one,' she said, staring at him as if trying to gauge his honesty, 'What a frakkin' mess this is.'

He shrugged. 'I uncovered a plot. I had to do something.'

'And you invented this mine?'

'Not exactly. It was an accidental discovery with a colleague of mine. Until a day ago I had no idea it had been built.'

'And so you stole this ship. Rather than let them use it.'

'Exactly.'

'And they were really planning to obliterate the Achenar system?'

'So they said. These weapons could do it.'

She shook her head. 'Frakkin Galcop. Those stards have got it coming to them. I always thought they were a dodgy outfit. Mark my words, the whole thing will come crashing down one day soon. Sounds like the rot is already setting in. What were you planning to do?'

'I was heading towards Lave. I'd just arrived in the Zaonce system. Your Boa was nearby.'

'I remember. We thought your ship looked odd. You headed straight for the star.'

'Too dangerous to approach the stations.'

'Figures.'

'I can only assume the Courier was an assassin, sent to kill me.'

'And we got in the way.'

'I'm truly sorry. I had no idea...'

She shrugged. 'They're dead now.'

He frowned. 'You're taking this very well.'

She glared at him, eyes blazing with sudden anger. 'No I fraggin' well am not! You think it's easy having your ship shot out from under you? Seeing your brother killed? Your cousins murdered? Your father's agonised expression the last thing you see? Prak you, lab boy!'

He didn't respond to her outburst, couldn't; waited as she calmed herself down.

'I'm sorry.' she managed.

'I understand. You've lost everything...' it sounded hopelessly inadequate.

'No, you don't understand,' she said, her head dropping, allowing her hair to fall forward, covering her face. 'It's not like that.'

'What do you mean?'

'You wouldn't understand.'

She dissolved into tears.

Guilt; a horrible thing to have to deal with in such a situation. Survivor's guilt? Or a genuine regret for life choices? That was her problem, not his. He had to find out what had been happening.

Jim decided the best thing he could do was distract her.

'Were you flying the Boa?'

'Yeah.' She sniffed.

'You fought well.'

'I was beaten.'

'Hardly a fair fight,' he observed. 'On equal terms I reckon you would take him down.'

Her eyes hardened with resolve. 'One day I will.'

'It's your funeral,' he replied with a shrug. That wasn't what he intended to get her to think at all. 'You'll end up dead quicker than you can get into witchspace if you pursue a vendetta.'

'Don't lecture me!' she snapped. 'Nobody tells me what to do! I decide!'

He held up his hands, backing off. 'Whatever you say.'

She wiped her eyes. 'So. The Courier is an assassin. How did it find you? It must've had some way of tracking this ship.'

Jim shook his head. 'I don't know, at least not yet. But it must have followed some kind of trail as it didn't come after me directly.'

'Homing device?'

'Can't be, I've checked thoroughly.'

Not thoroughly enough!

'Then the 'goid ran straight into us.'

'Galcop must have issued an order to kill any witnesses.'

'The stards!'

'And the Courier attacked you.'

Rebecca shivered as she recalled the memory, it was raw in her mind. 'It was unreal. I've never seen such a ship. It killed our escorts in seconds and turned on us. My dad chunked me in the escape pod. I saw *Eclipse* explode, then nothing.'

'I saw that too, and the Courier going for your pod. I injected my way in front of the Courier, knocked it aside and scooped your pod, then got out of there as fast as I could.'

Her estimation of him jumped a notch. 'So you really did rescue me.'

'And you repaid me with a cracked skull.'

He could almost see her hackles go up at that. 'I thought you were the Courier pilot! It was self-defence!'

He smiled, trying to ease the tension. 'Sorry, just a joke. What happened next?'

'I locked you in, debated about ejecting you into space...'

'Yeah, thanks for that. You'd have killed me. Your radiation shielding was gone.'

'You should have thought about that before you scooped my pod.'

'Haven't you ever heard of altruism?'

'Quit with the big words. Nobody gives a rusty gravemarker for the safety of anyone else out here in the black! That's not the way things work! You were dumb; it was a stupid thing to do. If it had been me I would have just cleared out.'

'I guess you would, too,' he snarled. 'So next time your ass needs saving I shouldn't bother, is that what you're saying?'

She glared at him.

'I'm grateful you saved my life,' she finally admitted. 'But don't expect any great favours from me.'

He shook his head in amazement at her attitude, was it typical of traders? Perhaps it was. Maybe living the way they did made them selfish and self-obsessed, unconcerned with the fate of those around them.

'Oh, don't worry, I won't. Anyway, your story. What happened next?'

'I ran for the Sun. I came across four Vipers. I tried to surrender, but they just started blasting me.'

'You fired at them?'

'Not initially, but I was forced too. Then I discovered the fraggin' laser doesn't work.'

'Doesn't work?' He stared in surprise.

'The cooling system was bypassed for your prakkin' mines!'

Jim thought about that. What a mess! These mines must have been developed fast, a rush job. They worked, but introduced ridiculous compromises. Diverting the coolant! How tacky was that. A complete kludge. He'd never have allowed it. They should have been self-contained devices, like missiles.

'So how did you...?'

'I fired a missile but it was shot down, so I figured one of your mines would make a diversion, enough to get me some distance to trigger the injectors. I dropped a mine. I never intended to kill them all...'

'The Vipers? What happened?' Jim was curious, despite himself.

'See for yourself. No explanation could do it justice.' She flipped on the vidlog, 'Candid camera.'

He watched the video replay of the Viper attack, the detonation of the bomb and the resultant chaos. It was scary enough to watch it now, let alone being present when it happened. The girl had guts, she'd kept her head when the bomb had gone off and got herself out of the way. The battle with the Vipers was impressive too; she was a flyer and no mistake. He realised he would not have survived that encounter. He probably would have been shot down long before he'd been able to launch a mine, and he might not even have done that. She'd probably saved his life, though not intentionally.

'Where did you learn to fly like that?' he asked, impressed.

She shrugged, 'I just can.' She looked back at the vidlog, frowning. 'Dumb weapon. As dangerous to the attacker as to the target.'

'So you injected out of range...' he prompted.

'... and the Courier found me. I tell you, it can track this ship, has to be able to. No other way it could have found me. I was trying to jump out-system, so I had no choice.'

Jim's face was a question mark. 'So how did you...?'

'I forced a mis-jump.'

He was staggered. She was brave. Stupid maybe, but definitely brave.

'And here we are, stuck interstellar. I was ill, really sick. I must have passed out. I guess you fixed that for me.'

'It was radiation poisoning from when you ejected. You were almost dead. It was lucky I came round in time.'

They looked at each other for a long moment.

'So you did save me a second time,' she said, with the first hint of humour in her eyes.

Jim smiled and held out his hand.

'Jim Feynman.'

She shook it.

'Rebecca Tyley. Sorry about your head.'

'Sorry about your trashed accounts.'

'Yeah,' she mumbled, then heaved a sigh. 'So, we're both fragged then. You're a victim of conscience and I'm a Galcop Viper killer. What are we going to do now?'

'We should be safe out here in interstellar for a while. I think our first job is to get this ship back on its feet. How are you as a technician?'

'Better than you, I bet.'

'Uh-huh.' Jim replied. She had a full measure of arrogance, that was for sure.

'I'm not going anywhere without a working laser.'

'Let's see what we can do together,' he offered. 'Tyley-Feynman. Has a bit of a ring to it, don't you think?'

'No, I don't.' Rebecca snapped back suspiciously, giving him an acerbic look. 'Sounds like a second-hand spare parts franchise.'

It turned out the design flaws on the bomb were pretty trivial. The coolant had been rerouted because whoever had designed the bomb thought the cascade might trigger inadvertently. Jim calculated that unless you were redlining the cabin temperature then coolant was unnecessary. They could route the coolant lines back to the laser without risk. They decided to do that first.

And fell to arguing almost immediately.

'You can't just pull the coolant pipes out and reconnect them!' Jim shouted at her. 'You've got to bleed them down, flux-clean the interiors and then repressurise them. I designed some of these systems, I know!'

'Prak that,' Rebecca retorted, 'that'll take hours.'

'So?'

'You can do it in a couple of minutes. Just pull them out, slap them back in and run the pumps in backwash for a while.'

'Backwash?'

'You just reconnect the pump circuits with invert. Easy.'

'You can't do that you'll blow the pump! It's an impeller design, it won't work! Not to

mention all the valves you'll need to reprime!

'Done it a hundred times. You think you've got time to go through the manual in the middle of a fight?' she put on a silly voice. 'Oh look, the laser's overheated again. Oh, the manual says we have to take two hours to re-run the coolant. Better get started I suppose. Oh, we're dead! Wonder how that happened?'

'No need to be patronising.' His voice dripped scorn.

'And you need to get your head out of your stupid theoretical backside,' Rebecca growled back angrily at him. 'This is the real world, not your lab.'

'I know about the real world.'

'Oh yeah? So you think a 'harmless' combat rating is good do you?'

'I get good scores on the simulators...'

'Don't mean a thing.'

'Well, I've not been out in space much...'

'You're a total greenie, aren't you? Harmless! That explains everything. You're lucky to still be alive.'

'I can handle myself.'

'Still think the flight manual is worth reading? Prak that. Listen Harmless, you need to realise that out here in the field, tech is only as good as what you can get it to do. I don't care if you aren't supposed to connect the pumps in backwash, it works, it keeps you alive. If you need coolant in thirty seconds you've got to figure a way of doing it. End of story.'

She pulled out the coolant pipes. Red flashing lights lit up all around them and sirens wailed imminent disaster. She slapped them across into matching receptacles on the other side of the small interhull space they were working in. Then she took the power pack from the pump, flipped open the access plate, adjusted the internals and pushed it back place.

There was a burst of sparks from the pump.

'Frag!' Jim cursed, seeing Rebecca jump back. 'Are you all right?'

She was nursing her hand, he could see she'd burnt it. 'Yeah. Always does that.'

There was a strange grinding and sloshing sound from the pipes. Rebecca counted for a few seconds, then pulled and reversed the power pack.

All the lights turned green one by one.

'There you go, job done.' she said brightly. 'Next. Coming, Harmless?'

She crawled out of the access way, leaving a bemused Jim behind her. She was really beginning to annoy him. Worse, he knew she was right.

Other than the laser, securing the mine and ejecting the useless escape pod into space it took them only a few hours to get the ship straight. Rebecca upgraded the astronavigation systems with weird and wonderful battle tested but unorthodox programming. She'd even rebooted the computers...

**RUN*

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Ready.

>

She'd also tried to pick up any Galcop wideband transmissions, but they were too far out to hear anything. Worse, she'd picked up some strange clicking noises on an unused wideband channel. She could make no sense of it. What was most alarming was the signal strength indicated the source wasn't too far away, yet there was nothing on the scanner. It was an eerie sound, unnerving and filled with menace.

'What do you make of that?' she asked him, looking rather ill at ease.

