

# MUTABILIS

Drew Wagar



A Novella based on the  
space trading game *Dolite*  
and sequel to *Status Quo*

Cover composition by Neil A Badman

## **Mutabilis**

A novella based on the space trading game Oolite

Part 2 of the Oolite Saga, by Drew Wagar.

Sequel to Status Quo.

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## Thanks to:

My wife Anita and my two boys Mark and Joshua, for letting me have time to write this.

David Braben and Ian Bell for the original Elite game. Robert Holdstock for his original novella 'The Dark Wheel'.

All the readers of Status Quo, particularly those who took the time to email back and tell me how much they enjoyed the story.

To Neil Badman, who won the coverpage competition.

To all those who provided an entry for the coverpage competition – you can find all the other entries on my website, they're worth a look

To Bob Lavellee, who did a fantastic professional job in editing the text and provided some useful feedback into the bargain

In particular I'd like to thank Captain Hesperus, Star Gazer, Cmdr Maegil, DaddyHoggy, Rxke, Magamo, Jack\_H, TGHC, Cos, Cat and Littlebear for their most excellent feedback, and their typo obliteration service.

To Disembodied, for his excellent 'Rough Guide' to planets in the Elite universe and amazing proof reading skills.

To Ahruman, for keeping Oolite going after a change of leader. High praise indeed. The sheer scale of work has to be seen to be believed. Oolite has changed enormously since I wrote Status Quo.

Dave Hughes (Selezen), for his invaluable assistance all matters to do with Raxxla, time-lines, inconsistencies and the various factions in the Elite universe. I hope you enjoy having your own crisis!

To Dr. Nil, for advertising Status Quo within the game itself, with his excellent 'Your Ad Here' OXP add on.

To Commander McLane, for improving my Tianve Pulsar OXP add on and generally being a good egg. Thanks for the encouragement!

To P.A. Groove, for creating the 'Famous Planets' OXP add on and providing some of the scenery referred to in 'Status Quo' to players of 'Oolite'.

To Killer Wolf, for the loan of a 'Vampire Mk1', a fearsome new ship for Oolite players.

To Roberto, for his excellent 'Justice for Mrs. Combs' stories. Find them in the bulletin board, and enjoy!

To the open source community: for Oolite itself, the Openoffice suite used to write this novella and the Ubuntu operating system that runs my PC. This story was written on second hand 8 year old Dell X200 Laptop.

## 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

*A fable as old as space travel itself, a mystery and an enigma: Raxxla. The very name causes conversation to cease, and meaningful glances to be exchanged.*

*The younger generation mocks it, until quelled by stern glares from their greybeard elders. Parents tell their offspring the story of a ghost planet, beyond witchspace, lost in the void. The name is interspersed throughout popular culture as a synonym for futility.*

*Pervading opinion suggests it is indeed a planet, but no one has ever seen it and lived to tell the tale. Its very existence is in doubt, its reputation spread only by hearsay via notorious borderland trading posts on the edge of inhabited space, far from civilisation. Where there is any overlap in the reports that have come back, they seem to suggest Raxxla contains some kind of alien construct – a gateway or portal to... somewhere else. The nature of this device remains unclear.*

*A number of missions have been undertaken with the express purpose of locating Raxxla, some official, others less so. The most recent being undertaken some eight years ago by the Ryder Expedition in early 3132. Two members of the expedition were recovered in an escape capsule some months later, raving incoherently and dying shortly afterwards of an obscure degenerative brain disease. As a result, some pundits have suggested Raxxla is guarded by a corps of ruthless, power crazed Elitists who will stop at nothing to preserve their anonymity.*

*A planet older than the Galaxy itself, a gateway to different dimensions or a power base for a clandestine group of Elite combateers; Raxxla remains as inexplicable as it is elusive.*

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

*Like the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, many have tried to find Raxxla. No one has yet succeeded, or even returned from such an expedition, but there seems to be no shortage of crazy folk willing to slip berth and go questing.*

*Does it exist or not? A gateway to riches or nothing more than a story concocted after one too many Anlian heavy-gins in the local Coriolis bar?*

*As legends go, Raxxla is one of the least well supported myths on record; no memrechs, no visios, not even a remotely plausible artefact of any kind. The only thing it has going for it is a vague similarity in the stories and that anybody who goes looking for it never comes back in one piece, physically or mentally – hardly convincing proof. Ask yourself how an entire planet can remain hidden for centuries.*

*So, almost certainly a complete load of Leestian grub dung in our opinion, a bedtime story for the younglings. We hear there is only one thing you can believe: don't believe one thing you hear. Maybe we should ask members of the legendary Dark Wheel... No? Apparently they don't exist either.*

– Extract from the Unofficial Galcop Conspiracy Theory Archive, Tianve

*The Dark Wheel is not a legally recognised organisation.*

– Extract from Lave Space Licensing Authority Log

## Chapter One

Larais was not a beautiful planet, in fact the Galactic Census entry was short, somewhat ‘tongue in cheek’ and to the point – *‘This world is a revolting dump.’*

As accurate as this currently was, the description didn’t do justice to the planet’s past. Long ago it had been an industrial planet, churning out fusion energy products: drive cores, reactors, missile warheads and the like. It was the centre of an atomic industry shipping products all around the eight galactic regions and one of the richest planets in the quadrant. Virtually the entire surface of the planet was covered in factories, power plants and vast condominiums built to house the billions of dependent workers.

A downside of this was severe pollution, but huge atmospheric scrubbers kept the air breathable for the most part, although a constant thick orange haze of hydrocarbons blanketed the planet in a permanent shroud.

Then, Quirium was discovered.

Easy to store, easier to use, easier to make. A far more powerful fuel.

Within a short space of years atomic power was obsolete. The atomic economy crashed abruptly and a billion individuals found their livelihood gone, the foundation literally pulled from beneath them. Larais became a ghost planet virtually overnight. The huge buildings were abandoned, left empty and open to the elements. Everything of value taken away, and later looted by privateers.

But the big atomic fusion power plants were too big and too expensive to dismantle. The economy was in tatters and there were other pressing priorities.

Initially it was planned to shut them down gracefully, but the cost of working on the planet became prohibitive. The desire to preserve anything as the mass exodus ran its course lost momentum and eventually fizzled out entirely.

The reactors went unattended, broke down and ultimately poured their reactants into the atmosphere. The scrubbers had long before ground to a halt. Everything on the planet disappeared into the deepening orange haze and was forgotten for generations.

Three centuries later it was accidentally discovered that an airborne plant growth was feeding on the thick hydrocarbon haze, creating incredibly fine, yet strong, filaments which could be woven into dazzling garments of extraordinary grace and beauty. Huge anti-grav combines were built to harvest these tenuous plants, eventually resulting in a reasonably strong agricultural economy as the Galactic Co-operative came to power.

Down in the haze, underneath layers of high pressure poisonous gas and smog, the surface of the planet wasn't entirely quiescent.

The native species had been a type of semi-intelligent rodent. It was assumed by most that it had perished after the industrial collapse, but no one ventured down to the original street level to be sure. Not even the hardiest of anthropologists were keen to examine what three hundred years of poisonous gas and radiation might have resulted in.

Amidst the crumbling remains of a broken and vanished industrial past, Galcop had constructed a virtually impregnable high security prison.

Designed to hold prisoners requiring absolute secrecy, it was completely automated. Guarded by intelligent machines, immune to corruption, bribery, boredom or loneliness; carrying out their tasks without thought of change or variety.

Few knew of its existence, and fewer cared. Only those whose jobs required occasional attendance were able to approach in specially modified Adder class ships, particularly designed to manage the pressure of the turbulent and polluted atmosphere.

One such ship had recently dropped out of witchspace and was quickly approaching the planet. There were three occupants: two Galcop pilots and a passenger.

'Secure from torus drive,' the first officer noted. 'Co-ordinates for docking location locked in. Autopilot steady.'

'Atmospheric shielding?' the Captain asked.

'Check.'

The first officer was a young, newly qualified officer, keen to impress his grizzled and jaundiced superior.

'Charge the hull, negative polarity.'

'Sir?' the query came back.

'Just do it. You'll see.'

The Captain looked over the controls and noted the astrogation settings. He turned to the passenger, seated at the rear of the cramped cabin.

'Should be planet-side in about twenty minutes, sir.'

The figure nodded in acknowledgement but said nothing. The Captain turned back to his controls. He wasn't happy with the mission, not happy at all.

It had seemed straightforward enough, fly to Larais, drop off a passenger, wait for an hour, pick up another passenger and then return to Lave.

Then it started to look distinctly odd. Firstly Larais was a ghastly place to have to go to, and all destinations planet-side were security classified, so he had no idea where he was going, or what kind of base he was expected to dock at.

Secondly, going to Larais meant flying an Adder, a tiny, primitive ship class that should have been retired a generation ago, a far cry from his luxurious second generation Boa. The Adder class' only saving grace being that it was one of a few ships that could cope with repeated atmospheric entries without costly and frequent overhauls, that and it was the only ship that could cope with the strange toxic atmosphere of Larais. Its primitive fusion powered atmospheric engines seemed to actually thrive on it.

Third, he'd been forbidden from filing a flight plan. This wasn't *that* unusual for citizens of high importance, but it always made him nervous. No one knew where they were, if something went wrong there would be no rescue. This ought to be a milk run. Ought to be.

Finally, their passenger was covered in an onyx airtight environmental suit, completely covering his (or her, or its?) body from head to foot. The suit looked like dark burnished metal from the outside, giving the passenger a vaguely insectoid look. Inside the suit, the occupant was supplied with intravenous food and water, with waste products being disposed of automatically, as well as being capable of supporting the occupant in a complete vacuum if necessary. That said, it wasn't a pleasant experience by all accounts. He couldn't imagine anyone wanting to wear such a suit. He assumed the passenger was one of the rarer species, unable to cope with an oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere.

The passenger had ignored any and all pleasantries. In fact, they hadn't spoken throughout the entire three day trip. The Captain found it unnerving. That and the document holder he'd never seen the passenger put down once the whole way.

*I've got a nice Ophidian class yacht waiting at Leesti central four. Retirement in six months. Just cruising until then. Six more months – hold that thought.*

Visibility through the forward viewport began to fade away as the Adder dropped into the atmosphere of Larais. Soon nothing other than orange haze was visible all around.

*A whole planet covered in smog. No wonder the environmentalists use it as an advert for change.*

The Adder began to vibrate as the heat shield began to protect them from the fierce friction of their approach. They began to feel a noticeable deceleration.

'Approach looks good, speed and temperature on track,' the first officer obviously liked the sound of his own voice. The Captain smiled to himself; he'd been young once too.

Their speed continued to be radically reduced as the patented heat shield did its work. Visibility was dropping just as radically and there was nothing to see at all in any direction, just uniform haze.

'Mach 5 and slowing. Switching to atmospheric engines and extending flight panels.'

Outside, sections of the Adder's hull folded and extended outwards. Inside all three passengers experienced a sudden sensation of drag as the Adder suddenly became an aerodynamic flying machine as opposed to a small rectangular brick falling out of space.

Suddenly the Adder shook violently. There was a flash of blazing white light from outside. Vague colours flashed around the cockpit, strange discharges of electricity. Harmless, but disconcerting.

'It's called 'St. Elmo's Fire', ' the Captain said, looking at his bewildered first officer with amusement as he wrestled the ship back on course. 'Massive plasma discharges out there, mucks up your instruments big time unless you polarise. Now you know.'

'The census didn't say anything about lightning strikes!' the first officer complained.

'Those guys had a sense of humour. You've just got to read between the lines – a *revolting* dump – get it?'

'Very funny.'

'They didn't have much space for accurate descriptions in the old Fibonacci storage devices of the time, so they made some of the descriptions pretty cryptic. They'll update them one day. Don't worry; we'll be through in a minute.'

The Adder shook again as another fierce bolt of plasma struck around them.

'Atmospheric control established, searching for nav beacon,' the first officer intoned. 'Got it. Range six thousand five ninety and closing.'

'Good work,' the Captain said. 'Let's bring her in nice and gentle.'

The range indicator kept counting down, and the radar altimeter showed they were getting closer to the planet's surface. Visibility remained zero, and the haze was darkening down to a deep, thick, smoky ochre.

Some course corrections appeared on the astrogation console and the first officer adjusted accordingly.

'Atmospheric pressure six times ambient,' the first officer noted. 'It's like flying into a gas giant. You sure there is a surface down there?'

'You just watch your speed and altitude.'

Suddenly, out of the gloom loomed a huge shadow. As they closed the shape of an enormous tower block formed out of the mist. The Adder was dwarfed into insignificance, passing between the tops of ancient buildings. The Captain could see the jutting aerials and dishes of old style comm arrays, the gaping mouths of air scrubbers and, further down, dark and empty windows. There were no lights in evidence. It looked cold, desolate and dead. He shivered.

They descended still further. There were buildings all around them now, rising up like sombre tombstones, obscuring what little light remained. The first officer flicked on the powerful landing lights. Four beams penetrated the gathering gloom.

They passed a number of landing gantries suspended up against the high reaches of the building they were closest to, most were empty. The Captain saw the landing light beams pick out the outlines of two other vessels. One looked like an Ophidian yacht like the one that awaited him back home, the other was much larger and only half visible in the mist.

*That looks almost like... no, it couldn't possibly be one of those here on a Galcop planet! Must be an old wreck of some kind.*

'They could have arranged for us to land in daylight,' the first officer said, miserably.

'This is daylight,' the Captain retorted, turning his attention back to the descent. 'It's one hour after noon local time.'

'Nice. What a frak of a place.'

The radar altimeter beeped abruptly and then gave a continuous tone.

'Visibility is less than fifty metres!' the first officer said in alarm. 'Still can't see the landing site, even though we're on top of it!'

He keyed in the retro thrusters and they slowly descended, the beams of their landing lights focusing downwards, looking like hollow, ghostly cylinders of light supporting the slowly sinking ship. The first officer was now relying solely on his instruments. Finally the exposed gantry of their landing pad showed an outline. The Adder touched down gently in the middle with a slight jolt.

The Captain nodded to himself, pretty good... considering. Not an easy landing for anyone, let alone a rookie. 'Good work, I'll put an exceptional in your file when we get back.'

'Thanks, Cap.'

'You can stop calling me 'Cap' right now. Let's do the post flight and off load.'

The Captain turned towards the rear of the Cabin where their enigmatic passenger was seated.

'Sir, we should be ready in...'

The Captain looked in surprise. The passenger was already standing up, having removed his flight harness. He was positioned against the rear hatch door, directly beside the airlock. The Captain saw him entering an access code.

'Sir! You can't access the...!'

Alarms suddenly sounded inside the compartment as the on board computer overrode the commlink.

'Warning! Inimical atmosphere detected! Environment suits must be worn prior to airlock egress!'

*How the frak was he able to access the airlock code?*

'What the frak! Hey!'

The Captain fumbled with his flight harness as the airlock door suddenly opened. The interior of the Adder was flooded instantly with a thick brown miasma. He felt his eyes burn as if he'd been splashed with acid. He felt his throat spasm and his muscles start to seize up. He vaguely saw his first officer vainly trying to grasp for a remlok survival mask secured on the cabin wall before collapsing back into his chair.

The Captain's hands went to his throat as his vision failed. At least it was swift.

*No.....!*

The Agent surveyed the scene after a couple of minutes and then attached a small device to the interior bulkhead of the Adder. He'd felt no remorse over his actions, he had dispensed with remorse a long time ago.. In his view his actions were motivated by a higher plan. Casualties were... unfortunate, but necessary. Witnesses were however... unacceptable.

He walked down the exit ramp and sealed the hatch behind him. Without a backward glance he walked swiftly away from the ship along the outstretched gantry towards an adjacent airlock leading into a large building. As he walked the thick mist swirled about him, swiftly obscuring the lone Adder. Inside the onyx environment suit he felt no discomfort. Nothing hindered his progress.

He approached the airlock, typing an access code. The doors parted and he walked inside, only then turning around and look back the way he had come. The Adder was obscured by the noise fog. He clasped a small device in his hand and squeezed it gently.

Away in the mist, there was a flash of flame and the muffled bark of an explosion. Only a faint concussion registered within his suit. A few pieces of charred and blackened debris clattered along the gantry towards him. Then silence reigned again. The Agent tucked the document holder under his arm.

The airlock closed.

Inside, the Agent moved swiftly down the corridors within. A security droid's sensors detected his approach and moved swiftly to intercept, multiple mechanical arms raising threateningly, with two incorporated hand blasters dramatically in evidence. The Agent slowed as the machine approached, whirring on a set of antigrav plates.

'Hold your position! Identify! Any attempt to flee will be punished by immediate extermination!' the machine prompted almost laconically, overlaid on a grating metallic rasp.

The Agent held up a small crystalline identity microdrive and gave it to the machine. It took it with a small reversible tool and spun it around, analysing it with a faint beam of laser light.

The machine abruptly lowered its arms and adopted a neutral posture.

'Root access granted. Ready to receive programming.'

The Agent produced another microdrive and inserted it into the machine's appropriate input slot. There was a faint whirring and then the machine resumed its ready posture.

'Sensor glitch logged. No lifeforms detected. Resuming patrol.'

The machine whirred off down the corridor. The Agent moved silently on, in the opposite direction. He paused at a doorway to type in another access code. The door slid open.

'You took your time.'

Inside was a large, overweight man dressed in prison garb. His countenance was severe, a man not accustomed to being imprisoned. His face had been familiar across much of the Galcop hierarchy.

'It wasn't the most straightforward assignment you've ever given me,' the Agent replied. 'You've rated a category zero. Maximum security until the trial. Quite an achievement. It took me a week to unscramble your location.'

'I never doubted your abilities, though I am surprised by your price. Are you sure this is what you want? I doubt it's what you think it is.'

'Let us proceed.'

'As you wish.'

The Agent took the document holder out from under his arm and opened it. Inside were two more microdrives and a single manilla folder, apparently made of paper. It was labelled with baroque, old fashioned lettering, detailing a single six letter word. There were two thumb marks on the outside edge.

The Agent was still encased in his environmental suit, but even had he not been he would have handled the folder with protective gloves, and for a good reason. Had he touched the document with his bare hands it would have immediately evaporated in a puff of gas and likely poisoned him into the bargain.

The prisoner took it from the Agent. He was not wearing gloves. The document remained unaffected.

'You're absolutely sure about this?'

'Our deal remains exactly as we agreed; this file and the names.'

'I get a ship and the microdrives as we agreed?'

The Agent handed the two microdrive cartridges to the prisoner.

'Take your pick. I think you'll appreciate both,' the Agent said. 'One is a retired civil servant from Chart Three, a few minor scrapes, plenty of money, some useful connections, some awards. The other is a honorary doctorate, a member of several out-world quangos, enough to keep you busy. I've arranged the surgery, only the best, of course. Instructions enclosed. There is an Ophidian Yacht waiting outside on gantry sixteen and the sentinel guards have been dealt with.'

The prisoner nodded, considering.

'So. Are you going to look for it yourself?'

'That is my business.'

'You can tell me that at least.'

'I beg to differ. From now on you're no longer my employer. We owe each other nothing. You no longer have authority. I have taken over this assignment.'

'So, after all these years I don't even get to see your face.'

'It's better this way.'

'You'd have to kill me.'

'Yes.' The Agent was matter of fact.

'And what is to prevent you from killing me the moment you get what you want?'

'We entered into a contract, my word is my guarantee and my bond.'

The prisoner considered this. 'Yes, you've proved you're a man of your word. Your reputation means a lot to you. They refer to you as the gentleman assassin.'

'My reputation is everything.'

'With a perfect hit rate,' the prisoner continued, unable to pass up an opportunity to needle his liberator, 'apart from one incident.'

The Agent drew back slightly, his voice tightening. 'The SuperCobra was crippled, effectively destroyed. The assignment was completed.'

'At much personal cost I understand, the damage to your ship...'

'Inconsequential. It has been repaired.'

'Still, it was a near thing by all accounts,' the prisoner persisted. 'Fortunate you were able to witch out in time. A worthy opponent it would seem.'

'Indeed.'

'My sources tell me the pilot was a lower class trader girl with delusions of grandeur. Rather embarrassing for you, to be defeated by the likes of her? She doesn't even merit an 'Elite' rating apparently.'

The Agent paused, as if deciding how best to answer. The prisoner grinned inwardly at having riled his faceless interlocutor.

'Her piloting skills were my concern, and they were... considerable.'

The prisoner smiled, and turned the manilla folder around in his hands. He pressed his thumb against the outside corner edge. It glowed green momentarily.

'Galcop Military Chief of Staff, identity confirmed. Access granted,' a voice said, issuing from the folder.

'Transfer of access and ownership rights to next identity trace,' the Chief said quietly. 'No acknowledgement.'

The Agent removed a glove and pressed a thumb against the folder. The Chief noted that the hand that emerged appeared human.

The folder glowed, but responded in no other fashion.

The Agent quickly took the folder, closed it and returned it to his document holder.

'Now the names.'

The Chief sighed. 'A death warrant by any other name.'

'The price of freedom, in your case. You know it is necessary.'

'You drive a hard bargain.'

'The names,' the Agent said remorselessly.

'There are four; Mahl Triboner, Presidential aide.'

The Agent nodded. 'I suspected as much.'

'My assistant, Janu Tinuviel, secretary to the military consortium on Zadies.'

Inside his suit, the agent raised his eyebrows in surprise. 'You confided in her? A pity, a remarkably talented woman.'

'Make it quick, for her at least.'

'I am always quick.'

The Chief continued: 'Tenim Neseva, adjunct to Galcop security.'

The Agent passed no comment.

'Last but not least, Zerz Furvel. I believe you've had dealings with him before.'

'Galcop's erstwhile chief technician,' the Agent said, almost amused. 'Yes, of course.'

'I'll look for the headlines.'

The Agent smiled wanly. 'Indeed. I must take my leave now. A pleasure, as always.'

The Agent strode back towards the landing gantries. The ship the Adder's Captain had failed to recognise was not a wreck, though it had come close to being one in the past. Whilst repaired, the port engine apparently bore the marks of heavy laser fire. It would have been a simple job to repaint the affected sections and re-panel the exterior, but the Agent had sufficed with a functional repair only. It remained a scar on the otherwise pristine hull; a scar on his reputation.

He had taken time to identify the individual behind the damage dealt to both him and his ship. The identity of the attacker had indeed surprised him. He had expected a hired hand, an Elite combateer from one of the premier flight schools. Instead it was a young woman, a mere trader with no known military training with a rating no better than 'Dangerous'. He had underestimated her twice, and she'd almost brought him down. He would not underestimate her again. They would meet when the time was right, and there would be retribution. She would suffer a humiliating scar by his hand this time.

The Agent climbed aboard his ship, touching the smooth flanks almost with affection. The airlock closed behind him and he gratefully removed the environmental suit he'd been wearing for almost four days.

The ship's navigation lights illuminated and the engines began to prime for take off, the distinctive whine of the two ramjet drives echoing around the landing pad. The lights illuminated a small inconsequential name plate, just under the bow.

*Falchion.*

Other than that the ship was completely unadorned; a uniform pure white, save the port engine scar.

It rose, gracefully balanced and extended its engines to flight configuration. Still rare in Gal-cop space, there was no mistaking the predatory outline of an Imperial Courier.

## Chapter Two

'...We interrupt our scheduled programming to bring you breaking news! Mahl Triboner, close confidant, aide and friend of the Galactic Co-operative President himself, was found dead this morning inside his official state mansion on his home planet of Ontimaxe!

'Mahl was found by staff in the early hours of this morning, galactic mean time.

'Initial reports appear to indicate some kind of systemic nanobot failure, though this has been thrown into rampant speculation by contrary reports of his previous excellent health and young age. Representatives from the medical firm that supplied the nanobots – HealthExtreme – were unavailable for comment. Forensic teams have closed off the mansion and are continuing their investigation as we speak.

'It is believed that there is no evidence of a forced entry to the mansion but that this hasn't been ruled out of question at this time, leading to speculation that the investigation may have uncovered something much more sinister.

'What really happened to Mahl? Truth is: we don't know. This is Anna Mereso, for the *Tionisla Chronicle*, wideband channel three-eight-five-point-two...'

Groove (P. A. to his mates, for reasons that were never explained fully) was one of the junior members of the forensic team investigating Mahl Triboner's death. He was freshly out of simulator training academy, recently qualified, and newly certified on communications analysis and system security.

He was tasked with digging into the surveillance systems dotted all around Mahl's extensive mansion. He'd ended up in the drawing room, where Mahl's desiccated corpse grinned hideously from its seated position behind a large oak desk. He'd never seen a dead body before; it was seriously kelvin!

The mansion was extremely impressive. With five floors and four wings, it was constructed almost entirely out of different varieties of marble, with enormous panelled windows, Romanesque pillars and flooring covered in expensive and exotic rugs. There were a number of virtually priceless works of art adorning the walls; statues, sculptures and paintings. They all combined to give the impression of exquisite taste combined with a stupendous credit balance.

Groove whistled. What he wouldn't give to have just a tenth of that money! He wondered what would happen to it all now Mahl was a corpse.

Maybe some lucky niece or nephew, assuming they have a good alibi of course! Ha!

Two older men were standing over him. One was an inspector with the Galcop security service, the other, an incident investigator from some high level government bureau. Neither of them seemed enthused by the dead body.

Groove had to admit it was pretty grotesque. According to what he had overheard, somehow all the nanobots in Mahl's body had simultaneously gone berserk.

Nanobot injection was a common treatment for the rich and super rich. It cost around a million credits or so under license, and required expensive annual top-ups. Treatments varied depending on your credit balance, but it generally involved injecting uncounted numbers of tiny robots into the bloodstream, whereupon they took up station in every part of your body, fixing damage both inside and outside almost the moment it occurred.

Life expectancy rose from the Galactic mean of about one hundred and twenty years, to a staggering two hundred – and you stayed looking young virtually throughout. Even better, you could 'customise' your body (within sensible parameters was recommended) subtly changing shape, increasing muscle tone and so on. You could be fantastic looking for decades. Such was the demand that only those with serious credit balances could afford it, and it was pretty much *de rigueur* if you wanted to be taken seriously in the top flight social circles.

The only downside was that when you did eventually die, you pretty much disintegrated on the spot. However, this was monitored in advance, and most nanobot vendors provided an extremely comprehensive 'after-care' service. Groove knew a couple of the techies who worked at HealthExtreme; apparent it was called the 'Dust Buster' department.

In Mahl's case though, he was only fifty five. Something had gone wrong with the nanobots, or they'd been reprogrammed somehow. Rather than keep his internals operating at peak efficiency they'd literally consumed him from the inside out, apparently within the space of a few minutes.

*Nice. What a way to go...*

Groove was glad he wasn't on the post mortem team though. No guarantee there weren't some of the rogue nanobots still floating about. Tough break for somebody.

'What have you got?' the inspector snapped, bringing Groove's mind back to his job.

'A video fragment sir, it's pretty badly corrupted, somebody did a pretty good job of deleting it.'

'Where's it from?'

'Right here in this room.'

'No prak! Let's see it.'

Groove pressed a couple of buttons on his attached console.

The video was rolling and jumping, crashing with static and barely decipherable.

'Can't you tidy it up a bit?'

'Give me a moment.' Groove adjusted some parameters. 'I've got some pull on the v-sync, if I can de-interlace the file fragments...'

The video juddered and stuttered.

'Nope, let's go with h-sync and apply one of my pet algorithms, got to get the right decoder, hang on...'

The inspector and the investigator exchanged a significant look.

Bloody Techies! Just because they know some new tech inside and out...

Suddenly the video cleared. The inspector and investigator exchanged a second look, impressed despite themselves, and leant in closer.

'There it is,' Groove said, smugly.

'Play it from the top.'

'It's not complete, it's a short section, only a few seconds. Here we go...'

Groove hit a button. The screen crackled and hissed, and then two figures could be made out, one on either side of a desk. It was the same desk that Mahl Triboner was currently sitting behind. In the video he was still sitting behind it, somewhat more animated than he currently was capable of being.

The other man was facing him, standing with his back to the camera, dressed in a dark grey nondescript spacers' outfit fitted with a hood. He was evidently having a conversation with Mahl. The video spluttered and died.

'Who is this guy?' the inspector demanded

'No DNA at the scene, and we swept the room. No scans, nothing, got to be a pro,' the investigator replied defensively. 'No traces.'

'Frag! Is there any audio?'

'Give me a mo, there's a bit more video here too,' Groove said, a bit irritated. These gov-types never appreciated the art involved in deciphering code.

*I'd like to see you de-frag a forty percent corrupted data-stream, fix the bit-locks and hash out the checks! As if!*

'Should have the source de-fragged and the streams uncrossed in a mo. Yep, got an offset carrier here...'

'Play it back from the top,' the inspector snapped impatiently.

The video stopped and spun back, the two figures jiggling back and forth slightly.

'Here you go...'

The audio was scratchy, but comprehensible. Mahl spoke first.

'...never get away with this!'

Then the stranger rejoined. 'Darkness falls, and the wheel turns. It's inevitable.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

The video moved on further than before. The newcomer held up what looked like a small transmitter, a faint tone was heard and the device emitted a brief flash of bright blue light.

'What? You gonna bleep me to death with a screwdriver? The police will be...'

On the screen Mahl twitched, began to writhe, and then emitted a terrifying shriek of pain.

The video spluttered and cut out.

'That's all, folks,' Groove said jauntily.

'What does it mean?' the investigator said.

The inspector made a motion with his head and they both stepped aside, out of earshot of Groove.

'It means trouble,' the inspector replied, *sotto voce*. 'That's a code, an agreed code.'

'An agreed code?' the investigator whispered back.

'It means we were supposed to find this, it is a signature of ownership. Illegal organisations send phrases to Galcop in advance of committing crimes, in order to claim responsibility with authenticity.'

'Whose code is this then?'

'Come on! Darkness falls and the wheel turns? Don't tell me you've never heard of the Dark Wheel.'

'Give me a beacon, you're not serious.'

'Totally serious.'

'The Dark Wheel? They're just a bunch of wacky mystics chasing mysteries, hokey religions and ancient weapons...'

'They're real enough, trust me. It's just they've never murdered anyone before. Not their usual bag. Something real odd is going on here.'

'Screw you!' Janu Tinuviel shouted, glaring across the deeply polished Leestian mahogany conference table at her opponent. Her staff, a small troop of worried looking civil servants, sat around the table flinching every time she shouted, recognising the warning signs of a major loss of temper approaching.

Janu Tinuviel was a striking, tall and athletic looking blonde woman. Her eyes were a curious grey, like hard flint. Her manner was brusque and business like. She dressed appropriately to powerful effect. She was the object of many an unfulfilled fantasy; both for men and women.

Previously she had been the secretary to the now disgraced Galcop Military Chief of Staff, and she had wasted no time at all in taking up as many of his duties as she could manage to scramble together. This had culminated in her rapid rise to head of operations around the tactically important central star systems in Chart One, centred on Zadies. It was a problematic area, with a lot of unstable governments, but at the centre of virtually all the long distance trade routes in the region. As such, she ran the organisation that made sure the Zadies' economy got its cut of all trade passing through the system.

Her new staff, and most Galcop employees that encountered her, were in complete shock and awe afterwards. She had that affect, cultivated it, and enjoyed it immensely. Only that morning she had fired two staff members allegedly for not producing an analysis on time. She was a product of one of the best female-only business schools on Zadies. They churned out fiercely aggressive, ambitious, power hungry, independent, competent and typically crushingly arrogant candidates. She was top of her class, one of the *crème de la crème*; the infamous Zadies' Ladies.

'Listen, if Esusti can't handle the privateer problem then we give the guild rights to Solageon. Let them figure out how to cope on their own, why should we waste any more time with them? The Esustians are a totally incompetent administration!'

Her opponent faced her steadily from the other end of the table. He was leaning on a chair, rather nonchalantly, both hands clasped on its backrest. He seemed quite relaxed and unfazed by Janu. She appeared infuriated with him.

Tenim Neseva had dealt with her a number of times before.

'It's in your own interest,' he replied mildly. 'Solageon is too far from...'

'It's inside the seven light year range, don't give me any grub over that!'

'If I might be permitted to finish?' Tenim interrupted.

Tenim was a wily individual who had worked his way up the food chain from a common ship salesman and through the Galcop ranks by a combination of political expediency, clean shaven and chisel jawed good looks, and a talent for networking with the right people. During the process he'd acquired a lot of extremely powerful friends and a significant stockpile of cash.

'Solageon is too far away for most traders to consider it a viable trade route,' he continued. 'It leaves too little fuel for injector usage once they arrive in your space if they jump from that far away. You're a multi-government too, you'd be naïve to ignore your own privateer problem. Traders simply won't take the risk, too many pirates. Not until Galcop makes it legal to carry extra fuel.'

'And when is that going to be?'

'Well, the legal people are looking at it right now, might be soon in fact. A couple of years?' Tenim was grinning. Janu suspected it had been in Tenim's interest to delay that particular piece of legislation for as long as he could.

'Total rubbish and you know it! Esusti is a communist planet, they just can't keep a lid on their problems and are trying to blame me! Solageon is a better solution. Fact.'

'Nonsense. I can see why you think that, but the truth of the matter is that you aren't able to negotiate an acceptable compromise with the Esustians. Perhaps another official might be...'

'How dare you! I got us the fraggin guild deal in the first place, and on better terms than any of the last eight elects. Don't lecture me on negotiating tactics! Screw you!'

'Then use those profits you claim so vociferously and allow me to sell you a better Galcop security package. I'll even throw in the new ship types. The latest model of Viper...'

'And give over more control to your stupid ineffective bureaucrats! Frak that, salesdroid!'

'It's your only choice.'

'That's enough, I'll reach my own decision. Staff dismissed.' Janu gestured to her staff, who gratefully filed out as quickly as possible.

'As for you, I'll deal with you later,' she snapped, scowling at Tenim. One of the staff members, a wizened old man, gave him a look of pure sympathy and then beat a hasty retreat.