Jim listened to the strange sound and shrugged, 'Some weird kind of static, pulsar emanation maybe? A dark star perhaps.'

Rebecca shook her head, 'It's too irregular. I think there's something out there.'

Jim left her to it, he was thinking through what he planned to do next. He hadn't got far when Rebecca interrupted his chain of thoughts.

'So, Harmless, drives are on, laser is cool, shields are up, witchdrive is charging. We're pretty much ready to go.'

'Question for you first.'

'Oh yeah?'

'When you first scanned this ship, what did the ident computer say?'

She frowned, 'It showed up as a Cobra Mk3, with a mismatch – fifteen percent I think. We assumed it was a new type of Cobra or something.'

'Anything else?'

She looked blank for a moment, 'Yeah. It said 'gravimetric radiation detected'.'

Jim sat back in the pilot's chair, 'Mystery solved then.'

'Huh?'

'How the Imperial Courier is able to track us. It's the mines themselves. They're leaking radiation.'

She looked worried, 'Oh wonderful...'

'No danger to us, well, not directly.' he continued, 'Gravimetric radiation won't kill you. But it will show up like a sore thumb to a scanner properly set up to look for it.'

'So let's dump the other mine and make good our escape.'

'Can't.'

'Why not?' she asked, exasperated.

'I need it.'

She looked at him with annoyance, 'So what's the plan then, harmless?'

'Well, listen up, 'Dangerous'. Set the hyperspace system to Lave.'

He'd decided to start calling her 'Dangerous' in response to her 'Harmless' out of pure spite. It wasn't very edifying, but it was very satisfying to irk her in return. She had to be the most irritating people he'd ever encountered.

'Lave?' she looked incredulous, 'Are you mad?'

'Maybe. But that's where we need to go.'

'Did I miss part of the plan here?' she yelled at him. 'The part where I agreed to commit suicide voluntarily? You want to go into the seat of Galcop power in a stolen ship, with an illegal bomb, two fugitives aboard and the police of half the galaxy looking for us?'

'Yes.'

'Just on a whim? Bit of sight-seeing perhaps? Don't you think it might be just a little bit... fatal? As in dead?' Her voice rose to a shout. 'As in blasted to smithereens on sight?'

'There is a good reason.'

'Oh wow. This is going to be good, I'm sure. I can't wait to hear it.'

Jim sighed, tiring of her constant outbursts. 'Can you park your attitude for just a minute?'

Galcop can make more bombs; they don't need this one. It will alter the balance of power. It will mean war; bitter bloody war across every system. Do you know what this bomb will do if you detonate it near a planetary surface?'

'No, what?'

'It's a cascade bomb.'

'Are you saying it could cascade around a planet? Prak! It would wipe everything off the surface and...' she stopped, stunned by the thought, her imagination running wild.

'Exactly. A war would mean the end of pretty much everything. I figure if everyone has the bomb it will be total chaos. Imagine a boy racer with one of these, mind blown and out for a laugh.'

'So what are you going to do? You can't stop Galcop for ever, and you can't give the tech away. You're stuffed.'

'I've going to do what any good techie does,' he said grimly. 'I'm going to give a demo.'

'A demo?'

'I'm going to detonate the remaining bomb over Lave's moon at low altitude. The moon is covered in unmanned hydrogen processing plants, sucking in plasma from the sun on each orbit pass and refining it into Quirium. It will make a huge explosion, ripping the entire moon's surface away. Just like that stupid vid series, do you remember?'

'What, 'Space: 2999'? I loved that show!'

'It will scare the living goids out of everyone, but with no casualties. People will see what this bomb is capable of. I'm trusting that fear, awe and dread will do the rest. I'll back it up with a recorded announcement to be broadcast on wideband. The news stations will relay it everywhere. Everyone needs to know about this. We need to preserve the status quo.'

Rebecca stared at him. 'You really are mad! And what about the assassin?'

'If we see him, you get to kill him. We'll see how dangerous you really are.'

'Don't get cute.'

'Will you help me, Dangerous?' Jim was enjoying her discomforture.

Maybe I should slug him over the head again and get the frak out of here...

But where would she go? She was as marked as he was, with no money, a fugitive ship, with a bomb that could be tracked anywhere. Even if she dumped it she wouldn't get far. Without a credit account she had nowhere to go other than slavery. This situation had to be closed down one way or

the other. Until it was, she had no life.

'I must be prakkin' mad,' she said bitterly. 'This whole thing is mad, and your plan is the maddest part of it!'

'Yes or no.'

'Yes, prak you!'

'Then let's get busy.'

'It's not so much a mis-jump,' she said a little later, far too glibly for Jim's comfort, 'more a sort of un-mis-jump.'

'Is this another one of those not-in-the-manual things I don't want to know about?'

Rebecca nodded, looking nervous herself, 'You got it in one, harmless.'

'Let's get it over with then.' This dark interstellar space was beginning to get to Jim. It was spooky. The clicking sound returned again; the wideband signal strength indicating it was really nearby now.

Both of them hunched over the scanner trying to make sense of it whilst Rebecca's witchspace calculations finished compiling.

'It's moved,' Rebecca breathed, 'It's getting closer! There is something out there heading this way!'

'You're imagining things.' he said with a distinct lack of confidence in his voice.

'No! Look!' she said, pointing at the viewer.

There was something there, a vague shape, almost indiscernible against the black background of space itself. Both of them squinted, trying to make out what it was.

'There's nothing on the scanner.' Jim said, 'Perhaps it's an asteroid or a dense gas pocket, a moon...'

Whatever it was, it was growing bigger as they watched.

Rebecca shook her head, 'That's no moon, it's a...'

The scanner pinged.

'God, I'm beginning to hate that sound!' Rebecca snapped. 'It's always trouble!'

Jim had already activated the ident computer. How could it be a ship, out here in interstellar?

'Look! Two, three, no five, eight! Prak!' Rebecca called in alarm.

The computer finished its scan.

Thargoid Warship, variant three. Mass indeterminate. Speed .35 LM.

Dots were appearing on the scanner, flashing green and red. Yet these represented small fighting ships barely visible on the screen. Behind them was the far vaster bulk of... something else.

'It's a Thargoid battle fleet! With a Thargoid mothership!' Rebecca yelled. 'Oh, for prak's sake, how much bad luck can a girl have?'

'Get us out of here, now!' Jim shouted, on the verge of panic. He'd heard stories about what the Thargoids did to captured human subjects. It didn't make for pleasant reading.

Rebecca punched the hyperspace controls.

Witchspace to Lave in 15 s.

The Thargoid ships were closing fast. Their ghastly green and purple hulls glinting cruelly in the dim light. Green laser beams snaked across space towards them. Jim reached for the controls.

'No! Don't touch!' Rebecca yelled. 'We have to stay put! If you change heading or velocity now we'll frag our jump!'

Tensely they watched the countdown. It seemed to be taking a lifetime. Sitting here while eight Thargoid warships were bearing down on you...

Eat raisins, leaf dwelling carpet salesmen!

'Whatever those guys are on, I've got to try it,' Jim said nervously.

Rebecca was staring calmly, almost dreamily, at the approaching ships.

She actually wants to fight them! And she calls me mad...

The Thargoids were approaching optimum firing range. Hurry up with that jump...

Then the bottom dropped out of their universe.

'Oooooo!' Jim cried out, panicking, wondering what was happening. His face was contorted in fear and apprehension. He grabbed the console in front of him. It was nothing like a normal witchspace entrance. The normally mild rollercoaster effect was a hundred times worse. It felt as if the ship was dropping into a black hole. Rebecca screamed too, but he couldn't tell whether or not it was with fear or exhilaration.

The witchspace tunnel flashed before them. On the other side, Lave awaited.

Chapter Eight

A major component of the Galactic Navy was stationed in orbit around the moon of Lave. Four retrofitted military Anacondas, twelve military Asps and two full squadrons of Vipers, eight apiece.

A few short kilometres across space were two other fleets.

The Federation fleet was composed of six military specification Puma transports, heavily beweaponed with their new turret mounted military lasers. These were accompanied by their new fighter class ships, the Falcons and the Hawks. Ten of each, arranged in a wall formation.

The Imperial fleet was no less imposing.

Eight Imperial Couriers accompanied by their latest fighter craft, the Osprey. Twenty of the sleek, deadly ships, arranged in a delta formation. They looked vicious just holding station.

In between them all, the witchspace marker drifted, deactivated. Lave was indeed closed for business. Galcop had switched it off once threats had been received that any ship entering Lave via witchspace would be destroyed.

No ships could witch in from Diso, Leesti, Zaonce, Oerve or Reorte without the broadcast co-ordinates from the marker. Huge queues were building in those systems as traders, wishing to jump to the Lave system found they couldn't get clearance to travel. Due to Lave's location and importance as a major centre of commerce on many trade routes, the result was complete pandemonium.

And stalemate.

All of Lave's Coriolis stations were recommending that docked ships remained docked and had advised all private craft still flying to dock or witch out until the situation resolved itself.

If it did.

The word was on everyone's lips, probosces and jaws across thousands of systems.

War.

Only one person seemed to be pleased about it all. It made Anna Mereso's career at the *Tionisla Chronicle*.

Yet not a single shot had been fired. There had been no communication. Everyone was waiting for the first move to be made.

The commanders in each of the flagships could see the tactical displays, the multiple missile locks, the vector analyses. The situation looked grim.

The blockade was in force. The Galnavy Admiral had not received orders to reopen the jump point although he knew it was only a matter of time. The tactical simulations did not look promising. The turret-mounted guns on the Puma would make short work of his Viper squadrons. The Imperial Couriers were known 'Asp-Killers'. His best avenue of attack was a long range bombardment with the Anacondas' combined missile compliment, followed by an energy bomb barrage, but he suspected the Federation and Imperial Fighter craft would survive in enough numbers to defeat him.

More ships were on their way, but it was likely that Federation and Imperial re-enforcements were going to arrive just as quickly. If they were to break this blockade, they would have to do it alone.

The Admiral sat in the ship's main wardroom, opposite an imposing figure. The Admiral wasn't cowed by many, but the man opposite him controlled more power than just the combined weaponry of the fleet.

'I will begin overtures immediately,' the man said. 'A war will be catastrophic for everyone.'

'Surely an ambassador would be a better choice...'

'Diplomacy has failed, Admiral. This is our last but one resort.'

'Sir, it's too dangerous for you to remain aboard; if we should be attacked, I cannot guarantee your safety.'

'Admiral, if we fail to resolve this here, my safety will be the least of our worries.'

'As you wish, Mister President.'

The SuperCobra glinted in the half-light of witchspace. Rebecca's hasty programming, rather than the more usual transmitted coordinates of a marker, were guiding the ship to its destination. She was using the old fashioned technique of 'dead reckoning', which used to be a common method back in the days of 'far away' jumps. The SuperCobra burst into real space a mere fifteen kilometres from the marker.

'That was close.' Jim managed, swallowing to keep himself from being sick.

'Not bad, even if I do say so myself. Escape from the Thargoids and back home in one neat move...' Rebecca preened, turning to look at Jim with an 'I told you so' expression on her face. Jim

didn't return her look, he was staring at the main viewer.

'What?' she asked, a bit miffed not to have received any congratulations.

He merely pointed.

Rebecca looked around and gasped.

Arrayed across space in equidistant orbits of the witchspace marker and Lave's small moon were ships of all kinds: Galcop, Galnavy, Federal, Imperial. She'd never seen so many military ships together before.

'What the frag? It looks like a blockade; do you think they are all waiting for us?' she asked.

'I don't see how they can be. They can't have known we were coming,' Jim replied.

'Anyway, we've no choice: head for the moon, full power, before we get intercepted.'

'At least we'll have a decent audience this time.'

'This is the President of the Galactic Co-operative, representing the interests of the Galactic Co-operative, the Galactic Navy and the Sovereign system of Lave. We wish to negotiate the re-opening of the Lave witchpoint. Please respond.'

The wideband transmitter punched the message across space. If the Federation and Imperial vessels heard it, they did not respond.

'I don't think they intend to answer,' the Admiral, 'Probably loading their missile tubes right now that they know you're aboard. They will think we're stalling for time, waiting for reinforcements.'

'That is a consideration,' the President admitted.

'Sir! Witchspace inbound!' called a scanner operative.

The Admiral swung around. 'Whose is it?'

'Ident shows a modified Cobra, sir! Acquisition marked as target gamma two. Out of range.'

The President leant forward, 'Scan for gravimetric emissions.'

'Sir?' came the puzzled response.

The Admiral looked at the President, who simply inclined his head slightly.

'Do it!'

The check took a few moments. 'Scan positive, sir! Faint gravimetric emission from the

Cobra!'

'That ship must be destroyed, Admiral. Top priority.'

'Sir, if I could...'

'Top priority, Admiral.'

'Aye, sir. Viper Squadron Alpha! Apprehend target gamma two! Destroy target! Confirm!'

'Viper Alpha. Destroy target gamma two. Confirmed.'

'Viper Squadron Beta! Defend Viper Squadron Alpha.'

'Viper Beta. Defend Viper Alpha. Confirmed.'

'Now, Mister President, if I might ask: just what the prak is going on?'

Aboard the flagship Imperial Courier, his eminence Prince Duval received similar information, as did the Federation Commander. Within seconds Ospreys and Hawks were chasing down towards the SuperCobra.

'So the stards do have a bomb after all!'

The Federation and Imperial orders to the fighters differed slightly from the Galcop ones. Capture the vessel regardless of cost.

'Games up! Company's coming!' Rebecca hissed, looking at the astrogation scanner. The reaction from the assembled military ships had been quick. Fleets of fighters were streaking towards them.

'Just keep them behind us,' Jim instructed, watching the moon looming closer rapidly. He had completed the programming for the mine. Everything was ready. He could almost make out the hydrogen processing plants clustered on the surface of the moon. They were heading for the north pole: far enough away from the fleet that none of the big ships would be in danger from the cascade. The small ships would have to take their chances.

The Federation Hawks seemed to be the fastest ships, closing rapidly on the Galcop Vipers, jostling for position. The Imperial Ospreys were not quite so quick, but were running on a parallel vector having correctly determined that the SuperCobra was heading for the moon. All the ships were going to converge at around the same time, just after the SuperCobra reached the moon.

'We'll have to slow down to deploy the mine,' Rebecca shouted over the din of the engines.

'It's unpowered and will share our velocity! Take us out too! It will be too dangerous to use the injectors with all these ships on top of us!'

That would be cutting it fine. The fighter craft would be all over them. Jim shook his head; there was no alternative.

He toggled the arming sequence. Beads of sweat formed on his brow. He was personally deploying the mine, this terrible consequence of his research would be unleashed again. How many people would die as a result this time? If he could only turn back the clock...

There was no time for reflection.

Arming sequence complete. Deploy mine?

The moon was filling the display, Rebecca was bring them low over the pole as planned. He could see the jutting intakes of the processing plants. Billions of tonnes of hydrogen and Quirium down there. The destruction would be nothing short of apocalyptic. A moment in history about to occur. Maybe the entire moon would fracture. Lave might soon have rings rather than a moon. The repercussions were incalculable. The altitude monitor turned red. Point-blank range and closing.

'Stand by,' Rebecca said, placing her hand on the throttle controls. 'Hold it steady... hold it...'

The SuperCobra vibrated. The engines weren't designed to operate against a gravity field; they didn't like it. They had a nasty habit of pushing against the ship when under gravimetric strain like this. It wasn't the atmosphere or surface that killed you on a close approach, it was hull breaking apart from the strain of the engines fighting themselves.

She slammed the throttles closed. 'Now!'

Jim hit the firing circuit. With a hiss and a mechanical clunk the mine deployed. Rebecca pushed the throttles forward and pulled the SuperCobra into a reluctant climb.

The President saw the tactical display update.

'Get them out of there! That is a gravimetric mine!'

The Admiral turned and shouted orders. 'Abort pursuit! Clear the area! I repeat, Abort pursuit!'

The Viper pilots were well trained. They immediately split, turned and ran, streaking back into formation as they fled from the moon. Behind them the Ospreys and Hawks veered around randomly, confused by the sudden change in direction. They had also spotted the mine, but had no

intelligence as to what it was. The apparent panic run of the Vipers convinced them that it was no good thing, and they turned and fled too.

Jim counted down the time in his head. Five seconds. The SuperCobra had steadied out as it retreated from the moon.

He flipped on the rear view display. He couldn't see the mine, as it was too small, but it was marked with a flashing dot on the scanner, in a low, high-speed orbit a scant few kilometres above the surface.

More seconds passed; one, two, five, ten.

Nothing.

'Where the frag is the big bang?' Rebecca demanded, sounding panicky.

Jim was speechless. He checked the launch criteria; everything was as expected. The scanner was showing strong gravimetric emissions, the signature of the priming sequence. The mine should have gone off, so why the prak hadn't it? Was it faulty? Had the cooling been necessary after all? Had he overlooked something?

He thought through it quickly, his brain racing. Temperature, Quirium density, launch parameters, distance verification, cascade balance. It was all correct, he'd double checked it, triple checked it all! Why hadn't the mine worked? It was a pretty simple piece of machinery, all things considered. It couldn't be a simple mechanical failure, surely?

Rebecca could see the Vipers were turning, realising the mine hadn't detonated. It would only be moments before they came on the attack. Eight Vipers, and what seemed to be hundreds of Ospreys and Hawks. Well, she'd always wanted to go out in a blaze of glory; this looked like it was going to be a good day to die.

Jim had his head in his hands. Nothing was wrong, yet something most obviously was.

'We gave it our best shot.' Rebecca said uncertainly, 'Look, we could still just run for it...'

Jim motioned for her to be quiet.

He checked the scanner again. The mine was still there! It was still giving off strong gravimetric radiation, just like in the lab accident, before the cascade effect destroyed the gravity sled. It was working! Something must be preventing the cascade reaction. The gravimetric radiation was being blocked somehow...

'Oh god,' he said, looking up at Rebecca.

'What?'

'Don't you see? The Quirium cascade is based on an initial gravimetric surge!'

'So?' Rebecca queried; he was talking gibberish as far as she was concerned.

'We're next to a massive moon! At the bottom of a gravity well! The gravimetric radiation is nothing but a gravitational effect! The mine is jammed! The cascade can't happen in close proximity to a large mass! God, I'm an idiot!'

He realised his idiocy was complete. The shock of it resonated through his mind, stunning him. The mine was of no use in a planetary bombardment; his fears of an interstellar war of complete planetary destruction were unfounded. The mine could only be used in clear space outside of a gravity field. How could he have missed something so trivial?

The wireframes! They'd been running them in simulation. They didn't simulate gravity: it wasn't a necessary parameter in engine tests; it had never been factored in. Their extrapolations were based on a faulty premise. The Quirium Cascade appeared to be far more dangerous than it really was. Quirium simply couldn't cascade in a strong gravity field!

He shook his head, 'Damn eight-bit simulators! It's a dud!'

'A dud? You saw what it did to those Vipers!'

'In clear space, yes. Next to a planet, a moon or anything that big, it simply won't work!' His eyes were wild.

Rebecca stared at him.

'Well it's a prakkin' great time to figure that out!' she shouted back at him, apoplectic.

The Ospreys lead pilot saw the confusion in the Viper ranks. Whatever that device was, it wasn't doing anything. There was a tactical advantage to be had. He took it. Explosions spread across space. The Vipers were being shot to pieces. More Vipers swooped behind and retaliated. Tiny fighter ships streamed across space, trading weapons fire. The battle was joined.

The Galnavy Admiral saw what happened. The gravimetric bomb didn't work. The Vipers veered aside and came under attack. The pivot point had been reached. There was no going back. He instinctively knew what was going to happen next. He'd trained for this. It was time to put the training into operation.

'Launch missiles! Wave one! All capital ships! Flank speed! Battle formation!'

'Admiral!' The President called, sharply.

'You owe me an explanation, Mister President, sir!' The Admiral returned furiously.

'However, for the moment I suggest you brace yourself. All hell is about to break loose.'

The missile ports on the four Anacondas opened. Four missiles launched from each of them and sped across space, heading towards their intended targets, the six Federation Pumas.

'Asp Alpha! Engage Imperial Couriers!'

Within a few brief seconds the tidy fleet formations broke up. It became a mêlée; ships trading fire with whomever came into their sights. A Federation Puma, damaged by Galnavy fire, reeled over through the Imperial lines, annihilating an Imperial Courier and impacting on the surface of the moon in a huge conflagration. One of the Galcop Anacondas was taken out by a sustained missile barrage, its destruction destroying the Ospreys that had launched the final assault. Heavy lasers scored flaming gashes in the sides of the bigger ships. In between, the fighters flitted like fireflies. From a distance it looked like quite a serene scene.

Rebecca was holding her own. She wasn't quite sure whose side she was on, so she shot anyone who fired at her, trying to make her way across to the other side of the fleet so she could make a run for the star while hoping the SuperCobra wouldn't take any serious damage in the meantime. She'd never been in such an intense fire fight before. Ships were everywhere.

The scanner was having trouble keeping track of it all. The overlapping coloured dots were causing serious colour clashes. She zoomed the scanner resolution up: 256x192; 320x200; 640x480; 800x600; 1024x768. Ah, better: now she could see clearly.

The competing fighter craft around her were trying to lock onto her with magnetic grappling hooks but it was proving impossible for them. Every time somebody got a lock on they'd be blown apart by another faction. Soon it simply became a fight for survival.

She turned looking for an escape angle. A small gap appeared in the spinning, tumbling metal menagerie.