Tenim shrugged and left the meeting room, heading towards the elevator. Janu caught sight of him walking away.

'Hey! Where the prak do you think you're going?'

'I have another appointment. Time is money after all. Plenty more customers in these systems honey. I've got quota to hit.'

'You're not getting away that easily,' she shouted, glaring at him at him down the corridor and walking swiftly back towards him, the soles of her expensive Sotiquan shoes echoing sharply. 'How dare you come in here and tell me what my job is? If you ever undermine me in front of my staff again I'll make sure you never sell another prakkin' thing within twenty light years!'

Tenim stepped into the lift and pressed a button to take him back to ground level. Janu reached the door and stuck her arm in the way, forcing the door back open and moving inside.

'Sticks and stone honey. Listen, if you can't see good sense that's not my problem,' Tenim replied easily, unfazed by her attitude.

'If you want a deal you'll have to do better than that,' she snapped.

He raised an eyebrow. 'I'm open to suggestions.'

The lift door closed and the lift began its descent from the stratospheric levels toward the ground.

'You know what I want,' she whispered roughly.

It was a game they played effectively to mutual benefit. They had been having an affair on and off for over two years, their respective partners totally unaware of it. Implacable foes in public, they were lovers in private. Tenim got a favourable shot at any shipping contract that came out of the area, and Janu always got a good deal on price, keeping her under budget and out performing her colleagues, ensuring her rise to the top. Not exactly legal, but Janu kept a lid on things. The last pair to raise a query about Tenim's success rate in gaining contracts were now jobless and packed off on a third class shuttle on a trumped up charge. Janu played to win and no one got in her way for long.

She grabbed him around the neck and kissed him fiercely, aggressively, forcing him back against the lift wall with a crash. A moment later she broke away.

'God I love it when you stand up to me. Fooled those dumb saps! Wastrels, the lot of them. I'd shoot them if I could!'

'Just doing my job,' Tenim replied, only mildly surprised.

'You want that deal of yours?'

'Of course I want the deal.'

'How much?'

'Much much.'

'Then earn it, my apartment, two o'clock.'

'I've got a better idea. I'm renting a room up on Coriolis eight. Take the afternoon off. I've got my new ship to show off.'

'Expensive?'

'Positively filthy. The new Fer-De-Lance, a Spectrum ZX Model B. 25 year anniversary edition. It's even got those new wide-angle progressive scan HD vids, DRM lockdown and aero glass controls. The whole forward hull can go transparent on demand. It's like really being out in space, none of that old limited XP viewscreen rubbish, it's a whole new vista. It's got the latest and greatest computer control, totally secure and they say it's impossible to crash. I've even managed to get one of those new quirium cascade mines. Docking port one twenty eight.'

'You had me at filthy. Half an hour, and stuff the station. Take me out into deep space. I need a break from this fraggin provincial planet. Don't forget the wine!'

She pressed a floor button and the lift came to a stop. She stepped out, giving him a wink. Then her voice turned official again.

'...and don't even think about trying to flog anything else to me! I want your best price! No! I want a third off your best price!'

The staff immediately outside ignored her outburst, and looked busy. Janu Tinuviel was something of a legend in the Zadies' office of administrative affairs.

The lift doors closed and the lift resumed its descent. Tenim leant up against the wall and raised his arms behind his head, stretching with satisfaction. No problems with the quota this season then. Sometimes this job was a complete piece of grub dung, but it did have its occasional compensations.

The Fer-De-Lance never docked at Coriolis eight. Instead, riding a plume of fierce magenta fuel injected flux exhaust, it roared straight past and out of the system into deep space, running in the shadow of the planet, opposite to the Sun. There it paused, its exterior running lights fading into darkness, the hull reflecting only the distant light of the stars.

The bridge lights were showing dimly, a faint red glow spilling out from the windows. Inside, with a flagrant disregard for flight regulations, the helm was unmanned, and the auto-pilot was not engaged. The ship drifted slowly through the darkness, the two people aboard otherwise occupied.

With other things on their minds, neither had bothered too much with either the pre-flight or hull inspection checks that competent commanders performed as a matter of course. Even so, it was unlikely that either of them would have noticed that a section of the heat shield just forward of the secondary atmospheric engine intake had been removed, status terminals bypassed, and cunningly repainted to look as if it were intact.

It made a spectacular sight, a daylight visible meteorite streaking across the sky. People in four continents across Zadies saw the flaming fireball. Several hundred were temporarily deafened as it punched through the lower atmosphere high above populated areas at over ten times the speed of sound.

It impacted in the southern hemisphere, crashing into a coastal area and making a significant impact crater about two hundred metres across. Fortunately the area was sparsely populated and casualties were light.

Even so, Galcop received a number of new calls for landing capable ships to be more strictly regulated, and a few months later traders were cursing under the weight of more paperwork, more legislation and higher permit costs.

'Investigations into the crash that tragically killed Tenim Neseva, Janu Tinuviel and three other civilians at ground zero continue, and today Galcop has exclusively informed us that they are able to confirm the accident was indeed the result of sabotage.

'Apparently a section of heat shield had been tampered with and the ship, a brand new type of Fer-De-Lance, disintegrated during re-entry and crashed as a result.

'This came as a welcome relief to Zee-Pee-Gee (Zorgon Petterson Group), the manufacturers of the Fer-De-Lance, whose stock price had crashed recently. Initially they were trying to play down concerns that their new vista-aero glass forward view-screens might have been to blame. As we reported two weeks ago these had already been panned by experienced commanders as 'an unnecessary, wasteful and potentially dangerous piece of frippery on a space capable vessel'.

'Both Janu and Tenim were deeply unpopular within the Zadies' department for Administrative Affairs, and there are also allegations from staff at the administration that Janu and Tenim were conducting an illicit affair. It's reported that neither of them had an entry in their calendars for the time period in question. They filed no flight plan and telemetry indicated their ship flew out in to deep space for two hours and then returned, crashing during atmospheric re-entry. Their partners have turned down requests for interviews from the press, but have been taken into custody for questioning.

'This is a further headache for Galcop, as the number of potential suspects has increased. They believed they had made progress on the investigation and have previously stated that an organisation calling itself 'The Dark Wheel' has claimed responsibility.

'That's right folks, you thought they were just a bunch of Raxxlian magicians chasing dreams, but now they've apparently gotten serious. Investigators have linked this incident with the earlier demise of Mahl Triboner, saying that 'established codes' were received just before each incident, although not with enough notice to avert the attacks.

'Quite why the Dark Wheel would start killing high ranking Galcop personnel is unclear, as no demands have been received as yet and no further attacks have been threatened. A Galcop spokesperson said that the public should report any suspicious activity to them immediately, but that individuals suspected of being members of the Dark Wheel should not be approached. Galcop is under mounting pressure to deal with these crazy mystics and bring them to heel. Are we safe? Who is next on their hit list? Why are they doing this? Truth is, we don't know. This is Anna Merezco, on Zadies, for the Tionisla Chronicle, wideband channel three-eight-five-point-two.'

Jim McKenna idly flipped through the virtually infinite number of channels coming through his subscription to the quadrant's premier Tru-Vid service, 'Tionisla PrimePlus'. Nothing particularly caught his eye, but flipping the channels each evening had turned into something of a habit. He ended up, as he always did, listening to ancient instrumental music from old earth.

*Music played with acoustic instruments just sounds better...*

He had returned home from his current role as a lecturer on astronomic studies and most evenings were spent in the same way, sitting in his apartment on the unfashionable western arm of the Onrira Tori Station. He knew he ought to do something else and be more active. He ought to find something, anything, to prevent him idling the hours away before returning to the daily tedium of talking to uninterested students about grey and dusty subjects. It just felt like so much effort to do anything; he felt constantly tired.

Part of him knew it was a reaction. The events of just fewer than two years ago were still fresh in his memory.

He'd realized that, just maybe, those brief few days of terror, fear, and thrilling excitement might well have been the most significant events there would ever be in his life. Now it was all over and he wasn't even forty.

Discovering a hitherto unknown technology; finding out it was a deadly weapon in the making; covertly trying to hide facts; stealing a ship; entering a pitched battle with an Imperial Courier armed to the teeth and piloted by an Elite assassin; witch-jumping into interstellar space; being in the front line of a major assault on a Thargoid battlecruiser. After that, anything else was likely to be pretty lacklustre by comparison.

Life since had certainly been woefully dull.

That was his rationalization for his current state of ennui, and like most rationalizations it omitted some key facts.

Simply cut mousy brown hair and matching eyes. An almost permanent frown and a habit for biting her lower lip. An arrogant, jaunty attitude and a fiery temper. A fleeting kiss and an unfulfilled promise.

*Rebecca Weston.*

He'd shared that adventure with her, though not out of choice for either of them. She'd been working on her family's ship when it had been embroiled, purely by chance, in the events surrounding the Q-Bomb. Rebecca had lost what remained of her family at the assassins hand that day. Her father, brother and cousins shot down and destroyed. What about her mother? Jim couldn't recall her ever talking about her. In truth, there was so much he didn't know.

Jim had rescued her as the assassin attempted to destroy her escape pod. Rebecca had initially repaid him by smashing him over the head and running off with his ship, but they'd reached an understanding after she'd managed to escape from the assassin by diving into an uncontrolled witch-space jump, but not before destroying four police viper ships with one of the Q-Bombs.

Fortunately for Jim, Rebecca knew her way around a spacecraft. She turned out, rather surprisingly, to be one of the best pilots he'd ever seen in action. After helping dispatch a Thargoid battlecruiser, she'd tenaciously fought the assassin. He was in an arguably superior ship, but had been forced to retreat. Jim had known she was pretty handy at the helm, as she'd achieved a 'Dangerous' rating in only a few years in space, but it was only after the event that he realised that she had fought off a very experienced Elite combateer.

*She'll be Elite one day, for certain.*

This resulted in a stalemate, with both ships crippled. The assassin had failed in his mission, yet narrowly escaped into witchspace. Rebecca had been very bitter about that, vowing to hunt him down in revenge for the death of her family. The identity of the assassin was never discovered. He, she or it had disappeared as silently as they had arrived. Both Jim and Rebecca presumed the assassin was still alive out there... somewhere.

Both of them had been forced to change their names, submit to hex-editing and leave their previous lives behind in some fashion, bequeathing their names to the by now infamous Q-bomb; The Tyley-Feynman Quirium cascade mine.

Jim had tried to prevent Rebecca from going after the assassin. He smiled involuntarily at the memory of her fierce glare and angry rebuttal. That memory also brought on the cold embrace of melancholy.

*'Stay safe. I mean it, I want to come back and see you some day.'*

Well, she never had. Not a visit. Not a vid. Not even a text message.

He knew she was still alive, her ship registration was filed with Galcop and anyone could look up location information after it was declassified after a month or so. She'd been travelling around a lot, never staying in one place for long, always on the move, staying true to her trader upbringing. She'd recently graduated to 'Deadly' on the old-style 'Elite' rating system. She'd visited her home planet of Tianve a number of times, but she'd never come within witch-space range of Onrira. The last indication showed she was heading back towards the North East Quadrant, passing through the troubled central systems like Zadies, Solageon, Esusti and Sotiqu, presumably on some lucrative trading run.

He'd sent a couple of vids, but they had gone unanswered, in fact he'd been able to tell they had not even been viewed.

*It's been two years! She's moved on, and you need to move on too. For God's sake find yourself something worthwhile to do and forget her!*

The Tru-vid burred on to itself, switching channels in response to a news flash.

'...and we bring you breaking news on yet another mysterious attack on Galcop staff! Zerz Furvel, Galcop's chief technician, was killed this afternoon whilst travelling to a conference on Diso when the auto-pilot of his Boa Class Cruiser appeared to go haywire and rammed the ship into Diso Coriolis two!

'It took several hours for rescue staff to penetrate the shattered Boa and get to Zerz, whereupon he was rushed to hospital aboard the space station. Sadly, Zerz Furvel later died partly as a result of his injuries, and partly due to radiation and exposure caused by the failure of on-board systems after the crash. Galcop security has confirmed that the shadow organization 'The Dark Wheel' is once again claiming responsibility for the attack.

'Travel in and out of the Diso system remains problematic and doesn't look to be getting any better in the immediate future. We tried to get a statement out of Galcop, but they declined to comment. Does Galcop have this situation in hand, or have we got a terrorist threat on our hands? Truth is, we don't know. This is Anna Mereso, at Diso, for the Tionisla Chronicle, Wideband channel three-eight-five-point-two...'

Jim had sat bolt upright, frowning in surprise at the vid-cast. Zerz Furvel! Jim had only met him once, but the name was almost too familiar. Zerz had been the one who had stumbled across his Q-Bomb design schematics, reverse engineered them and constructed the first pair of working prototypes Jim had later ended up stealing aboard the SuperCobra. He was a brilliant man, but misguided in Jim's view and overly fanatical about the future of Galcop. He, and a bunch of other high level officials, seemed to be paranoid that Galcop's future was in jeopardy. He'd managed to escape the demise of the military chief of staff by some clever political manoeuvring, but Jim had never forgotten that he'd been at least partially responsible for the death of his friend Geraint, and the abortive coup to attack the Imperial capital – Achenar – and all that had transpired as a result.

*Now he is dead too, assassinated by these bizarre people, the Dark Wheel...*

Jim couldn't see what they were hoping to achieve by these high profile murders. Neither could he see how these people were connected, other than they were Galcop officials. What did the Dark Wheel have against Galcop anyway? It was the topic of conversation on a hundred worlds.

The Members of the Dark Wheel, or rather those suspected of being members, as it wasn't an official organisation, had all disappeared without a trace. Galcop was rumoured to be hunting them down covertly.

Jim ran back through his mind all that he knew about the Dark Wheel. According to most reports they were a semi-legendary space unit, star-riders who made it their business to seek the truth behind the plethora of myths and romantic stories that filtered back from all corners of the Universe: fabulous cities, parallel worlds, time travellers, even planets that appeared to be the old 'heaven' of Earth legend. The Dark Wheel was as mysterious and as mythical to the traders of the Galaxy as the fabled generation ships.

They were usually discussed in the same breath as that other fairy story: Raxxla; the mythical planet of dreams and false hopes. Of course, any suggestion you took the legend of Raxxla seriously blew all your credibility out of the airlock, so the Dark Wheel, once a fairly respectable troop of space adventurers, had until now been regarded as something as a joke; a bunch of crazy, but harmless, ageing pilots who liked to believe in magic and otherworldly stuff.

Jim had little time for it. As a scientist he believed in empirical fact, not mysticism. There was space, planets, suns, nebulae and a bunch of people trying to make money by dragging stuff through the hard radiation between them all. That was all there was.

The only other fact of interest regarding the Dark Wheel was that it was an invitation only club. You couldn't go and join up if you just so desired it. It was very much a case of 'Don't call us, we'll call you'.

*Doubt anyone would join up now even if the invitation was platinum plated!*

Quite why they had suddenly turned to murdering people was beyond him, it seemed unlikely behaviour for a bunch of half crazy old men.

The door buzzer sounded.

'Come!' Jim called, his attention still focussed on the Tru-vid.

The door slid open, revealing two Galcop guards, armed with rifles. Jim turned in surprise.

'Professor Jim McKenna?'

'Yes, that's me.'

'Please come with us, Professor.'

'Why? What's this all about?' Jim demanded, looking from one to the other.

'Just come with us, Professor,' the first said darkly, heavily. Both guards stepped into the room.

'Now just a minute, you can't come in without...!' Jim began, standing up and backing towards the rear of the apartment.

Both guards brought up their rifles with a smooth flourish. Jim could hear the power packs humming. These guys were serious.

'Jim McKenna, you're under arrest.'

Jim stared at them, dumbfounded. 'On what grounds?'

'On suspicion of murdering Zerz Furvel.'

## Chapter Three

A trader's life was not an easy one.

Making a living in the empty wastes of space was a game of chance. Each day was uncertain. Prices rose and fell, societies' demands changed in a fickle way, sometimes overnight; often making a prized cargo a bunch of useless canisters in a matter of hours. Sometimes it was hard to make a sale. Negotiations on the outer worlds could get interesting, often at the point of a blaster.

The inner worlds, though more automated and more predictable, were costlier. You needed permits, tariffs, taxes, insurance, fees; it was a never ending list. Everything took a slice out of your revenue; increasing your outgoings, denting your profits.

Some folk couldn't make it and went bankrupt. Others turned to a life of crime, preying on those still in business. The pirates were no romantic swashbucklers; they were desperate people, fighting to stay alive and one step ahead of the law. If you were starving you tended not to look too carefully where your next meal was coming from.

Of course, if you stuck to the more salubrious systems, the 'Corporates' and 'Democracies', everything usually went swimmingly. You could pretty much guarantee staying alive, though once the officials had taken ninety five percent of your earnings in assorted fees and taxes you might wonder why you'd bothered. You had to pay for that police Viper surveillance.

Lower down the scale the 'Multi-Government' societies and 'Confederations' were more risky, but less costly and more profitable. You had to take your laser and a pack of missiles with you for those hops, just in case.

If you wanted maximum profits you aimed for the 'Communist' and 'Feudal' systems. Life was rough here, and you'd be well advised to make sure your ship was kitted out with an 'iron-ass', to use the trader vernacular. That meant a ship with boosted shields, a decent beam laser or two, hardened missiles, an ECM, more energy and not least, a fraggin good pilot.

Of course, only the most financially desperate would even consider venturing into the Anarchic systems to trade. There was hardly any Galcop presence and most of the systems in question featured a menagerie of pirate vessels fighting over anything of value. Short of a military spec fighting ship, it was almost certain suicide.

'Police coming!' D'vlin's odd voice crackled across from the comm-station. One of his eyes was focused on the scanner, another on the viewscreen and a third was looking at the ship's time-piece. 'Five minutes!'

'Might as well be five years for all the good it will do!' Captain Hesperus hissed crossly, wrapping his tail around his haunches as the Python's helm swung about. His gamble had failed. He felt the cold clutch of fear cramping his stomach. Either that or it was down to a bad batch of goat soup.

Captain Hesperus, a rather cuddly, yet surprisingly elegant, grey-furred feline from the planet Orrira, started young in his ambition to be inordinately rich and never have to work again. It was fair to say that his career hadn't quite gone to plan. Caught smuggling narcotics and other associated illegal cargoes by a Galcop sting operation, he'd spent a number of years in Galpen under lock and key. Still convinced the universe owed him a living, he'd continued with a series of complex financial undertakings with scant reference to Galcop or planet-side legislation, which ended up leaving the feckless Hesperus bemused, bankrupt and, at one point, married to no less than eight females of different species and one hermaphrodite lobster.

He now was the (almost) legal owner of a rather decrepit Python class cruiser called the *Dubious Profit*.

Four tough looking Asps in tight formation were now rapidly bearing down on his ship. Another ship was holding back, some kind of large freighter according to the mass signature. Given that all four of the Asp's had a firm missile lock, Captain Hesperus had reluctantly come to the conclusion that they probably weren't part of an honour escort for famous space celebrities such as himself.

'Rus!' he snapped out across the intercom. 'I need full power now, or we're all dead!'

There was a peculiar roar from below decks by way of response.

The engine room of the *Dubious Profit* was inhabited by a blue six-foot-four-inch horned lizard from Inera. Hesperus had enjoyed a very a brief conversation with said lizard when boarding the *Dubious Profit* for the first time which revealed that the lizard's name was 'Rus', that he was the ship's chief technician and that the ship's previous owner owed him eight months back-pay. It took less than three seconds for Hesperus to hire him and all of four seconds for the lizard to let go of his throat and allow air to enter his lungs again.

'Five ships!' D'vlin clicked in horror. 'Frak! Novamash! Coming fast!'

D'vlin Nil was a furry, aubergine coloured Reredian insectoid who'd been hired as ship's system engineer on the basis that he said that he'd worked for the Galactic Navy in the past. Later investigation revealed his work experience was solely concerned with dusting the control consoles of Navy Asps with his furry abdomen. Like most insectoids, he had difficulty in communicating in common speak. He was unable to grasp anything other than verbs, nouns and a variety of swear words in various languages. To be fair, he did know his way around ship's systems and was good at making temporary repairs. This was skill that was firmly in-line with the general state of play aboard the *Dubious Profit*.

'Stand down!' came an imperious order over the narrowband from the unknown freighter, 'Dump your cargo and you can go free, ten seconds or my boys mess you up good.'

Hesperus had tried all the usual tricks to avoid pirates. Come out of witchspace a fraction early, heel over ninety degrees straight away and torus jump away from the space lane running between the jump point and the planet. Get out of sight. It had worked for him before. Of course, the pirates knew these techniques as well, and must have spotted them coming in. The problem with being away from the space lane was that it would take far longer for any help to arrive, the few police that were about were a long way off.

*Four Asps! Why don't we EVER get any luck?*

'Bastard pirates! Stepan, get your claws up here!' Hesperus screeched into the intercom.

'What do?' D'vlin asked.

'We stall! If we dump the cargo we're broke,' Hesperus said.

'Not dump cargo we dead!' D'vlin retorted, snapping his mandibles together in alarm.

Hesperus hissed and flashed out his molybdenum-coated claws in a warning, grabbed the comm-link and thumbed the transmit button for the narrowband comms.

'Oh, please!' he miaowed across the airwaves. 'Our hold grapples are off-line, we'll need a few minutes to eject, please don't shoot, please, we'll do our best for you fine gentlefolk...'

The crew of the *Dubious Profit* had fallen on hard times. More accurately, they had fallen on worse times. Hesperus had continued his trait of making poorly judged deals, and this, combined with a variety of mishaps, ship breakdowns and plain old bad luck, had forced them into a do or die trading run through the Sotiqu system. A net profit of one thousand, three hundred and fifty credits per tonne was too much for them to resist, particularly when they were flat broke.

'Five seconds,' came the imperious answer from the pirate vessel.

'Canines!' Hesperus snapped, dropping the commlink again. 'Didn't even go for my cute little kitten routine. Blast the closest Asp!'

'We're fighting?' Stepan said incredulously, emerging from below decks and jumping into the pilot's chair, sweeping a huge pile of sweet wrappers onto the floor in the process. 'Are you mad? What happens if we all get killed? I am not taking responsibility...'

Stepan McLane was a large Erbitian feline who applied for a job as navigator. After signing up, it had taken him two days to find the *Dubious Profit's* docking bay. Stepan seemed to eat nothing else but Diso's favourite brand of feline 'Chewi-bars' and, for a cat, had lamentable personal hygiene. He made up for it by being a dab hand at combat. He'd claimed he was 'Dangerous'. This turned out to be literally true, rather than a reflection of his actual Elite combat rating. By coincidence, his Elite combat rating was 'Competent', which was missing only the prefix 'in' to have been an accurate reflection of his ability rather than his rating.

'Lasers ready,' D'vlin clacked, hitting the boost buttons and watching the charging indicators on the fore and aft laser coils. 'All charged.'

'We've got to stay alive for four minutes that's all,' Hesperus hissed. 'Fire! And try not to break anything expensive!'

Stepan hit the missile firing circuit and two ECM hardened missiles detached from the lower hull, angling towards the first pair of Asps rushing through space towards them, trailing faint blue ionised plasma from their miniature engines. The Asps turned instantly, their engines flaring as they twisted up, attempting to flee. The ringing tones of an ECM echoed through the bridge, but the missiles continued unabated.

'You used two missiles at once?' Hesperus wailed. 'Do you know how much those things cost?!'

'It's up to you!' Stepan spat back, his hackles rising. 'Do you want to be poor and alive, or rich and dead?'

'Neither!' Hesperus hissed.

D'vlin pushed the engines to full power and the Python lurched into forward motion.

'Take them out, lads!' Came the imperious voice.

The third Asp was attempting to shoot down the missiles chasing the first pair of Asps; the fourth Asp was rapidly closing on them. It took a full blast of the Python's high intensity military laser. It rolled aside, but not before it inflicted a fierce assault on their forward shields.

Despite Hesperus' aversion to actually spending hard earned credits, the Python wasn't badly equipped; its shields were boosted, it sported a forward and rear military laser and hardened missiles. However, it lacked the toughest defences and was short on energy. It was also not the most agile of ships. Two Asps might have been a fight it could win, four was uneven odds.

*Three minutes.*

The third Asp succeeded in shooting down a missile. The second missile hit its target, the second Asp reeling out of control before its pilot stabilised it.

Then the attack came. All four Asps managed to pick a vector which brought them simultaneously into a firing arc. The shields failed under the load. Lasers scorched the hull, coming dangerously close to the bridge itself. But the Python was a tough old ship. It weaved again, returning fire with the Asps.

Hesperus' fur was all fluffed up with alarm. Stepan's eyes had narrowed to slits as he concentrated on flying.

*No serious damage, evasive moves! Get some power back into the shields!*

Stepan was a good pilot, but he didn't have the tricks up his sleeve to counter this assault. He rolled the Python in pursuit of one of the Asps. He'd lost count of which one was which now, and any target would do. The Asp was hit, but turned and accelerated out of the way, outrunning the slower Python.

*Two minutes.*

The Asps regrouped and tried their combined attack again. Stepan loosed another missile, forcing them to abandon the formation and deal with it. One hopefully triggered its ECM to no avail. Stepan fired the military laser, watching with satisfaction as the shields on one Asp failed and the laser bit into the hull. The Asp limped away, trailing plasma.

'Take that, and that! Good Stepan!' Hesperus called, punching the air with his paws. 'Got the cops on the scanner, hang on! Vipers inbound! Goat soap for anyone left alive at the end!'

Hesperus, like most felines, was particular about his food and so had also hired a cook, an actual chef from Ordima. He was a green bony bird called Gasazck. Despite this, most meals seemed to consist of variations on goat soup. Gasazck also had some other curious habits, mostly concerned with his wardrobe, that the rest of the crew had decided not to inquire into too closely.

A jolt and shock ran through the Python. The other three Asps had arranged themselves behind them. The rear shields failed.

Warning! ECM System Damaged!

'Cat pee!' Hesperus yelled. 'D'vlin, get your exoskeletal hide down below!'

D'vlin scuttled towards the lower deck access point. 'Me fix!'

The insectoid jumped through the hole in the floor. Moments later there came the sound of a muffled series of thumps punctuated by yelps of pain and surprise.

'How can he miss his footing with six feet?' Hesperus despaired.

*One minute.*

Stepan could see two purple dots approaching on the scanner.

*Only two Vipers?*

'Pirates! Stand down or be destroyed!' came the call on the wideband.

To Hesperus and Stepan's surprise the four Asps suddenly broke off their attack, streaking away from the stricken Python.

'Are we going to make it?' Hesperus breathed, trying to smooth down his fur.

They watched the astrogation console as the Asps withdrew, and then saw them swing around and drive straight at the incoming Vipers, the bright glare of injector powered engines flaring against the stars.

'They're going to attack!' Hesperus yelled. 'Scratch! They're trying to divide and conquer. Get in there!'

Stepan pushed the Python to full speed, but the big ship had no answer to the Asps' injected engines. Hesperus and Stepan watched as the hunters suddenly became the hunted. The Vipers seemed to lack the agility, pace and firepower they were renowned for.

*Probably cheap servicing, lack of spare parts, and bad maintenance! You'd never find me cutting corners like that! Well... not every day.*

The Python joined the fight again as one of the Vipers succumbed, disintegrating in a volley of fire.

'Take that, dog-breath!' Stepan yelled, as the Python barrelled through. One of the Asps, the one that had been damaged earlier, took the full brunt of the Python's firepower and exploded.

'Yes!'

The Python's shields had recovered somewhat in the interlude, but it was still down on power.

D'vlin clattered back from below deck, his shiny thorax plate sporting a definite dent.

'ECM back, how do?'

'Still not good. Local police can't fly for toffee.'

'Bad, bad!' D'vlin responded. He didn't understand adjectives at all, and tended to repeat words for emphasis.

The Python shuddered under another assault. The shields fading back towards failure.

*Even with help we're still in trouble...*

Another blip appeared on the scanner, a ship torus-driving into range and becoming mass-locked by their presence. The scanner confirmed it wasn't a police ship. It was another independent trader, pirate or scavenger most likely. It was something of a reasonable size, another Python, or maybe a Cobra. It was too far away to tell.

*No fraggin use to us either way!*

Hesperus stared as the second police Viper disintegrated; an Asp loomed through the expanding cloud of gas.

'Now for unfinished business... no mercy lads!' came the, now furious sounding, imperious voice once more. The forward shields flickered and collapsed under the impact of the lead Asp's fire power.

'Generator overload!' D'vlin shouted as a panel blew out above his shiny carapace, showering him in sparks. 'Hurt, hurt!'

A roar of outrage came across the intercom from below decks; it was Rus, the lizard.

Hesperus looked across at Stepan. 'What did he say?'

'Something about stringing you up, probably...' Stepan said, listening to the lizard's peculiar mode of communication. 'He says the engines are failing and he cannae get any more power...'

'Engineers!' Hesperus switched the commlink to wideband. 'Mayday, Mayday! Please assist! We're being attacked by marauders; we would really appreciate quite a lot of extremely well armed help at this stage...'

The Python lurched as its drive began to fail catastrophically. Chewi-bar wrappers floated around the cockpit. D'vlin's suckered feet allowed him to remain fixed as the artificial gravity went haywire. By contrast, the two felines ably demonstrated that cats do not always land on their paws.

Hesperus sprang back to his feet and stared in horror at the commlink receiver in his hand. The cable was dangling out of the end, snapped. The rest of it stuck innocently out of the astroga-tion console, sparking indolently.

'Oh, rodents...' he muttered.

'Randomius factoria, I commend my soul to your safe keeping, no more weeping, days of sleeping, food for the eating...' Stepan began to yowl out a feline prayer.

On the vision screen they could see the three remaining Asps regrouping, lining themselves up for a devastating final attack. Hesperus felt his heart beating wildly, felt the blood coursing through his veins, was intimately conscious of his fur rippling and fizzing.

*I can't die with my fur all over the place! I'll never live it down!*

Dimly he was aware of the imperious voice again. It was saying something out of context.

'...just back off! This is no business of yours! They're owned... Yeah? Well, kiss your ugly ass goodbye, bitch! At her, lads!'

A light flickered around the lead Asp.

*The laser about to fire? A missile launch?*

The Asp appeared to hesitate for a moment, altering its stance. Then suddenly it was spinning out of control, a blast of coruscating light framing it from behind in silhouette. Then it disintegrated, showering the two escorting Asps with debris and metallic particles. The Python rocked from the force of the explosion.

'What the frak...'

Behind the shattered remains of the Asp, another ship was rapidly approaching; a wide low and classic ship design, instantly familiar to the Python crew.

'Cobra mark three!' D'vlin twittered, wriggling in excitement, waving four of his legs around.

'No, it's a Cobra Courier,' Stepan argued back. 'Look at the flux panels...'

'I don't give a flying fish what it is, it's helping us out! Get back to the guns!' Hesperus yelled out, waving his paws around theatrically, striking what he thought was a dynamic Captain-like pose. 'Frag the missiles! Full speed ahead!'

The Python swung slowly around, firing once more, as the two remaining Asps barrel rolled in opposite directions away from the demise of their leader, sweeping out and coming in behind the Cobra Courier.

The new ship turned through ninety degrees and then cut its engines abruptly.

'What in the name of...'

The Cobra Courier rolled around on its central axis, pitching upwards and sideways in a strange, alt-azimuth fashion. The Asps, unprepared for a stationary ship directly in front of them, both turned aside in the same direction without firing a shot.

*How did the ship turn that fast? It must have been customised somewhere expensive!*

The Cobra's engines flared brightly as it dropped into pursuit behind them. The Python crew got a brief glimpse of customised near ultra-violet running lights on the base of the Cobra Courier illuminating a hull plate bearing the legend *Eclipse II*.

'Wow! Look!' D'vlin shouted, thumping three of his legs down on the console as the Cobra Courier started firing on the Asps. The bright beam of a military laser flashed out, striking one of the Asps continuously. The Asp ducked and weaved, but the laser tracked with an almost fanatical accuracy. Suddenly the Asp was no more. Unlike the Viper pilots, the Cobra Courier pilot could fly.

The second Asp triggered its fuel injectors, streaking away into the void at high speed, but it was to no avail. The Cobra Courier's laser tracked it with merciless accuracy, pummelling it into submission. It exploded, despite being tens of kilometres away.

'You see? Extreme range! Good, good!' D'vlin clicked.

The Cobra Courier slowed, paused and then heeled over and headed back towards them. The pirate freighter had disappeared from the scanner in the confusion and was nowhere to be seen.

'You don't think...!' Stepan said, watching the Cobra Courier approaching.

Hesperus held his breath. Was the Cobra Courier just the worst of two evils, another pirate intending to claim their cargo? There was no way they could take on a ship like that on equal terms under normal conditions, let alone with the damage they'd suffered. The smell of burnt circuitry wafted through the bridge.

The comm link buzzed, and a female voice crackled across the speakers. It was curiously subdued and quite difficult to hear. 'This is the commander of the *Eclipse*...'

'Here comes...' D'vlin whispered.

'...you're all clear, now let's go home.'

The three of them exhaled simultaneously: 'Thank God.'

Hesperus grabbed the commlink, pressed the button and said grandly. 'This is Captain Hesperus of the ...'

Stepan pointed at the severed cable. 'Uh, Cap...'

'By Dogs!' Hesperus mewed. 'Quick, stand down the missiles and the lasers, flash the hull lights! Wave out the window! Hold up a sign! Do something! Move!'

Hesperus, D'vlin and Stepan managed to limp their damaged Python into system space and towards the welcoming sight of the nearest Coriolis station, escorted by the enigmatic Cobra Courier. There had been no further communication from the other commander, but she had stayed with them all the way into system space. Hesperus wasn't sure whether to be grateful for the help, or annoyed at being babysat. The good news was that even with the damage they had sustained they would make enough profit to get them onto a far firmer financial footing.