Jim felt his stomach lurch as the SuperCobra dove, twisting and turning through space. Laser fire was all around him. He was paralysed with indecision and guilt. It had all been unnecessary. The death of his friend Geraint, Rebecca's family on board the Boa, the Viper pilots. He looked across at Rebecca, skilfully flying the SuperCobra defiantly onwards. He knew it was hopeless; there was no way they could possibly escape this. Another death on his conscience. He swallowed. He didn't want her to die as well.

Rebecca doggedly pursued her plan. Her mind was locked on her plan for her survival. She intended to live, regardless of what Jim thought or did. Two Vipers and a set of Ospreys were still in pursuit behind them, but space in front was clear.

Suddenly a Puma cruised into view before them. They had a terrifyingly close view of the turret mount weapon arcing up towards them before Rebecca rolled the SuperCobra aside.

The turret fired. The pair of Vipers and one of the Ospreys exploded into fragments behind them, tossing the SuperCobra into a spin. Rebecca used the force of the explosion to turn the SuperCobra out of the firing solution the Puma had drawn on them.

'Prak that was close!' she breathed.

She saw the lead Anaconda launching energy bombs. She twisted the SuperCobra around again, bring the Puma between them and the Anaconda. The outbound burst of energy impacted against the Puma. The Ospreys, not in the shadow of the Puma, exploded behind them. She flew on.

The Galnavy Admiral staggered, clutching the console as the Anaconda shuddered beneath them. The President stood next to him, calmly surveying the destruction. The Admiral was impressed: most civilian politicians were cowards. This one wasn't.

'Sir! Energy down to forty percent, forward shields are critical!'

'Maintain fire! Standby energy bombs! All ships key into blast frequency!'

They'd done well. More than half of the Federation fleet had fallen and the Asps had made good account of themselves. Whoever came out victorious, it wouldn't be the Galnavy, but they would have only a pyrrhic victory.

'Energy bombs away!'

They were currently in a furious long-range battle with one of the Federation Pumas. They'd knocked out its turret weapons and were slowing circling each other trading laser blows. The Anaconda was slowly succumbing. Defeat stared him in the face. He consoled himself with the knowledge of a battle well-fought. His ancestors would have approved.

'Sir, incoming witchspace!'

'Who is it this time?' the Admiral demanded. Galnavy reinforcements? Imperial or Federation?

'Can't tell, sir, no ID! Something big judging by the witchspace sheer!'

The Admiral turned to look out of the starboard viewer, seeing the characteristic flash of

light that preceded ships emerging from witchspace.

The Puma was turning, lining its forward weapons up for a strike on them. The Anaconda's shields were still fractured. The next volley would make a serious impact.

Suddenly the Puma was not alone.

The Admiral stared in absolute disbelief. There behind the Puma was a vast ship, kilometres long. Its hull gleamed threateningly in dark purple and green hues. As he watched a massive green hued laser snapped out, hitting the Puma squarely in the flank, drilling through to the other side of its hull before continuing on into open space. The Puma rolled drunkenly. The laser cut out.

'Look at the size of that thing...' somebody said.

The Puma exploded moments later.

'Cut the chatter!' The Admiral hit the wideband comlink. 'THARGOIDS!'

Rebecca saw the Thargoid materialise almost directly behind her. The Puma they'd just hidden behind was skewered by the new ship's primary weapon, exploding into dust.

'Thargoids!' she whispered in disbelief.

'The mothership!' Jim echoed in response and awe.

'THARGOIDS!'

Something had happened. While the Federation, Imperials and Galcop had always operated on the verge of internecine war, their issues paled into insignificance when confronted with this familiar menace. Across all the combatant ships a tacit agreement took place, almost magically. This was one thing everyone had in common.

Almost as one, the human vessels turned and attacked. The reaction was instinctive, drilled into every human pilot, regardless of political alignment, from the moment they began their training.

The Thargoids were everyone's enemy. Kill them. No quarter. No mercy.

The three remaining Anacondas flanked the four Pumas. The remaining Couriers covered them in a box formation and the fighters began immediate attack runs against the Thargoid mothership.

Galcop, Empire and Federation attacking as one force. Missiles streaked across space. The

battle intensified another notch.

Terrifying, horrendous clicking and rasping noises came over the wideband transmitters. They struck fear into any who heard them. The translations were no less peculiar.

Steak death! Mirror finished dusty locusts!

Deadly thesaurus! Conjugate neck tie!

Every time the Thargoid superlaser struck, a ship died, regardless of size, regardless of speed or shields. Rebecca watched as an Imperial Courier had one of its engines sliced cleanly off, before it tumbled against the Thargoid mothership, exploding into fragments. The mothership shrugged off the impact with no damage at all. One of the Anacondas was impaled by the mighty beam as it launched its remaining missiles. It was crippled, but the captain heroically rammed his ship into the starboard flank of the Thargoid mothership, ripping its shields away and exposing it to the heavy artillery of the Pumas' turret guns. The superlaser struck out again.

'All missiles, fire!' the Admiral shouted. The two remaining Galnavy Anacondas launched the last of their combined ordnance. They impacted against the mothership's flank, causing massive breaches in the hull. The Thargoid vessel continued on, indomitable, driving straight into one of the Pumas, ripping it to shreds on impact.

'We're just not causing enough damage, sir! It's too big!'

The Admiral acknowledged the fact. Soon the combined fleet would lose its big guns, and the Thargoid still seemed to be able to cycle its laser about every thirty seconds.

'It must have followed our witchspace trail!' Rebecca said, watching horrified as the mothership continued surgically obliterating ship after ship, 'Those Thargoid vessels that chased us in interstellar! They must have thought we were spying on their new super-ship!'

'They might have detected the mine too,' Jim said, horrified to the core at the destruction he was seeing; thousands of people were dying. 'Maybe they came to investigate...'

'That's it! The mine, that's it!' Rebecca shouted. 'We can drop the mine on it!'

'The mine is in low orbit around the moon!'

'So? We tractor it with the cargo scoop, towards the Thargoid!'

'Scoop a live mine?' Jim couldn't believe she could even entertain the idea.

'We keep the bay doors closed. Override the tractor's auto-off! It will hold it! Then we fly up to the Thargoid and dump it!'

'Override the... you're mad! Insane!'

'Got a better idea?'

There were so many problems with her plan that he couldn't even start to explain them, the odds of successfully scooping an active mine, in a gravity well, at high speed, whilst being fired on, not knowing how it would react to the tractor, trying to drop it at speed, not knowing when it would be far enough out of the moon's influence to start working, into the face of an implacable enemy with a killer weapon were just ridiculous.

But it was just possible. It might work. He could monitor the gravimetric flux, it would tell him when the mine was about to go critical. He'd simply have to trust her intuition.

I'll have to trust her. Is she as good as she thinks she is?

'Do it!' he yelled back. 'I'll get on the comm to anyone else who's listening and try to explain what we're trying to do.'

Another Imperial Courier was sliced into oblivion.

Rebecca rolled the SuperCobra out of the fight and down towards the moon. The mine was still visible as a flashing dot on the scanner. She brought the ship in fast and the decelerated harshly. They heard the sound of the tractor sucking the mine towards them.

'Got it!' she called, turning the ship around and heading back towards the shadowy Thargoid vessel.

'They're what?' The Admiral assumed he hadn't heard correctly.

'They've scooped the mine, sir. They say they're planning to drop it on the Thargoid mothership. They're requested covering fire and advising all ships to vacate the vicinity.'

'But the mine doesn't fraggin work!'

'They say it will work outside of the moon's influence, sir.'

The Admiral glared out of the viewers, catching the sight of the SuperCobra in the distance. What a damn fool plan. Zero chance of success...

An Asp was impaled by the Thargoid laser, exploding not far from the Anaconda.

He was out of options. Zero chance of survival.

'I suggest we give them a chance, Admiral,' said the President.

'All ships, covering fire for the SuperCobra! Keep that stard insectoid vermin occupied!'

The SuperCobra barrelled in at full speed, flanked by Vipers, Ospreys, Hawks and Falcons. The Thargoid mothership responded with anti-fighter short range weapons. Close up the hull was dotted with turrets, towers and protrusions of all sorts. The wideband chatter confirmed the view.

'How many guns do you think, Group Leader?'

'I'd say about twenty guns, some on the surface, some on the towers...'

The reporting Osprey exploded into atoms. The SuperCobra rattled and shook.

'If this doesn't work...' Jim began, looking at her from the co-pilot's seat.

'We're hull fragments either way,' Rebecca snapped back.

'Exactly... I just wanted to say...'

'You don't want to die without revealing your true feelings for me,' Rebecca quipped in a mock romantic voice.

'Very funny.'

'Cheer up, Harmless! We'll survive.' She looked back the screens, then muttered to herself, 'I hope.'

She's actually enjoying this! Definitely mad.

A nearby Hawk flashed into oblivion.

Rebecca piloted the SuperCobra close into the vast bulk of the alien mothership. Its incredible size was difficult to grasp, rather like the mythical space dredgers and generation ships the old-timers talked about in the null-gee bars. Its proportions were truly staggering. Small anti-fighter weapons continued to fire at them. The shields shrugged off the impact without too much trouble, unlike the small fighters around them. The SuperCobra was a tough little ship.

Jim watched the sensors, 'The mine's about to go critical!'

'Just a little closer...'

'Rebecca!'

'Now!'

Jim cut the power to the tractor beam. The mine tumbled away. She pulled the SuperCobra up.

'It's away!' Jim shouted looking at the astrogation scanner. He shouted into the commlink's wideband transmitter. 'All ships! Run! Run for your lives!'

Rebecca hit the fuel injectors and the escorting fighters peeled away.

The Thargoid mothership continued to drive forward. Its primary weapons glowing, almost ready to discharge again.

The Admiral could see it was tracking his ship. There was nothing he could do.

'Mister President...'

The green destruction never came.

The unleashed fury of the Quirium Cascade reaction burst forth. A terrifying wave of blue fire spun out into space, the Thargoid mothership was directly in the path.

'Oh my God!' the president exclaimed, 'What the prak is that!'

The Thargoid wasn't destroyed immediately on contact; it was too big for that. The blue fire bit into the ship, bolts of lightning cascading around the hull, striking deep within it. Gradually sections of the ship emitted their own blue cascades until the entire length of it was a mass of flaming blue and white energy.

Suddenly the blue fire expanded, shattering the ship in a glare brighter than the sun. Pieces of débris flashing out at half the speed of light destroyed some of the unfortunate fighters caught in the way, en route to the distant stars. The SuperCobra was caught a glancing blow and tumbled briefly before Rebecca righted it. None of the ships were caught by the Quirium cascade.

The blue halo faded and then there was nothing but a burning core of debris, slowly disintegrating into space.

'We did it!' Rebecca screamed. 'We did it! Awesome! Did you see it go bang! Prakkin' awesome! Take that you insect scum! Wooooo!' She launched herself at Jim and hugged him close. 'Told you it would work, Harmless!'

'Right as always, Dangerous!'

The wreckage of the mothership continued its slow disintegration surrounded by the fierce

glow of ionised plasma. It was impossible to see how many of the Galnavy, Federation and Imperial ships had survived. Little by little the explosion dispersed. Space cooled. The Lave star shone through once more.

'We fraggin' well did it!'

They could see the Galcop, Federation and Imperial ships limping back into their formations, their numbers sadly much reduced. Surely they wouldn't continue the fight now...

White flickering lights signalled in the darkness.

'A truce! They're calling a truce!' Rebecca shouted gleefully.

Jim collapsed back into his seat, a sense of utter relief washing over him. Some good had come of this at last.

In the debris field a shadow lurked.

The unmistakeable silhouette of an Imperial Courier emerged.

'What's he doing?' Jim slowly releasing his hold on Rebecca.

'Huh? Maybe he's checking to see if we survived! Hello! Yes, we're okay!' Rebecca said, looking up at the scanner. She moved back to the pilot's seat, her eyes narrowing in concentration. The Imperial Courier appeared to be on an intercept course with them. It was not lining up in formation with the other remaining Imperial ships beyond the burning wreckage.

She squinted.

There were no hull markings, no Imperial Insignia, no telltale flash markers on the forward part of the engine nacelles that were the Imperial Fleet badges of office. An anonymous ship...

'Where the prak did he come from?... Frag! We've got to get out of here!' she yelled. 'It's the assassin!'

Chapter Nine

The job was defunct. Apparently priorities had changed. The Agent had already received his payment in full. There was no need to destroy the target. The orders were annulled.

Except for one consideration, equally as important to any assassin as the lucre.

Reputation.

He did the job, there was nothing else but the job. The job was always completed. It was a contract, a covenant. Unshakeable. He couldn't countenance any other outcome. The battle would be joined. Courier versus Cobra. As it should be. Only one would emerge victorious.

Rebecca reacted instinctively. She turned the SuperCobra and accelerated towards the Courier at full power. The Courier was closing them on fast at a combined speed Jim didn't even dare to calculate.

She was concentrating hard on the viewer, Jim could see the whites of her knuckles showing through her clenched fists.

Warning! Collision imminent.

Jim looked across at her, she wasn't flinching. The Courier was close now, looming rapidly larger on the viewer, they were seconds from impact. Jim knew the bigger, heavier Courier would survive a direct collision, the SuperCobra wouldn't.

'Rebecca...'

'Wait!' she hissed.

The Courier turned aside and there was a flash of light from its underside. Rebecca hit the ECM and laser control simultaneously. Jim saw a missile explode harmlessly and then watched as their military laser scorched the Courier's shields. Jim counted almost a full second of impact before the Courier left their field of view.

'How did you know...?'

Rebecca swung the SuperCobra around, dived and came up behind the Courier, hitting it again with the laser. Jim was already dizzy with disorientation and wondered how she managed to keep track of what was going on.

'Never use the same trick twice on the same ship,' Rebecca growled under her breath.

The Agent was surprised. The SuperCobra pilot had anticipated his point blank missile attack and countered it, virtually removing his forward shields into the bargain. It was a trademark move of his; it had never failed before. Now the SuperCobra was behind him, attacking the rear shields. He'd underestimated the pilot again. It was time to up the stakes.

He shut down his engines abruptly.

Rebecca saw the engine flux cut out.

'Prak!' she yelled.

The SuperCobra was still accelerating and she couldn't prevent it overshooting. She pushed the throttles forward and pulled the Cobra into a steep climb. The rear view showed the Courier relighting its engines and pursuing them. A scant second later laser fire washed out the view, the rear shields burning away beneath the fierce assault.

Rebecca ducked and weaved, but the Courier stayed on her tail, getting the occasional burst of fire to hit. Slowly their energy banks were being drained. The shots were draining them just a little faster than they could recharge.

Warning! Fuel Injectors Damaged!

Warning! Cargo Scoop Damaged!

It was a slow attrition, but a cruel and fatal one. Rebecca knew she had to change their positions. The mines were gone, and the single remaining missile was useless unless they could get a clear shot, and that meant being behind the target. The SuperCobra was being slowly pecked apart.

Damn, this guy is good!

She turned the SuperCobra and dove towards the moon, laser fire following her path.

Jim was amazed the Courier was able to hang on to her. He'd never seen flying like this; Rebecca was flying with a level of skill he could only appreciate and admire, never obtain. Nevertheless, the Courier was equalling her every move.

Warning! Fuel Leak!

Warning! ECM System damaged!

She continued to twist, trying to avoid the Courier's fire.

The moon loomed larger in the Courier's display. The SuperCobra was flying well, the pilot was obviously talented after all. But the Agent prided himself that once something entered his crosshairs, it never left again. He continued firing. The SuperCobra was slowly bleeding to death.

Jim saw the altitude warning come on. Five energy banks were drained, the forward and rear shields barely registering. They were close to the moon now, close enough to see the hydrogen processing plants once more, craters, extinct volcanoes and the threaded rills which ran across the surface like cracks in a mirror.

The 'moon'; another complete misnomer. It wasn't really a moon at all, but an oversized Oort cloud fragment that had looped into the Lave system a decade before following some gravitation perturbation out in deep space. Lave and a group of similar systems had been in a gas-poor area of space when the planets formed, thus there were no gas giants: only a single rocky planet with a few asteroids and comets loitering in the darkness. A fleet of tugs had been mobilised to push the 'moon' into an elliptical orbit which took it out into deep space every three months. It had been a neat idea, using it as a hydrogen processing plant, but unfortunately the 'moon' turned out to be unstable, its orbit requiring constant monitoring. Within another decade or so it would have to be let loose once again before gravitational tides ripped it to shreds, going back to the frozen wastes whence it came.

Why in space was he thinking about that now? Maybe the rational part of his mind was seeking a final task... was it a premonition? Were they going to die? Maybe.

Rebecca spun the SuperCobra, diving and climbing alternatively, but the Courier still matched her course.

She dived directly towards the surface, a vector perpendicular to the rock grey ground below. The Courier lined up behind her.

'What are you doing?' Jim demanded.

'The Kessel run,' Rebecca quipped back at him.

'The what?'

'Watch.'

The altitude was critical. The Agent knew the SuperCobra had a slightly better turning circle than the Courier. Which way would she break, up or down? The moon filled the whole view. He saw the SuperCobra twitch. A feint? Yes, a feint! She was climbing! He pulled back on the controls.

Rebecca fainted once, twice and then dived, the SuperCobra almost hitting the ground upside-down relative to the moon. She cut it so fine that the external wideband antennas on the SuperCobra's top hull were ripped off as they scraped the surface.

The SuperCobra and the Courier raced off in opposite directions.

'Woooo!' she yelled, 'Never thought I'd have to thank the boy racers!'

The Agent had never dealt with such guile before. He spun his ship, looking for the SuperCobra. The scanner was confused by the close range of the moon and wasn't registering properly: it showed a marker directly behind him. That couldn't be the SuperCobra?... Laser fire confirmed the observation. His rear shields drained away and then the energy banks began to bleed. Drastic measures would be required for the first time ever. A impressive opponent, and worthy. An Elite combateer, perhaps? He'd have been honoured to meet the pilot. He felt some regret that the fight would shortly be ended.

Rebecca had pulled a complete loop, dropping in behind the Courier as it turned to look for her, she poured shot after shot into the Courier's shields until the SuperCobra's laser overheated. She'd made every shot count, but the Courier was a tough ship to bring down. She followed it up away from the moon as the laser cooled.

'I think you might have got him!' Jim said.

'Don't sound so surprised,' she snapped. 'And it's not finished yet.'

Something flickered at the back of the Courier, almost as if a hatch had opened. Jim squinted at it. It looked almost like... no it couldn't be...

A reversed missile launcher, set to fire aft.

'Missile!' he shouted.

Rebecca saw it too and threw the SuperCobra into a spinning dive, ignoring the hull stress warning indicators. The missile hit a moment later, draining what little remained of their shield power, overloading their remaining energy banks and penetrating into the starboard lower hull plate. It came the nearest in the world to utterly destroying them, but most of its energy expended into space due to the small amount of shield power available.

Despite that, it gashed the empty Quirium tanks, ripped through the sensitive electronics of

the burnt-out ECM system before expending its final energy on the duct housing of the starboard outrigger engine. It too exploded, blowing off the wing tip hull plates and throwing the SuperCobra into a brain-jarring high-gee spin. Consoles shorted out, the lights failed and sparks showered around them. Gas hissed out from fractured lines and for a terrifying moment there was the sound of pressurised air jetting out into the vacuum of space before the auto-breach systems plugged the gap.

Rebecca, clinging to the console, managed to hold on, but Jim was flung from his seat. The superstructure of the ship screamed in protest around them.

She still had her finger on the laser trigger; the beam of collimated energy consuming their last vestiges of energy, lancing out into space as the SuperCobra tumbled out of control.

The Courier was not far away.

The beam of the laser spun out like a pulsar, stitching a line of fire down the rear-most part of the Courier's port engine nacelle. The Courier had no shields left. Plasma and hull fragments spun like glitter in the void. The port nacelle exploded and almost completely detached from the primary hull. Deprived of one engine, the Courier also began to spin out of control.

Rebecca managed to bring the crippled SuperCobra under control by using the emergency gyro system. Most of the controls were scrambled, the displays garbled with static, the main engines non-responsive. The forward view was working though.

The Courier span, leaking plasma from its damaged nacelle, right in front of them, only a few kilometres away. It was running, its speed not much more than a limp.

'Got the stard.' She cried, her eyes gleaming.

She had one missile left. It was already locked on target.

She hit the fire control, but nothing happened. The control circuits were gone.

'Help me! Quick!' she shouted to Jim. 'I need a manual launch override!'

'I'll get it,' he replied, diving down the gravity well to the systems deck.

Jim ran into the crew compartment and unlocked the hatch down into the 'tween hulls area. He grabbed a Remlok from the cabinet after seeing the noxious gases venting from damaged equipment. He dropped down into the section, slowly negotiating his way towards the missile pods.

Rebecca meanwhile was watching the Courier. It was leaking plasma in a bad way. The pilot obviously had his emergency gyros on full power, offsetting the thrust from his remaining engine, trying to keep the ship stable. He could only use a minimum level of thrust to move. She had no

idea what other damage the Courier had suffered, but since he was running she assumed it was pretty comprehensive.

No! The Courier was altering course, slowly coming about. If he had another missile...

She wanted that ship dead.

'Hurry!' she called over the comlink. 'He's turning!'

Jim reached the missile pod and looked it over, staggering in the confined space. The remote circuits were damaged. It had its target lock, but not the firing orders. He'd have to hot wire it. He popped open the control circuits, and was confronted with a mass of fused optronic relays.