It had been too much of a near thing though. None of them had said a word to each other on the inbound flight. Hesperus had retired to his cot for a bath, snooze and preen; he liked to keep his fur in good condition.

Stepan sat back as the auto-dock controllers took hold of the Python and guided it into a vacant berth, matching the roll rate of the Python to the gentle tumble of the space station, for once managing not to scrape any of the remaining paint from the hull. The Cobra Courier was behind them, next in line for docking clearance.

A few moments later a soft thump and a queer moment of nausea followed as the artificial gravity generation of the Python gave way to the larger field generated by the station.

'Docking complete,' the on-board computer announced.

Stepan started the arrangements for repairs and unloading the cargo with the auto-mech units. Then the three crew members disembarked and headed towards the airlock doors at the outer edge of their landing slot.

The view was quite disorienting. They appeared, to all intents and purposes, to be standing inside a hollow cylinder. The 'ground' curved up sharply to their right and left in a huge arc, meeting above them. Dotted all around were other landing pods, with a variety of ships secured against them. From their vantage point, some of the ships appeared to be hanging off the walls, and there was a large Anaconda moored directly 'above' them. They could see a group of passengers milling about it, apparently standing upside down and suspended from the roof.

If you were born to space you never had any problems with things like this. Folks born planet-side tended to either look down, or chuck up.

Another ship was just entering the central corridor of the station from the entry portal. From here, all directions were 'down'. It was the Cobra Courier.

It was obviously a recently built ship: the hull had still not completely lost the polished sheen of brand new duralium, though it had evidently seen some action. The hull had some untreated laser burn scars in places, and there was an indication of at least one or two hull panels having been refitted.

It was a well equipped ship. Hesperus looked with envy at the the forward military laser, the twin power spikes of shield boosters, rare military enhancements, ECM transmitters and the squat dome of an energy bomb housing. Three hard points were boasting a Navy grade hardened missile, the final one had something spherical he didn't recognise.

*One of those fancy new Q-Bombs maybe? Miaow!*

He was curious to meet the commander. It required a rich owner to run such a ship. The Cobra Courier was not a cheap vessel, retailing at over fifty percent more than the basic Mk3 Cobra on which it was loosely based. This one wasn't far from being brand new. The voice they had heard on the narrowband was to the point, no-nonsense and typically trader tough. Hesperus knew how hard it was to make a living in space with a crew. It was even harder as a 'lone-wolf' trader. He imagined the commander was a hard nosed old bird of the galaxy; a quick witted, rough and raw space bitch.

*I hope she's not a canine, that would really ruin my day...*

The Cobra Courier rolled slowly around and began to descend on the landing pad adjacent to theirs. The ship settled on its undercarriage and the navigation lights winked out, the hum of the engines fading away. There was a characteristic half visible flicker of light as the shields unfolded from around the ship and dissipated.

'Come on,' Hesperus purred, running a paw over his fur. 'Let's meet our saviour. We ought to buy her a drink or something. We'd be dead otherwise.'

'That's some ship,' Stepan commented, licking his paws, trying to clear away the more obvious signs of his 'Chewi-Bar' fixation.

'Wow, wow, wow!' D'vlin agreed.

All three walked over to the next pad as the docking port doors swung downwards and the internal gantry swung down.

A young human woman walked out, dressed in rather second-hand looking blue overalls. She was quite short, at a shade over five foot tall, her hair cut simply into two straight brown folds on either side of her head. Thin, but not skeletal, she was probably quite pretty to another human. She looked like a decent meal to Hesperus, he was quite partial to simian based delicacies. Cooked

humans were illegal, given the overwhelming human prejudice in the GalCop sphere of influence, but not impossible to come by.

Also obvious was the oversized pistol secured by her side.

*Frak! That looks better than mine! She must be rich! Will she marry me? No bad idea, scratch that...*

Hesperus' immediate thought was that she was a deckhand, a crew member. Cobras sometimes ran with two crew, even though most were piloted by a single occupant. She had to be the ship's grease monkey, doubtless the Captain was waiting for the all clear.

The woman looked over at them, and then confidently walked across, head held high. Hesperus stared in surprise as the Cobra Courier's hatchway closed up behind her.

*This is the commander? She's young even for a human! Where did she learn to fly like that?*

'You're the Captain, I presume?' the young woman said, her voice sounding sharp, intimidating, almost annoyed.

It was the eyes that did it, Hesperus decided as they exchanged a look. The woman looked like a breath of wind might blow her away. But the eyes, a deep brown, were sharp, hard and old beyond their years. They gave the indication of a firm will lurking just below the waif like exterior. This was not someone to be crossed. She was like an iron fist in a velvet glove. Whoever this woman was, she was on a mission. Hesperus was immediately on his guard, sensing trouble.

*Let's wind this up as fast as we can and get out of here...*

He purred, preening himself. 'Captain Hesperus. This is the *Dubious Profit* and this is my crew...'

The woman looked over the battered Python, her eyes resting briefly on some glowing green sludge that was dripping from one of the engine cooling manifolds.

'Rebecca. Rebecca Weston,' she said distractedly, trying to look around Hesperus for a closer view of the growing puddle of goo on the landing pad. 'What is that stuff...?'

'...Don't be alarmed!' Hesperus said, sidling across to block her view again. 'We're experimenting with some new drive modifications, top spec, latest tech... very secret! My crew would like to express their appreciation...'

Stepan and D'vlin were simply staring at the woman. Stepan was licking his chops, while D'vlin had reared up on his rear legs for a better sniff and was fluttering his antennae around. Re-

becca turn her attention to them, waiting expectantly. She gave them a quick impatient glance.

'Yes?'

'Lads...' Hesperus prompted.

Stepan recovered first, and then they both began to gabble.

'Oh, I er... sorry. Stepan Nil, first mate on the *Dubious Profit*...' he said amiably. 'I'm the pilot... er... navigator... er... type person.'

D'vlin wriggled his antennae. 'Me, me! Engineer! Thanks rescue! Pirates kill! Not so...'

Rebecca looked slightly pained and interrupted them.

'Pleasure,' she said dismissively. She ignored both of them, returning her cold gaze to Hesperus. D'vlin's antennae drooped. His feelings were easily hurt.

*Charming, these humans! Time to make our exit, I think. Been lovely meeting you and your attitude problem...*

'Well, on behalf of the crew of the *Dubious Profit*, our hearty thanks Commander,' Hesperus began, hoping the woman wouldn't take him up on what he was about to offer. 'We've not got much to spare, but if there is anything we can offer you in exchange for your help...'

Rebecca raised an eyebrow and tilted her head expectantly.

*Then again, I know what she needs... something to ease away her stress...*

'...Are you looking for a cute and fluffy companion for those long interstellar journeys perchance?' Hesperus said, turning on his feline charm. 'We have some rare, exotic and adorable creatures from the far flung corners of the galaxy aboard that would give a lovely lady such as yourself much care and affection in the dark and lonely...'

'I know what a Trumble is!' Rebecca hissed in response. 'Don't bother. I had one once and it ate an entire crate of Lavian tree grubs before I managed pin it to my fuel scoop and went sun skimming. It took me ages to scrape the carcass out of the intakes!'

'Oh. In that case I'm not sure...' Hesperus examined his paws, nonplussed. Stepan and D'vlin winced and exchanged a look of distaste.

'You can just do me a big favour and promise not to fly into an anarchic system again, Captain,' Rebecca continued hotly. 'It was madness! Your ship is under-powered and under-spec. Your flying skills were pish. You deserved to be shot up. You got lucky this time, don't depend on it again.' She turned on her heel and made to leave, looking over her shoulder at them. '...Most don't get a second chance.'

Hesperus' claws flicked out, scratching the surface of the docking port.

*Ooo! Touchy! Get yourself another scratching post human girl!*

Then she was gone, walking swiftly towards the airlock that led to the interior of the station, leaving Stepan with his ears sticking way up in outrage, D'vlin looking as if a missile had just slammed up his thorax and Hesperus fuming, whipping his tail back and forth in indignation.

*Well, at least it didn't cost me anything.*

'Who does she think she is?' Hesperus growled, his fur bristling. It would take him ages to comb it all out again.

Stepan handed him a comm unit showing a basic ident trace.

Commander Rebecca Weston

Credit Rating Triple A

Legal Status Clean

Rank Deadly

'Rich Girl,' D'vlin clicked in awe. 'Deadly fighter! Tasty human! Neat, neat!'

'You shouldn't have tried to give her a Trumble as a token of your appreciation,' Stepan added. 'That's low.'

'Cheeky, cheeky!' D'Vlin squeaked, nodding vigorously.

Hesperus almost let out a choice feline expletive at the departing figure, but then caught himself in an unusual moment of lucid thought.

*The little hard-nosed bitch was right, frag her. She was right. Maybe I should rethink things a bit...*

Rebecca sat in a dark corner of one of the seedier bars on the station, nursing a plastic cup filled with Anlian heavy gin. It was a peculiar distillate, which couldn't be served in glass as it tended to react and dissolve. They said drinking it was like having your brains smashed out. Some reported strange 'trips' afterwards, often involving dreams of gold bricks and slices of lemon.

Rebecca liked the lower gravity here near the axis, having spent most of her life aboard ships and stations. She didn't like looking out of the windows at the station edge either, it made her dizzy. She also liked to be left alone.

A tear dripped down her cheek. She angrily brushed it aside, rubbing it away furiously. She turned the cup around a few times without taking a sip.

The rest of the bar was cluttered with an assortment of off-worlders, felines, grubs, insectoids and a variety of humans sharing little in common other than a desire to drink too much alcohol and forget about stuff. They had all come from worlds of different gravity and surface conditions. She'd walked past a group of overweight traders boasting with each other over who would achieve the rank of 'Dangerous' first.

Most traders could achieve a rank of 'Dangerous' within about five years in space. Arguably, if you wanted the big profits, you wouldn't last long unless you achieved a rating of that level. A great many pilots were 'Dangerous'; it implied you were a seasoned space dog, ready for anything, though virtually all your kills would have been in self defence.

Reaching the giddy height of 'Deadly' required a lot more dedication. It meant you had deliberately sought out danger, witchspacing into difficult systems and facing down fierce opponents; perhaps even taking on covert military missions. 'Deadly' implied you were not just a trader, but a fighter as well; going on the offensive, taking big risks.

Rebecca had done all of these things. What was more, she had done them in less than two years.

That was virtually unheard of. 'Deadly' was a rank associated with advanced skills, a rank that indicated you were cut out for bigger things, that you might be 'Elite' material. It indicated a single minded fixation on killing for killing's sake, a hunter, someone apart from normal society.

'Elite', of course, was something else.

Rebecca could often be found in these sort of places. Always half hidden, always alone.

She was looking for something she couldn't find. She hardly slept, catnapping on the bridge of her ship, safely out in the void. Always moving on, never staying in the same place for long. Searching, always searching; fighting her way through anything in her path. Hundreds of pirate vessels had met oblivion under her laser and missile attacks. She was tenacious and vicious in combat, single minded and emotionless. For pirates she gave no quarter, and asked for none.

She'd been everywhere in Chart One from Tianve to Riedquat and back looking for an trace of a nameless combateer and the distinctive shape of an Imperial Courier.

She'd gotten leads, clues that pushed her onwards into different systems. Each time the trail led her away from the civilized systems into some of the frontier worlds, across interstellar space

and then looped back on itself towards the Galcop core. Every time the trail had gone cold, forcing her to start again. It was like hunting for Raxxla.

The vision of the assassin's ship witchspacing away while she impotently watched from the deck of the shattered SuperCobra haunted her dreams, both waking and sleeping. It was out there, somewhere. She couldn't shake herself of the memory.

*My father, brother, cousins, my entire family all gone, blown away...*

Only an hour before their deaths she had been intending to jump ship, running to pursue her own selfish dreams of independence, leaving them high and dry without her.

*He destroyed my life, and I will destroy his!*

Guilt, shame and the need for atonement drove her. She'd rescued countless beleaguered traders over the last few months, savaging her way into pirate attacks and decimating them all. Traders were always falling over themselves in gratitude, but no number of good deeds was able to fill the aching void she felt every time the last pirate vaporised in a flash of disintegrating duralium. There was never a tatty Boa, two sidewinders and a creaky old Cobra Mk1 waiting for her; only strangers like that daft cat and his motley crew. Despite their narcissistic tendencies, she had a soft spot for the feline races of the galaxy, having grown up on Tianve with its famous 'Pulsar Cats'. It was difficult to ignore the distinctive plaintive cry of distress on the wideband.

There was only one planet she hadn't been inclined to visit.

Onrira.

There was no point going there. It was a high tech world, crowded out with Galcop citizens, barely any crime, almost total surveillance, sky high prices and heavy regulation. No assassin could hide in such a place.

*He told me not to go looking...*

Jim McKenna lived on the Torus station at Onrira. 'Harmless' was her nickname for him. Her erstwhile partner in crime. He was the stuffy academic who had shared that ridiculous escapade over the equally ridiculous Q-Bomb.

*What an idiot he was – 'Harmless'! Lucky I was there, he'd have been dead without me!*

Anyway, going to Onrira might unwitting lead the assassin to discover him again. She owed him that much. She'd not involve him in her hunt. He wouldn't approve anyway. He'd give her another lecture.

*Like I need that!*

She worked alone, it was easier. She was protecting him, stupid fool. That was the reason. He was just a lab boy who couldn't fend for himself. Nothing more than that. Onrira was just going to be a safe port in a storm one day.

*Why can't I watch the vids he sent then? No point, probably just some boring tattle about Onririan politics...*

Another tear formed at the corner of her eye. Her hand shook.

*He's got class, I'm just a trader! We had nothing in common! It's been years anyway! He's no different from any of the others! JUST STOP THINKING ABOUT IT!*

The plastic cup cracked and broke in her hand, the Anlian gin spraying across the table and splashing on her hand. She could feel the cold as the liquid evaporated, and the heat as it mildly burnt her skin.

'Good evening, Commander. I trust I'm not bothering you unduly.'

Rebecca was jolted out of her reverie and looked up into the hooded cowl of a heavily cloaked figure. She hadn't even noticed him arrive. His face was shadowed, and he gave the impression of being hunched over. His voice was rough, as if he'd suffered some accident or disease that had affected his vocal cords. Yet the accent was cultured, sophisticated even.

'What do you want?' she snapped aggressively.

'Actually, I'm keen to discuss what you need,' he said, rather enigmatically.

'Well, you can ship out,' Rebecca replied. 'I'm not buying any Trumbles!'

'Which is good, as I'm not selling any,' he replied smoothly. 'Don't take me for some conjurer of cheap tricks. I'm trying to help you. May I replace your drink, Miss Tyley?'

Rebecca was about to tell him where to stick his drink when she suddenly realised what he had called her. She stared up at him in shock.

'Good to see you're discrete about it,' he said, with a hint of humour in his voice. 'I know a lot about you.'

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'Yes, you do, Rebecca Tyley,' he said dismissively. 'Let's not play games.'

'That's not my name,' Rebecca spluttered. 'I'm Weston, not Tyley. You're mistaking me for someone else...'

'Rebecca Tyley,' he replied, his voice lowered. 'Born in orbit of Tianve, daughter of Reet Tyley, nearly lost aboard the Boa class freighter *Eclipse* when it was destroyed, involved in the Q-Bomb affair and responsible for the destruction of a Thargoid...'

'Enough! Keep your voice down!' she hissed. 'That's supposed to be classified information! Who are you? Some kind of cop? I haven't broken any of the rules I was given!'

'Calm down,' he smiled. 'I'd forgotten how... Listen. I'm not with the Galactic Co-operative, I'm your friend.'

Rebecca's eyes narrowed, and painfully said, 'I don't... I don't have any friends.'

The man paused, as if considering. 'Oh, yes. Well. A benefactor, then. I mean you no harm.'

'Like, I've not heard that one before!' Rebecca almost decided to get up and leave, but she had had her curiosity piqued. She folded her arms and sat aside slightly, glaring at the man in pointed silence. He didn't move.

Rebecca capitulated. 'All right. You've got my attention. Gin is my poison.'

The man gestured briefly and a barkeeper provided them with fresh heavy gins after another brief spell of uncomfortable silence.

'So, what do you want?' she repeated, glaring at him.

The man put his hand into the folds of his cloak. Rebecca stiffened, her hand resting on the blaster at her side. The man pulled out a thin black wallet and opened it, turned it around and pushed it gently across the table towards her.

Inside was a picture, blurred, magnified and enhanced, but unmistakable. Rebecca stared at it, drawing a sharp gasp.

'It's been causing some trouble for me,' the man said. 'Steps have been taken and found ineffective. This was taken by the ident computer on one of my ships.'

The picture showed a ship, angled half aside from the perspective of the camera, apparently in the process of turning in toward it. A stream of fire was issuing from the forward gun emplacement, arcing towards the camera's vantage point. The weapon wasn't a military laser, it was something else, something she wasn't familiar with. But there was no mistaking the outline of an Imperial Courier.

'When and where was this?' Rebecca demanded immediately.

'I'm not prepared to give you the details yet.'

'Why is he after you and yours?'

'As yet, I don't know. What I do know is that a one of my Elite pilots was killed by this ship. My pilots do not die easily, but we were outclassed. Apparently my colleague was killed within three seconds of being fired upon.'

*Three seconds!*

'What kind of gun can...'

'Only one person has faced this assassin and lived to tell the tale,' the man interrupted. 'I need your help.'

Rebecca stared at him. 'Me? But I'm not Elite, I'm not even close! I got lucky!'

'There is no such thing as luck, and the rating matters less than the ability. You survived, that makes you unique.'

'So?'

'As I said, I need your help.'

'And this matters to me... why, exactly?'

The man sat back and took a long pull of his drink. He seemed to be regarding her from deep within his hood.

'We've been watching you, Rebecca.'

'We?'

'You've been travelling from one end of the galaxy to the other, looking for this ship for almost two years, without finding it.'

'Who is 'we'? she demanded, leaning forward aggressively.

'This ship killed your family. You want vengeance, and yet you can't find it. We can tell you where it is. In exchange, you kill it for us.'

'Who the frak are you?' she grated out, between clenched teeth.

The man raised his hands and gently lowered his hood, revealing the face of an old, grey-bearded man. He was tall and carried himself with an air of practised authority. He looked back at her with a piercing gaze. There was something familiar about his eyes, as if she'd met him before somewhere, but she couldn't place him.

'My dear, haven't you guessed?' he said with a smile.

'No,' she replied annoyed. 'And you can stop playing games yourself!'

'Very well,' he said, folding his arms. 'You're doubtless aware of the high profile murders that have recently taken place.'

'Of course. It's all over the news; Triboner. Tinuviel and Neseva here on Sotiqu... and what's his name on Diso...'

'Zerz Furvel.'

'That's him, so what? They were done by the...'

The man smiled his enigmatic smile as Rebecca stared back at him, her mouth dropping open.

'Yes. That's right, my dear,' the man intoned. 'The Dark Wheel.'

## Chapter Four

Jim hands had been secured with energy binders and he was unceremoniously escorted below decks on the Onrira station under armed guard. He received no interrogation other than a simple DNA ID check with a morose and taciturn custody officer. He was placed in a featureless grey holding cell that contained nothing but a simple, padded bench and a toilet.

Throughout all this none of the guards had spoken a word and Jim's demands for legal council had been comprehensively ignored by all. The rational part of his mind told him not to struggle or make a nuisance of himself, the rest of him raged with frustration.

'Frak it! This is outrageous! It's illegal! You've blown your case wide open with this! I have rights! Do you hear me?'

The cell door had been locked and fused, becoming part of the cell, indistinguishable from the rest of the wall. He didn't suffer from claustrophobia, but it wasn't a pleasant feeling being completely enclosed in this way. He banged the door with his fists. It was futile.

How could he possibly be a suspect for murdering Zerz? He'd only met the man a couple of times and he'd been teaching at the time of the incident.

*I've got a cast iron alibi! Twenty Sci-Ed students! They know I didn't do this!*

Two hours passed without incident, before the cell door unfused, unlocked and opened.

Two Galnavy marines gestured to him. Both were decked in dark metal body armour, with heavy fitted helmets and plastinium visors. They both carried assault rifles.

'You're coming with us.'

'I'm not going anywhere until I get some answers!' Jim fumed at them belligerently.

'Prof,' the more senior one replied easily, 'we can do this the easy way, or the hard way. Either way, you're coming with us. It's your choice.'

Jim took another look at their muscle bound physiques and relented.

He was frogmarched down to the docking ring. At every intersection was a combination of GalNavy marines and Galcop enforcement officers. Jim was forced aboard a Viper patrol ship. From there the Viper rapidly departed the station. It was joined by four more Vipers which had been on patrol outside, which were in turn escorted by a full squadron of military spec Asps.

*A full squadron? They're acting like I'm public enemy number one, two and three!*

Jim could just overhear the chatter on the narrowband comms.

'Flight formation delta wing.'

'Roger.'

'Full throttle, shields at full power, all weapons online.'

'Scanner reads clear.'

'Target secure, proceeding to way point.'

From his position at the rear of the Viper, he could see one of the pilots entering witchspace co-ordinates. He frowned, it looked like a mis-jump, the co-ordinates were for interstellar space...

On the view screen the witchspace tunnel opened up in front of them, accompanied by the familiar, and yet still sickening, sensation of dropping over a precipice. Jim didn't think he'd ever get used to the feeling.

Fortunately it was quick, and the fleet emerged into the darkness of the void between stars, assuming their formation almost immediately and driving forward into the blackness.

Jim noticed the pilots looked nervous, checking and re-checking their instruments, particularly the long range scanners.

*What in God's name could possibly be a threat to this mini armada?*

'Anomaly at quad five.'

'Checking... asteroid, all clear.'

'Target two locked in. All ships resume delta formation.'

'Roger, checked in.'

'Standby injectors.'

'Roger, sync'd and ready.'

'Engage.'

All the ships streaked forward into the darkness.

*What the frak is going on here? Even if I had murdered Zerz, there would be no reason for all of this!*

On the view screen there was something just becoming visible; a dark metallic object, roughly rectangular in appearance. Jim frowned. Whatever it was it wasn't rotating and there was

no way it could be a station out here in interstellar space. He could see from the scanner that it was still out of range. Whatever it was, it was big.

As they closed it rapidly grew larger, assuming the form of a massive vessel. Jim could see huge drive exhausts (big enough to swallow the average ship), windows and communication antennas, and most threateningly, the poised turrets of some plasma based weaponry.

It was a monstrous ship. A hulking mass of power, concentrated into a dark and forbidding visage. It dwarfed the smaller ships as they approached and swung around towards the rear. The ships rocked slightly as they crossed the bigger ship's engine wake.

*It has its own docking bay!*

Jim had never seen anything like it, not even the Thargoids had something like this. A Galcop super vessel; a battleship, a dreadnought, no... a behemoth!

The Asps peeled off and assumed guard positions around the super vessel. The Vipers slowly filed into the hangar, and docked as if nothing were amiss. The rear hatch opened and Jim was ushered out into the docking bay.

Inside he was acutely conscious of the ranks of assembled GalNavy soldiers, marines and other armed personnel. There were hundreds of them, engaged in various activities; servicing ships, organising supplies and marshalling other staff. It looked like full scale war preparations.

Jim felt a gloved hand shove him forward toward the interior of the ship. Together they marched through dreary, austere, gun-metal grey corridors until they came upon a closed door. As the marines released him from his binders the door hissed open. They gestured for him to enter. He stood rubbing his wrists and glaring at them, making no effort to comply. They raised their rifles, repeating the gesture. Not wanting to test their resolve he turned and entered the room. The door hissed shut behind him.

Jim blinked. The inside of the room was not a cell, as he'd expected, but an ornate and extremely plush lounge, complete with subtle mood up-lighting, comfortable chairs, coffee tables, cushions, hanging rugs and the trappings of luxury all around. It looked like a plush hotel lobby. Huge plastinium windows provided a view out into the void.

'Good, I see you have arrived safely. All is in order.' A man was standing close to the windows, looking out at the distant stars.

The voice was familiar. Jim recognised him immediately, it was the President of the Galactic Co-operative.

'We meet again, Mr. Feynman,' the President smiled, turning around and crossing the distance between them in a few strides. He extended his hand.

Jim hadn't heard his original surname for so long it seemed almost unnatural.

'I don't understand,' he said stiffly, warily. The President lowered his hand when Jim did not take it.

'Relax, Jim,' the President continued. 'I regret the manner in which you were brought here, but it was most necessary. It had to look convincing. We have something of a situation.'

'Why am I here? I didn't murder Zerz.'

'I know. You are not under arrest. Relax.'

'Then why...?'

'I will elucidate. Allow me to explain.' The President indicated for Jim to sit opposite him on one of the comfy lounge chairs. 'Sit. Help yourself to a drink.'

Jim poured himself a fruit extract and then sat back, regarding the President.

'What do you think of our latest ship?' The President said, gesturing around at the enormous room.

'Very impressive. Good to see my taxes are being well spent.'

'Our latest addition in the war against the Thargoids. Perhaps we will manage to gain the upper hand again.'

'Since you've referred to me as Mr. Feynman, I'm assuming that this has something to do with our previous meeting.'

'It does,' the President replied. 'Tell me. What do you know of an organisation known as the Dark Wheel?'

Jim almost choked on his drink. 'The Dark Wheel? They're a bunch of crazy old men who think they're mystical. You don't really think they're behind Zerz' murder, do you?'

'It seems incredible, I agree,' the President smiled, 'given their reputation. However, the image portrayed in public is not... entirely accurate.'

'What do you mean?'

'The Dark Wheel is not merely a troupe of old star-hands, past their prime and dreaming of distant worlds, Jim. The reality is that they are a centuries old order of distinguished servants, or

perhaps 'guards' is a more appropriate title. Older than Galcop, older than the treaties. Their image of a band of dusty old wizards is deliberately cultured in order for them to hide behind it.'

' 'Guards'?' Jim said derisively.

'By their own admission they guard certain key secrets from the populace and the government. They operate beyond the law. I've only met them once, when I first became President. They left me in no doubt of both their capability and their intentions.'

'And yet we never see them anywhere.'

'That is the way they want it. However, they are extremely active. They have kept Galcop, the Federation and the Imperials from outright war on a number of occasions. They mediate technology exchange and development. They keep tabs on pirate activity and trim the edges of civilisation, restoring the balance whenever required. They may even keep some of the Thargoids at bay. I am certain they would have intervened in the Q-bomb affair had you not brought it to a satisfactory conclusion yourself.'

'Nonsense, I can't believe...!' Jim stopped at the look on the President's face. It was plain that he was entirely serious. 'So, they are our guardian angels. What does that have to do with Zerz?'

'The Dark Wheel is sworn to protect a number of things,' the President intoned. 'They have a 'code' that every member is required to swear adherence to. They guard a number of things they would refer to as 'relics'.'

'Sounds quasi-religious,' Jim commented dismissively. 'What sort of things?'

'There are many: lost civilisations, pre-tech planets, fragile ecosystems, endangered species...'

'Doesn't sound all that important from a Galcop perspective.'

'There are others of more significance. One of those things is the location of 'Raxxla'.'

*Raxxla?*

Of all the things the President could have said, that was the last one Jim expected to hear. He sat back and frowned at the President. 'All right. I've been a good sport. You'll have to do better than that. What is this all about?'

'I am serious, Jim. This is really about Raxxla..'

'Raxxla?' Jim shook his head. 'Raxxla is a myth; a fairy story. A bedtime fable for children who can't get to sleep at night!'

'Raxxla is real,' the President spoke in measured tones. 'Even Zerz was convinced of it.'

'And I suppose you're going to tell me that all the silly stories are a fabrication put about by the Dark Wheel who are directing what they want us to believe?'

'The murders speak for themselves...'

Jim was staggered. 'You think the Dark Wheel murdered your Galcop staff because they knew something about Raxxla?'

The President smiled. 'Let me fill you in on some other details. Galcop and The Dark Wheel go back a long way. A very long way indeed. Based on the historical evidence I have managed to uncover, Galcop tried to find Raxxla, in secret, many decades ago. The Dark Wheel intervened and stopped us. A reason was given, but deliberately not documented. What that reason was has never been explained, but it is written into the President's terms of office that the agreement with the Dark Wheel must be honoured at any cost. Galcop has obeyed this restriction ever since, as have, quite remarkably, the Imperials and the Federation.'

'What is the nature of this agreement?'

'We have a reciprocal and tacit arrangement with The Dark Wheel. We do not pursue the veracity, or otherwise, of Raxxla. They keep secret from all and sundry any information that they assemble from all sources. They send things of value our way, new technologies and so on. A balance is maintained. Whatever Raxxla does contain, it would seem that it is immensely powerful. The Dark Wheel appears to have good reasons for guarding the location of Raxxla. They protect it with their lives. The agreement has lasted for generations. It is one of the first things each new President is briefed on by the outgoing incumbent.'

'And now?'

The President sighed. 'Doubtless you recall one of my staff, my erstwhile Military Chief of Staff.'

*Oh yes, I remember him...*

Jim nodded. 'The man behind the Achenar plot, project Manhattan. The one who ordered that assassin to kill me.'

'Indeed. He was arrested and scheduled for execution for his part in that affair. He was awaiting trial, locked in our most secure and remote prison facility. Two weeks ago, he was reported missing.'

*He escaped from a secure facility?*

'Missing?'

'He was simply not in his cell when they went to retrieve him. No unauthorised access was detected, only the wreckage of a small transport ship was found. Two pilots were reported missing at the same time, apparently they had left on a conveyance mission, without a flight plan.'

Jim struggled to take this in, the Military Chief of Staff had been a dangerous, powerful man. He gulped down the last of his drink, placing the glass back down on the table. His hand shook as he did so.

'We've been unable to locate him,' the President continued, 'which is one of the reasons I had you moved here.'

'One of the reasons?'

'These recent high profile murders...'

Jim nodded. 'Mahl Triboner and the rest... and Zerz.'

'Yes. What has become clear is how these different people were linked. You see, when we discovered that the Chief had gone missing we began checking all past and present access under his name, every stat, file and trace. A most thorough investigation.'

'And?'

'A single file was missing, checked out of the data core with no copies left behind.'

Jim breathed out. 'Let me guess. Raxxla?'

The President nodded.

'You're trying to tell me there is an official Galcop file on Raxxla and it's gone missing? All those brain dead conspiracy theorists were right? What's in it?'

'I haven't seen it,' the President said, almost impatiently. 'I was not privy to its contents. However, it appears that the Chief did. His secretary at the time, Janu Tinuviel, also had access, as did Tenim Neseva of Galcop security.'

'And Zerz?'

'Galcop's chief technician had a direct report into the military. He saw it too.' The President got to his feet and walked behind the chair he'd been sitting in. He stopped to gaze out at the distant stars for a brief moment, before turning around. 'They have all been killed. A unique code, arranged by us with the Dark Wheel long ago, was transmitted or left at each scene. A stamp of authenticity. They're out there.'

Jim looked up at him.

'So the Dark Wheel has been killing anyone who knows anything about Raxxla, and you think...'

'Your life could also be in danger, given your previous association with the chief and with Zerz.'

'But why? I know nothing about Raxxla! I don't even believe it exists!'

'My analysis is that the Dark Wheel believes we have reneged on our agreement,' the President said. 'Somehow they know that someone with access to Galcop security has recovered the file, so they are eliminating anyone who has knowledge of it. They believe we've changed our minds and are seeking Raxxla covertly. They are duty bound to prevent this.'

'And have you reneged?' Jim said, looking directly at the President.

'There's the mystery. We haven't,' the President said, returning the gaze. 'Not officially, or even unofficially to my knowledge and that of Galcop security. There are only two people who know enough and could possibly be responsible for all of this.'

'The Chief of Staff... who else?' Jim asked.

'Somebody previously in his employ.'

Jim racked his brains for a moment, before gasping. 'The assassin himself!'

'Precisely. We believe that the Chief has gone into hiding, which leaves either him or the assassin with the file. I believe either one or both of them is attempting to locate Raxxla, with the intention of using whatever power it contains for purposes unknown.'

'And the Dark Wheel thinks they are sanctioned by you, and is after Galcop as a result.'

'Precisely. The Chief was one of us after all, and he hired the assassin.' The President finished his drink. 'Jim, I need to bring this under control.'

'And where do I fit in?'

The President sighed. 'I will come to that. I can not have the Dark Wheel murdering Galcop people left, right and centre however pure the motive. This organisation cannot remain above the law. The political ramifications alone are incalculable. There have already been some minor uprisings and local riots. I must be seen to act. I will be forced to declare war on the Dark Wheel unless this conflict can be stopped in short order.'

'I don't give a fraggin about the politics. What does this have to do with me? Why are you telling me this? I told you, I know nothing about Raxxla!' Jim snapped.

The President looked at him intently, and raised his eyebrows. 'You've met this assassin, you've faced him down, you can recognise his ship.'

'So? I'm no combateer! I can't bring him down!'

'I have a solution to that. You'll be able to stop the *Falchion*.'

'*Falchion*?' Jim snapped back. 'What is a *Falchion*?'

'Originally? An ancient weapon, combining the weight and power of an axe with the versatility of a sword. Today it is the code word for our assassin.'

'I'm just a university professor...'

The President smiled, and handed Jim a folio. 'Read this. This was sent to me shortly before... well you have read the news...'

Jim took it.

'...is probably the most brilliant technical mind of our generation. The modified injector technology that led to the development of the Q-Bomb itself is a masterpiece of design and intuition. I was able to duplicate the thinking, but to design it from first principles was a stroke of genius. Jim remains one of our key assets. It is vital he is kept out of sight until we're in a position to manage the Raxxla affair effectively. —Zerz Furvel.'

'You underestimate yourself, like most truly capable people do. You see, Jim, Galcop takes a long term view of events. You are not a university professor because that is all you are capable of. You were put there deliberately.'

'But...'