He turned to the empty pod next door, one that previously held one of the bombs. He pulled an emergency patch cable between the two, linking it into the auxiliary ports.

'Target on two and send a launch command on one!' he called, staggering back out of the hull area. Rebecca stabbed the controls.

The missile shot out from beneath with a roar and burst of cyan flux, the SuperCobra shuddering with the recoil. It streaked towards the slowly turning Courier.

'Faulcon, don't let me down today,' she whispered.

Jim crawled back up to the bridge, falling into the co-pilots seat. They watched as the missile tracked in on its target. It flew straight and true.

'Come on...'

The missile turned slightly, orientating itself towards the biggest part of the Courier, the primary hull. It couldn't miss. The range marker counted down rapidly.

There was a flash of light...

'Yes!' Rebecca shouted triumphantly, punching the console. 'Killed the goidson! Yes!'

But her jubilation was short lived. There was flickering blue wormhole where the Courier had been a moment before. There was a second explosion as the missile, deprived of its target, self-destructed.

'No!' she cried, then screamed. 'No! NO! You fraggin' stard, you goid-prakkin' crazy frog! Come back and fight, you cowardly goid! I own your iron ass!'

'Rebecca, he's gone!'

'No! No! I'm going to kill him. Get those engines back online, we can stop him! There's time, the wormhole! We can follow him!'

Jim didn't move. She was crazy: the SuperCobra was a wreck, would never fly again. He could see via the starboard view that a quarter of the ship was completely buckled; it was amazing that it hadn't come apart around them. How could she even consider it? There was no telling where the Courier had gone and where that wormhole would take them. They had no fuel to return.

'It's not possible!'

Rebecca pushed him aside, jabbing commands into the computers, trying to get the engines back on line.

'Out of my way! Move, you stupid hunk of junk, move!' she shouted, pounding the console with clenched fists.

'Rebecca, it's over!'

'Never!'

Jim grabbed her hands. 'We're dead in space! Stop it! There is nothing we can do!'

Rebecca wriggled and freed herself, drawing back and punching him viciously. He was thrown back, stunned with both the force of the blow and the expression of hatred on her face. He fell to the floor and lay there, reeling.

The wormhole shrank, flickered, collapsed and disappeared.

'No!' She sank into the pilot's chair.

'Rebecca...'

She didn't answer for a moment, but then her head snapped around. Her expression was as cold as witchspace, a hard metallic glint in her eyes.

'I could have got him! I could have rid the universe of that stard! You stopped me! Why did you stop me? Nobody tells me what to do! You stupid harmless goid...'

Her voice faltered and her head dropped, her hair hiding her face. She was shuddering with emotion, too furiously upset even to cry.

He slowly got to his feet and moved across to her. He laid a hand on her shoulder. She trembled at his touch, but didn't flinch.

'I could have got him.' Her voice was a thin whisper. 'I *should* have got him...'

'Rebecca, there was nothing you could have done. You beat him, but we're crippled. Give it up.'

'He killed my family ...' her eyes were glazed, she was staring into the void, into the

blackness, past the vanished wormhole, to wherever the Courier had fled. 'I'll find you! I swear I'll find you!'

The SuperCobra rocked slightly. Both of them looked up at the main viewer. There were ships, lots of ships.

'To the pilot of the SuperCobra prototype! Stand down and prepare to be boarded, or be destroyed!' a harsh call sounded over the tightband comlink.

There were eight military Asps surrounding them, one for every point of the compass. Rebecca quickly flipped around the forward, aft, port and starboard views. There was no escape. She looked around at the remains of the SuperCobra console. It was totally fragged; the SuperCobra had fought its last battle. So they stood the ship down.

There was nothing else to do.

They stood together in the empty cargo bay, side by side. There was nowhere to run, nowhere at all. The crippled SuperCobra had been towed towards the flagship Anaconda of the Galcop fleet. It had taken the Asps an hour or so to lock on, stabilise and rig for towing, but they had eventually been dumped near the big ship. It slowly drew alongside them.

A metallic screech was followed by the sound of heavy machinery clamping their ship to the hull of the Anaconda. They exchanged a look of trepidation.

'Always figured I'd go out in a blaze of glory somehow,' Rebecca said. 'I'd rather be atomised than imprisoned any day of the week. I wanted to be a big news story.'

'Be careful what you wish for,' Jim muttered sardonically.

He watched as the SuperCobra's docking bay doors were wrenched open in a bright burst of sparks.

Heavily armed marines burst into the bay, rifles at the ready, all trained on them both. Jim had only a moment to notice their body armour, blast-shielded helmets and military precision before a voice bellowed out.

'Lie on the floor with your arms outstretched! Do it! Now!'

They complied. Within seconds they were secured with binders, and wrenched unceremoniously to their feet and pushed together, side by side once more.

'Search the ship!'

Quickly the men fanned out through the cargo bay, up the gravity well and into the rest of

the ship. It didn't take them long.

'All clear,' one said into a comlink.

A man, dressed in a dark green cloak trimmed in elegant gold finery emerged from behind the marines. He was tall and held a certain air of command. His hair was rich and dark, longer than fashion dictated but not unkempt. Around his neck was a large platinum medallion. His eyes were like two burning jewels of obsidian, set in a severe dominating face with regular features and a long aquiline nose. Two aides followed him in and stood flanking him, once each side. Jim stared in amazement. Rebecca caught his expression.

'Who the prak is that?'

Jim didn't take his eyes from the man, 'It's the President. The Galcop President.'

Rebecca turned to look back at the man. 'Wow. The big cheese himself.'

The President walked across to them and examined them closely.

'Jim Feynman and Rebecca Tyley, I presume.' His voice was measured, clipped and precise.

They both nodded. The President gestured to the guard, 'I think we can dispense with the binders.'

The guard nodded and released Jim and Rebecca from their restraints.

The President paused impressively. 'On behalf of the Galactic Co-operative, our thanks.'

Rebecca looked at Jim and then back at the President.

'You're *thanking* us?' she burst out.

'You are our saviours,' the President replied. 'It is appropriate, I think.'

'Saviours?' Rebecca echoed, completely bewildered.

'Saviours,' the President repeated magnanimously. 'I am gratified to see you are still alive after that frightful battle.'

'But we weren't alone in taking down that Thargoid mothership...' Rebecca began. 'So why...'

'I am not talking about that. The mothership was indeed a most serious threat, but I am talking about something much more important. You have saved Galcop itself.'

Next to her Jim made to say something, and then stopped himself.

'We haven't saved Galcop!' Rebecca burst out. 'Why would we? You're a bunch of murderous fiends! Your assassin! Jim's colleague! You tried to kill us! The Vipers...'

'Our Military Chief of Staff's idea throughout,' the President continued gently. 'As was the Achenar plot, 'Operation Manhattan', I believe it was called. Most unfortunate. Operating outside of overall control. A loose cannon. I have only just become aware of it myself. He has been, how shall we say, encouraged to retire early.'

'But...'

'Jim understands, do you not, Jim?'

Jim looked the President in the eye. 'I think so.'

Rebecca looked at them both with exasperation. 'Well, I don't, so will someone explain it to the rest of us lowlife pond-suckers?'

'The bomb didn't work,' Jim volunteered.

'Fortunate for you it did not,' the President intoned. 'Up until that particular piece of information was forthcoming, we were attempting to destroy both you and it as threats to Galcop's best interests.'

'So?' Rebecca hissed at him.

The President answered her, eyes still locked with Jim's. 'Consider what would have happened if the bomb had been deployed as planned.'

Jim answered him. 'The plot was to destroy Achenar. You'd have discovered pretty quickly that the bomb didn't work in a gravity field, despite all the successful simulations. The Imperial guard would have descended on the SuperCobra. Without a working laser your team would have been captured in short order. Even if they self destructed the Imperials would have the bomb and vid footage of the attempted attack.'

'Yes. The Imperials would have absolute proof of a failed military coup. A concrete violation of treaty. A permit for a just war. Galcop's moment of glory would become its undoing. The Imperials would have declared war immediately. The Federation would have joined with them out of self-interest and the Thargoids would have finished off whatever little remained. I would have presided over the end of the Galactic Co-operative, which is not exactly what I wanted on my epitaph. I have only two years left before retirement, you know.'

'Frag...' Rebecca's jaw hung slightly agape.

'As it stands, your bomb was a complete success for Galcop. It destroyed the Thargoid mothership and yet demonstrably can not be used against planetary targets, so we can reasonably claim that the 'Manhattan Project' was a piece of Imperial propaganda. You saved the remains of the Federation and Imperial blockade whilst putting the fear of God into them regarding Galcop's

military superiority. Our ambassador cannot wait to accept their thanks. Absolutely marvellous.' The President actually grinned.

'And the bomb itself?' Jim queried.

'Since the bomb has proven to be tactically no more dangerous than the traditional energy bomb, we have already arranged for the technology to be made public in exchange for all manner of worthwhile leverage over our erstwhile political opponents. In fact, with this Thargoid attack we have become, if not friends, certainly much less implacably hostile during just the last hour. It has been most refreshing: real progress has been made. We are talking now, and the most optimistic amongst us even believe a proper dialogue may be established.'

'So everyone gets the bomb...'

'... and parity is achieved once more. Perhaps crucially, the bomb does seem rather efficacious against the Thargoids, as you ably demonstrated. Having many ships, both public and private, thus equipped may prove quite an advantage. We will be able to take the fight back to them.'

'So,' Rebecca said, getting tired of all the talking, 'what about us?'

'That rather depends on you. I am rather afraid that Tyley and Feynman must be silenced. They know too much.'

Rebecca scowled. 'I knew it. You're going to do us in! I won't go quietly! You bunch of murdering, dictatorial stards!'

The President held up his hand.

'My dear, we have no intention of 'doing you in', as you so eloquently put it. Our problem is that your names are registered in too many data silos outside of our control. We can not protect you. Do not doubt that the Federals or Imperials have been closely watching! The prices on your heads at this time are enough to tempt any bounty hunter across the eight galaxies to investigate.'

'So somebody else will do us in!'

'In appreciation of your efforts we are prepared to offer you new identities, generous credit balances, permits, even background life stories. It has been arranged. We will take over your previous personas and manage them ourselves.'

'How? What's the catch?'

'The Lave authority logs and your homeworld electorate information will be edited appropriately. True, you yourselves will need minor hex-editing, so you can fit in with your new

identities, nothing more serious than that. Your memories will be intact, but we respectfully ask you not to speak of certain aspects of this incident.'

'And if we do?'

'You will find that various pre-prepared and somewhat unflattering psychometric evaluations on your good selves will find their way into the public domain. I would imagine incarceration and severe regression therapy would follow shortly afterwards.'

'Suppressing the truth?' Jim said cautiously. 'Altering the facts to suit your version of history?'

The President smiled. 'History is merely a consensus view written by the survivors... surely you understand that?'