'Beyond even this affair, things are afoot that may very well shake the fabric of society across the eight charts. Not even the future of Galcop is assured.'

'What do you mean?'

'I can not tell you right now, but Galcop's future may well depend on finding Raxxla.' The President looked crestfallen.

'You've been manipulating me.'

'Encouraging you in particular directions would be the way I would phrase it,' the President returned with a wry grin. 'But yes, and for longer than you probably suspect. If anyone can figure out the mystery of Raxxla it is you. I need our best mind on this.'

Jim felt that he should have been furious, but his emotions seemed oddly reluctant to engage.

'I don't have to help you with this.'

'I certainly can't force you. But we are talking Raxxla here, Jim. Now you know there is a real possibility that it exists, you won't turn down the chance of finding out more about it. Galcop needs you.'

Jim sighed. 'What can you tell me about Raxxla?'

'Precious little without the file,' the President admitted. 'It would seem to be a secret of great power. The location is guarded by the Dark Wheel with singular intent. They would die defending its location, that alone indicates its value. The common threads do seem to indicate a planet, with some kind of immensely powerful portal...'

'So the rumours are true?'

'I would expect them to have some basis in fact.'

Jim exchanged a long look with the President, and then nodded very slightly.

*Anything is better than the life I've been living recently; have they deliberately made my life boring so I would jump at any chance for action? I wonder what Rebecca would make of all of this? I guess I'll never know...*

'Assuming I go, how do you expect me to sneak past the Dark Wheel and this... the *Falchion*? As I recall they are all Elite Combateers. Even with your best pilot...'

'Technology,' the President said with a grin. 'A solution close to your heart. I think you will appreciate it.'

He pressed a few code words into the table top holofac. The image of a small ship appeared, rotating, with attached schematics and data associated with it. Jim frowned; it was an unfamiliar, yet somehow traditional, design.

'Allow me to introduce the Constrictor,' the President said. 'One of our most advanced military prototypes. It is capable of point six light mach, far faster than even the SuperCobra with which you were familiar. Fitted with the latest in AI navigation and M5 multi-tronic combat computers. It is invulnerable to anything less than a long duration high power military laser. We tested it in battle against four military asps with four of our top pilots and it caned them. It can out-fly and out-fight an Elite combateer on its own with no help from you.'

*Four on one and it beat them? Just a computer? Impressive!*

'A ship like that is virtually...'

'...invincible. More than a match for a single Imperial Courier,' the President finished for him. 'Please try not to damage it. It is, shall we say, rather expensive.'

Jim was still staring at the schematics, lost in appreciation.

'How do I find the assassin?'

'Fortunately, all Galcop files contain a witchspace fold. It's a marker we can trace. I doubt the Dark Wheel or the assassin are aware of it, but the Chief of Staff would know. The ship has already been keyed to follow it, but you will need to be discrete. If we can recover the file, we can call off the war. It is as simple as that.'

'Why not just send in the marines?'

'I said discrete! Jim, this has got to be off the record. I need someone I can trust. Someone who understands the nuances of the situation. I need your specialism, not a bunch of muscle bound...'

'...and if it goes wrong you and Galcop can wipe their hands of it all.'

'Plausible deniability?' the President acknowledged with a grim smile. 'Not really. If it does all go wrong, I will have no choice but to send in the marines. I would rather not have to do that, as it would be the end of my term in office. Galcop taking down civilians in full view of the public? I do not want a war with the Dark Wheel, and I seriously doubt they want one either. That alone shows me how important Raxxla is. Naturally I am happy to give you anything you desire as payment.'

'We'll talk about that if I'm successful.'

'You will do it?'

'I'll do it.'

'I knew you were our man. Locate the thief and recover the Raxxla file at all costs. You will leave immediately. It is essential that we re-establish the status quo...'

Rebecca stared at the man in shock, her eyes wide and her face pale. She reached for her blaster and grasped it reassuringly.

'The Dark Wheel? Then what the frak are you doing here?' she hissed. 'I should shop you; the rewards alone...'

'I've already told you. We need your help.'

'I'm not helping a bunch of murdering bastards!'

'The Dark Wheel doesn't murder people in cold blood, Rebecca.'

'Yeah?'

'And, if you don't mind me saying so, you have an interesting attitude to murder given that you are someone who has dealt death to hundreds.'

'Pirates have it coming.'

'Aren't they merely victims of circumstance? Desperate, failed traders?'

Rebecca changed the subject and then glared at him. 'I suppose Mahl, Janu and the others just had some unlucky accidents, what a co-incidence... They found your ID, it was you!'

'Murders have been committed, no doubt about it,' the man continued, 'but not by us. We're merely getting the blame.'

'And I'm supposed to take your word for it, am I? Listen buster, I don't even know your name, let alone what your angle is.'

'I have had a number of names over the years,' the man said with a sudden grin, 'but you can refer to me as Iacobus.'

'Iacobus,' she replied, struggling to pronounce it. 'Bit old fashioned isn't it?'

'I'm an old man,' Iacobus leant back again with a laugh. 'What do you know about us, Rebecca?'

'Not much. You're a bunch of crazy old space hippies, tripping out on adventures and pretending to be mystical, going off on quests to look for dreams and fairy stories. A load of ageing wizards, so they say.'

Iacobus smiled. 'A fair description.'

'And you're going to tell me different.'

'Not exactly. The Dark Wheel primarily exists to guard things: items of importance, secrets of value.'

'Such as?'

'Secrets important enough to kill for.'

'You're going in circles.'

'Let me be plain. Someone is murdering Galcop staff, claiming to be the Dark Wheel. It wasn't us. Someone is murdering my people too. Your assassin is the one after us, and he was previous in the employ of Galcop. Perhaps he is behind these murders too.'

'He's not *my* assassin,' Rebecca said coldly.

'Do you agree with my hypothesis?'

'It makes sense,' she said slowly as if agreeing. Then she raised her voice impatiently, 'Apart from one big question. Why? You dumb ass! That assassin was a hired hand! He was employed by Galcop to kill me and Ji... Mr. Fey.. McKenna. Why would he start attacking them?'

Iacobus smiled at her stutter. 'A higher price? A new contract? Assassins aren't known for their loyalty.'

'But why? Who would want to kill the Dark Wheel and Galcop at the same time?'

'The Federation or the Empire?' Iacobus was obviously leading her along.

'What's the motive? They would risk a war. After the Q-bomb affair none of them want that!'

'Perhaps Galcop themselves.'

'Huh?' Rebecca hadn't seen that coming.

'Consider this. Assume for the moment that you, in fact, trust me implicitly...'

Rebecca coughed theatrically. 'Oh yeah, right.'

'...Galcop and the Dark Wheel have agreements that go back many decades. Just suppose a new government decides that these agreements are too onerous, no longer desirable for some reason. A senior Galcop figure arranges for this assassin to murder their own people, plants evidence to indicate our guilt in order to give it a mandate to pursue the Dark Wheel. They know our 'agreed code', after all. The Dark Wheel members are also murdered by this same assassin. A Galcop plot to eradicate us and we have no choice but to fight back. Galcop has a mandate for a just war against us. Galcop emerges without a stain, and our secrets are available without interference.'

Rebecca looked thoughtful. 'It would have to be someone high up. The President or the Military Chief of... not much different to what happened to us over the Q-Bomb!'

'My point exactly. Galcop has a history of assassinating its own staff. They aren't the most trustworthy organisation.'

'Fraggin Galcop!' Rebecca snapped, and then frowned again. 'Wait a minute. We had a bomb, and we knew about their plan to attack Achenar. They had a good reason for killing us, we

were a threat. Why does Galcop want to attack the Dark Wheel? Answer that! What is it that you people know that is so dangerous?'

Iacobus sighed, looking rather wistful. 'As I mentioned, we have an agreement with them that goes back many decades. They agreed not to search for it, we agreed to keep secure all information about it, preventing it from falling into the hands of... the unworthy.'

'Search for what?'

Iacobus paused, looked at her with a level gaze and then intoned a single word.

'Raxxla.'

Rebecca stared at him for a moment and then burst out laughing. 'Raxxla. You idiot. Look, just tell me where this assassin is and I'll go try to kill him, no need for all of this cloak and dagger nonsense. I thought you were being serious...'

She looked back at him, he hadn't moved. She frowned.

'...you are serious!'

'Indeed.'

'You don't really expect me to believe in Raxxla do you? What about the Ontiatian asteroid eater or the edible poets of yesteryear? What a load of rubbish! I stopped believing in Raxxla when I left my incubator!'

'It doesn't bother me whether you believe or not,' Iacobus replied. 'In fact, it might be better if you didn't. Nevertheless, it is the reason Galcop is attacking the Dark Wheel.'

'No way does Galcop believe in Raxxla, they live in the real world, not fairyland!'

'Even if Galcop as a whole doesn't believe, whoever is behind these attacks does. The Dark Wheel briefed a number of Galcop officials on limited aspects of our knowledge of Raxxla. They had access to a Galcop file. Would you like to take a guess as to who they are?'

Rebecca look at him, eyebrows raised. 'Mahl and the rest?'

Iacobus nodded. 'We believe they were killed because they knew something about Raxxla, either some high official in Galcop is pursuing this, or Galcop themselves have been infiltrated by someone else who is.'

'What is so important about Raxxla then? What is it?'

'I am forbidden from giving you exact details. Suffice to say that Raxxla holds the key to the future of us all, every life form between here and the edge of the charts is subject to its power. If abused, everything could be lost. That is why we guard it so fervently.'

'I thought you lot were supposed to be searching for it! Are you telling me you've actually found it?'

Iacobus merely smiled at her. 'Raxxla was found long ago, in a manner of speaking.'

Rebecca had little time for philosophical musings and grew impatient. 'Whatever. Look, I'll kill the assassin either way, just tell me where he is.'

'I can't.'

'Why the frak not?'

'Because I don't know where he is.'

Rebecca stared. 'Then what was the point of this whole conversation? You're just wasting my time!'

Several people looked over in her direction.

Iacobus smiled to himself, almost as if in fond recall. 'You are hot headed, aren't you?'

'Screw you 'stard!'

'And you have a short temper and a tendency to profanity.'

'Can we quit with the character breakdown?' Rebecca hissed.

Iacobus resumed. 'Finding the assassin is not that straightforward.'

'So how do I...'

'We have intercepted a Galcop transmission. They have received a number of covert messages from one of their operatives. We've been able to deduce the subject was Raxxla, but we've not uncovered any further detail other than a time and location trace. They are launching a covert mission to rendezvous with the current keeper of the file, with a new prototype ship called 'The Constrictor'.'

'So I take them out.'

'No!' Iacobus looked quite alarmed. 'They are your guide! We'd like you to follow the Galcop mission until you discover where they are headed. It should lead you to the assassin. Retrieve the Galcop file first and only then dispose of the assassin. We must regain control of the knowledge of Raxxla.'

'You want me to kill on demand,' Rebecca sounded slightly uncertain. 'You're asking me to become a bounty hunter.'

'You've killed before. You're not naïve, Rebecca, however much it would suit you to appear so. If you want to be Elite, you need to make the hard choices. The assassin is a murderer and you will have no qualms about him. The Galcop mission is an illegal covert operation, outside of jurisdiction in flagrant disregard of an agreement which has kept the peace in this galaxy for decades. Galcop can't come after you officially without admitting the whole sordid affair.'

'They could just assassinate me though!'

'So consider them to be criminals of the highest order, it's not too difficult. You can deal with Galcop, Rebecca. Raxxla is too dangerous, too powerful to fall into the hands of these untrustworthy folk.' Iacobus shrugged. 'Besides, we'd compensate you, of course.'

'Oh, that's sweet of you,' Rebecca said acidly.

'The reward would be...'

'How much?' she interrupted, her trader instincts coming to the fore.

'More wealth than you can imagine.'

'Don't count on it, I can imagine quite a bit.'

'One million credits now, another million when you return with the file and vid proof of the demise of the assassin.'

Rebecca's years of experience allowed her not to react, though her head spun with numbers. Her trader instincts immediately sensed an opportunity.

*Traders' maxim – 'Everything is negotiable'!*

'I want ten million, or no can do,' she said in an offhand manner, casually looking at her fingernails.

'Don't try my patience, young lady,' Iacobus returned, sternly.

'Seven.'

'Two.'

'Five mil, one in advance... and that's my last offer. If I'm so valuable, you'll pay it.'

Iacobus sighed. 'Five million. Success would grant you something far more significant than mere money. You would be offered membership of the Dark Wheel itself.'

*Five million! Membership of the Dark Wheel? Are they serious? They must really be desperate!*

Rebecca shook her head to clear it. 'Sounds lovely. What if I say no?'

'Do you think you're likely to?'

'I like to keep my options open.'

'Then we part company now. You can enjoy the rest of your drink and continue pursuing your fruitless quest. No more contact will be made. You will not encounter the Dark Wheel again. It is unlikely you will find the assassin on your own.'

'Why can't you just go *en masse*? The assassin couldn't hold off a combined attack from you guys even if he could take you out individually.'

The man sighed. 'Firstly, a number of Dark Wheel ships would attract immediate attention. We're in hiding if you recall. Communication is difficult. Galcop would instantly be aware, alter their plans and the assassin would not show his face. He's wily, only striking when the odds are in his favour. He only appears on a one to one basis.'

'True enough.'

'Secondly, you can pose as a normal trader without difficulty. You won't arouse suspicion. Neither Galcop nor the assassin will know you are coming. You're an unknown.'

'Thanks very much,' Rebecca said snidely.

'Thirdly, the members of the Dark Wheel are simply getting too old for this kind of thing. You on the other hand, are young and fresh, not to mention the best combateer we've seen in decades.'

'Flattery will get you everywhere,' Rebecca preened.

'It is not empty praise,' the man replied solemnly. 'The Dark Wheel does not choose just anyone. We are very selective. Few have the calling, and fewer are chosen. I need a decision from you, I have limited time here.'

'What about you?'

'If you decline or if you fail I will endeavour, along with my colleagues, to protect Raxxla. It seems likely at this stage that we will die in the attempt. We need you, Rebecca. If it will help, I'll beg and grovel. Although at my age it will take me a moment, my knees aren't what they used to be...'

'Alright, alright!' Rebecca snapped. 'You've got a deal. What now?'

The man smiled, and handed her a small comm-tab. 'This contains everything you need to track the Galcop mission.'

Rebecca accepted it. 'How will I find you?'

'Once you've achieved the mission, I will find you. You'll also find some information on some less well-known ship outfitters. There are some upgrades I suggest you invest in.'

Rebecca nodded.

'Remember Rebecca, there is nothing more important than Raxxla. Do not underestimate the severity of your assignment. We will be watching.'

Rebecca remained in the bar for a while after Iacobus left. She was in two minds as to what to do. This clue would likely lead her to the assassin. At that point she could either try to laser him into oblivion and just make off, ambition achieved, or she could try to carry the mission out for the Dark Wheel.

She flipped through the comm-tab information briefly. There was a fair bit to digest. The technical upgrades caught her eye; military shield enhancements, naval energy units, ported and polished drive intake manifolds, high compression injectors – a veritable catalogue of serious performance upgrades, some less than legal, from some well hidden specialist ship modification companies.

The credit numbers Iacobus had mentioned danced in front of her eyes – enough to keep her going for the rest of her life in more than satisfactory comfort.

*I could almost buy my own space dredger for that kind of cash!*

She laughed. It would be more than enough for her live a life of luxury and throw credits out of the airlock for the rest of her life. More money than three generations of her family had made in space in their combined lives, before tax.

*Who you gonna share that with then?*

Rebecca gasped as memories from two years before jolted their way back into her mind. She felt her stomach twist with emotion. They'd been arguing again – no surprises there! He'd been telling her how to run her life again. She'd told him to get lost, but he'd taken her in his arm and....

*OH, STOP IT, DAMMIT! WHY CAN'T I STOP THINKING ABOUT HIM? JUST GO AWAY!*

She bit her lip and brought her mind ruthlessly back into the subject in hand, breathing deeply to order her thoughts. It took her several moments to regain her composure. She dropped the comm-tab on the floor, cursing at her clumsiness.

*After this is done and dusted I'm getting that memory hex-edited! Then it will go away!*

'You all right sister?' the bar man said, showing concern for the benefit of his other customers, looking at her askance. He'd seen enough emotionally troubled people in his time to spot the obvious signs.

'I'm fine,' Rebecca snapped, glaring back at him.

The bar man shrugged, turning back to his duties. 'Your funeral, honey.'

Rebecca grabbed the comm-tab and left the bar, walking quickly back toward the docking levels.

*They thought I could be Elite. Think about that! A member of the Dark Wheel for God's sake! I want to be Elite!*

She was worried as to what the Dark Wheel would do if she backed out of this agreement. They seemed pretty uptight. She could easily imagine them pursuing her across space, and she had to sleep sometime. It was prudent not to have too many enemies simultaneously.

She was also staggered that the assassin had taken down a Dark Wheel Elite combateer as easily as he had. She knew she was a good flyer, but she'd never really thought she was that exceptional. Plenty of other pilots were 'Deadly' like herself, though perhaps not at her age. Was she really the only one to face that assassin and live? The SuperCobra had been one 'stard of a ship though, would her Cobra Courier be up to the job?

She also sensed the man hadn't told her everything. Was all that stuff about Raxxla true? Could it really exist?

*As if! The assassin has them riled, that's all. They want to give Galcop a bloody nose over this, and who can blame them!*

Anyway, decision made. Let them believe in fairy tales if they wanted to. She wanted the assassin, and this was by far the best lead she'd had in ages, and it wouldn't hurt at all to kick a little Galcop butt along the way. Galcop had been complicit in the death of her family; that score could do with evening out. It would be sweet retribution to take on the Galcop mission too, despite Iacobus' reservations. Perhaps she could recover the file first and then destroy the Galcop team. If she could get paid for it all, so much the better.

*And if I do find the Raxxla file, then maybe that's worth having too. Raxxla's got to be worth more than five million...*

A snatch of conversation drifted back through her mind, a warm embrace and an earnest caring expression...

*'Give up the revenge.'*

She ruthlessly squelched the thought, diverting herself by checking her credit balance. One million credits had been added to her account, apparently from an 'Admirer'.

*Just forget him! You'll never see him again. What's past is past! Focus on the cash! Focus on the profit!*

She headed back to the docking bay to ready her Cobra Courier for launch. As she approached her ship she could see that the growing puddle of green goo from the feline Captain's battered Python had attracted the attention of a Galcop space dock official. A furious argument had started that halted abruptly when the Captain 'found' a large domination credit marker on the floor which he promptly handed to the official. The Captain appeared to be inquiring as to whether the official had dropped it. Obviously grateful, and now satisfied that the Python was space worthy despite his previous protestations, the official went on his way.

Rebecca grinned, she'd done similar things herself to get out of tight spots. You had to do whatever was required to get ahead in this life, she had that much in common with the feline Captain. You made your choices and followed your path. Her route was clear in front of her. The assassin was running on borrowed time.

*I'll have my revenge, whatever the cost!*

## Chapter Five

It was a sparsely occupied region of space. Few stars graced the sky, and the region was completely devoid of nebulae. A tumble of asteroids orbited far from the dim little red dwarf that was the unremarkable centre of the system. A pair of planets tumbled erratically around an ever changing centre of gravity, followed around their eccentric orbit by the asteroids they seemed to be herding into place, both surfaces scarred from repeated meteorite impacts in the distant past.

The Galactic Census entry for the system had been written based on the findings of a passing seismic probe, and none of the original pioneers had ever bothered to visit the world in question. The probe had picked up unusual earthquake activity on both of the planets, assumed to be due to the gravitational pull of one planet on the other.

The original interpreters of the probe data noted that the double planets were not stable and, at some point in the future, would crash together and destroy themselves. Perhaps they would create a new planet or, more likely, just another asteroid belt. Odds had been calculated by distant astro-cartographers and bets were exchanged on the exact time and nature of this destruction. This led to the spurious entry on the Census, indicating that the planet sported an 'Unusual Casino'. In reality both planets were barren rocks.

No one went there, for the very good reason that no one could ever leave. It was beyond the range of the seven light year witchspace range. The only way to reach it was by a galactic witchspace jump from the planet Rainza in Chart Seven – and there was no good reason to go; no stations, no trading posts, not even rock hermits.

All of this ended up giving this wretched hole of a system a rather grandiose title: 'Oresrati. The planet at the end of the universe'.

Given these facts, the arrival of a ship via Galactic Witchspace jump was something of a rarity.

Jim wearily checked the flight instruments. The Constrictor was an odd ship; noisy, blisteringly fast in a straight line, but prone to excessive yaw when manoeuvring. In the hands of an experienced combat pilot it would have been lethal. Jim, on the other hand, found it a tiring ship to fly. He kept overshooting turns.

*M5 standing by. M5 is capable of assuming all command, combat and flight functions.*

The onboard flight computer had an unpleasant high pitched metallic rasping voice. It kept prompting Jim, asking whether or not he wanted to relinquish control of the ship.

'I'm fine M5,' Jim replied, irritated.

M5 is the latest in multi-tronic sophistication for onboard command and control. M5 is a product of the Daystrom institute for cybernetics. M5 has computed that this ship's trajectory and flight dynamics could be optimised by 22%...

'That's enough!' Jim snapped.

M5 standing by.

Maybe it was just his paranoia, but he wondered if the computer was taking a disdainful view of his flying skills. It sounded like it was sulking.

*I'm fragged if some computer is going to take over my job!*

Jim had not been all that happy with some of the vague conversations he had overheard during his last stopover at Rainza. He'd heard tell of ghost stories and ships that never came back. No one ever went to Oresrati; there was no return. The only way out was a long and dangerous thruspace trip in suspended animation. You'd accelerate your ship to a significant fraction of the speed of light, climb into a stasis pod, wait for twenty years and hope your ship arrived at one of the nearest systems without breakdown. Needless to say, of those who had tried, none had returned; at least, not yet.

Jim's hand hovered over the witchspace jump control. This could be a one way trip. Jim could be stuck in the Oresrati system. Jury rigging a galactic witchspace jump would not be easy without high tech facilities.

There was no logical way to make the decision. Either he gave up now, or continued with no guarantees. He pushed the control. The countdown began remorselessly. He braced himself for the nauseating feeling and closed his eyes.

*Chart Eight, here we come...*

The witchspace fold trace had led him through a number of galactic witchspace jumps, taking him far away from the familiar home systems of Chart One.

Jim had never been out of Chart One before. Leaving the local group of systems he knew had been something of an emotional wrench. The further he travelled the less familiar the stars appeared. The background of the galaxy shifted subtly, and he became conscious that he was a long way from home. The background wideband chatter of the heavy trade central systems dropped

away to a whisper, and then finally ceased completely. The sheer scale of the galaxy, once a mere text vid fact, became a weighty reality.

The trace co-ordinates led straight to the slightly larger of the two planets. Jim pushed the throttles up on the Constrictor and the noisy engine pushed the ship towards its destination at a rapid pace, quickly vanishing into the dim light of the distant red dwarf.

The scanner crackled, the screen clouding with static for a moment, before clearing again. Jim wasn't sure what was causing it; the Constrictor had a number of systems that seemed to be not quite 'finished'. He was concerned that a ship might be following him, however the scanner remained blank and a visual scan revealed no sign of a ship. It seemed he was alone.

Rebecca had found tracking the Galcop mission one of the toughest pieces of flying she'd ever attempted. The Dark Wheel information she'd been given had only indicated that the Galcop ship would be emitting a faint gravimetric signature from its prototype drive unit. It had provided no other means of tracking the ship. In fact, the information was coded in a most peculiar way. Rebecca had tried to decode the rest of it, but it was beyond her abilities. She'd settled for what she could get.

Quite how faint that gravimetric signature was going to be wasn't indicated in the information either, and the task was compounded by the fact that the trace degraded quickly. Secondly, she couldn't risk getting too close to the Galcop ship, so she'd been forced to stay out of scanner range and track visually. Third, whatever the Galcop ship was, it was fast. Quicker than anything she'd seen before. The brief glances she'd managed to get from her ship's on-board telescope showed a classic design, but overall it was an unfamiliar shape. Fourth, the ship seemed to fly erratically, forcing her to resort to tediously triangulating the position from the faint gravimetric trace. She hated maths, even with the computer's help.

Fortunately the modifications she'd managed to gain from the rather esoteric custom ship-shops – also mentioned in the Dark Wheel download – had allowed her to close the gap. The Cobra Courier was now very much an uber ship, beyond even the wildest dreams of the boy racers. Rebecca had been impressed at what they could do. She'd been impressed by the price too; she'd ended up spending more on the modifications than she originally had on the ship itself.

Her favourite modification was the stealth technology. Gravimetric warping. The ability to wrap electromagnetic radiation around the ship at will. It meant you were virtually immune to missile locks and practically invisible.

*A cloaking device! For real! Who would have thought it!*

It was a very handy device, its only drawback being that it caused a massive drain on the ship's power supplies and couldn't be operated indefinitely.

The ship wasn't the only thing she had upgraded. She'd found the most remarkable gun she'd ever come across. It was an assault rifle. A rather illegal assault rifle.

*Sweet vengeance, if I get a chance to use it....*

She turned her attention back to the astrogation console. The gravimetric trace had led her on a merry chase across the galaxy, beyond even the areas she had visited on some of her more adventurous trading runs. She'd been around the charts a couple of times, but always felt most comfortable back in Chart One. It seemed like 'home' somehow.

Finally the Galcop vessel had led her into the Rainza system in Chart Seven. On the screen the tiny spark of light that represented the Galcop ship flickered and disappeared. The telltale blue signature of a witchspace wormhole appeared; she wondered where she was going this time. When would the chase end?

She sighed and pulled up the triangulation screen on the computer and set course for the wormhole at full throttle.

'Here we go again.'

Jim was surprised to discover the larger of the two planets sported enough of an atmosphere for him to breathe unaided. He stood on the exposed gang-plank of the Constrictor, looking out across a barren and inhospitable landscape.

The ground was largely composed of rocky outcroppings, buried here and there in dunes of sand. Everything was cast in a deep red hue by the light of the red dwarf, which hung low in the sky like a huge arch of glowing embers. It was possible to look directly at it without hurting your eyes.

Overhead the sky was black, with the brightest stars still visible. Down towards the horizon the thin atmosphere slowly coloured the sky a deep purple. The horizon curved noticeably around him, the diameter of the planet being far smaller than most habitable worlds.

Behind him, looming almost menacingly in the sky, the other planet orbited close by, a mere few thousand miles away. It too was illuminated a deep red, with its craters and mountains easily visible. It was noticeably moving too; not fast enough to be seen with an idle look, but quickly enough to cause an occasional nervous glance over your shoulder as the pattern of light around you shifted subtly.

A faint wind blew sand past him; already the landing gear of the Constrictor was generating small dunes at each strut.

Here and there were lichen like growths of plant life. They all looked primitive and repellent, almost black in the dim light. It was clear that life had never really got going on Oresrati. The future didn't look too inspiring either.

The gravity was low too, less than half a typical colonised planet, and less even than the environment aboard a station. It seemed strange that it had managed to retain a breathable atmosphere.

On the nearby horizon a group of caverns sat starkly, their mouths dark and forbidding. The locator trace was pointing directly towards them. He'd landed away a good distance from the caverns, having realised that landing too close would instantly alert anyone on the look out. He'd coasted in the last few thousand kilometres, engines off, with the Constrictor tumbling like an asteroid. He allowed the Constrictor to dive into Oresrati's gravity well, only applying thrust to stop a fatal crash. Then he'd slowly crept the ship towards the trace, a few tens of metres above the ground, with only passive scanners engaged. So far he'd detected nothing save the trace from the file.

The ground trembled underneath him. It appeared the Census report on the frequent earthquakes was right on the money.

Jim clicked the remote activator, and the gang-plank retracted. He gathered together emergency rations, water supplies, a portable scanner and holstered a pistol. Then he began a slow bouncing trudge across the surface.

Rebecca's Cobra Courier came out of the witchspace tunnel. Instinctively she flipped on the long range scan. It was part of her established routine whenever she arrived in a new system.

*Always have an active witchspace lock. Just in case...*

The long range scanner buzzed, an error message flashing at base of the screen. Rebecca frowned.

*Out of range. Insufficient fuel for witchspace jump.*

She looked back at the scanner. There was no way she had insufficient fuel! Her ship was full to the brim! It didn't cost you anything to hitch on a witchspace wormhole! Had to be a glitch.

She told the computer to rescan.

Out of range. Insufficient fuel for witchspace jump.

Rebecca pulled up the Galactic chart. 'Where the frak am I...?'

*Maybe a mis-jump or something... Oresrati? Chart Eight!*

Rebecca had heard of Oresrati. Why the frak would anyone galactic jump here? It was a dead end!

*There are no facilities on Oresrati! No way to recharge the galactic jump!*

The galactic jump technology was a slightly curious one time overcharge of the witchspace drive, requiring a planet with a reasonable tech level to recharge and replace afterwards. They made use of a curious network of wormholes that had been discovered long ago by some of the early pioneers of witchspace travel. Some claimed these to be a natural function of witchspace itself, others that some long lost alien race had constructed them for purposes unknown, Still others claimed they were haunted passages between the stars, but few people took this seriously. Regardless, they were a handy mechanism for accessing hitherto unreachable parts of the galaxy.

'Oh wonderful.' She looked at the data cube that contained the Dark Wheel information. 'You guys better have a way out of here.'

Rebecca watched the Galcop vessel land via her telescope, hovering her Cobra Courier a few hundred metres above the planet, and a few kilometres away behind it. She'd been careful to approach the landing site from the same direction as the warm light of the red dwarf. Her ship would be almost invisible from this angle, lost in the glare and haze on the horizon even without the cloaking device. The Galcop vessel had tried to look as inconspicuous as possible during the approach. Rebecca had copied the tactics, knowing her cloaking device wasn't infallible.

Unfortunately, whilst she could just make out the ship, she couldn't see whether or not anyone was disembarking, the red light made it impossible to see much detail and the occasional fine haze of wind blown sand was obscuring the ship completely at times. She was going to have to get down there.

She landed the Cobra Courier, secured it and gathered her things together. After all the essentials were stuffed into a small rucksack she grabbed the new rifle, sighted it on a nearby rock and then flipped it back onto her arm. All set.

She ventured out, grimacing at the unpleasant surroundings, making sure the cloaking device was still engaged. With no power going to the flight systems the cloaking device should be able to run for hours. She'd just have to remember where she had landed.

'Hold it there!' a voice called out of the darkness.

Jim had cautiously entered the cavern, scanning for intrusion detection systems with his portascanner. It appeared the scanner hadn't been very efficacious, it was still showing nothing at all. He had his pistol grasped in his other hand. A light shone towards him. He squinted into the glare, unable to make out anything at all.

'Jim? Jim Feynman?' the voice queried.

'Who are you?'

A figure emerged from the darkness. 'It is you! Excellent! I take it you got my message?'

Jim stared in astonishment at the figure of a man. A man more than familiar to him.

It was Zerz Furvel.

*But he's dead!*

'Zerz?'

'In the flesh,' Zerz grinned.

'What the frak are you doing here? You were reported dead!'

'Ah, Jim! Just a ruse, to throw the Dark Wheel off the scent! I knew the President would be too dense to do much other than contact you, but now you're here...'

Jim brandished the pistol. 'Just slow down. I'm following the Raxxla file trace. The assassin...'

'Jim! Jim! Do catch up! I've got the file! I had to get it away from both The Dark Wheel and Galcop! There's too much at stake – and I need your help!' Zerz seemed enthused.

Jim recognised him from their previous meetings, it was definitely him without a doubt. The thin aquiline face, prominent nose and slicked back grey hair were instantly recognisable.

Jim clipped the portascanner onto his belt, but kept the pistol trained on Zerz.

'I should take you in,' Jim said, coldly. 'After what you did! Your actions...'

'I regret your friend's death,' Zerz said quickly. 'In my analysis, Galcop's security was at stake. The Q-Bomb appeared to offer an answer to the problem. As it turned out...'

'...Geraint died for nothing.'

'Neither of us knew the Q-Bomb wouldn't work in a gravity well, and I didn't hire the assassin, Jim,' Zerz seemed faintly amused; Jim didn't care for the cavalier attitude.

'Just don't expect me to forgive you for your part in his death,' Jim snapped.

Zerz nodded. 'I expect nothing of the sort.'

There was a moment of uncomfortable silence. Jim lowered the pistol.

'What have you discovered?' Jim began. 'Is the Military Chief of Staff behind all of this?'

Zerz nodded. 'Mostly certainly. He has kicked off a chain of events that leads inexorably to this point.'

Jim frowned at Zerz' somewhat roundabout way of answering the question.

'So... What have you found?'

'The President told you about the Raxxla file?' Zerz said obliquely.

'Yes. What does that...'

'Did he tell you what was in it?'

'He didn't know.'

'Fortunately, I do,' Zerz said, looking out towards the exit of the cavern, and then looking back towards Jim. 'It is a compilation of all the available evidence attributed to Raxxla.'

'Evidence?'

'A surprising amount of evidence.'

'Such as?'

'The history of the last twenty five years.'

Jim frowned. 'History? You're not making sense.'

'Let me give you an example of the content. In the last twenty five years there have been punctuated periods of sudden technical advance. All this new technology we've come to enjoy: witch drive injectors, plasma cannons, astrogation compasses and the like; all invented in the last few years, mostly without precedent.'

'So? Sometimes there are quantum leaps in development; you know how things work...'

Zerz continued unabated, 'Did you know that there have been more new ship designs in the last four years than in the last one hundred combined? That's not unprecedented, Jim, that's a plain aberration. Twenty years ago we had the basic set of original 'snake' ships with a few minor special models. Ships were built the same way – regular panelling for ease of construction, now we have a literal explosion in new manufacturing technologies. Designs of ship simply not possible a generation ago – ships we couldn't even imagine back then. We couldn't even simulate them back then.'