Jim felt Rebecca stiffen beside him. 'And if we refuse to do what you say? If we refuse to be hex-edited?'

The President made a small hand gesture.

Every single Navy officer brought up his rifle, efficiently arming it and pointing it straight at them in a fluid co-ordinated fashion.

'Tyley and Feynman tragically die before they can be rescued from their mortally wounded ship. Now... that would be a great pity, do you not think?'

Rebecca swallowed, looking at all the guns. 'Hex-editing is good.'

'I hope you see we are being quite generous.'

Rebecca opened her mouth to say something. Jim stood on her foot, hard.

The President beamed at her, 'Miss Rebecca Weston, meet Mister Jim McKenna.'

They looked at each other.

'And who are we?' Rebecca demanded.

'You are pretty much who you were,' The President said, 'a trader, making her way upwards in the galaxy, with a clean legal status now, which I trust you will maintain. We will reinstate your credit balance, insurance and access rights. Jim will be a university professor, touring from another galactic sector giving lectures on flight systems. Obviously your locations at the time will show you were not involved. Jim's family and colleagues will undergo similar conditioning. Due to those tragic circumstances which I truly and deeply regret, that is not necessary for you.'

'What about Tyley and Feynman?'

'It will soon be known that a new type of device was used to counter the Thargoid incursion here at Lave. It will eventually be found that two humble research scientists were involved in the construction of the bomb, and heroically helped deploy it here. Shy of public scrutiny, they will never be seen by anyone outside their comfortable ivory tower and will quietly be forgotten as time moves on. This will come to light over the next decade or so of course, as a thorough investigation runs its course and certain information is declassified as appropriate. Doubtless the media will do their best to pry. Infact, I am counting on it.'

The President actually winked at them.

'Elyssia Tyley and Richard Feynman will be regarded as heroes for saving us from a terrible Thargoid incursion. Only their names will be remembered for any length of time once the bomb is widely available.'

'Elyssia and Richard!' Rebecca spluttered. 'Where did you get those names from? And why will their names be famous?'

'Other than this Thargoid business? Well, we decided to call the bomb, the 'Tyley-Feynman Quirium Cascade Mine' once it is openly available, in honour of their achievements. Rather grand; rolls pleasantly off the tongue, do you not think?'

'I think it stinks.' Rebecca said after a moment's reflection. 'Just call it the Q-bomb and be done with it. That's what everyone else will call it!'

In the Onrira Torus station's main hangar a brand new Cobra Courier stood gleaming in the bright repair lights. Its duralium was still reflective, still untarnished by radiation exposure or scarred by the inevitable docking scrapes. It had magenta running lights and trim. Jim could just make out the text *Eclipse II* inscribed on the fore flank.

'Nice ship. I thought you were going for a Mamba?'

Rebecca looked a bit sheepish. 'I really wanted one, then realised it was only a fighter escort. No hyperdrive. Don't know what I was thinking. It would have been a little embarrassing the first time I headed for the witchpoint marker.'

'Oops. Good to see I'm not the only one who makes big mistakes. Cobra Courier, isn't it?'

Rebecca looked fondly at the ship behind her. 'Latest and greatest. I was kind of spoiled by the SuperCobra I guess. This is the next best thing. Funny really, I used to think the Cobra series was so dull, but they're really a great all round ship. Doubt the SuperCobra will be up for sale any time soon though.'

'Maybe one day the design will be declassified. Where are you off to?'

'Arexe. I'm doing a favour for Galcop, hunting down some bad ass renegade ship. Top secret and all that prak.'

'Very public-spirited. Sounds like your kind of caper.'

'You could come with me,' she said, a trifle wistfully. 'It's a two man ship. You're not so bad as a techie. You did well with that missile.'

'I'm no fighter. My life so far has been building technology. Now it's time I thought a bit more about the consequences. This is something I need to do. I want to get this bomb banned and that means I need to be here. There's so much that needs changing.'

'That conscience of yours is still working overtime, I see.' she said with a hint of disapproval, 'What does Galcop think of this, then?'

'Oddly enough, they approve. I don't think they were truly happy with the Q-bomb being wildly available. They don't think I've got a whelk's chance in a supernova, but they aren't going to stand in my way.'

'So what are you up to now?'

'Believe it or not I'm attending a symposium on the merits of scooping escape pods.'

'Sounds thrilling.' She rolled her eyes.

'Apparently my little Pod scooping technique is being considered by the insurance industry as a way to rescue paying clients and drop pirates into the brig. You might soon get a reward for scooping rather than a rating hit.'

'And there was you thinking you hadn't made a difference!'

'Look out for Galcop Pod Protocol resolution v1.65 later on this year!'

Rebecca looked at Jim for a moment. 'Sure you won't change your mind?' she said. 'Last chance!'

He smiled, 'Rebecca, I've got to do this, I owe it to the people who died, to Geraint and all the others. Besides, we'd argue about coolants again. We'd kill each other inside a week.'

'I'd kill you first.' she replied jauntily, her head held high, but her voice tightened. 'So, any last advice for an incorrigible trader?'

'Yes, actually,' he said, seriously, taking a step closer to her.

'... which is?' she prompted, a half smile on her face, her head tilted to one side. She looked

up at him expectantly, coyly, her eyes half-closed in anticipation.

'Give up the revenge.'

He saw her eyes snap wide and then saw annoyance, anger, frustration and defiance cross her face in sequence. She looked away.

'You should have just given me a kiss goodbye and sent me on my way,' she snapped. 'That's how all the holovids, end isn't it? Why do you always have to frag things up?'

'I don't want to see you killed needlessly.'

Because you can't help caring for someone after going through something like that!

'That stard killed my family,' she ground out at him.

'Killing him won't bring them back.'

'Stop being so prakkin' self righteous!' she shouted, oblivious that people in the hangar were turning to look at them, 'This is my deal, not yours!'

'Rebecca, I...'

'Anything else?' she snapped with an air of finality. Her cold, indifferent manner sliding back into place.

He sighed, maybe he should have just kissed her goodbye, 'No.'

'Good. See you around, Harmless.' She stormed off towards her waiting ship.

He watched her walking across the hanger bay, he called out, 'Any advice for me?'

She stopped, looked around and then looked away. He'd expected a choice phrase of trader profanity, but it didn't come. She simply stood there. He could see she was trembling.

There had been tears in her eyes. He walked over to her, putting a hand on her shoulder. She didn't turn and refused to look at him.

'Stay safe. Watch your back.' She said, her voice catching on the words, 'And don't trade in thrumperry flavouring - it's unlucky! Don't get into any escape pods without a gun. Shoot first! Don't...'

'This isn't about me, is it?' his voice interrupted softly.

She turned and stared at him.

'What happened to your family wasn't your fault, Rebecca.'

He saw the muscles in her face clench. For a moment he thought she was going to hit him

again, but suddenly the fight seemed to go out of her.

'I was going to leave them when we reached Diso you know.' she confessed, 'I had this angle on my own ship and I'd figured out a way to do it! I was going to leave them high and dry. I didn't care a damn about them. I was so prakkin' selfish; I always have been. I was so concerned with my own future I wasted all that time I had with them.' her voice cracked and began to break up, 'Now they're all gone and I wish I could have them back and I can't...'

She burst into tears. He spun her around, took her in his arms and kissed her. She instinctively fought for a moment and then relented, succumbing willingly.

'You've got some nerve,' she snapped when she could speak again.

'Learnt that from you.' He replied with equal quickness.

She relented, relaxing in his embrace.

It would be so easy to stay...

'Jim...' more tears appeared in her eyes, and trickled down her cheeks, 'I... I'm going to miss you. Promise me you'll be careful.'

'And you try to stay out of trouble.' he said seriously.

The tannoy sounded, echoing across the vast docking port of the Tori station, 'Cobra Courier Registration W4REB, please proceed to station aegis immediately.'

'I've got to go,' she whispered, resting her head against his chest. 'There isn't time to...'

'I know. There never is.' His voice was soft.

'Stay safe. I mean it, I want to come back and see you some day.'

'Rebecca, I wish you'd call me 'Jim'.'

'All right then, Jim.' She pulled away from him, her arrogant, jaunty manner returning almost immediately. He smiled to himself. For a brief moment he'd seen the real Rebecca, a softer, warmer, yet lonely woman hidden behind the tough, hot-headed, hard-nosed trader girl. It was a big galaxy, but maybe there was a chance he really would see her again.

Will she give it up? I'm not sure. I've said my piece, what else can I do?

'I'll be here,' he affirmed. 'This is my home after all. Make sure you visit.'

She held him tightly again for a brief moment before letting him go, wiping at her eyes.

'Oh, by the way,' he said, giving her a chance to regain her composure. 'I'm not Harmless anymore.'

'Oh yeah? What are you now then?'

He shrugged, looking sheepish. '... Mostly Harmless.'

She grinned. 'Mostly Harmless! Oooh! Fearsome!'

'I'll be Poor soon, you wait and see.'

She laughed, wiping away tears. 'You'll always be poor! You can't shoot straight! You can't even cope with a witchspace mis-jump; some combateer you'd make!'

'I'll get used to it, give me twenty five years or so and I'll make Elite. You wait and see.'

'Elite!' she said, almost choking with mirth, pulling a face reminiscent of the terrified expression he'd had on his face during their erratic 'un-mis-jump'. 'More like Oooooolite!'

Epilogue

Rebecca Weston posthumously found worthy of Elite Combateer status, this date, Galactic Year 3152. Decorated for extreme valour in the Thargoid War of 3151, twice commended for bravery under fire. Awarded the Tionisla Crossed Dagger for her defence of the Tionisla Coriolis station, in which she single handedly destroyed five Thargoid warships after the local Galcop contingent was wiped out. Hers was the only trading vessel that remained to defend the station when others fled. Despite a brave fight, watched in horror across the galaxy on the station's vidlog, she eventually succumbed to enemy fire. Coriolis station five was destroyed shortly afterward with the loss of over four thousand men, women and children before GalNavy reinforcements could arrive. It was later deemed to be one of the worst disasters of the Thargoid War.

'The video footage is used as training material for our pilots – jaws still drop. She's a legend. Her flying is still unequalled, still the envy of the navy. She was beyond 'Elite', she was more like a force of nature out there. I only wish we'd got there five minutes sooner, she might still be with us.' – Commander McLane, GalNavy.

'She gave her life in an attempt to save others; she's our guardian angel. She will always be remembered here on Tionisla. A special marker has been placed in the Tionisla Graveyard in her honour.' – David Hughes, Tionisla Orbit Commissioner.

– Extract from Elite Rating Authority Log

James McKenna, though little is known of his background outside of academia, became a leading advocate of the Karella Institute (commonly referred to simply as the 'Ban the Bomb movement') set up shortly after the Q-Bomb appeared for sale in 3139. He was killed whilst en route to a demonstration at Lave in 3156 over the proposed use of the Q-Bomb in order to quell the Aesbion uprising. Though it was officially claimed it was a life support malfunction, circumstantial evidence points to an assassination by forces unknown. Despite the fact he never lived to see the Q-Bomb banned, historians agree that without his efforts the ban would never have taken place at all.