'It's odd, yes, but not inexplicable. The pace of change is always accelerating...'

'Really? How do you account for it then?'

'We're standing on the shoulders of giants. We're capitalising on the work of the past.'

'Or the future.'

'What?' Jim had lost the thread of the conversation.

'Consider this. We had the faraway jump drive for over a hundred years. Then within a few short years the thruspace motors were everywhere. At the same time the Raxxla legends came back – don't you remember all that fuss about the Ryder boy around that time?'

'Vaguely, I was only a kid.'

'Then, a couple of decades later, up pops the witchdrive injector, both technologies appear unannounced, suddenly developed within short periods of time, and adopted mainstream in a very short space of time, without significant teething trouble. No prototypes, no obvious research and development, nothing. In addition, some very cleverly hidden people make a lot of money.'

'Hidden people?'

'Name the person who invented the thruspace drive. Or the witchspace injector. Hmmm?' Zerz raised an eyebrow quizzically.

Jim stuttered. 'It was... Giles somebody? No... well... I'd have to look it up. Some corporation or other.'

'Don't bother, nobody knows, or they're corporations with faceless share holders and no accountability to the stockmarkets. Trust me, every time a major new technology advance comes along, Raxxla comes back to the fore and the Dark Wheel comes out of hiding. I've gone back decades, it's always the same. I've checked all the feeds, there is a major correlation which can't be explained statistically...'

'What are you telling me?'

'Whenever advanced new technology appears, it's always secret and it's somehow linked to Raxxla.'

'No way. Most of the technology is military stuff, declassified once they upgrade to the latest and greatest, like the lasers: pulse; beam; military. There is a progression...'

'But there's the rub. I'm Galcop's chief technician. Shouldn't I know where some of this technology comes from? Each time it happened the discovery was just swept up into the fuel scoop and conveniently forgotten. Only an entry was made...'

'In the Raxxla file.'

'Exactly. To start with I assumed Raxxla was simply a code word for unexplained items and the stories were just that, stories to entertain the ignorant and stupid. Now I know otherwise. I discovered the secret.'

The comm-tab on Zerz belt suddenly beeped softly. He looked up out of the cavern again, back towards the area where Jim had landed his ship.

'We should get inside,' Zerz commented.

'I fear I may have been followed,' Jim admitted.

'Oh I'm sure you have, in fact, I'm counting on it.'

Jim frowned. 'But...'

'The Dark Wheel is duty bound to stop you, Jim,' Zerz tapped the side of his nose. 'We're talking Raxxla, after all. Watch your step, the floor is uneven.'

They walked deeper into the cavern, Zerz leading the way with a 'glo'. It was completely dark inside, but a sixth sense gave Jim the feeling that the enclosed space was vast. It was cool too, and Jim noticed that their footsteps stopped echoing after a time. As they walked forward the floor became smooth and sandy, the area having been cleared and adapted for use. Just in range of the glo Jim could make out canisters, equipment and some kind of heavy lifting machinery, normally used for servicing ships.

'So this technology you've been talking about... What have you discovered?' Jim asked. 'What do you need help with?'

'The Chief discovered some correlation in the file. Something that linked all of those disparate pieces of evidence together; something that both indicated the nature of Raxxla, and aspects of its location. He'd started working on it, I'm close to figuring it out myself, but I need your help. You're the best mind in Galcop.'

'Why hide here? This is the hind end of the universe.'

'Mostly for secrecy. Galcop has a number of these types of operation dotted around the charts. This one is no longer used, but I knew of its location. I'll show you in a moment, come on.'

Zerz was walking quickly into the cavern, Jim had to pick up his pace to keep up.

'And the Dark Wheel? They're not going to allow the Chief or us to pursue this! If they have followed me...'

'I think we can reason with them,' Zerz seemed overly confident.

'Maybe at the point of a blaster!' Jim retorted. 'They tried to murder you, Zerz!'

'So it would seem.'

'And the assassin?'

'Oh, I don't think we need to worry about the Assassin,' Zerz said with a smile, coming to a halt and pressing a button on his comm-tab.

'Why the frak not?'

A series of bright lights flashed on in the darkness, slowly illuminating the immense cavern. It was much larger than Jim expected; he and Zerz were now standing right in the middle. Looking up, Jim ducked instinctively. Towering over them was a ship, its central hull immediately above them, gracefully curving back and out, differentiating into two enormous engine nacelles. One was pristine, the other seemed to bear the marks of weapons fire.

Rebecca found the entrance to the cavern and cautiously proceeded inside. It was pitch black and she dared not use a glo. It would do her little good, and give away her position immediately. She carefully slid along the cavern wall, taking care to be as quiet as possible. Her portascan showed no obvious signs of intrusion detection systems of any kind, with a bit of luck she'd go unnoticed.

She edged further in, and began to hear distant snatches of conversation. She was too far away to catch the words, but it was a familiar accent, definitely from Chart One.

Preceded by a momentary flicker a bright light blazed out of the cavern. Alarmed, she immediately threw herself to the ground. She tripped and fell in the dark, sliding down a slope and rolling into a gully, knocking the wind out of herself. She kept very still for a few long minutes, listening. The voices seemed to have faded out at about the same time as the lights had switched on.

Clipping the portascan to her belt, she slowly crawled forward. She cursed when she realised she had ripped her flight overalls in a number of places.

In front of her was a small rise, part of an irregular part of the cavern wall formation; it would conveniently hide her from view from anyone further in. The cavern was enormous, big enough to house a ship.

She crawled up to the rise, loosened the strap on her rifle, setting it aside to give herself a bit more freedom of movement. Then she poked her head above the rise to get a better view.

She gasped as she recognised the lines of an Imperial Courier. One engine still bore the marks of weapons fire. Her weapons fire.

*He's here! The assassin's here!*

Rebecca could just make out two figures standing beneath it. She frowned, squinting, trying to make them out.

*It can't be... Oh God, it is! What the frak is he doing here?*

She froze, almost falling back down the rise in bewilderment.

Jim staggered back in shock. The Imperial Courier seemed enormous, looming over him like a predatory bird about to dismember its captured prey.

'But...' he managed weakly.

'Yes,' Zerz smiled wanly, 'I thought you'd be surprised.'

'Then...'

Belatedly Jim went for the pistol at his belt and held it directly at Zerz. Zerz didn't even flinch.

'Not a wise choice, Jim. Not everything is as you may first suspect. I will endeavour to explain all,' Zerz seemed completely unconcerned about the gun.

'You're the assassin! You murdered Geraint! You tried to kill me, Rebecca and the others!'

'If you need to be so mundane, yes. But...'

'You... I should...' Jim gestured with the gun.

'Jim, you're powerless. It's no accident that we're out of witchspace range. I have the only way out of here. Kill me and you're marooned. Accept you are outmatched. Ditch the emotion and analyse your situation rationally,' Zerz was smiling, completely at ease.

Jim was brought up short by Zerz' matter of fact manner and took a deep breath to calm himself. Was this really the faceless assassin? The Agent hired by the Chief of Staff, the Elite combatteer he and Rebecca had faced before?

He ran the events of the Q-Bomb affair back through his mind. Zerz had reverse engineered his schematics and created the Q-Bomb. After that he'd not been seen for ages. Jim had always wondered how his ship, the SuperCobra carrying the Q-Bombs, had been tracked. If Zerz knew how to build a Q-Bomb, it would have been child's play. Perhaps he'd even built a homing device into the design. Zerz had access to Geraint too, and would have known where to start looking for Jim. Only Rebecca's intervention had saved the day.

'The President hired you for all of this?' Jim spluttered.

*Galcop's set me up again!*

'No, no. The President was a pawn in the game, Jim,' Zerz said with a smile. 'It was surprisingly easy to manipulate him. He had just the wit to get you involved and send you to me unescorted. A team of marines would have been most inconvenient to dispose of.'

Jim's head was spinning, trying to unravel all the implications. 'Then you're still working for the Chief?'

'The Chief was never involved, other than providing me with the Raxxla file itself. He lacked the ambition and the power to seek out Raxxla. Since I became aware of the implications I made it my task to seek out the truth behind it.'

'So it's you who are pursuing Raxxla, just you?'

'Yes. Naturally I've also made sure that others with similar knowledge were unable to trace the same path, or reveal my intentions.'

'The Dark Wheel didn't commit those murders?' Jim's eyes were wide.

'Not at all. The Dark Wheel members are the much maligned innocent party,' Zerz laughed. 'I've made sure they're in quite some turmoil!'

'Then it was you who attacked them, not Galcop! You even faked your own demise!'

'Indeed. For once, even Galcop is innocent. As for the Dark Wheel, obviously I needed their information. It was a simple cover up. Both organisations blaming each other, whilst I continued with my task unimpeded.'

'But you've got everything you need!' Jim almost shouted back. 'You have the file and you must have taken information from the Dark Wheel ships you attacked.'

'All true,' Zerz smiled back at him. 'However it transpired that I needed a few more items than I originally anticipated.'

'You need me,' Jim shot back. 'You really think I'll help you?'

'I don't think you'll find you have a great deal of choice,' Zerz said with a smile.

'Don't count on it,' Jim replied coldly, clenching the pistol tightly.

Zerz' comm-tab beeped again. 'Ah, right on schedule. The Dark Wheel.' He lifted his eyes to the rear of the cavern, and raised his voice. 'You can come out now.'

For a moment nothing happened, but then a figure strode slowly into the light. It was small, petite, compact. It was holding an unpleasant looking rifle pointed straight at both of them.

'Put your weapons down and raise your hands!' The owner of the rifle interrupted belligerently. 'Now!'

The voice was familiar. Jim couldn't believe it. He felt a surge of delight, quickly followed by confusion, fear, concern and dread.

*Oh my God! Not her! Not here! ... She's working for the Dark Wheel? How did she get here? And how did Zerz know she was coming?*

'Rebecca?' he gasped in astonishment.

'Weapons down and raise your hands before I blow both of you away!' She remained focussed them, continuing to walk forward and keeping them both within an easy shot.

Zerz didn't move, but Jim looked at Rebecca in surprise. 'Rebecca, it's me...'

Rebecca tweaked the settings on the rifle. 'Do it!'

*She's prepared to shoot me?*

Jim dropped his gun and raised his hands. Zerz also did as he was bid, rolling his eyes and looking almost bored, as if he'd seen these events before and was simply watching them replay.

Rebecca sidestepped and kicked Jim's gun aside into the shadows.

'I heard your entire conversation,' she snarled, now totally focussed on Zerz. 'You're the assassin.'

'If I might be permitted to explain...' Zerz began to say, as if only mildly impatient. 'It's not quite that simple...'

'Shut the frak up! There's no fraggin reason I shouldn't blow your ass away right now!' Rebecca fairly screamed at him.

Zerz smiled back at her lazily. 'If you insist.'

Jim wasn't sure what was going on; Zerz was far too confident, far too sure of himself.

*What is he hiding...?*

Zerz was outnumbered and had a gun trained on him, Jim was sure he could figure out a way to jury rig a galactic witch-jump in order to get them out of here...

*There must be something else...*

'Rebecca no!' Jim cried, moving towards her. 'We need to...'

She pointed the gun at Jim, back at Zerz and then back at Jim again, a crazed look in her eyes. 'DON'T MOVE!'

*What's happened to her? She's pointing the gun at me again! She's unbalanced! Overwrought! She's been pursuing a vendetta against him all this time... Maybe she's gone crazy...*

'This bastard killed my family; he's the one I've been chasing! Don't get in my way, Jim!'

'Rebecca,' Jim stepped towards her, trying to calm his voice. Things were happening too fast. 'Rebecca, just listen to me. Put the gun down...'

'Don't come any closer!' she whispered, stepping back, and then whipping the gun back towards Zerz, glaring with unconcealed hatred, her face a mask of fury and rage.

'I've finally caught up with you,' she whispered, her eyes narrowing.

'Rebecca, wait! Don't...!'

She pulled the trigger.

The rifle spat fire, a bolt of energy arcing across the room. Rebecca's aim had lost none of its veracity. The bolt hit Zerz squarely in the chest.

And dissipated harmlessly.

Rebecca stared in shock and then pulled the trigger again and again. Each bolt deflected, striking the floor or the hull of the ship above Zerz, who stood still, immobile, with something approaching a maniacal grin on his face. Jim jumped aside for cover as the lethal energy discharge flashed nearby.

'Stop it!' he shouted. 'Rebecca!'

Rebecca stared in shock, adjusted her rifle and fired again, with the same lack of effect. Then she stopped, the rifle drooping in her hands.

'Have you quite finished?' Zerz inquired, politely.

'That's not possible,' she said weakly, a bewildered expression crossing her face.

'I was just telling Jim of some of the remarkable technology that occasionally crops up whenever Raxxla is mentioned,' Zerz continued amiably, lowering his hands and stepping towards her. 'An example for you, Jim. A personal shield.'

Rebecca was backing away, shaking her head.

Jim was shaking his head too. 'No way. That isn't possible! The power demands are astronomical... no way it can be done portably!'

'A cent's worth of observation is worth a credit's worth of theory,' Zerz continued, 'wouldn't you say?'

Rebecca stepped back as if dizzy and then threw her gun aside. She launched herself towards Zerz with an almost animal like howl, pulling a knife from a strap against her right thigh and sprinting across the cavern floor. She held the knife outstretched in front of her.

Zerz didn't move. Rebecca came within a few inches of him and was then violently flung aside like a rag doll, landing ungracefully on the ground near Jim, stunned. Zerz was unaffected.

Jim went to her side, helping her to sit up. She was staring into nothing, dazed and confused.

'Rebecca?'

For a moment she looked at him, but then her eyes rolled back in her head. She fainted.

'Did I mention it repels physical force as effectively as directed energy?' Zerz said in an amused tone, holding his arms casually behind his back.

'Frak you!' Jim snapped back. 'If you're going to kill us, just get on with it!'

'Kill you?' Zerz seemed surprised. He laughed. 'Why would I have gone to all this trouble just to kill you? It's you two I need.'

Jim had managed to get Rebecca lying down in a recovery position. She was still unconscious. She seemed to have suffered something akin to a strong electric shock. He stood up and faced Zerz.

'She needs medical attention!'

'In good time. Firstly I must have your agreement.'

'Why? Why me?'

'Your gravimetric expertise, of course. Your insight into the workings of technology and advanced mechanisms. I'm shamed to admit that some aspects of this are beyond my abilities.'

'And what do you need her for?'

Zerz grinned. 'To secure your co-operation, of course.'

'She means nothing to me,' Jim knew his bluff was a waste of time.

'Come now, Jim,' Zerz seemed mildly amused. 'I'm gratified to see that my research was correct and that you do have a penchant for her. I must admit to being surprised at you though, with all the cultured women available, you choose a back-world trader...'

*How does he know? What does he know?*

Zerz bent down and picked up Rebecca's rifle, appraising it with a professional eye, turning it end over end.

'A disrupter. Hardly the weapon of a gentlemen,' he said with disdainful appraisal. 'But it will serve. This is rather illegal, don't you know?'

'Zerz... wait..'

Zerz raised it and pointed it directly at Rebecca's limp form.

'Have you ever seen anyone executed with a disrupter, Jim?' Zerz continued in the same relaxed tone of voice. 'It's rather interesting. Rather than simply drilling a hole through vital organs as with your common laser, a disrupter uses a plasma bolt to disassociate the bonds within organic cells. Literally rips them apart at the cellular level. Paralysis is instantaneous, but death takes many minutes. The subject is fully conscious throughout. I'm told it's not for the faint hearted.'

He pressed the arming stud. The rifle's power pack hummed back up to operating readiness.

Zerz' dark eyes turned as hard as duralium. He levelled the gun at Rebecca's prone form.

'So, unless you wish to have a first hand demonstration of the disrupter effect on your *petite femme fâché*, I suggest that you do exactly as I say.'

## Chapter Six

Rebecca came to with a start, sitting upright with a short scream. Her mind was whirling. She turned, trying to focus her eyes. She struggled to remember what had been happening.

*The ship! Jim! The assassin! He was invulnerable! Now I'm caught, what am I going to do? He's never going to let us go...*

'Lie still. Slowly!' Hands pushed her back down. The voice was familiar, she blinked and a face swam into view. 'You're on a bio-bed.'

Jim had been relieved to see only the symptoms of exhaustion and stress showing up on the monitors, the shock of physically impacting against Zerz' strange shield didn't seem to have done Rebecca any permanent damage. It was nothing the medivac couldn't fix anyway.

'Jim? What happened?'

'It's me. Take it easy, you had a nasty shock. You were knocked out when you hit Zerz' shield.'

*Jim...!*

For a moment she looked delighted to see him, but then her expression hardened.

'What the frak are you doing here?' she demanded, sitting up despite his protestations.

*You shouldn't be here! You should be safe, back on Onrira! Out of harm's way! You're not cut out for...*

'I could ask you the same question; are you working for the Dark Wheel?'

'Yes and no. Are you working for Galcop? For him?' she sounded angry and suspicious.

'Yes and no,' Jim admitted, trying a faint smile.

'You'd better choose which side you're on then, Harmless,' Rebecca snarled. 'You know what that assassin – whatever his name is – Zerz! – did to me and mine! I mean to bury him.'

'Rebecca, listen...' His delight in seeing her again had quickly evaporated under her antagonistic glare.

'No, you listen! You can either help me out nailing this guy, or stay out of my way! Galcop has screwed me over enough times! That guy killed all those people, he killed my family!'

'Rebecca, calm down! You're obsessed! Put it aside for a moment and think rationally for God's sake...'

*How dare you! You really have no idea what it's like, do you...!*

'Don't tell me how to run my life! Just don't go there, Harmless! I will do what I need to do! I've tracked this heartless bastard across all of space! You're not the one who lost everything!'

Jim blazed back at her. 'I lost people too! Or did you forget?'

'So why are you working for Galcop now then, eh? He works for them too! Hardly a fitting way to honour their memories is it? Selling out? I can't believe you'd betray your friends' memories! Working for those murderers; I thought you were better than that!'

'It's not as simple as that. He doesn't work for Galcop any more...'

'Looks pretty simple from my point of view. Turncoat!'

'And you're working for the Dark Wheel out of the goodness of your heart are you?'

*That's not fair!*

'That's got nothing to do with it! The Dark Wheel guy told me that safeguarding this Raxxla prak was important future-of-the-universe-at-stake stuff. Yes, he backed it up with big money, so who was I to argue? They want that assassin taken out ... and so do I!'

'How much did the Dark Wheel pay you, eh?' Jim snapped back. 'I know you, remember? Trader girl! No allegiance without profit, isn't that your motto?'

*Some of us don't have mum and dad's fat credit account to live off!*

'I'm not apologising for what I do. I'm a trader, it's my life! Profit isn't a dirty word!' she hissed at him. 'That's not the point anyway!'

'So what is the point?' he yelled back.

They glared at each other.

'Look,' Jim said, breathing deeply and trying to calm himself down. 'The situation isn't clear. I had no idea Zerz was, or might even be, the assassin. I was under the impression the Dark Wheel had committed those murders! I don't understand this any more than you do.'

*That much is obvious!*

Rebecca looked at him and then said, 'Well, the Dark Wheel say it's not their fault either! I don't know who to believe.'

'That makes two of us,' he snapped back.

'So what is it then?' she said, looking away.

'What's what?'

'This Raxxla thing. The Dark Wheel seemed to think it was real enough.'

'Galcop too. They're running scared. I don't know whether it's real or not. Whatever Raxxla is, Zerz is the one who knows about it. Galcop had a file on Raxxla – Zerz has it. That's why I'm here.'

'Me too. So, here's the plan then, Harmless. Let's kill him, nab the file and get the fark out of here!'

'Subtle as always. You saw that shield. We can't get at him! He could have shot us down en route or killed us at any time since. He knew we were coming. He needs us for something.'

'Yeah, so he can kill us slowly rather than fast! He's a psycho! As far as he's concerned we're unfinished business! He tried to kill us once, he's going to do it again! We should be trying to escape!'

'Escape?'

'Yes, escape! You know; flee, run, get out! Leave!'

'Assuming we can get past a sealed door, down a closed docking ramp, and assuming we aren't shot down, and assuming we get back to our ships and take off...'

'Yes?'

'Do you have a way of breaking the seven light year witch jump range?'

*Oh no, don't tell me...*

'You mean, you don't?' Rebecca seemed aghast.

'No! At least, not immediately.'

'Then why in God's name did you come here if you couldn't get back?' she raged at him, virtually apoplectic.

'I figured I'd have time to sort that out after I dealt with the assassin! Anyway, Zerz says he has a way...'

*You fool! And I'm a fool for following! That was your plan? You've no idea what you've got us into do you!*

'You stupid idiot!' She sat down with a thump, looking dejected. 'So we're stuck here! We're marooned! He's going to leave us for dead – maybe that was his plan all along!'

Jim shook his head. 'He needs us. Rebecca, listen...'

Rebecca sighed. 'So what do you suggest we do, O Wise One?'

'I suggest we watch and observe. Look for a weakness. We need to get that file away from him and find a way out of here. We have some time. Zerz wants me to help him and is using you as leverage.'

*Leverage eh? And why is that then, Jim?*

'Me? Why me?' Rebecca asked. Her voice sounded false and uncertain.

*Go on, tell me why!*

'Because,' Jim hesitated, 'because of our previous association I guess....'

*Coward!*

'...He's threatened to kill you unless I co-operate.'

Rebecca scowled and considering carefully. 'Co-operate with what? Decoding the Raxxla file?'

'I guess so.'

Rebecca looked around the room for a few moments, thinking hard.

*It's the only way I can see out of this mess he's got us into...*

'Right then, here's the plan,' Rebecca said, biting her bottom lip. 'You play along until you get hold of the file. Take some time to work it all out. I'll need some time to sabotage his ship.'

'How are you going to do that?'

'Leave it with me,' she said, with an air of certainty.

'Rebecca...'

*I'm trying to save your life you idiot! Shut up!*

'Leave it with me!' she snapped. 'Trust me, I know what I'm doing.'

Jim sat down opposite her, taking a deep breath. Rebecca looked at him, and looked away again.

*Just don't ask me, Harmless... just don't ask! You don't want to hear this and I don't want to say it...*

'So,' he said heavily. 'Where have you been for the last two years?'

*Frak you!*

'I was busy, that's all,' Rebecca replied immediately, she refused to meet his gaze.

Jim regarded her for a moment, surprising himself by how disappointed he felt. 'Busy. Right.'

*You asked for it!*

The door to the medical room snapped open. Zerz was standing on the threshold. Rebecca immediately grabbed one of the medical scanners and threw it at him. It bounced off his shield and clattered to the floor.

Zerz ignored it.

'Once you have recovered we will discuss this affair in a civilised fashion. You'll find a washroom, clothes and toiletries next door. Dinner will be served in two hours.'

'Get lost!' Rebecca yelled, jumping to her feet unsteadily. 'You son of bitch...'

'I see your *femme fâché* is already invigorated,' Zerz commented drily to Jim, before closing the door once more.

*I hate all this upper class snobbery! So you know some words in an obscure language, big deal!*

Rebecca whirled on Jim. '*Femme fâché*? What the frak does that mean, lab boy?'

Jim sighed. 'It means 'angry woman' or thereabouts, in one of the old world modes of speech.'

*He has no idea!*

Fully half of the central cargo bay of the Imperial Courier had been converted into state rooms. It was decked out in something of an old fashioned manner, with sumptuous furnishings that would not have looked out of place in some of the best old world hotels. Zerz obviously took great pride in his décor. Everything from the carpets, the drapes cunningly hiding the internal hull struts down to the brass fittings on various pieces of equipment was tastefully executed. Even the interiors of Fer-De-Lance ships would have looked cheap in comparison.

The centre piece of the room was a large rectangular table which, astonishing though it seemed, was made of real oak. Upon this was set a silver service, studded with napkins, bone china plates, crystal glasses and a variety of the most expensive dishes known in the core systems. Even Jim, with his relatively opulent upbringing, didn't recognise some of them. Rebecca was completely out of her depth.

The room was lit by a large chandelier, suspended from the overhead bulkhead, giving a warm soft yellow glow to the room. Faint strains of ancient orchestral music provided a background to the ensemble.

Rebecca had not been impressed by the choice of garments available to her; they were all evening gowns of elegant design, not something she was familiar with. Jim had been startled to discover the high quality brands represented in the extensive closet. There were garments from the top outfitters on Sotiqu and Riedquat, some of the best names in Chart One. Whatever his other faults, Zerz clearly had taste.

Quite why Zerz had a compartment full of expensive attire for both men and women was uncertain. Jim could only presume that, as an assassin, he needed to be able to accommodate a variety of scenarios. It appeared that he moved in some very stratospheric social circles as well as murdering people in cold blood. Rebecca had sworn and cursed, refusing to wear anything Zerz had supplied. She wanted to stay in her trader coveralls but they were ripped, torn and mud-stained. Common sense eventually prevailed.

She chose a elegant dark green evening dress and matching high heeled shoes. The dress still was a shade too big for her frame. She had obviously not worn anything like it for a long time, if at all. She staggered the first time she tried to walk forward, finding her movement far more restricted than normal and the shoes causing her to struggle with balance. Despite this, the dress suited and flattered her.

Jim had never seen her like this before. Her standard issue traders' overalls were eminently practical, but completely anonymised the wearer. Her habit of keeping her hair relatively short and un-styled, again for practical reasons, enabled her to blend into a crowd unnoticed and forgettable. Now, Jim found himself reappraising her appearance.

Her skin was pale, as would be expected for someone who spent their life inside a ship. Her arms and legs were shapely, with firm muscle tone, though marred by the occasional bruise and scratch. She was probably underweight, in his opinion, but she retained enough of a feminine curve to allow the dress to fit appropriately. He noted that she wore no jewellery or make up of any kind, nor did she sport any of the tattoos many traders adorned themselves with. Her fingers were long and thin, but her fingernails were unpainted and trimmed short. That said, she could easily pass as an elegant sophisticate at the celebrity parties common in the corporate systems. She'd turn an awful lot of heads.

Having caught her balance she looked up at him. He found himself staring into her eyes, admiringly.

*Why am I doing this to myself? She plainly isn't bothered about me. I thought we had something...*

She caught him looking at her and glared back at him.

'You look...' Jim began, trying to encourage her, despite the situation. He had chosen a more practical smart jacket, dress trousers and formal shirt.

Rebecca glared at him, snapping out each word slowly and pointing a finger at him. 'Don't start, Harmless.'

*...obviously not.*

As they entered the central bay Zerz was already seated. Rebecca noticed that her rifle was propped up against the far wall behind him. She scowled, wishing she was armed and she knew a way around that personal shield.

Zerz stood. He was dressed in a dark-hued formal uniform, complete with dress cloak and silver fastenings. He looked quite the statesman.

'Greetings. Would you care to join me?'

'Do we have a choice?' Rebecca snarled.

'Not at all. However, I thought it was only polite to give you the opportunity to show some manners. Shall we?'

Rebecca and Jim slowly sat down, Rebecca having to sit sideways rather awkwardly, and then swinging her legs around.

The food was exquisite. Jim was extremely hungry and began to eat. Rebecca sat in stony silence, refusing to move. She stared at Zerz with cold hatred.

'So,' Jim ventured after some time, 'would you care to explain yourself?'

Zerz still seemed inordinately relaxed. 'Jim. This affair is more important than you, me or...' He waved his hand dismissively in Rebecca's direction. She glowered in return.

'...Greater things are at stake. I cannot stress the import of this enough.'

Jim shook his head. 'Zerz, for God's sake, stop with the big picture stuff. Tell us what is going on.'

Zerz made a show of wiping his mouth, setting aside his cutlery and moving aside his dishes. Only then did he return Jim's look.

'Yes, I am the assassin...'

Jim heard Rebecca's knuckles crack. He could see the whites of her finger bones showing through the skin on her hands.

'...But I am not an idle mercenary out for profit. My contracts are vetted for suitability against a grand design. Everything I do is necessary. My overriding objective has never wavered. I am Zerz Furvel; the survival of Galcop is my sole motivation. I will stop at nothing to preserve it, defend it and maintain it.'

'You hypocrite!' Rebecca yelled. 'You murder civilians, you killed Galcop staff!'

'I do not expect such as you to understand,' Zerz continued. 'Such things are necessary for the greater good.'

'The excuse of dictators and oppressors throughout recorded history!' Jim snapped back.

Zerz shook his head. 'Jim, let me be absolutely direct. Galcop is dying. System by system the economy is turning sour. The Federation and Imperials snap at our heels, the Thargoids grow ever more brazen in their attacks. All my simulations, whether economic or military show that we are doomed, sooner or later. It's only a matter of time.'

'That's rubbish!' Rebecca interjected.

'Sure, Galcop has its issues, but a collapse is hyperbole, it's nonsense! Doomed! Come on!' Jim said, agreeing with her.

'Didn't the President mention this?' Zerz returned.

Jim cast his mind back, remembering. 'He said that there were things afoot beyond all this, and that Galcop's future might not be secure for some reason...'

'Allow me to let you into the reason for his concern. It's a secret; classified information of the highest degree. The wormholes, the overdrive channels between the charts used by the galactic witchspace jumpers, are growing unstable. They are collapsing. We've been trying for years to prevent the decay. Nothing we have tried has worked. In thirty years, give or take, they will be gone. Tell me then what will happen.'

Jim shook his head. 'Without galactic witchspace, Galcop is just Chart One, two hundred systems...'

'Not a big enough economy to be self sustaining, particularly in light of the increasing vociferousness of our opposing factions. I've even given it a name – the 'Selezen Crisis', named after the man who discovered the effect. The fact remains, Galcop will collapse inwards and cease to exist.'

'It will be good riddance as far as I care!' Rebecca intervened.

'And you think you and people like you will survive as independent traders without the protection of Galcop? Every system an anarchy?' Zerz snapped back at her. 'Or take your chances with the Federation or the Imperials? It would be disastrous, the end of civilisation!'

'What's this got to do with Raxxla?' Jim interrupted.

'Raxxla, by my own conclusion, is our only hope,' Zerz said, a gleam coming into his eye. 'Raxxla is linked with every piece of new technology that emerges. Raxxla holds the key to new technologies, future technologies! Yet we are drip-fed this technology by whim, by this shadow organisation that claims it has our best interests at heart.'

'The Dark Wheel.'

'The Dark Wheel,' Zerz' voice was full of cynicism and venom, 'this holier-than-thou troupe of old star hands who think they know best. Doling out technology in equal measures to us, the Imperials and the Federation, allowing none to gain an upper hand. Always preserving the status quo. Well, it's time we had more than our 'fair' share. We need this to survive.'

Rebecca narrowed her eyes. 'This is all because you failed with the Q-Bomb, isn't it?'

Zerz seemed surprised. 'Very astute. Had the Q-Bomb been successful, Achenar would have been destroyed. Galcop could have taken over their jurisdiction...'

'You're nothing but a mass murderer!' Rebecca shot back. 'You would kill the people of an entire planet to get what you want! My family weren't even involved, but you had to kill them to continue your master plan...'

'Spare me your insignificant personal crisis! Had Jim not taken matters into his own hands you and your family would never have been involved! Blame him for your parents' death, not me!' Zerz was uncharacteristically angry for a moment, before he regained control.

'You killed them,' Rebecca said coldly. 'Not Jim.'

'If I hadn't intervened, we would be at war with the Imperials by now,' Jim shot back at Zerz. 'And we'd probably be losing!'

'Only because of your failure – your Q-Bomb was flawed!' Zerz returned.

'I never intended to build a bomb! You built the things, not me!'

'Regardless,' Zerz waved his hands dismissively. 'I will use any and all means at my disposal to keep Galcop ahead of the Imperials, the Federation and the Thargoids. Galcop itself is too weak to openly search out and use the more aggressive methods necessary, only by grasping all possibilities can we survive. The Chief of Staff knew this, now only I remain to carry out the task.'

'So now you're going after Raxxla.'

'Raxxla is our last chance,' Zerz said. 'I have painstakingly pieced together every last morsel of information on it. The Dark Wheel has been solely privy to this information for too long. It's time for others to use it now.'

'You're convinced that you know what Raxxla actually is?' Jim murmured.

'Yes, I am. And once I tell you, both of you will be willing to help me find it.'

Rebecca's fists clenched on the table, but she didn't say anything. Zerz paused.

Jim looked across at Rebecca and then back at Zerz. 'Well?'

'Plainly put, the stories and legends of Raxxla are true,' Zerz began. 'It is indeed a planet on which there is a portal, a time machine if you prefer.'

'Time travel?' Jim said, weakly, his incredulity strained to breaking point. 'You're mad.'

'So what can you do with this .... this portal?' Rebecca asked, curious despite herself.

'It's able to move people, ships, resources, pretty much anything you wish to any date in history, or any time in the future. Imagine being able to make a military decision, proceed into the future and see the consequences, come back and alter events until they were suitable. Or taking technologies from the future to use in the past, as I believe has already been done with all these recent innovations.' Zerz looked over to Rebecca. 'Or perhaps travelling back in time to avert a personal disaster. It's all possible with Raxxla.'

Jim looked across at Rebecca, she had gone deathly pale. He saw her bite her bottom lip and frown. He remembered the habit; it meant she was thinking hard. Zerz evidently caught the expression on her face and read it accurately.

*She can't possibly be taking this seriously! Don't fall for it, Rebecca!*

Zerz was looking directly at her. 'Help me to find it, and you can use Raxxla for your own purposes.'

*Leave her alone, you manipulating bastard!*

'Rebecca, don't listen to him!' Jim snapped. 'He's playing you along, there is no such thing as time travel.'

'On the contrary,' Zerz replied. 'As I explained before, technology arrives sporadically, at intervals. It is always preceded by a resurgence in Raxxla stories, and always the Dark Wheel comes out of hiding. I have thoroughly researched these events, there is a pattern and a trail.'

'That's your evidence? Dammit Zerz, you're a scientist – at least, you were! Time travel, portals, planets, the end of Galcop! You tell me what I should be thinking! Occam's Razor!' Jim snapped.

'Occam's what?' Rebecca interrupted bewildered, still trying to follow the conversation. Jim noticed she was now focussed intently, her open hostility had dropped away in favour of curiosity. He recognised the classic opportunistic attitude of a trader; weighing odds, risks and uncertainties.

'What Jim means,' Zerz said slowly, 'is that, all things being considered equally, the simplest explanation is likely to be the correct one. That Raxxla is nothing more than a set of coincidences and imaginative flights of fancy. What would I need to prove my story?'

'Prove?' Jim blustered. 'You'd need to show me some technology from the future, or you'd need to show me this fabled Raxxla of yours! Go on! Show me the planet, if it is a planet!'

Zerz leaned back in his chair. 'Oh, Raxxla is a planet, all right. A unique and special one, but I can't show it to you, not yet.'

'Surprise, surprise.'

Zerz got to his feet and paced around the far side of the table.

'Have you ever seen a personal shield before, Jim? You saw it first hand.'

'Granted, that's impressive, but it's hardly utterly unprecedented. I can see any number of technologies that could be miniaturised to perform that feat with a bit of R&D. We miniaturised lasers with little problem.'

'Perhaps this will convince you.'

Zerz slid a commtab over to Jim. 'Pull up the equipment section for the *Falchion*.'

'*Falchion*?' Rebecca queried.

'The name of this ship,' Jim replied sourly, typing a command into the commtab. He read the readout.

'This is junk,' he said in surprise.

'I assure you it's true,' Zerz replied. 'It's one the of the reasons I've been so successful as an assassin in recent months.'

Rebecca's face was a question mark, so Jim slid the commtab to her. She read it in astonishment, two particular entries jumped out at her immediately. They were jarringly obvious to anyone familiar with space travel.

Front Mount: Small Plasma Accelerator.

Military Drive: Range 21 Light Years.

'A plasma beam weapon?' Rebecca asked, sliding the commtab back to Jim and thinking back to the image that Iacobus had showed her a few days before. 'That would explain...'

'Capable of rendering current shield technology effectively useless,' Zerz said grandly. 'Makes a military laser look like a penlight.'

'It's not possible, nobody can make it work!' Jim was shaking his head. 'We, the Imperials and the Federation all tried and failed! Tens of people were killed in industrial accidents. It's been given up as a dead loss! Accelerated plasma weapons are a fiction. Only the old style direct plasma cannons are viable.'

'Feel free to blast a hole in this cavern if you think it's necessary,' Zerz continued, 'though I'd rather you didn't.'

Something in his voice challenged Jim.

*He's not lying! At least, not about that...*

'And the drive?' Jim asked. 'You're really saying the seven light year limit can be broken...?'

'Yes.'

'So that's how you eluded me time and again!' Rebecca cried. 'I was right on your tail and yet you were able to jump a system ahead! I couldn't understand how you did it!'

'Clever girl,' Zerz said disparagingly. 'It's technology from the future, I stole both concepts from a damaged Dark Wheel ship I caught. A Dark Wheel ship that must have been to Raxxla at some point. They just haven't seen fit to divulge this equipment to the rest of us yet. That's how the Dark Wheel can slip aside and disappear whenever they wish too.'

Jim chucked the commtab aside. 'Even if I buy the concept of technology from the future, which I'm not sure I do, where is Raxxla? Do you know?'

'No.'

'So you've no proof at all, in actual fact. Just a bogus technology claim that I can probably fly a Python through. It's probably just smoke and mirrors...'

'Consider this. If Raxxla had a specific location how could it possibly have gone uncharted for so long? You can't hide an entire planet from view. Even if you had a cloaking device big enough and enough power to run it, it would show up on a simple gravitational trace.'

'So you're agreeing that it doesn't really exist?'

'No. Consider the myths. Raxxla is a ghost planet, a portal, an elusive destination. It's been reported in different places all over the charts. If we assume Raxxla does exist, how can we satisfy these myths?'

'The people who reported them were nutters, or tabloid journalists?' Rebecca interrupted disparagingly. 'Like Anna Mereso...'

'Or...!' Zerz looked at Jim quizzically.

'Raxxla moves,' Jim said softly.

'Precisely.'

'But that is ridiculous,' Jim spluttered. 'You can't move a planet, at least not across those distances! The amount of energy required to move a planet that far would vaporise it! You might be able to adjust an orbit, but that's a far cry from...'

'You're assuming that Raxxla is in an orbit.'

'But...!' Jim stopped. 'A rogue planet?'

'What?' Rebecca snapped, her attention riveted on the conversation. 'What's a rogue planet?'

'A planet not gravitationally bound to a star,' Zerz replied, 'tracing a path through the galaxy, undetected, unnoticed, never in the same place twice.'

'The only way to detect it would be via gravitational anomalies in other system orbits,' Jim continued. 'But it would be frozen solid; no light, no heat for most of the time!'

'Perhaps. What is key is this: Raxxla legends come back at intervals, every few decades or thereabouts. If we trace unexplained gravitational anomalies back through history...'

'We'll get a track...!' Jim muttered, his mouth falling open.

'The secret to unlocking Raxxla,' Zerz said with a smile. 'That track may intersect with the times and locations of sudden tranches of technology improvement. The clues to where it will appear next. I don't think even the Dark Wheel ever knows the location with any certainty. They only guard the clues. They only interfere when people go looking with the right background information, which is hardly ever.'

'This still doesn't work,' Jim said, shaking his head. 'Even if Raxxla is a rogue planet, there is no way it could be moving fast enough to travel galactic distances in just a few decades, and if it was travelling at relativistic speeds you'd never be able to rendezvous with it anyway.'

'Consider what else we know. Raxxla legends suggest a portal in space and time.'

'It's just fairy tales!' Jim was on the defensive, he was beginning to fear there really was truth behind what Zerz was talking about.

'Assume the reports are true for the moment,' Zerz continued doggedly. 'Theoretically, how could you achieve time travel?'

Jim shook his head and shrugged his shoulders. 'Well, *theoretically* there are a quite a few ways! A singularity, quantum string oscillations, black holes, perhaps a mis-configured witchspace jump, but *theoretically*! No one would consider them plausible...'

'A witchspace jump? And the planet appears to be able to move quickly...'

'A lot of conjecture! What you're suggesting is a planet with a witchspace drive!'

Zerz smiled. 'A planetary witchspace drive is probably overstating it, but certainly a planet that is influenced by witchspace, or influences witchspace. The clues are there Jim. Two intersecting tracks, and a witchspace profile, a frozen planet. It's just going to need your kind of genius to figure out where Raxxla is right now. Then we can go there.'

'Assuming I'll do it for you.'

'Oh, you'll do it all right.'

*What?*

Jim and Zerz both turned to look at Rebecca. Her voice was ice cold. There was no sound save for the quiet unobtrusive background music.

'Rebecca, no...' Jim stared into her face. Her expression was threatening. She had obviously made her own calculations.

Rebecca looked at Zerz intently. 'Is all this really true? Raxxla gives you the ability to go back in time and change things?'

Zerz nodded. 'I believe it is so.'

*Surely she can't believe this...*

'Rebecca!' Jim intervened. 'Raxxla, even if it does exist, is more important than our own needs and wants! We can't let him or all people get hold of it!'

Her voice shook. 'I don't give a frag about all that! I've heard enough! If there is even the smallest chance I can save my family, I'll take it! Because of this murderer,' she sneered at Zerz,

'every day I have relived the death of my family! Every day! I see their ship burning away, hear their screams over narrowband! I want this! I want Raxxla just as much as him!'

'Rebecca and her family were accidental inclusions in the Q-Bomb affair, Jim,' Zerz said smoothly. 'A warning, a delay, something small would be enough to save them. I was forced to kill them only because they were witnesses. It means little to me if they are not involved. I would be quite content to not have her chasing me around the galaxy looking for vengeance. It has been rather tedious...'

'I don't believe you. I don't believe this!' Jim protested. 'Rebecca, this is complete hogwash! Don't listen to him! He's just telling you what you want to hear...'

Zerz opened a drawer in the table, pulling out what appeared to be a thin manilla folder. Jim knew it was a coded file, DNA-linked to its owner. It had to be the Raxxla file. Rebecca was looking at it intently.

'Here it is,' Zerz said in hushed tones. He pressed his thumb against the top corner. 'De-restrict access.'

The folder glowed for a moment, and then Zerz slid it across the table towards Jim.

'Find it for me Jim. If it turns out to be false I have failed anyway. You can let *fâché* here kill me if she so desires. Give her a chance to save her family, give me the chance to save Galcop. This is Raxxla, Jim! I don't want to have to use force, but if it's the only way...'

To Jim's surprise, Rebecca stood up and walked around the table in the opposite direction from where her rifle was stored. She ended up standing next to Zerz. Zerz looked at her with suspicion.

'No need for that, Furvel.' She looked at Zerz, her voice cold and calm. She turned to stare coldly at Jim. 'If he refuses to work this out, I'll do the convincing for you.'

Jim stared into Rebecca's brown eyes in shock, seeking any hint of deceit or deception. He saw none.

'What about the Dark Wheel?' Jim stammered. 'Your mission?'

*What about our plan? What about me?*

'I don't care about the Dark Wheel, or Galcop for that matter!' Rebecca returned angrily. 'Listen. I came here because all I wanted was a chance to kill this bastard,' she waved vaguely at Zerz. 'I never even thought there was a possibility that Raxxla was real...'

'And now you know it is...' Zerz interjected.

Rebecca continued her tirade at Jim. 'If Raxxla exists and I can use it to save my family, then he's irrelevant too!'

'Rebecca, there simply isn't a chance that we can save your family!' Jim returned, trying to reason with her. 'Time travel isn't possible, end of story! Even if it were, chasing our own desires would be fraught with danger...'

'FRAK YOU JIM!' Rebecca slammed both fists down on the table. 'I WILL HAVE MY FAMILY BACK!'

The plates and cutlery rattled, the wine glasses vibrating. One fell over and rolled across the table in a small arc before colliding with a plate. It sounded surprisingly noisy in the silence following Rebecca's outburst.

Jim stared at her in anguish.

'How dare you moralise at me!' Rebecca's voice was quiet again, but it trembled with suppressed rage. 'I've heard enough! You can find Raxxla, you will find it! If you don't... if you dare deny me this chance! I swear...!' she paused for breath, before shouting her final words, '...I WILL KILL YOU MYSELF!'

Rebecca's face was a mask of pure fury. Jim flinched back, ashen-faced. He'd never seen anyone so incensed. The sheer power of her emotional outburst was terrifying.

*Clear enough for you Jim? She never cared for you! You've been deluding yourself all this time! Fool! She's what she said she was: a trader, a fighter, a lone wolf! She's out for herself and nothing else! You're on your own here!*

'How delightfully ironic,' Zerz said after a pause, watching both of them closely. 'I was fully prepared to threaten you with all sorts of unpleasant torture in order to convince you Jim, but it appears she has done quite a good job of that on my behalf.'

'Rebecca?' Jim whispered. He was shaking with shock.

Rebecca was breathing hard, her teeth clenched, her eyes blazing furiously. She wasn't giving an inch.

Zerz regarded them coolly. 'It would appear that you're not a very good judge of character, Jim.'

'Apparently not,' Jim said, stricken. He looked at Rebecca again. Her expression was now scornful, almost dismissive.

Zerz leant forward, hands resting on the table. 'Jim, listen to me. You may not agree with my methods, but my cause is sound. I only want to save Galcop from destruction!'

'Maybe Galcop should come to an end! Maybe it's out of time!'

Zerz' anger finally burst forth. 'And have everything cast into disarray? War, poverty, famine, trial and tribulation? Economic chaos? A trillion lives disrupted? Is that what you want? Too long have we seen our ineffective bureaucracy avoid dealing with the issues head on. Too long have the Imperials and Federation laughed at us behind our backs! Too long have the Thargoids encroached further on our territory! Enough is enough! It's time to stop this, time to strengthen our resolve!'

'It's wrong! If it does exist, Raxxla isn't meant to be found!' Jim argued back.

'Don't be a coward!' Zerz snapped. 'Who appointed the Dark Wheel to be the owners of Raxxla? Who said they had ownership of all that that entails? The technology, the advances, the knowledge... the power! No one but themselves! They are a self-serving organisation!'

'They've kept the peace for hundreds of years!'

'According to them! There have still been wars and loss of life! How do we know they are trustworthy and have our best interests at heart? We don't! Their domination can and will be stopped! Why should they decide our future? We can be masters of our own destiny! It's ours to take!'

Zerz paused, gathering his composure and lowered his voice.

'Do the right thing, Jim. Join me. Save this girl's family. Save Galcop!' He clenched both of his fists together tightly and shook them. 'Help me find Raxxla!'

Jim looked up at Zerz' almost desperate face and Rebecca's determined one.

*No choice. If I refuse, one or both will kill me, there's no doubt about that. Maybe Zerz is right too, I don't know what the Dark Wheel's real agenda is! Maybe there's a way out of this if I play along...*

'All right! All right!' Jim snapped. 'I'll do it! Frag the pair of you!'

Zerz straightened, sighing with satisfaction. 'You're doing the right thing, Jim. Believe me.'

Jim was unable to answer.

Rebecca looked at both of them. 'Let's get a move on then. I don't want to hang around this godforsaken hole of a planet for any longer than I have to!'

She walked across to the exit.

'I agree with you on the need for alacrity, but you'll wait for me if that's quite all right,' Zerz said, warningly. He had moved to the back of the room and had picked up the rifle.

'Of course,' Rebecca said, in deference, and then looked at Jim with scorn. 'You heard him, move it!'

Jim glared at her.

'Time is of the essence, after all,' Zerz said, gesturing with the rifle.

Jim looked between Rebecca, Zerz and the exit, gauging his chances.

*This is not the time...*

He walked to the exit, his head hung in defeat, resignation and betrayal.

## Chapter Seven

Jim shook his head.

This could take months of investigation, astrometric inquiry and backtracking instrument readings. Zerz' data was good, but it was voluminous, and not all of it was relevant. Jim had transferred the information from the Raxxla file into the computer and was trying to decode it.

Zerz' ship was well equipped, better than any other shipboard astrometrics facilities he'd come across. Despite this, it was no match for the fully funded lab environment he'd enjoyed back home. It would have been easier if he could have used the astrometric computers at the Onrira torus station.

*It would also be easier if I wasn't burning with betrayal! Frag her!*

Rebecca was adjacent to him, sat at one of the other consoles on the far side of the lab. She was leaning back on her chair, one foot propped against the console. She was studiously ignoring him. She'd not spoken to him since the dinner. She'd also been reading through the information Zerz had provided, examining it thoroughly. She seemed to be working with a singular purpose. She was scribbling notes, then crossing them out and trying again.

*This is intolerable!*

Jim threw down the stylus he'd been making notes with in sheer frustration. Rebecca looked across at him.

'Get back to work, Harmless!' she snapped.

'Just get lost,' her yelled at her, struggling for words, 'you fraggin...'

'Sticks and stones, Harmless,' she replied nonchalantly, shrugging her shoulders. She ran a hand through her hair and flicked it out of her eyes, preening herself. 'What's your problem anyway?'

*I've got to know...*

'It meant nothing to you did it,' he asked, looking directly at her, 'when you said you wanted to come back and see me.' His voice caught on the words.

'Is that what this is about? Back on Onrira?' She laughed and sneered back at him. 'God, you're so pathetic! Trader's instinct! All I wanted was a safe port in a storm. They're worth a lot to the likes of me, you know. I might have needed a stopover someday. Don't tell me you thought there was more behind it...'

*There was more behind it! There was!*

Jim's face was pale.

Rebecca laughed again. 'You did, didn't you!'

She got up and walked over to him, swinging her hips provocatively, her voice teasing. 'You thought here was this poor, torn up little woman who needed defending from the big bad universe.'

*Yeah, that's exactly what I thought...*

Jim turned away, but was forced to look up into her scornful face by her proximity. He was painfully aware of how attractive she looked in her elegant green dress. She leant over towards him.

*Why are women so much more desirable when they don't want you?*

'Listen to me, Harmless,' she said in a low sneer. 'You were an opportunity to be used, nothing more. I played you like a holo-book.'

She smiled cruelly, turning her head to one side and raising an eyebrow. Jim swallowed.

Rebecca continued, leaning back and raising her voice. 'I have a dozen men across the galaxy who would welcome me in whenever I need the diversion! I'm not sweet and innocent and I don't need saving by the likes of you. I can look after myself!'

*Tell me something I don't know. I've got that message loud and clear...*

Jim turned away, sniping spitefully. 'Yeah, I guess you can, it's what you're best at after all.'

'I'm a trader, Harmless. I make no apology for what I need to do to survive! Buy low and sell to the highest bidder. You lost out to Furvel, he's holding the credits now.'

*I should have listened to myself! I was right! 'No allegiance without profit!' This is the real Rebecca; the tough, hot headed, hard nosed trader girl! What else did I expect?*

'Now get back to work,' she snapped. 'I've made more progress than you already. I've categorised the gravitational anomalies by strength and vector already. Look, here are the systems.'

She flicked her hand at his console, her action initiating a transfer of information to it. A series of documents with highlighted indicators appeared.

Jim took a deep breath and turned back to look at the console.

'The answer is in there, lovesick boy. You've just got to find it,' she said, her voice amused. 'Now, get me Raxxla or you can kiss your ass goodbye!'

'Get off my back and I will!' he snapped.

She made an exaggerated show of being offended, and sauntered back to the other side of the room.

Jim looked back at the text. It was a mass of unfamiliar names. He really ought to have committed the systems in Chart Eight to memory.

'This could take weeks,' he muttered.

She glared at him. 'The answer is in there, Harmless! Look at the list of all the planetary systems and hurry it up! I need to see Zerz!' Her stare seemed oddly intense as she got up and left the astrogation lab. The door snapped closed behind her.

Zerz regarded Rebecca carefully as she emerged from the astrogation lab.

*No breeding or sophistication that one; a mere trader, scratching a living off of the detritus of civilisation. Yet somehow she has acquired the flying skills of an ace, an ability that few can claim, even with extensive bio-modification and training...*

It had taken him some time to reconstruct the events that had involved this curious young woman in the Q-Bomb affair. She had been a deck hand on the Boa that had witnessed the flight of the SuperCobra, ejecting from the ship prior to its destruction in a lone escape pod. It was that pod that he'd been about to destroy when Jim had intervened and scooped it with the SuperCobra. From then it became less clear, but it appeared that the girl was responsible for destroying the incoming Viper squadron and eluding him by a foolhardy witchspace mis-jump.

She had returned to fight over Lave's moon, whereupon their pitched battle had been fought, neither of them victorious. Zerz had been impressed by her combat skill. Concerned enough to research her in great detail. He felt there had to be a reason for her abilities, some explanation.

He'd discovered nothing particularly unusual about her, no indication of where such a talent could have come from. His disbelief in being nearly defeated by her in battle was second only to the disdain he felt for her lack of social standing. Being bested by an Elite combateer would have been hard to stomach, but being beaten by a mere girl with no real rating from a backwater planet was more than he could reasonably stand.

A series of hacked vid files had given him further clues about her. She frequented particular types of bars in the Coriolis stations and went out of her way to antagonise the miscreant boy racers. One vid file showed her in a close embrace with Jim, just prior to her launching her ship. Zerz had assumed they had enough of a relationship for it to be a useful tool for him to use if the situation required it.

Zerz quickly became aware that she was also inquiring after him. It had become apparent that her trading runs followed his movements. She was actively trying to locate him, presumably with a view to taking her revenge for the death of her family. Zerz had provided enough clues for her to follow, but never to quite catch him. He'd led her on a merry chase for almost two years, courtesy of the *Falchion's* extended witchspace jump range. Once Zerz realised he needed Jim to help decode the Raxxla file, she became a useful commodity. His plan had unfolded accordingly.

The only anomaly in the data was that her mother was not listed, there wasn't even a deleted file reference, and he had access to far more than standard Galcop data silos. That was peculiar indeed. It worried him. There was a thread unaccounted for.

The girl clearly had an eye for opportunity, and would switch her allegiance to the highest bidder at any time. He'd eavesdropped on their conversations whilst in the astrogation lab. She was wily, and she'd played on Jim's naivety effectively. It appeared she was accustomed to being underestimated and used it as a weapon. Even he had been guilty of that error. She was obviously not to be trusted.

Zerz regarded her with a wary eye.

'What are you looking at?' she snapped at him.

'Nothing in particular,' he replied, wondering if she would register the irony.

*Apparently not...*

'How is Jim doing?' he continued conversationally.

'He's working on it. He should have some results soon.'

Zerz nodded, regarding her with a superior look. 'I'm intrigued. You've been pursuing me for over two years. I murdered your family without consideration, not even for a worthy cause as it transpired, yet you're happy to leave that aside now?'

Rebecca met his eye, and shrugged. 'You have the advantage. I can tell you believe in this Raxxla stuff. If it is what you say it is, I can get my family back. I don't need to care about you any more. Like you said, pursuing you around the galaxy is a waste of time for both of us. If Raxxla isn't true, or you're lying, or you try to double cross me, then I'm after your hide again. It's simple. I read people pretty well. You have to when you're a trader.'

*Perhaps she really is a simpleton. She really considers herself worthy enough to approach Raxxla? To abuse its power so selfishly, just to avert the deaths of her wastrel family? Jim might be a fool, but at least he understands Raxxla's significance. Still, she serves a purpose...*

'And Jim?' Zerz probed, looking for a hint of hesitation or reflection.

She didn't react at all. 'A means to an end. He gets what he deserves for being so gullible, stupid fool. You got me wrong Furvel. I don't care about him.'

'Is that so,' he regarded her skeptically.

'He fell for my vulnerable girl routine like all men of his type do. They're all suckers for a pretty, tearful face. Call me sadistic, but I actually enjoy breaking their hearts in the end!' She flashed a cruel grin at him. 'A bolt hole like Onrira is a handy thing for a trader who lives on the edge of a Viper's bite. I guess I'll need another one now! It doesn't matter. I've got a dozen men across the galaxy who think I'm their girl. He was no different.'

*She's single-minded in pursuit of her grubby priorities. I can admire that at least.*

Zerz nodded in appreciation. 'I congratulate you on your thoroughness.'

'You'd better go and make sure he's doing the job, I don't understand all that technical garbage he spouts.'

'I will,' Zerz agreed.

'What do you want me to do?'

'What can you do?' Zerz said, with a raised eyebrow.

'I can prep your ship better than any dockhand between Diso and Anle. When was the last time you had your witch drive serviced?'

'It will soon be overdue. I have been rather occupied.'

'I bet your witchdrive targeting alignment is well overdue for a check. You've probably got a twenty percent efficiency loss by now.'

'A witchdrive alignment will take hours. You're just trying to delay me...'

'I can do it in five minutes,' she replied. 'Take it or leave it.'

Zerz considered this. He'd planned to do it himself and she was absolutely right. She clearly knew her ships.

*It's a menial task, suited to her stature. If supervised it will save me significant time...*

He nodded. 'The witchdrive does indeed need a significant alignment check, but any sign of...'

Rebecca glared at him. 'Listen! We aren't ever going to be close buddies, but we don't have to like each other in order to work together for a common goal. Do you really think I'd be that dumb and throw away my opportunity to get my family back?'

*She really is utterly committed to one thing; herself! So selfish! It changes nothing. She is a means to an end. I will make use of the skills she has.*

'I shall escort you to the core.'

*And I still owe her.*

Jim was staring intently at the console, trying to concentrate. He was finding it hard, his thoughts continually straying back to Rebecca. His caught his breath every time her face came into his mind; the frown, the eyes, her habit of biting her lower lip when she was thinking...

*Doesn't she realise that once I find Raxxla Zerz will probably kill both of us? He works alone, he doesn't need either of us! She's really lost it if she thinks Zerz will share Raxxla with her! She can't see past her obsession with getting her family back. Zerz has completely muddled her thinking...*

The Raxxla file was still lying on top of the console. Jim looked at it idly for a moment, and then decided to pocket it, slipping it inside his jacket. He turned back to the console, where Rebecca had noted down a series of system names. With a sigh, he started cross-referencing them on the galactic chart.

Ryrros.

*System not found. Please re-key.*

He checked the spelling. It was correct. He tried the next one.

Osalxx.

*System not found. Please re-key.*

He continued down Rebecca's list, his frown intensifying. None of them appeared on the Chart Eight long range scan. There was a final one called 'Surt'. It didn't appear either. He tried the other galactic charts too, but the systems didn't exist there either. He checked the Imperial and Federation charts too, still nothing. He frowned in puzzlement.

*What's she playing at? This is all nonsense, meaningless!*

He scanned down the list of systems again.

Ryrros

Osalxx

Armihe

Vigtno

Degato

Baslli

Wideg

Gubere

Wzecni

Vnocot

Dahemt

Surt

*Is it a code? Is she trying to tell me something? Geraint was always the one who was good at code writing!*

If it was a code, it couldn't have been that complex. Not that Rebecca wasn't smart, but she'd not had the time. He rewrote the spurious system names into a single stream.

RYRROS OSALXX ARMIHE VIGTNO DEGATO BASLLI WIDEG GUBERE WZECNI  
VNOCOT DAHEMT SURT

Then he spotted something peculiar.

*Two xx's, that's not even pronounceable! I know some of the systems in Chart One are a bit of a challenge after the cats and bugs lobbied for their declensions to be included, but there's no way that can be a real name!*

Osalxx

Armihe

Osalxx Armihe? Still means nothing...

*Wait a minute... Backwards! ehimra xxlaso... Raxxla! Can't be a coincidence!*

Quickly he re-arranged the letters.

TRUS TMEHAD TOCONV INCEZW EREBUG GEDIW ILLSAB OTAGED ONTGIV  
EHIMRA XXLASO SORRYR.

*Still nonsense! Wait a minute... SORRYR? Sorry Rebecca? The spaces need to be shifted!*

TRUST ME HAD TO CONVINCEN Z WERE BUGGED I WILL SABOTAGE DONT  
GIVE HIM RAXXLA SO SORRY R.

He physically jolted back from the console.

*So Sorry... We're bugged? That whole conversation was for Zerz' benefit? She didn't mean it!*

Hope flooded through him.

*That was all an act? My God, I believed it one hundred percent! Did Zerz fall for it too? What's she playing at?*

Jim tried to think of all the ways Rebecca might be able to sabotage the Imperial Courier. There were a number of obvious ways, but no way he could see that she could do it with Zerz watching her like a hawk. There was no way he'd let her out of his sight.

*But why the elaborate deception? Don't give him Raxxla?*

Jim felt the creeping fingers of fear and dread. Zerz had threatened to torture and ultimately kill Rebecca if Jim failed to co-operate. Jim knew he couldn't have allowed Rebecca to suffer that. Zerz obviously knew it too.

*So Sorry...*

'No! You fraggin stupid girl...!' Jim exclaimed in horror.

Jim knew that he would have given up the location of Raxxla in exchange for Rebecca's life. Rebecca obviously had figured that out too, and she had been completely wise to the fact that Zerz would in all likelihood kill both of them once he had acquired the location of Raxxla. Her intention was clear now. She must have figured out a way to sabotage the ship despite Zerz' watchful eye. She was then going to remove the leverage Zerz had over Jim. Better one of them died than both of them.

*She's not saying sorry! She's saying goodbye! Trying to give me a way out!*

Jim jumped to his feet and raced to the door, hitting the opening circuit in haste. The door failed to respond. It was locked from the outside. Rebecca had planned meticulously.

'Frak you!' Jim raged. 'Rebecca, don't do this!'

*I'd rather both of us died together than live without you now! To frak with Raxxla and Zerz!*

The strength of his feelings surprised him. He pounded his fist impotently on the door, thoughts racing through his head.

*I've got to distract Zerz somehow, before she forces him to kill her! How?*

The only way to do that was to find Raxxla. There wasn't enough data. Here he was, trying to find some fraggin stupid planet that could appear and disappear at will. There had to be something else he'd overlooked.

He returned to the console, feverishly scanning through the plots, graphs, reports and spatial co-ordinates. There were too many missing data points, no way to make the plots fit a predictable curve. He needed at least another set of co-ordinates to have a chance to make a prediction.

*Wait just a moment...*

Zerz' anecdotal evidence indicated the last spurious technology injection had occurred around ten years before, so he was looking for a gravitational anomaly approximately a decade ago, an unstable witchspace signature, or any other kind of anomaly. Was there one?

There was nothing in the file, or in the console. Jim put his head in his hands, desperately racking his brains.

*Think man! Her life depends upon you right now! There must be something!*

He tried to think of all the anomalies he'd seen reported via the Onrira monitoring feeds; anything reported in the Tionisla Chronicle, Galcop archives, Tianvian conspiracy theories, the Lave space authority reports. Lave...

He stopped, dumbstruck.

*It can't be...*

Quickly he typed in a set of co-ordinates and test ran an algorithm based on Zerz' data sets.

*Triangulation confirmed.*

Bi-trajectory match confirmed.

Curve error estimate < 15%

Probability of location 92.8%

The astrogation computer agreed with his findings.

*Oh my God, it's so obvious! Right under our noses!*

Jim hit the intercom. 'Zerz? Zerz! I've found it! I've found Raxxla. But if you want it, you've got to show me Rebecca's alive!'

Zerz led Rebecca to the witchdrive core of the *Falchion*. It was deep within the primary hull, one of the best-protected parts of the ship.

'Don't assume I am unfamiliar with the menial tasks required to maintain my ship,' Zerz said, watching her carefully. 'Any hint...'

'Yeah, yeah, I'm out of the airlock with a hole in my head.'

Rebecca pulled out an access cover, and looked into the core. The alignment mechanism was a pretty standard affair despite the interesting modifications he'd made to the witchspace jump drive. Rebecca would have liked to have had a good nose around those. Zerz stood watching her attentively, still cradling her disrupter.

The dress and shoes she was wearing got in the way as she crouched down to examine the circuitry. She took off the shoes. She was tempted to throw them at Zerz, but thought better of it.

'A grease monkey in a dress,' Zerz laughed as she was forced to hitch the dress up around her thighs on order to wiggle into the core. 'That's from Sotiqu you know, probably worth more than all the cargo you shifted last interval. It suits you, though. Why, you could almost pass as a lady.'

'Almost,' Rebecca replied, glaring back at him. She climbed inside the narrow core access tube.

She began pulling out the alignment rods, studying them with a practised eye before inserting them back into the core and resetting the nearby console with a series of configuration commands.

'Your alignment technique is rather unorthodox...' Zerz commented.

'It's about ten times quicker, and more accurate than the Galcop textbook method,' she said, concentrating on her task. 'I learnt to do this the old fashioned way, my father trained me on a far away jump ship. I can drop out of witchspace within fifty metres of a marker, using nothing but dead reckoning. Saved my life once.'

'Impressive,' Zerz commented, sounding anything but impressed.

The indicators on the alignment circuits all turned green. Rebecca inspected her finished work and then closed the access panel. 'There, job done. We're finished.'

'Come out and back away from the console.'

Rebecca did as instructed and Zerz moved up to inspect it, typing in a few diagnostic commands. He nodded, satisfied she had done the job correctly.

'Fine work for a menial. But, we're not finished,' Zerz said, casually. 'There is a debt unpaid, after all.'

*Here it comes...*

Rebecca glared back at him. 'Debt, what debt?'

'I have considered for quite some time what I would do if I had you within my grasp.'

'Yeah, I figured you might play the bully!' she snapped angrily, backing away.

Zerz paced closer. 'It pains me to admit it, but you are the only combateer who has ever bested me in combat. Imagine my chagrin when I discover that I have been defeated by a mere trader. A youth. A girl!'

'Tough break for a chauvinist pig like you!'

'It was an insulting scar to my ship, and worse, my reputation. I was undefeated, until encountering you.'

*So, this is it. Make your last a fight a good one, girl!*

'You just weren't good enough,' Rebecca sneered back, goading him. 'If you hadn't witted out, I would have destroyed you over Lave. So much for your reputation!'

Zerz nodded, his voice bitter and grating. 'So you claim. You forced me to run, forced me to choose the coward's way out to survive.'

'You're an assassin! You're a coward by definition!' she crowed. 'Striking from hiding, fighting only when the odds are in your favour! I bet you were bullied in edu-class! I bet you were the thin kid at the back who never got picked for sim games! You think you're so superior! You and your high-faluting ways – but you're nothing more than a joke!'

'Enough!' Zerz turned and withdrew something from his cloak. Rebecca's eyes grew wide as she recognised the knife she had tried to stab him with earlier. She looked around her. She was cornered. There was no way out.

'I am through bandying words with you. It's time for the repayment of that debt. I swore I would have retribution. Now the time is ripe!'

She tried to punch him. Her fist came close to connecting with his jaw, but she was thrown to the floor immediately on account of his personal shield, her body convulsing with what felt like a severe electric shock.

'You coward!' she snarled at him, her head spinning. 'Still hiding behind your shield! Why not fight me on equal terms? Ship to ship or hand to hand – I don't care! Or don't you have the guts?'

He walked towards her swiftly and suddenly, grabbing her around the upper neck and jaw, lifting her off the ground.

*His shield is off? Try to...*

She struggled wildly, flailing with her legs trying to get a purchase on him somehow. Her hands grabbed hold of his arm, trying to move it, but she had no leverage. He seemed inordinately strong, she struggled for breath.

'You are not worthy to be fought on equal terms,' he whispered, his face close to hers. 'You are trash, a classless excrement with ideas above her station.'

'I'm better than you,' she choked out, 'and you know it!'

He rolled the knife around in his fingers in front of her face. The point was inches from her eyes.

'The damage you inflicted to my ship was a trivial matter to repair, but my reputation was lost. That will not go unpunished.'

'I'm not scared of you!' she gasped, clawing at his arm and hand, kicking and twisting like a cornered feline. 'You're weak! I bet you can't even kill me now, you yellow snob...!'