– Extract from the Unofficial Galcop Conspiracy Theory Archive, Tianve

The Tyley-Feynman Quirium Cascade Mine was finally banned across all Galcop, Empire and Federation territories today. Widely lauded, the treaty was ratified this morning, symbolically at Onrira, where it was reputed that the bomb was first developed. As we reported last year during

the Aesbion conflict, over five-hundred-and-twenty vessels were lost. More than sixty percent were destroyed by the Q-Bomb during a terrifying cascade reaction caused by the positioning of combative ships.

Some pundits have said the treaty is irrelevant and the Q-Bomb will remain regardless of its banned status. However, most consider that with the latest witchspace injector improvements the bomb is now something of a white elephant. Add to that the fact that all the major manufacturers have agreed to no longer produce this weapon, its days appear to be well and truly numbered.

Vocal and well-organised protests from the Karella Institute, not to mention the tragic death of their Chairman James McKenna, appeared to force the final resolution. A spokesman for the Karella Institute was quoted as saying, 'It's taken too long, too long by far, but we are pleased with this outcome. We wish only that James could have been here to see the culmination of his efforts.'

Is this the end for the Q-Bomb? Truth is, we don't know.

– Excerpt from the Tionisla Chronicle, Issue 1648, Volume 8, Year 3158, Editor-in-Chief:
Anna Mereso

Author's Notes for Status Quo, Second Edition.

I never wrote any notes for *Status Quo* when it was originally released, and a few were added later on, but it gives me a lot of pleasure to add some more to mark the second edition of this 'little' story, brought out to commemorate the 25th anniversary of 'Elite'. Status Quo was originally written in the summer of 2006, with this improved version being released in late 2009.

One thing that never ceases to amaze me is the strength of feeling that surrounds the original 'Elite' game, a game that simulated an entire universe within a measly 49152 bytes of assembly code (less on many versions). Elite comes from what is now quite a distant time in history, from a time when computers were far more primitive than today's mobile phones. As I write, we've just passed Elite's silver jubilee, which was marked with a little fanfare from the original authors, much to their credit. There are many thousands of people out there, of a 'certain' age, who have fond childhood and teenage memories of this game. Yet more gratifying, new folks are discovering 'remakes' of Elite, of which 'Oolite' is, of course, the very best. More sobering too is the thought that Oolite may well be superior, at least to the original fans, than the long awaited 'Elite 4', if and when it ever arrives.

I've asked myself what makes Elite so compelling. It's a question that deserves a considered answer.

I think it's a combination of factors, a constellation if you like. The 1970's had seen a revival of 'space operas' from the seminal 'Star Wars' and 'Star Trek', through to 'Battlestar Galactica', 'Dr. Who' and 'Blake's 7'. Many children's shows of the time reflected the interest in space: 'Battle of the Planets', 'Star Fleet' and my personal favourite 'Ulysses 31'. In the real world we'd landed on the moon, and the Space Shuttle first flew in 1981, we visited most of the planets in the solar system with the Voyager probes. It looked like things we're moving. I remember clearly thinking that the vision of '2001: A space Odyssey' looked rather pedestrian in 1985. Alas, there are no elegant spinning space stations in permanent orbit, no moon-base, no space liners. The space shuttle will soon cease to fly, we've lost Concorde. It seems the human race concerns itself with facile celebrities, pre-occupation with various forms of imminent doom and overall mediocrity in favour of actual achievement nowadays.

Elite originally allowed a way for prepubescent kids to fly into space and adventure amongst the stars in a rather more intelligent way than the 'left/right/shoot' variety of the original arcade games. Elite rode the wave of 'space enthusiasm' that occurred in the early 1980s. The 3D graphics were a significant part of this, though not unique even back then. The real 'core' of Elite was that

there was no set purpose; you went where you wanted too, travelling, fighting, trading at whim. The graphics were still scant, the procedurally generated universe rather homogeneous, forcing you to inject your own imagination into the game. You had the opportunity to 'save your game', a new innovation at the time, allowing yourself multiple personae. I was at once a bounty hunter, a fearsome pirate, a dashing hero rescuing beautiful (and presumably scantily clad) princesses from the evil clutches of hardened gangsters. By treating its players with respect, Elite catered for it all.

Elite paid homage to the 'Zeitgeist' of the time. The spinning Coriolis stations were clearly modelled on 2001. Later versions even included the familiar 'Blue Danube' music whilst ships were docking. Ships were armed with lasers and missiles, defended with shields, so far so Star Wars/Trek. Enemy ships came equipped with different levels of weaponry, so there was an 'arms race' to bring your own ship up to speed. There was no score, only cash and reputation; it was the 1980s!

Another key aspect of this was the small Novella that came with the game, alongside the necessary manual, keyboard overlays and a natty ship identification chart - clearly reminiscent of the World War II aircraft identifications charts you can now see in museums. Whilst the manual told you what you needed to know and was peppered with interesting titbits of information about the Elite universe, Robert Holdstock's 'The Dark Wheel' told you what you wanted to know – how did the Elite Universe work? What was it like there? With the Novella, the Elite Universe was now a 'real' place, with people, societies, organisations and powers, as fully formed and as compelling as the universe of Star Wars or Star Trek. We learnt it was a rough place; death was never far away. Life as a trader was tough, hard and brutal. There were those with secrets to protect, who'd stop at nothing to do so. A thousand years of technology hadn't changed the nature of humanity one bit. This was no sanitised universe where mankind had improved itself, quite the reverse. If anything, mankind's darker side was more prevalent. Here was a universe of piracy, illegal and underhanded trading, danger, held together by a thin veneer of civilisation and advanced technology.

The Novella followed a familiar groove – a huge personal loss and a vendetta. A naïve but talented young hot shot, a feisty female sidekick, a mysterious mentor/benefactor and a shadowy opponent. Through the course of the story the hot shot gains experience and becomes less the callow youth, finally winning the day and avenging his loss.

Probe a little deeper and you find that Robert included other fascinating details; 'The Dark Wheel' – an eponymous group of mystical old-time individuals, a lost planet – 'Raxxla'. None of these were actually in Elite, but that didn't stop people looking, wondering if somewhere in the code these places might be hidden. Such was the rich tapestry upon which the player painted his own story.

Fast forward 25 years. It's now 2009. Computer games are unrecognisably more complex. Elite looks like what it is, a product of a bygone age, a piece of history. So why does this game refuse to die? Why do people invest so much time and effort into it? There's no money to be made. No fame to claim.

Because we care. Elite is part of our lives. Elite was both story and game, and for many of us an escape from a reality which looked increasingly bleak as the 1980s drew to a close. Perhaps Elite showed us that hard work and determination could prevail over impossible odds, or perhaps it was just a great game, a distraction from the real world. Either way, it is gratifying to me that the original authors now understand that their greatest contribution was not 3D graphics, or procedurally generated planets, but the unforeseen and unlooked for opportunity to mold and shape the minds of youngsters; there can be no greater privilege, or heavy responsibility, than that.

Oolite will need little introduction to those of you who have played it. Suffice to say, here is what Elite would have been if the technology of the 1980s had been up to it. Better graphics for sure, but the same open ended gameplay. Crucially now, players have the ability to generate their own content for the 'Ooniverse'. Aspects of the original manual (Generations and Space Dredgers for example) now exist in Oolite. The Tionisla graveyard from the *The Dark Wheel* is now a real place. There are new ships, new missions, new places to go. The Ooniverse is as big as the imaginations of the people who create it.

And so to *Status Quo*. In many ways my small thanks to the original authors of Elite, to Robert, and to all the fans out there. Elite gave me a lot in my youth, and this is at least a down-payment on that debt. The story was written in 2006 shortly after I first came across Oolite. There was already some fan-fiction available, but to my mind it didn't sufficiently provide Oolite with the necessary background colour that *The Dark Wheel* provided for Elite.

Oolite has moved Elite forward whilst staying true to the original premise, unlike many other imitators. There are new bits of technology available to the pilot of an Oolite starship, with which the Elite Combateer would be unfamiliar. *Status Quo* was designed to bring the Elite combateer 'up to speed' and allow them to enter Oolite thus equipped. The rest is, of course, history – if that's the right word to use for something that doesn't happen until sometime in the year 3125!

Status Quo was also intended to be a bit of fun for the players of Oolite, and for me, an exercise in writing a 'Space' story, which was something I hadn't tried before. It was never supposed to be taken that seriously, and as a sample of my 'writing', is probably not all that great an advert. It's pretty lightweight, full of '8-bit in-jokes' for the cognoscenti and largely about ships and technology more than it is about people. It wasn't intended to appeal to a wide audience.

I tried to follow the genre guidelines that Robert Holdstock set out in *The Dark Wheel*. Space opera clichés therefore abound! The naïve adventurer is centre stage, accompanied by the feisty female sidekick, now updated with a distinct 21st century flavour – less the sidekick and more an equal. The tragic situation is played in reverse to a certain extent, and the mission is a familiar desperate race against time. The necessary shadowy villain completes the *dramatis personae*.

My website indicates over 20,000 people (at June 2010) have downloaded this story from the point at which it was published, and even after five years, I am still recording around 300 downloads a month. For this I am most humbly grateful. I didn't create this audience, I'm just providing content for it.

A lot of you have written to me; some with corrections and questions, others with thanks and acknowledgements, still more simply appreciative of more 'Elite'.. Some even saying that the story was a great diversion from 'real life' at difficult times in their lives – that's quite a privilege to know. Thanks! Keep them coming.

As always, I'm keen to hear from readers. What you like, what you don't like and so on. Feel free to ping me an email at drew@wagar.org.uk or leave a comment on my blog at www.drewwagar.com

If you're not already aware of them, (and you enjoyed this story!) you might want to have a look at the sequels – *Mutabilis*, *Incursio* and *Finis* which form what I now rather grandly refer to as the 'Oolite Saga'. They're all free from my website www.drewwagar.com

I hope you enjoy this 'Second Edition' of *Status Quo*. There are a few extra 'directors cut' bits in here; new scenes, improvements to tone and expansions of some of the material which I hope will enhance your enjoyment of both the book and the game. Long live Elite – here's to another 25 years!

Right on, Commanders!

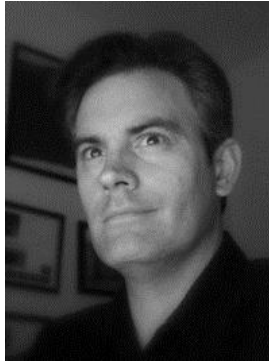
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October 2009.

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About the Author



Drew has written a series of novels and short stories for the '[Oolite](#)' Universe, along with other contemporary ebooks. You can find them at his website below.

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