Zerz' grip on her jaw was firm. Angrily, he shoved her head back against the wall, fast and hard. She nearly fainted from the pain and shock of the impact. As she struggled, he rammed her head back again. Her arms went limp as she tried desperately to stay conscious.

She still resisted, but feebly now. He held her tighter, bruising her skin. He was choking the life out of her, forcing her head back. Darkness whirled at the edge of her vision, sparkling lights flashed across her sight.

He lowered the knife towards her neck. Rebecca braced herself, conscious of her heart beating fast. She anticipated her throat being cut, her lifeblood slowly draining away. Oddly, she didn't feel scared, but curiously relaxed about it.

*I really am prepared to sacrifice myself for Jim? It seems so! I know I was dead anyway, but maybe I'm not so bad after all! I just hope he escapes from all of this somehow...*

Zerz shifted the knife upwards, away from her throat.

*What's he doing?!*

Rebecca felt the cold metal against her cheek, and then a hot burning sensation as he slowly drew the knife down to her jawbone. Then the real pain came. She writhed helplessly. She felt blood flowing down her cheek and neck.

'There, a scar for a scar. Now we are even.'

He released his grip and she crumpled to the floor, half unconscious, wheezing and gasping air into her starved lungs.

*No! He was supposed to kill me!*

'You can't goad me into killing you, I know that's what you want,' he said with a cruel smirk, wiping her blood from his hands with a pocket handkerchief he'd retrieved from inside his cloak. 'I'll give you credit, you are cleverer than you appear.'

Rebecca struggled to get to her knees and tried to pull herself up from the floor. She intended to rush at Zerz. She slipped and fell back. Her arms and legs were trembling with shock. She touched her cheek and her hand came away slick with blood.

'With you gone, Jim would have no reason to co-operate with me, would he?' Zerz continued. 'He'd probably sacrifice himself in a vain attempt at being noble too.'

'Leave him alone...' Rebecca despaired.

'You were trying to protect him. Nice try; it was very convincing. Unfortunately for you, I am not the fool that Jim is...'

'You won't get Raxxla!'

'I'm afraid it's inevitable,' Zerz gloated. 'Jim will do anything to save you once he realises you do have feelings for him after all. Once he finds Raxxla, your value, such as it is, diminishes considerably.'

The intercom buzzed. 'Zerz? Zerz! I've found it! I've found Raxxla. But if you want it, you've got to show me Rebecca's alive!'

Zerz grinned. 'You see? You've failed. He is too weak to let you go.'

'Jim, no...' Rebecca whispered.

Zerz hefted the rifle.

Rebecca tried to move, but Zerz turned and dealt her a vicious blow to the head with the rifle butt. Rebecca's body slammed against the bulkhead wall as she crumpled into unconsciousness.

Zerz clicked the intercom open, turning his attention back to Rebecca's prone form with a wry grin.

'She's alive,' he replied coolly, and snapped the intercom off again. 'For the time being, at least.'

*So, she managed to communicate her intentions to you, did she? She is clever! If she had breeding she would be worthy indeed...*

Zerz grabbed Rebecca's ankle and dragged her unconscious body from the witchdrive core.

Jim looked up to see Zerz enter the astrogation lab.

'Where is Rebecca?' he demanded.

'She is finishing the priming of the witchdrive,' Zerz replied conversationally. 'It is taking longer than she expected. What have you found?'

*There is no way she would take that long to prime a drive! And no way he would leave her unescorted! What's happened? Has she managed to evade him, or has he killed her? What do I do?*

'I've found it. I've found Raxxla. But you'll get nothing unless you take me to her now!'

Zerz sighed, sounding almost bored. 'You will be reunited once I know where Raxxla is.'

'Not good enough! You will let me see her!'

Zerz hefted the disrupter with a raised eyebrow.

'This disrupter can impart a serious amount of pain without actually killing you, you know.'

Jim whisked his hand across the console, he'd been ready for this. A red ring of light framed the work he'd been doing. A flashing indicator showed a single word.

*Delete?*

'You left the Raxxla file unlocked!' Jim said gleefully. 'One press, and its all gone! Everything!'

Zerz considered for a moment and relented.

'She's outside. You may see her briefly. Then I will have the location of Raxxla.'

'You promise you won't kill her?'

'Is this really necessary?'

'Your word, Zerz! I know what it means to you!'

Zerz thought for a moment and then smiled thinly. 'I promise I will not kill her. She's outside the ship. Shall we?'

*Outside? Why is she outside?*

Jim left the lab with Zerz following his every move, the disrupter aimed at his back. As Jim came to the loading ramp his heart jumped into his throat at the sight of a crumpled body unceremoniously flung to the ground nearby.

*No!*

Rebecca was lying on her side on the sandy floor of the cavern a few metres from the ramp, still in the dark green dress she'd taken from Zerz' supplies. It was now dusty and creased, torn at a seam and bloodstained. She'd lost her shoes somewhere too, and was bare foot. A bloodstained knife was embedded in the sandy floor nearby.

'Frag you, Zerz! What did you do?'

'She's alive. You didn't state precisely what condition she had to be in.'

Jim cursed again and ran to her, turning her over carefully. She was unconscious, pale, her face battered with a bruise spreading from her temple and across one eye. There was a lump swelling on her head and an unsightly cut across her right cheek was copiously oozing blood across her face, neck and chest.

He checked for a pulse, but he couldn't feel one with her wrists and neck being slick with blood. He felt, slightly self-consciously, for broken ribs or damage to her spine. If she was breathing he couldn't detect it. This was not the time for false modesty. He pressed his head against her chest, listening for a heart beat. It was there, slow, but strong enough for now.

He brushed the hair from her face. 'Rebecca?'

She didn't respond.

'She failed in her bid to sabotage my ship and safeguard the location of Raxxla; she was punished as a result. A clever ploy admittedly, it seems we were both taken in,' Zerz was standing behind him.

Jim stood to face him. He was shaking with rage, fists clenched, apoplectic.

He swung out, his fist coming with millimetres of Zerz' jaw. Jim found himself flung backwards to lie beside Rebecca, his body tingling from head to foot as if he'd just touched a live power conduit.

'Remember your kindergarten science, Jim?' Zerz said with amusement. 'Newtonian Physics? I know it's not in vogue at the moment, but that was a perfect demonstration of the Third Law – every action has an equal and opposite reaction...'

'You'll pay for this Zerz! Frag you!'

Zerz smiled at what both of them knew was an empty threat. He brought up the disrupter, 'Now. You've seen her! Give me Raxxla!'

'She's hurt! She needs help!'

'The quicker you complete the task, the quicker you can return to her. Her life is in your hands. My patience is at an end, Jim. Give me Raxxla, now!'

*She tried to sacrifice herself for me, I can't let her die for something that might not even be real! We'll have to find another way to stop Zerz...*

Jim cursed, glanced back at Rebecca's unmoving body and then ran back into the *Falchion*. There was no other way to help her now. Zerz followed him to the lab.

Jim showed him the console, speaking as quickly as he could. 'I've triangulated the technology trace locations you gave me, and matched up with reported gravitational anomalies. Here, here and here! There are loads of gaps, but you can get a track of some of it.'

'Enough to predict the location of Raxxla?'

'No, at least not precisely enough. Not on its own.'

Zerz frowned. 'But you said you had found it!'

Jim nodded. 'I have. There is one gravitational anomaly you hadn't plotted. One that was too obvious, too close to home.'

'What do you mean?' Zerz demanded.

'An established anomaly, one so commonplace that nobody could possibly suspect it.'

'Where!' Zerz shouted.

'It's the moon. It's at Lave,' Jim said, resigned. 'Raxxla is Lave's moon.'

For a long moment Zerz simply stared at Jim in complete disbelief.

'You're lying,' he finally said. 'Lave's moon is just an...'

'Let me go, Zerz. You've got what you...'

'EXPLAIN THIS!' Zerz roared. 'I'm not letting you go until I understand!'

'It's supposed to be from the Oort cloud,' Jim said hurriedly, 'but it's way too big, too regular! There is no way it should have been able to drop into the inner Lave system like it did, and if it had been out there all along it would have been discovered centuries ago. People see what they want to see.'

'Are you trying to tell me that Raxxla has been orbiting the seat of Galcop power for the last decade – AND NOBODY NOTICED?' Zerz was staggered beyond belief. 'That's not possible!'

'Crazy enough to be true,' Jim said, showing him the trace and alignment graphics on the console. 'You know as well as I that Lave and all the other systems in that vicinity formed in a resource-poor region of space. No gas giants, no nebulae – single rocky planets, single star! There is no precedent for any other planetary body to have formed in that system, no way to account for it based on established planetary formation formula. It's not possible!'

'But...'

'Nobody has ever seen an Oort cloud fragment of that size before anywhere. Its orbit is unstable, and no one can tell why, we keep having to adjust it with thrusters on the surface,' Jim continued. 'Astrometrics failed to pick it up until it was very close in to system space. They couldn't build anywhere except the equatorial belt, it's too unstable! It still doesn't register properly on scanners even now half of the time – and nobody has ever asked why!'

'But Lave...'

'It's only been there a few years, and the predictions are that it will break up in another decade or so. We're not reading instability on the moon, we're reading some kind of witchspace flux around the whole moon! It's the rogue planet we've been looking for, travelling through space, half in and out of witchspace, only this time it's got itself into orbit around a planet – right on our doorstep!'

'Raxxla,' Zerz whispered, lost in the moment. 'How ironic that this all would be over Lave once more...'

'Zerz, I'm going...' Jim snapped, grabbing a portscan from the bulkhead.

Zerz pulled back and stood up, gesturing with the disrupter.

'She will be your undoing, Jim! Mark my words!' Zerz laughed as Jim fled.

Rebecca stirred, conscious only of a throbbing pain in her head, arms and sides. She was confused, trying to recall what had happened.

*Something important, something I had to do?*

She opened her eyes and tried to make sense of what she was seeing. All she could see was the ground. She seemed to be lying down.

*Where am I? How did I get here? What happened before I got here? I can't think, it's so confusing! There is something important I should be doing! What is it?*

She tried to move her arms, but they seemed curiously detached and sluggish. She managed to roll over on to her front, moving her arms underneath her to prop herself up. The pain increased in intensity. She cried out.

'Rebecca! No!'

Rebecca looked up without recognition. Somebody was there, someone who looked familiar.

*I should know who he is? Why can't I remember?*

The memory tantalised her, frustratingly just out of reach.

Jim had sunk to his knees beside her, cradling her in his arms. Slowly she began to regain consciousness, her eyes widening in recall. 'Jim? Zerz... Ow... Hurts!'

She winced, gasping from the pain.

'I know, try not to move. I don't know how badly he hurt you.' Jim switched the portascan on and began to take a reading.

'I bet I've looked better,' she whispered. 'It was a bit one-sided.'

'You'll live,' he smiled, relieved at what the portascan showed. 'Concussion, bruises and cuts for the most part.'

'I'm a survivor...'

'Next time you decide to unilaterally sacrifice yourself for the greater good, you let me know beforehand!' he scolded.

'It seemed the right thing to do. He was going to kill me anyway, he needs you...'

'I don't think he had any intention of letting either of us go. We'll discuss it later. Right now we've got to get out of here! Can you walk?'

'I don't think so...'

Jim heard footsteps at the top of the ramp. Zerz had returned.

*Too late!*

'How touching. You really are an incurable romantic, Jim. You gave me Raxxla in exchange for the life of this...' Zerz gestured to Rebecca. 'And she was prepared to sacrifice herself to save you. An honourable, if futile gesture. Fortunately I am free from such emotional burdens.'

'You've got what you want, Zerz!' Jim said, leaving Rebecca for the moment and advancing towards Zerz. 'Leave us alone! We're no threat to you now.'

'I regret that I must tie up some loose ends before I depart,' Zerz said, raising the disrupter towards them.

'You bastard!' Rebecca said, managing to sit up despite Jim's protestations, her head spinning.

'So much for your word of honour!' Jim yelled. 'You said you wouldn't kill her!'

'You are absolutely correct,' Zerz acknowledged. The disrupter hummed with readiness.

'No!' Rebecca shouted, realising what he meant. She struggled to get up. 'Zerz! No!'

'But there are worse punishments than death,' Zerz whispered cruelly.

Rebecca had grabbed the knife from the floor. With quick reflexes she hurled it straight at Zerz. At the same instant he turned slightly, primed the disrupter and fired.

Jim was framed by a fierce glow of radiation. The knife ricocheted away from Zerz, deflected by his shield.

Jim crumpled to the ground. Rebecca screamed.

'Enjoy your final moments together.' Zerz said, raising his voice above the sound of the hydraulic rams which were now closing the loading ramp of the *Falchion*. 'I warned you, Jim!'

## Chapter Eight

'Jim!'

Rebecca desperately crawled to his fallen body, struggling against wave after wave of dizziness that threatened to overwhelm her. 'Oh God no! Jim!'

The *Falchion*'s manoeuvring thrusters fired, whipping up a furious gale inside the cavern. Dust blasted across the cavern floor, swirling violently past Rebecca, forcing her to shield her eyes. The Imperial Courier lifted gracefully up, its undercarriage retracting into the engine nacelles.

Jim was staring up at the roof of the cavern as the Courier's outstretched flanks rolled past. He couldn't move, a numbing sensation was growing in his chest. He realised that Zerz had put on the disrupter on a low power setting, he'd been spared the extreme discomfort the disrupter could have inflicted.

'Jim!'

Rebecca had managed to get to him. He saw her bruised and bloodied face looking down at him, her expression shocked and anguished, eyes brimming with tears. 'Jim!'

'Rebecca...'

'This is all my fault!'

'Reb...'

'If I hadn't...'

'Listen to me!' he managed to croak out. 'You've got to stop him, you're the only one who can do it.'

'He's a jerk. I screwed up his witchspace alignment good and proper right under his nose. He's not going anywhere!'

Jim smiled, despite himself. 'Another of your not-in-the-manual fixes?'

'Jim, don't joke, not now!' Rebecca's eyes were pleading and desperate. 'I've got to get you to my ship...!'

The *Falchion*'s engines ignited, the whine of its ramjet engines terrifyingly noisy in the confined space. The ship moved gracefully away from them. The noise dissipating as quickly as it had arisen. The *Falchion* was gone.

'No time... Rebecca, you've got to stop him...'

'No! I'm not leaving you,' Rebecca sobbed, huge choking sobs that caused her to gasp out words in the sudden silence. 'Those things I said, that's not what I meant... it was an act!... Promise me you forgive me... he was supposed to kill me! I'm sorry, oh Jim, I'm so sor...' she dissolved into tears.

Jim could barely summon the strength to respond. The numbness was moving up his chest, into his arms and down into his legs. So many thoughts drifted through his head, alongside so many regrets.

*Just like before – there is never time, never enough time!*

'Rebecca, I know you saved me...'

Darkness fell, whirling at the edge of his vision. He could hear Rebecca's voice receding, as if at a great distance.

'Jim, please, don't! Jim, stay with me! Stay with me! Don't you dare die on me! Jim! JIM!'

Zerz immediately scanned the vicinity of the cavern as the *Falchion* switched to flight configuration. He'd expected to see two ships, instead only one appeared.

The ident computer recognised the single ship as a prototype, a Galcop Constrictor. It was moored a couple of kilometres from the cavern. It must have been how Jim had arrived.

*Then where is the girl's ship? Puzzling.*

Zerz targeted his weapons on the ship. He knew the Constrictor's capabilities, how it was immune to anything less than a high specification military laser. It would be interesting to see how it fared against the fully unleashed might of the new plasma accelerator as fitted to the forward gun mount of the *Falchion*.

The Imperial Courier angled towards Jim's ship, coming into firing range. Zerz primed the gun, and waited for it to charge to full capacity. Zerz locked a missile onto the ship by force of habit.

The narrowband comms became active. It was the Constrictor.

*You have adopted an aggressive posture against this ship. This unit is programmed to respond with lethal force. Stand down your weapons or be destroyed.*

Zerz smiled. 'Doctor Daystrom, I presume. Hello M5.'

M5 recognises Zerz Furvel. Chief of Galcop Security.

'M5. Please activate your self-destruct imperative.'

M5 confirms your authentication but does not recognise your authorisation, Chief Furvel. You have adopted an aggressive posture against this ship. This unit is programmed to respond with lethal force. Stand down your weapons or be destroyed.

Zerz sighed. 'It was worth a try. Let's see how your programming copes with overwhelming fire-power, M5!'

M5 engaging offensive mode. Terminating communications.

The Constrictor launched itself from the ground and headed towards him. Zerz turned the *Falchion* to intercept. Military laser fire splashed across the *Falchion*'s forward shields.

Zerz thumbed the trigger.

With a scream of power the plasma accelerator struck out, impaling the incoming Constrictor. With inhumanly quick reactions, the Constrictor turned aside, but not before the stream of plasma penetrated the shields and tore into the hull of the beleaguered vessel.

Trailing smoke and debris, the Constrictor began to roll out of control, spiralling down towards the surface of the planet. Zerz watched it fall, until it dropped out of sight in the shadow of a crater. There was a flicker of flame within the crater, swiftly extinguished.

*Target Lost.*

*So much for M5 and the Constrictor...*

Zerz rescanned the area, there was still no sign of another ship. The scanner crackled, the screen clouding with static for a moment, before clearing again. Zerz frowned, switching the scanner settings.

*Gravimetric interference?*

The scanners washed out, the whole area was flooded with moderate levels of radiation. He smiled and shook his head. He didn't have time to locate and destroy a hidden ship.

*A cloaking device. Clever girl.*

He could not delay. Raxxla awaited. If the young woman's ship was operational she might conceivably still try to pursue him. Time was still of the essence.

*Perhaps I should have broken my word this once...*

The *Falchion* angled up and headed away from Oresrati, accelerating away from the planet, clearing a way to make a witchspace jump.

Rebecca lay next to Jim's body, trembling uncontrollably and weeping all the while. She was on the verge of unconsciousness herself. Nearby lay the Raxxla file. It had fallen out of Jim's jacket when he'd fallen. It was half open, as if mocking her.

Death was something she had encountered many times before; countless space travellers were either victims of others' attacks or subject to destruction under the weapons of her own ship. Somehow those just didn't feel as real. You fought the marauder, locked on, and mercilessly pummelled them into submission. All you saw was the flash of an explosion, debris tumbling, the occasional cargo canister; a message on your console...

*5.0 Cr, Right on Commander!*

It was as if it were a game.

Then there was nothing, just space. You moved on. Just another day in the cockpit.

Death had never been so personal for her. She suddenly realised that every pirate she had lashed to oblivion, every trader she had been too late to save; every one of them had a story, family and friends. Each was a person in their own right, with thoughts, feelings, ambitions, traits both good and bad. Some were twisted, some were desperate, but all had a history. How many had come to an abrupt unexpected or premature end with the sudden realisation that time had run out?

This was her epiphany, her day of realisation. Even the death of her family had not been so stark. She was suddenly, truly, aware of other people around her. Now she realised their significance. It was a lesson she'd been forced to learn in the most brutal of ways. A lesson forced on her in a few brief seconds.

It had come too late.

*Death has been my companion all this time, yet only now it has really caught up with me...*

Jim was gone, snuffed out just as effectively as the abrupt death of an disintegrating trade-ship. There was no escape pod this time.

How long she had been there she couldn't recall. Everything seemed pointless now, she could summon no will to move. She was numb, cold and shivering. She knew it was shock, both mental and physical, combined with blood loss. Maybe she was dying herself. Certainly she wasn't sure she could make it back to her ship.

*He was supposed to kill me, not you!*

Rebecca had known from the moment Zerz' shield confounded her disrupter that she was in trouble. Seeing Jim at the same time had thrown her into complete confusion. A myriad of emotions had washed over her; delight, joy, shame, anger, fear.

She had to find an opportunity to sabotage Zerz' ship. She knew Jim would give away the location of Raxxla in an attempt to save her. She was convinced Zerz would kill her once Raxxla was revealed and would have no qualms about torturing her to force Jim to reveal Raxxla. She was dead whatever she did.

As such she was determined to save Jim.

Without her as leverage, Zerz needed Jim alive permanently. The only way out she could see was to perform her act, get Zerz at least partly onside, and find a way to disable the vessel before Jim found Raxxla. She hoped her coded message would be understood in time. Jim would have to strike a deal for his own safety, but at least he'd be alive.

She had to make Jim believe it too, so he'd be hurt enough to let her go, at least until he would no longer be able to stop her. Feigning a lack of interest in seeing him again, and deliberately ignoring his question about what she'd been up to had been hard enough, she'd wanted to tell him that she'd longed to see him, but had been too ashamed to do so.

Putting on her show of betrayal had hurt her far more than she had expected it to.

*I've lied and cheated a hundred times to close a deal, yet this was like cutting myself in half...*

It had been to no avail. She had been prepared to sacrifice herself for Jim, but even that had been denied her. Zerz had both outwitted her, and punished her.

*This can't be happening...*

Her own words from just a day before came back to haunt her.

*I'll have my revenge, whatever the cost! – So Rebecca, was it worth it? My obsession has claimed another life! I can't kid myself any longer, now I know what my feelings were... Zerz could see it, even if I couldn't!*

She grasped Jim's lifeless hand, squeezing it tightly, emotions overwhelming her.

*Jim, you should have just let me die! Why did you mess up my plan?*

Rebecca knew the answer.

*Both of us fools! Why couldn't we just admit what we felt...*

'IT'S NOT FAIR!' she screamed into the darkness, dissolving into hysterical tears. There was no answer. Still distraught, she lowered her head, idly smoothing Jim's hair away from his eyes. Trembling, she ran her hand over his eyes, closing them. At the sight of his pale, empty face she gasped, her hand going to her mouth. Fresh tears formed, unashamedly cascading down her face.

*I've lost everything I cared about again! I didn't get to say anything I wanted to say. You were right, Jim! Give up the revenge! Why didn't I listen to you? Why?*

A breeze drifted through the cavern. She felt it, cool across her skin. She heard a faint sound akin to a ship landing, followed by a soft thud.

She sat up and spun around, looking frantically around her. There was nothing there. The cavern was empty. She almost fainted as a fresh wave of dizziness washed over her.

Suddenly a bright light fell upon her, she squinted into it, able to make out only a vague shadowy shape, a loading ramp, apparently folding out of nothingness. A cloaked ship? There were voices too, bickering with each other.

'Cutting it fine as usual I see,' the voice was rough and grating, but not unkind. The accent was tutored.

'We're exactly on time!' the other voice was lighter, more melodic, but less sophisticated. 'I'd like to see you do better.'

'Quickly, we don't have much time!'

Rebecca could see two figures approaching. Alarmed, she scrambled to a sitting position, wiping the tears from her eyes with her free hand. She was in no condition to put up any resistance.

'Who are you...?'

The figures strode in front of the illuminated docking ramp and Rebecca was able to make them out more clearly. The first was a woman, slender, but elegantly dressed in a somewhat impractical red gown, with fine brown hair interspersed with silver streaks. Her face was friendly and open, eyes alight with enthusiasm, but surrounded by crow's feet and wrinkles. The second was a man, dressed in a heavy cloak. His face was old, grey and bearded, but Rebecca immediately recognised his piercing gaze.

'Iacobus!' Rebecca gasped. 'Where did you come from?'

The man frowned, exchanging a look with his companion. 'Iacobus you say? You know me?'

Rebecca stared at him, frowning, he looked younger, more vigorous than before. 'You sent me! Don't you remember?'

'I did?' He seemed astonished.

His companion seemed to find this most amusing. 'Well, Iacob, who else were you going to trust, eh?'

'I can't believe I would be so cavalier,' Iacob replied. 'Yet, it explains who sent her here...'

'Stop it,' the woman interrupted. 'You'll confuse her. We've got to...'

'Yes, yes, all right!' Iacob blustered.

'What the frak is going on?' Rebecca demanded, angry and confused. 'Are you Iacob, or Iacobus?'

'Rebecca, we don't have much time,' Iacob said. 'This is complex, and I can not explain it to you in its entirety.'

'You can fraggin well try!' Rebecca cried out, her anger flaring.

'The assassin, Zerz, has used Raxxla as he intended, but there have been consequences that he did not foresee, events that should not have occurred. In the years following, the Selezen Crisis grew worse...'

Rebecca stared at him, bewildered. 'The what? Years? He only just left a moment ago!'

'She won't have a clue what you're talking about...' the woman said, in an almost sing-song voice.

'Selezen Crisis! 3162 'til 3174!' Iacob said hurriedly. 'Zerz is behind it! It's due to a quantum wave flux, a reciprocal vibration in the witchspace flow, it's vitally important that you reverse the primary event that caused this paradoxical...'

'3162?' Rebecca responded, looking from one to the other. 'That's more than twenty years away! What...'

The woman pushed Iacob aside, rolling her eyes and shaking her head. She knelt down beside Rebecca and spoke gently, touching her arm reassuringly. 'Listen, it's quite simple. We're from the future. We're here to make sure that you're able to stop Zerz before he misuses Raxxla.'

'You can't tell her about that, Reba!' Iacob snapped. 'She's not supposed to know!'

*Reba? She looks so like the holo-pics of my mother.... It couldn't be, could it? No, it's not possible. Maybe I'm dreaming...*

Rebecca stared into Reba's, eyes. Reba's face was tense, anxious, frank and honest. 'She deserves the truth,' Reba said gently, more for Rebecca's benefit than Iacob's.

Rebecca frowned, her head spinning with confusion. 'Who are you two?'

'Your ship; did you get the cloaking device as directed?' Reba asked.

'Well, yes, but...' Rebecca replied, still disorientated.

'Then Zerz won't have been able to destroy it. You must stop him before he jumps...'

'I'm not leaving Jim!' Rebecca tightened her grip on Jim's hand. 'You can't make me!'

Reba took her other hand and gently lifted Rebecca to her feet, pulling her slightly away from Jim's body. 'Jim will be fine. Come with me. Iacob, hurry up!'

*If it is a dream, it's a cruel one!*

'But... he's dead!' Rebecca's face crumpled again, tears filling her eyes. She allowed herself to be drawn away, but her voice rose with alarm and hysteria as she saw Iacob move towards Jim. 'Zerz killed him! It's too late! LEAVE HIM ALONE!'

Reba caught her arm. 'It's all right, everything will be all right. Trust me!'

Iacob had opened what appeared to be some kind of medical kit and was waving some kind of medical scanner over Jim's body. 'Old style cellular disrupter,' he tutted. 'To think people used to carry those around.' He looked rather reprovngly at Rebecca.

'Stop it, please!' Rebecca whimpered, distraught. 'Please, just leave him alone....'

Reba held her arms open to Rebecca, and Rebecca found herself falling into them, sobbing uncontrollably again. Despite her being a stranger, Reba's embrace was somehow reassuring, beyond just the physical support. It was almost like family.

*Who is this woman? It's like I know her! My mother...*

Rebecca almost fainted.

'Rebecca, he's not dead. Not for us...' Reba held her close, touching her gently on the back and shoulders. Rebecca relented, too lost and confused to hold back.

'Almost done,' Iacob called.

'She's hurt too,' Reba scolded, indicating Rebecca's face. 'That bastard Zerz roughed her up pretty bad! Be quick!'

Iacob adjusted the device and a beam of light played across Jim's body. After a few moments he handed the device to Reba. She gently pulled back from Rebecca.

'Hold still my dear, this won't take a moment.'

Somehow Rebecca felt she could trust this woman implicitly. The same light played across her face. Rebecca felt a sense of extreme well-being and energy flooded into her. She felt the bruising on her face easing. Reba wiped her face gently with a cleansing pad from the kit.

'There,' Reba said with a wink, apparently satisfied. 'Now you look gorgeous again.'

*I feel better! This isn't a dream! What's going on? Who are these people?*

'What is that? How did you.... Who are you?' Rebecca reached out to touch the device in curiosity. Reba quickly pulled it away and pocketed it.

'What in the name of Randomius Factoria...'

Rebecca turned to see Jim sitting up, looking pale, dizzy and confused, but very much alive. She stared in complete disbelief for a long moment, then looked at Reba and Iacob.

*That's impossible, I must have gone mad! Maybe I'm delirious!*

Reba smiled and nodded encouragement.

*I don't care!*

Rebecca cried in delight, flinging herself at him and hugging him close. 'JIM! I can't... JIM!'

'Rebecca? But I was...'

Rebecca couldn't help herself. She pulled him close and kissed him full on the lips, unwilling to let him go again.

'For God's sake girl! There's no time for all this!' Iacob snapped. 'You must hurry...'

'Aww, Iacob, this is the best bit,' Reba chided him, with a broad grin on her face. 'You're getting too old.'

Rebecca was oblivious of everything else around her. There was no façade of indifference this time, no offhandedness. She stopped, looking searchingly into Jim's eyes. 'I thought you were...'

Jim reached out to touch her face in amazement. The bruising and the vicious cut across her face were gone, along with the dried smear of blood. Just the thinnest, almost invisible, white line marked the location of the cut inflicted on her cheek. If it hadn't been for her now torn, blood-stained and muddied dress, there would have been no indication that anything had happened to her.

'And you? You were hurt...' he echoed weakly.

He didn't stop to hear the answer. He looked into Rebecca's eyes and pulled her back to return the kiss, she didn't resist.

*I'm never letting this girl out of my sight again...*

'Ahem!' Iacob coughed impatiently.

Jim released Rebecca and turned, looking at Iacob and Reba.

'Who are you?' Jim said, as bewildered as Rebecca had been. 'And where did you come from?'

'Oh, they're from the future or something,' Rebecca said matter of factly, releasing him helping him to his feet.

'The future...?'

'See, I told you she was the right choice,' Reba said to Iacob. 'Straight to the point, nothing fazes her for long...'

'...As always,' Iacob rolled his eyes.

Jim looked at Iacob and Reba, and across at the landing gantry apparently suspended in mid air. 'You're trying to tell me that Raxxla...'

'All true, yes, yes. Time travel, portals, all of it!' Iacob answered. 'Surely you realise that by now! Good grief! Don't be so dense young man!'

Jim eyebrows raised in surprise at the rebuff.

'Time travel. Right.' Rebecca turned to Reba. 'Wait a minute! You said Zerz had already been to Raxxla! If we stop him, then he won't get there, you won't have to come here, you won't help us and we won't be able to stop him, so...'

'Just stop,' Reba said, her voice amused. 'Trust me, you do not want to go there. All you have to do is stop Zerz.'

'Is someone going to explain this?' Jim demanded.

'There's no time,' Iacob snapped. 'You must trust us.'

'Why should we?' Jim argued back.

'Jim!' Rebecca hissed. 'You don't cross-examine someone who brings you back from the dead! You say 'thanks' and do what they say!'

'You should listen to her more, Jim,' Reba said, still sounding amused. Iacob, on the other hand, was glaring at her again. Jim looked unconvinced.

'You've got to answer this at least,' Jim said. 'Zerz has a plasma accelerator. He'll make mincemeat of us in a fire-fight! You say your from the future, how does Rebecca stop him then?'

'Good question!' Rebecca said, looking at the older pair expectantly.

Reba looked at Iacob and they exchanged an anxious look.

'I don't know how you do it,' Reba squeezed Rebecca's hand in hers, her eyes gleaming as if with pride when she looked at Rebecca. 'I just know you can. Believe in yourself.'

'That isn't very helpful!' Rebecca said, frustrated. 'Why can't you help us? Two ships on one – we might stand a chance!'

'Time paradox,' Reba shrugged. 'It's not possible. Anyway, we've only got an Ophidian class scout-ship.'

'We're not going anywhere until you tell us who the frak you are!' Jim stated, folding his arms.

'Jim!' Rebecca remonstrated, pulling at his arm. 'Now is not the time...'

'She's right! There's no time!' Iacob snapped. 'You must go! Hurry!'

Jim glared at Iacob impassively. Iacob sighed and looked at Reba.

Reba shrugged. 'I did tell you this would happen. You know what they're like.'

'Do you have to be right all the time?' Iacob replied, before fixed Jim with a sharp look. 'If I tell you will you go? Carry out this task immediately?'

Rebecca looked between them both, and then at Jim.

Jim studied the Iacob's face for a long moment and then looked at Rebecca. She nodded.

'All right. Yes, we'll go.'

Iacob looked at Reba, and waved his hand dismissively. 'You wanted to tell them.'

Reba smiled, and looked straight at them, with a mischievous grin. 'We're you.'

Rebecca and Jim exchanged a quick startled look.

'Us?' they replied together.

'From the year 3175 to be precise,' Iacob volunteered impatiently. 'No more questions, you must stop Zerz!'

Reba smiled, and with a flash of humour said, 'You could say the future depends on it.'

'If you're us, you must be able to tell us more!' Rebecca said. 'Give us some advice! What should we do?'

'Don't get yourselves killed!' Reba replied, grinning. 'We'd be most upset about it!'

'Cute.'

'I can only give you one piece of advice,' Jacob said sternly. 'I can't give you more for obvious reasons.'

'Time paradoxes,' Jim breathed out.

Jacob nodded and then spoke directly to Jim. 'Listen carefully. You will need more time.'

'That's it?' Jim spluttered. 'Just some cryptic clue? I'll need more time? What's that supposed to mean?'

'You'll understand why...'

'...when we're older?' Jim snapped back. 'Thanks! You're worse than my parents!'

'And for God's sake,' Jacob said crossly, stooping down, picking up the Raxxla file and pushing it towards Jim. 'Look after this!'

Jacob and Reba turned and headed towards their invisible ship. As they reached the loading ramp of their ship, Jacob called back to them, 'I can't tell you any more! Now go! Zerz must be stopped! And don't tell them anything else, Reba!'

They both ran up into the interior and the loading ramp began to fold away.

*If she's from the future, she must know!*

'Wait!' Rebecca suddenly shouted. 'One more question! Do I save my family?'

The loading ramp slammed shut and disappeared.

For a moment Jim and Rebecca said nothing, just listening as the invisible ship launched. The sound faded away.

Rebecca looked at Jim.

'Are you okay?' she asked, in a small voice. 'I mean, you were, well...'

'Dead?' Jim couldn't quite get his head around it. He remembered everything fading away around him, Rebecca's anxious face, and then it was just like waking from sleep, with a stranger standing over him.

'Er... yeah,' Rebecca said uncertainly. She picked up the knife from where it had fallen in on the sandy floor.

'I feel fine. You?'

'Good. A bit tired, but okay.'

He looked across at her in disbelief. 'I grow a beard?'

Rebecca laughed, and they both relaxed.

'Suits you,' Rebecca said coyly. 'Better than grey hair and laughter lines, though I do look good in a dress, don't I? Not bad for a wrinkly. Come on, we've got a job to do.'

Zerz had the galactic overjump programmed in to the witchdrive. He reduced the throttles and the whine of the ramjet drives reduced to a gentle hum. The *Falchion* was poised, ready to jump. He pressed the commtab sequence to initiate the jump.

*Galactic Witchspace to Lave in 15 s.*

He sat back and waited for the eerie glow of witchspace to surround the *Falchion* and transport him to his destination. He felt a surge of elation. He had the location of Raxxla, he was unimpeded now. Jim was disposed of and he had the comforting knowledge that he had both physically and mentally tortured the woman who had cost him his reputation.

She would be forced to choose between dying a lonely lingering death marooned on Oresrati with the corpse of her beloved Jim, or be forced into a desperate suspended animation thruspace trip which would take twenty years to complete, with little chance of success.

*I will savour that thought for many years...*

The countdown ended. Nothing happened. The console spat out a string of messages:

*Witchdrive Malfunction! Jump Aborted.*

Alignment Parameters Incorrect.

Please proceed to an authorised service centre.

Zerz stared at the console in disbelief, actually slamming his hands down on it in sheer frustration. A quick check revealed all the witchdrive alignment parameters appeared to be fine. He had seen her adjust the alignment! Yes, she had used an unorthodox approach, but everything checked out! All the status indicators had been green and they still were. Somehow she had been able to engineer a faulty alignment that appeared to be fine to every status check short of actually performing the jump itself!

*Again! Again, I underestimated her! In my pride I considered her inferior and she took advantage of it!*

'Frag you, *fâché*,' he whispered. 'Frag you to the ends of the universe!'

He left the bridge at a run, heading for the witchdrive core.

Jim started to run towards the exit of the cavern. He realised that Rebecca wasn't directly behind him. He turned to see what was wrong. Rebecca had hardly moved.

'What's the matter?' he demanded.

She glared furiously and shook her hands at her dress. She'd tried to hitch it up, but it was too narrowly cut for her to be able to do that. There was no way she could run in it.

'Shall I carry you?' he joked.

Rebecca didn't deign to give a response. She pulled out her knife and sliced through the dress above the knees, ripping it quickly and efficiently. She shrugged off the excess and seemed satisfied, far more comfortable as she joined him.

*If the tailors on Sotiqu had seen that there would probably have been a riot...*

They raced back across the dimly lit surface of Oresrati as fast as they could in the low gravity, Rebecca surprisingly fleet of foot despite her bare soles. Suddenly she stopped and looked carefully around her, looking at the depressions in the soil in front of her.

'Where's your ship?' Jim demanded.

'It's right here. Zerz took my key though. I'll have to use the back door,' Rebecca said, holding up her hands in front of her, feeling her way. She looked as if she was miming. 'Ah, here we are.'

A loading ramp appeared out of nothing.

Jim stared. 'You have a cloaking device too? Where did you get it?'

Rebecca grinned. 'From you apparently! Well, sort of. How else do you think I managed to follow you without being seen? Come on!'

'From me?' Jim asked, confused.

'Long story, tell you later.'

Rebecca led the way to the bridge, Jim followed, finding the interior of the Cobra Courier oddly familiar. It brought back memories of their adventures on a similar ship, the SuperCobra, two

years before. Jim had secured his harness in the co-pilot's chair and was distracted by Rebecca swinging herself around into her seat. The sight of her legs now free from the encumbrance of the dress brought up feelings he didn't want to have to deal with at this point in time. The shortened dress *really* suited her...

*Focus for Lave's sake! What's the matter with you man! You've got a job to do! Get a grip!*

Within minutes the *Eclipse* was in flight, roaring up out of Oresrati's gravity well and into clear space.

Rebecca was back in her element. She set the controls for cruise and toggled the scanner resolution out as far as it would go.

'So,' she said, after checking the instruments one more time and looking out of the forward viewer, 'what was it like being dead?'

Jim looked across at her. 'Well, it was quiet. Peaceful even.'

'Peaceful,' Rebecca replied. 'I see.'

'Lonely, too,' he said, quietly, looking across at her.

She looked back at him. 'About before, I'm sorry. I was just trying...'

'You were trying to save me, by confusing Zerz,' Jim replied. 'I think you succeeded, you certainly had me believing it.'

*I'm not acting any more, I know what I want now and it's not Raxxla...*

She sighed faintly, and bit her bottom lip. 'No more kidding from now on, yeah?'

'Rebecca, I...'

The scanner pinged. Rebecca immediately focused back to the controls.

'There he is,' she smiled grimly, 'the smug bastard.'

'You said you sabotaged his drive?'

'Mucked up the alignment good and proper, while he was watching me too. He should be having a proper hissy fit right about now. Ha!'

'Could he fix it?' Jim asked.

'How good a tech is he?' Rebecca scoffed sarcastically. 'As good as you?'

'He was Galcop's chief technician! I can only assume he's knows his way around a witch-drive core!'

'I'd better get him quick then,' she reached across, priming the missiles, locking them on target and charging both the shields and the primary weapons. Within moments the ship was ready to fight.

Jim saw her wriggle in her pilot's seat. She swore.

'What's the matter?'

She unlocked the seat controls and moved the seat forward a few notches. 'I've never flown without shoes on before, I can't reach the foot controls!'

Jim shook his head in amusement.

On impulse Rebecca flicked on the narrowband comm transmitter, grinning with anticipation.

'I tried it once your way Furvel, are you game for a rematch?'

*Bet that surprised you, you arrogant git!*

There was a long pause, and then the speakers crackled.

'You test my patience *fâché*,' Zerz said, his voice raw with suppressed fury. 'I will spare you if you withdraw immediately.'

*Ha! He's found out about his drive and he's not fixed it yet! That's all I need to know.*

Rebecca pushed the *Eclipse*'s throttles up to full power, zeroing in on the *Falchion*, which was cruising at less than half speed.

'Time to settle this once and for all, Furvel,' she said gleefully. 'And may the best girl win!'

She snapped the narrowband comms off.

'Was that really necessary?' Jim said, raising his eyebrows.

'I've been wanting to say something like that for years.'

On the main view the *Falchion* came about and accelerated towards them. Rebecca saw the signature of a missile lock, the scanner indicators flashing red. Both ships were on a collision course, their range shrinking rapidly. Rebecca pushed the engines to full throttle.

'What can you tell me about a plasma accelerator?' Rebecca shouted over the howl of the engines.

'Only that I don't think Zerz was exaggerating,' Jim quipped back. 'It's probably at least three or four times as powerful as a military laser. Stay out of his firing solution!'

'No worries.'

Rebecca spun the *Eclipse* around its central axis, and then began to engage the climb control, corkscrewing the *Eclipse*, but maintaining forward progress. It was a tough approach for an enemy to hit, but equally it prevented you from using your own weapons. A defensive approach tactic.

Suddenly the sky lit up with fury. Rebecca and Jim got their first view of the unleashed plasma accelerator, a twisting, raging storm of tormented energy, twisting angrily towards them, tendrils of fire mixed with lightning.

'Ouch!' Rebecca said, aborting the corkscrew and diving the *Eclipse* out of the way into an outside loop. 'Start counting!'

'What?'

'I need to know the recharge time! 1 2 3 4 5! Count!'

Jim counted mentally, as Rebecca turned the *Eclipse* back towards the *Falchion* and then dived away again, presenting a tempting target. As she had hoped, the *Falchion* fired again. She dodged, rolling into the corkscrew manoeuvre again.

'Eight seconds,' Jim called.

*He's got to pick and choose then...*

Rebecca triggered the cloaking device, flipped the *Eclipse* over, dropped the cloak and unleashed a barrage of military laser fire. The missile threat indicator turned green showing they were no longer targeted. The *Falchion*'s shields flared under the attack, but held. The missile lock from the *Falchion* re-established itself.

They circled again, Rebecca feinting and ducking the *Eclipse* to trigger an attack from the *Falchion* and then using the cloak to hide a turn before delivering a withering blast of fire by return.

*He can't bring that weapon to bear on us...*

Rebecca turned again, intending to use the tactic a further time, as it seemed that Zerz had no answer for it. They were wearing him down bit by bit, the *Falchion*'s shields would be unable to resist the bite of the military laser forever. She fainted as before, giving Zerz an obvious shot across their dorsal hull plating. She prepared to dodge again.

'He didn't fire!' Jim warned.

The *Falchion* twisted in space, its bow coming around to face them, rotating fast.

*Frak, he suckered me in...*

'Yaw thrusters!' Rebecca cried, pushing the *Eclipse* into a sharp dive and triggering the fuel injectors. 'I hate yaw thrusters! I always forget them! Who the frak was it who decided yaw control would be a good thing. It's just not right!'

Jim saw the plasma accelerator ignite out of the port side viewer, moments before a stream of coruscating, twisting fire lashed out towards them.

*It's going to hit!*

The shields screamed. Light flashed around the interior of the bridge and the *Eclipse* bucked as if a giant hand had snatched and shaken it like a child's toy.

Rebecca stared at the energy readouts, both forward and rear shields were gone. Fully two thirds of the energy banks had been drained away.

*'Stard! It was only a glancing blow! I've got shield boosters and a military spec upgrade and it almost blew me away!*

Rebecca immediately targeted and launched a missile, turned the *Eclipse* around, hit the fuel injectors and ran at full power. The ringing tones of an ECM echoed through the bridge. Rebecca's missile was hardened and wasn't subdued, forcing Zerz to disengage in order to deal with it.

'What are you doing?' Jim exclaimed.

'If he gets another hit with that plasma gun, we've had it! It's virtually a one shot weapon!' Rebecca replied, 'I've got to even the odds! We can't win out here. There is no way I can avoid getting hit again before we can finish him off, he's too good!'

She saw the missile succumb to fire from the *Falchion*.

The narrowband crackled online. 'Not so confident now, *fâché?*'

The *Eclipse* was diving towards Oresrati at full power. Gracefully, the *Falchion* rotated, and began diving back down towards them in pursuit, its ramjet engines glowing a bright actinic blue and blazing forward at full power. It too triggered its fuel injectors, hurtling towards them.

Courier versus Cobra. It had been a draw last time. This time, round one had gone to the *Falchion*.

Rebecca instinctively knew that her ship was at a major disadvantage; the plasma accelerator was far beyond the power levels she had anticipated, she'd assumed her modified ship would fare better than it had.

*If you can't win the game, you don't play. Even Elite combateers know when to run...*

She pushed the controls forward. The *Eclipse* rolled over and dived more steeply toward the surface of the planet. Jim stiffened, bracing himself in his seat as the craggy rock strewn surface of Oresrati filled the viewer, looming larger once more.

'I hope you know what you're doing...' Jim whispered.

'So do I.'

Rebecca pulled out of the dive just above the surface of the planet, with the *Falchion* now closing behind her. As if prompted by a passing thought she suddenly swung to port. The plasma beam flickered out, ionising the atmosphere and vaporising a huge tract of the surface nearby. The heat shields were glowing with the heat generated by punching through the atmosphere at space manoeuvring speeds. Debris and superheated gas flickered past the view screens and disappeared behind them.

Rebecca weaved the ship between hills, down crevasses and around the rampart slopes of the larger craters. The *Falchion* followed her move for move. The plasma beam flashed out again, detonating the rocky surface of the planet. The *Eclipse* narrowly slewed out of the way as thousands of tonnes of rock and metal fragments poured down across their path. Each time the plasma beam sprouted forth, it was closer and closer to them. Zerz was beginning to accurately lead her movements, anticipating her reactions. She was running out of tricks.

*He's too fraggin good!*

Jim watched the battle develop. Rebecca was exceeding herself again, but the *Falchion's* pursuit was inexorable. Sooner or later a blast from that plasma accelerator was going to hit them, and then it would be over.

*We're not going to get out of here....*

'There is no escape, *fâché*,' Zerz voice was full of triumph. 'This time you will die for certain.'

Jim looked at Rebecca, she shot him a desperate look.

'I don't think I can do this!' she said, sounding fearful. 'I can't shake him!'

The *Falchion* was closing towards firing range again.

'You can do it,' Jim replied. 'I know you can...'

The scanner pinged.

Both Jim and Rebecca looked at it in surprise. Another ship? It was in front of them, closing rapidly. Jim toggled the ident computer as Rebecca evaded another beam of plasma energy.

Galcop Constrictor Prototype.

Mass 120 metric.

0.45 LM.

'Who the frak is flying your ship?' Rebecca demanded.

Jim hit the narrowband comms. 'M5! Status report.'

The computer's peculiar voice responded immediately.

*M5 recognises Jim McKenna. Hello Jim. Shields off-line, engines at 72% of rated output, long range...*

'M5, weapons status?'

*Weapons operative. M5 Standing by.*

'Cause of damage?' Jim queried.

*This unit was attacked by an unlisted Imperial Courier with an unknown weapon signature.*

Rebecca looked at him. 'Is that a computer? Ask it how it got away!'

Jim repeated the question to M5.

The computer's answer was succinct.

*This unit is programmed to survive. This unit feigned an uncontrolled crash to avoid destruction.*

'Smart-alec computers!' Rebecca shrugged and rolled her eyes, narrowly dodging another plasma strike. Jim issued an instruction.

'M5. Engage and destroy the Imperial Courier!'

*M5 predicts the probability of destroying the Imperial Courier as less than 10%. Probability prediction indicates of the chance of destruction of this unit is greater than 80%. Please confirm override of self-preservation imperative.*

'M5! Engage!'

There was a pause over the narrowband; a computerised sigh.

*M5 will comply.*

Zerz hadn't seen the Constrictor immediately as it was hidden from his view by the fleeing *Eclipse*. The *Eclipse* continued to twist and turn across the surface of Oresrati. The girl was a superb pilot, he'd admit that. She was a master at feinting, leading his targeting this way and that be-

fore changing direction in an unpredictable way; better than any other he'd encountered. But like any pilot, she had her preferences and habits. Zerz was an astute student, and he was learning fast. The yaw control on the *Falchion* allowed him to compensate for the *Eclipse*'s superior manoeuvrability. It was only a matter of time.

The scanner flickered.

*Another ship? Where did... the Constrictor! But I killed it!*

The Constrictor was closing in at maximum velocity, rapidly closing the range between the vessels. The *Eclipse* barrel rolled aside, and Zerz found himself staring into the snub nosed prototype fighter's weapons head on.

The Constrictor was dwarfed by the *Falchion*. It looked like a wasp attacking an eagle.

Its forward military laser blasted forth, peppering the *Falchion* with scintillating energy, which blistered across the forward shields.

The wideband comms became active momentarily and a curiously determined computerised voice issued forth.

*M5. The Ultimate Computer.*

The brazen attack delivered maximum damage, but incurred a heavy penalty in tactical positioning.

Zerz triggered the plasma accelerator.

A final message came over the narrowband onboard the *Eclipse*.

*M5 is unable to complete its objective.*

The Constrictor exploded, disintegrating in a shower of metallic debris which sparkled down to destruction on the surface of Oresrati. Rebecca almost felt sorry for it.

*Not bad for a machine! And it's given me an idea...*

The *Falchion*, its forward shields reforming, came on.

Rebecca tweaked the throttle down slightly, executed a sharp turn into a long narrow sinuous canyon winding down through the surface of the planet. The *Falchion* closed quickly and followed her move into the valley. Rebecca flipped the rear view screen on. Jim saw it was just like the forward viewer, with an illuminated set of cross hairs.

*A rear military gun too? She's been earning some serious cash!*

A warning light buzzed on the console, the ship was overheating as it sped through the atmosphere. Rebecca was quickly flicking between the forward and rear screens, as if judging something. The plasma beam struck out again, narrowly missing them on the starboard side.

*Surely she can't fly and watch both screens at the same time?*

Rebecca thumbed the trigger, sending a bolt of laser fire from the rear gun mounting. Staggered that she could line up a shot whilst navigating the canyon, Jim saw the *Falchion* caught in the cross hairs. Jim watched in astonishment as Rebecca rolled the *Eclipse* around in a move that kept it on a clear path through the valley and still maintained a lock on the *Falchion*. The laser fire never wavered.

The *Falchion* staggered under the onslaught, its forward shields falling again. Jim was dumbstruck at the display of flying prowess. He saw parts of the *Falchion*'s forward hull crackle and break as the military laser punched through.

*How does she do it?*

There was more to come. Rebecca had slammed the throttles closed. The *Eclipse* lurched to an almost complete stop. The *Falchion* hurtled past. Then she pushed the throttles forward again.

The hunter had become the hunted. Round two to the *Eclipse*.

The *Falchion*'s manoeuvrability within the canyon was limited. The energy demands of the plasma cannon had required Zerz to remove his rear and side firing weapons. Rebecca had seen this on a close pass with his ship. Her experience with spaceborne combat had given her a trained eye.

Jim watched Rebecca as she fought. Her face was determined, a look of pure concentration etched on her features, her eyes blazing with zeal. As each move by the *Falchion* was countered an almost visceral grin crossed her face. She put Jim in mind of a feline stalking its prey, impaling it with its claws before ripping its unfortunate victim to shreds.

*I'm glad she's on my side...*

The shields on the *Falchion* failed. Jim saw the military laser fire from the *Eclipse* puncture further holes in the hull; plasma began leaking from damaged internal mechanisms.

Zerz tried his previous trick, yawing his ship around on its vertical axis. Rebecca was forced to dump all of her ship's velocity, but not before she triggered her forward military laser once last time.

Rebecca's laser fire, now unhindered by the failed forward shields on the *Falchion*, stitched a path across the primary hull, neatly across the forward gun mounting, just as the plasma beam lashed out.

The plasma attack only lasted for a fraction of a second before Rebecca's own weapons fire disabled it. Despite this, there was enough energy to penetrate the shields on the *Eclipse*, and strike the hull, sending shock waves of devastating energy through the ship. Jim and Rebecca ducked instinctively as overloaded panels and circuitry shorted out around them.

*ECM damaged!*

*Shields damaged!*

*Fuel injectors damaged!*

*Cloaking device damaged!*

*Drive coils damaged! Engine efficiency compromised!*

*Forward Military Laser overheated!*

*Undercarriage inoperable!*

*Main computer damaged!*

*Flight control offline!*

*Switching to auxiliary control!*

Damage assessment sys....

The console display flickered, showed a set of corrupted indicators and promptly faded out.

*I've never seen the damage report machine damaged before!*

Rebecca gasped as she wrestled with the controls.

The *Eclipse* staggered and spun away from the surface, out of control. On the forward viewer they caught a brief view of the *Falchion*, smoking copiously from a major hull breach across its forward section, before it disappeared behind them.

'Anything left?' Rebecca cried out, pulling on the non-responsive controls.

'Not much!'

'Brace yourself!' she yelled, as the *Eclipse* reached the top of its arc and started to spiral back down towards the surface. 'I may lose it!'

The *Eclipse* completed two more rolls before Rebecca managed to stabilise it, narrowly avoiding a collision with the rocky surface. She snapped on the rear view.

The *Falchion* was not pursuing them. It had angled up away from the planet's surface, and was heading back out of the gravity well.

Round three was a draw.

'He's running!' Rebecca snapped. 'I've lost main control! Help me bring her around!'

Jim manned the emergency gyros while Rebecca used the thrusters. The *Eclipse* turned and fell into pursuit.

'We can't catch him,' Jim observed. 'He's got full power to his engines, we've got damage to the drive coils!'

'Frak!' Rebecca snapped, targeting a missile on the fleeing *Falchion*. She switched on the narrowband. 'Taking the coward's way out again, Furvel?'

There was no response from the *Falchion*.

She fired the missile. The *Falchion* made no attempt to avoid it. The missile homed in square and true, impacting on the *Falchion*'s rear shields, which flared up against the impact, but remained intact.

*How much more can that ship take?*

'He's running out of range,' Jim said, worried. 'Probably fixing that galactic jump as we speak. How many missiles do you have left?'

'Just the one,' Rebecca said, targeting it and firing it. 'Oh and a Q-Bomb!'

'We're not close enough to use it,' Jim said, 'and we'd kill ourselves too! Next time, get a full rack of missiles!'

'Thanks for the tip, Harmless!'

Once again the missile homed in on its target, closing rapidly on the fleeing *Falchion*. It didn't seem possible that the *Courier*, no matter how strong a ship, could survive two direct missile hits in its weakened state.

The two dots on the scanner scope became one. There was a flash...

...and a circular patch of blue flickering energy, the signature of a witchspace wormhole. The missile turned aside and self-destructed.

'NO!' Rebecca yelled. 'He's not doing this to me again! This time we are going to follow him!'

'He's heading for Raxxla' Jim said. 'We've got to follow!'

Rebecca squinted at the wormhole entrance.

'You sure about this?' she asked, looking across at Jim.

'Afraid so. I found it. Raxxla's real.'

Rebecca looked back at the viewer for a moment 'And what's on the other side of that wormhole?'

Jim grinned. 'You're not going to believe this...'

'Try me.' Rebecca snapped, adjusting the controls.

'It's Lave.'

Rebecca turned and stared at him. 'Lave? What, our Lave?'

Jim smiled by return. 'The same.'

'The Lord Giles has a twisted sense of humour, that's all I can say!'

The *Eclipse* limped forward as the witchspace wormhole slowly began to fade and close up.

'This is going to be close!' Rebecca said. 'Hang on.'

She rolled the *Eclipse* around, giving them the optimum angle of approach. The witchspace wormhole began to shimmer as it destabilised, heralding its imminent closure. The engines strained under the load, plasma leaking from their damaged exhaust ports, leaving a yellow-tinged smoking wake...

Witchspace tunnel!

## Chapter Nine

Lave was always a busy system, with a large amount of traffic entering its system space at the witchspace marker. It was not unusual to see a number of ships appear in short succession. It was not even unusual to see a damaged ship appear on occasion, having found itself bested in combat in the profitable, but extremely dangerous, system of Riedquat close nearby.

Most ships would set a direct course for Lave system space and the relative safety of proximity to the Coriolis space station network. This was the safest way to travel, typically guarded by Galcop Vipers every few million miles. It could take a while though, the space lanes were often overcrowded.

Others, conscious of time and wanting a less busy transit would often dive away from the space lane, seeking clearer space. The transit might be faster, but you were further from Galcop assistance. Naturally, pirates knew this. It was the traders' choice; time, risk and reward.

Few ships, other than automated tugs, turned aside to make a close pass of Lave's peculiar moon. There was nothing of any value to a trader there.

Two ships, both showing the symptoms of a severe fire-fight, were breaking with tradition.

It seemed this was going to be an unusual day.

Rebecca looked out of the forward viewer with a sense of relief. Despite the crisis, it felt good to be back in Chart One. The other charts had their attractions, but it always felt more comfortable near home around the familiar *Old Worlds*.

*Strange how we're back here again! Like the song says – 'Everything spins about Lave'!*

'He'll reach the moon four or five minutes before we do,' Jim observed, looking at the scanner.

'What do we do when we get there?' Rebecca asked. 'It's a moon, just a lump of rock. What are we looking for?'

Jim had been thinking in advance. 'Look for a witchspace anomaly of any kind, I'm guessing there will be some kind of static wormhole, or maybe a jumpgate, that sort of thing. Somewhere there has to be something out of the ordinary. I remember lab data showing that the moon was unstable away from the equatorial belt. Start looking away from that region, north or south.'

Rebecca looked at the scanner, seeing the curve of the moon's surface moving towards them, and the bright dot that represented the *Falchion*. 'I don't see anything yet.'

'We'll need to fly low, just like we did when we dropped that Q-Bomb last time. Keep the scanners on maximum range and hope we get lucky before Zerz does.'

The *Falchion* had changed course slightly, moving towards a normal orbit insertion. Rebecca brought the throttles down and brought her ship to a gentle coast, watching as the *Falchion* drew closer to the moon, slowing as it established orbit.

'He's found something,' Rebecca said, indicating the scanner. 'He's heading for the north pole.'

She locked the ident computer onto the *Falchion*.

*Imperial Courier.*

Mass 480 Metric.

*Speed .375 LM.*

The *Falchion* had turned almost directly north, as oriented by the spin of the moon. It slowed further, coming to a stop directly over the pole.

'Right above it,' Jim said. 'It could make sense for any entrance or device to be positioned thereabouts. Easy access for docking, and it could take advantage of magnetic voids and rotational energy.'

'Whatever you say. Looks like he's scanning for something. Three minutes until we're in range,' Rebecca said, diverting the course of the *Eclipse*. The moon continued to grow larger, transforming from a small orbiting body into a landscape of low rolling grey hills, pockmarked with craters.

'Doesn't look like much, does it?' Jim commented.

'No,' Rebecca replied. 'Looks exactly how I'd expect a boring old moon to look. You sure about this?'

'Sure? Not at all!' Jim said with a laugh. 'Let's wait and see.'

'I remember being told about Raxxla as a child, by my mother,' Rebecca said wistfully. 'I imagined it like a polished black marble of a planet, diamond coated and floating in space like an onyx jewel. Not a scrappy old moon.'

'Your mother?' Jim queried gently, not wanting to probe too hard. 'You've never mentioned her.'

'It's complicated, she was...what in Lave...?'

The *Falchion* suddenly appeared to be dropping out of orbit, abruptly changing direction and careering towards the moon's surface. Even from their remote distance they could see the flash of actinic exhaust flux. What was Zerz doing descending like that? It was reckless in the extreme. The *Falchion* was dropping precipitously, heading towards the surface at breakneck speed.

'I'm not losing him now,' Rebecca said, pushing forward the throttles.

The *Eclipse* roared in towards the moon at full speed. Rebecca watched as the *Falchion* continued to descend. Something strange was happening. She couldn't make out the outlines of the other ship as it was too far away, but the engine flux was flickering on and off, almost as if the ship was tumbling.

Something else appeared on the scanner. An undesignated target.

'What's that?' Jim asked.

'Something on the surface,' Rebecca said, locking it into the multi-target computer. 'Zerz is heading right for it!'

Unrecognised target.

Mass divide by zero.

*Speed ... Your ident computer is not responding.*

'Frak!' Rebecca snapped. 'It's crashed my ident computer!'

The *Falchion* was heading towards a deeply shadowed crater, surrounded by grey forbidding hills. The moon was looming large now; the *Falchion* flickered on the edge of the scanner.

Then it was gone. It passed into the shadow of the crater and disappeared visually, the blip representing the ship on the scanner faded out at the same moment. The second blip also faded out. The scanner was empty.

Target lost.

Target lost.

Your ident computer is not responding. Please proceed to an authorised service centre.

'Frak it! It's gone!'

'Crashed?'

Rebecca waited for the flash of destruction. It didn't come. There was nothing; no explosion, no debris. An impact of that speed should have easily produced a noticeable trace.

'I don't think so...'

*Why did it go out of control?*

She pulled the throttles back and Jim pulled up the onboard telescope. The crater appeared as before, deeply in shadow, but with nothing that looked out of place. It was grey, covered in rills and boulders down to the resolution of the image. There was no wreckage, no smashed duralium panels, or any other trace of the *Falchion*, or the other mysterious target. Both had simply disappeared.

'There's nothing there,' Jim confirmed. 'No trace of it!'

'Now what?'

Jim pushed the scope aside and sat back considering options.

'We don't have much choice. Either we have a closer look at the crater, or give up and admit defeat.'

Rebecca bit her lip, tapped in a course and pushed the throttles back up, cautiously moving closer, heading into a standard orbit. At the same time she made sure the lasers were charged up and the shields and energy banks were fully powered.

*Wish I still had a missile left!*

The *Eclipse* established its orbit and she pulled the throttles back again. She'd followed in on the same trajectory, in position a few thousand miles above the surface. The crater was directly below her. Nothing seemed amiss.

She checked the astrogation scanner again. Nothing. Jim was looking through the telescope at high magnification.

'Anything?'

'No sign.'

'So what the frak happened? He can't have just disappeared, there's no witchspace worm-hole!'

*Ping!*

Something had appeared on the scanner again, the undesignated target was back.

Rebecca reached for the controls, but not before both of them were thrown abruptly back in their harnesses as the *Eclipse* lurched. The on-board system alarm began to howl. On the view

screen the stars whirled around and they caught a glimpse of the moon's surface rushing past. There was some kind of light, but it quickly disappeared off screen as the ship spun.

Gee forces were alternately pushing and pulling them against their harnesses. Rebecca struggled to reach the controls, feeling nausea growing in the pit of her stomach as the *Eclipse* was whirled about. She could see the internal gravity controls had gone off-line. The engines were still at idle, yet the *Eclipse* was spinning and descending rapidly towards the moon, the astrogation compass a blur of motion.

*A trap!*

She wrestled herself forward, grabbing the helm controls and pushing the engines to full power. The helm would not respond at all, the ship continued spinning uncontrollably, the moon looming closer all the time. She hit the emergency gyros, still nothing!

Warning! Excessive yaw, abort manoeuvre!

Warning! Helm control offline!

Warning! Excessive energy drain, check maintenance!

Warning! Collision imminent, alter course immediately!

Warning! Altitude low!

'You're not getting me without a fight!' she cursed, over-boosting the engines again.

The *Eclipse* shuddered, vibrating around her. Jim stared at the indicators on the console as Rebecca wrestled in vain with the controls. Everything was draining away; energy banks, shields, lasers, even the Quirium fuel levels, everything was going!

What kind of force could do this at range? There was no science, no technology he knew of.

*Warning! Gravimetric radiation detected!*

He looked at the course plot. Even at full power the *Eclipse* wasn't budging a millimetre. They were going straight down, perpendicular to the surface. The moon was close now. They would never survive an impact at this speed.

*This is it, we're dead!*

The engines spluttered and failed. The bridge lights dimmed as the energy banks finally discharged.

*Warning! Collision imminent, impact in...*

The computer faded out and the screens went black. Jim had his eyes closed. Rebecca braced herself for oblivion.

'Screw yooooooooo...!'

The *Eclipse* crashed into darkness, and they knew no more.

'Jim? Wake up, Jim!'

Jim came to, Rebecca shaking him.

'What happened?' he said, sitting up and looking around. The bridge of the *Eclipse* was in almost complete darkness, he could only just see because Rebecca had grabbed an emergency 'glo' from a nearby flight cabinet. Her face looked small and worried in the dim light.

'Are you okay?' she said, concerned. 'Are you hurt?'

'I'm good. Dizzy, but fine otherwise. What happened?'

'No idea, but the ship is completely dead, no power in the mains, auxiliaries or even the batteries. Everything looks okay, but nothing works, I've never seen anything like it.'

Rebecca's ship had no external viewpoints, everything was provided by remote cameras and thrown onto the viewscreen, fine if you had power, worse than useless without. They were blind, dumb and mute.

'If the ship's systems are off-line...' Jim said, taking the glo from her. He tossed it in the air and caught it, observing how it fell. 'Where is the gravity coming from?'

'Normal strength too. Can't be the moon, it's not big enough,' Rebecca acknowledged.

'And the ship appears to be level too, we must have landed on something. Whatever that mechanism we triggered was, it appears to be designed to capture ships intact.'

'We need to get outside and look around,' Rebecca replied. 'Airlock?'

'After you,' Jim replied, grabbing a portascan from the bulkhead. She extended an arm and helped him up out of his chair

*Definitely a changed woman...*

They climbed carefully down into the cargo bay, and Rebecca examined the airlock controls. The automatics were dead, needing power, but the emergency manual cycle controls would work. She pulled down a lever and a large wheel reluctantly emerged from the door.

'There's an atmosphere on the other side,' she reported, having looked at the basic controls within the airlock. 'Standard twenty percent O<sub>2</sub>, a bit thin, but breathable.'

'Let's go see.'

'Take this first,' she said, handing him a standard issue hand held laser. 'If we survived, it's likely that Zerz did too.'

'What about you?'

'That's the only one I've got left,' she said. 'I've got this, it will have to do.'

She held up the knife. Her eyes gleamed.

Rebecca cycled the manual controls for the airlock and the internal door slid open as she spun a heavy wheel. They proceeded through, closing the inner door behind them.

'All set?'

'Let's see what's out there.'

Rebecca repeated the process with the external door. As it slid back a crack of intense white light shone into the airlock interior. Both of them squinted into it as the door rolled back.

For a long while they could make nothing out at all, the light was so intense. They hesitatingly edged forward to the threshold of the airlock and peered out.

The view, or lack of it, was confusing. Jim first thought they must be inside a cloud, so lacking was the vista in any kind of feature or reference point. It was a complete, blank whiteness.

The ship was rock steady, the *Eclipse* appeared to be resting on an invisible surface. There were no shadows, nothing to give a sense of scale. The light seemed to have no source, but was simply present, as if it was emitted uniformly by whatever it was they were resting on.

Rebecca looked up and out. 'Whoa. This is weird.'

There was complete uniformity, no sky, no ground, no visible horizon. It was similar to the feeling she'd once had whilst flying through the atmosphere of a gas giant, only she got the strong sense she was looking at a great distance rather than a few short metres.

She put her foot out, testing the ground. It seemed able to support her weight, though she could see nothing under her feet. Gingerly she stepped out of the airlock.

She winced. 'Ow!'

'What's the matter?' Jim said with alarm, preparing to pull her back inside.

Rebecca was looking down at her bare feet. 'It's cold!'

Jim sighed. Rebecca stepped further away from the ship and turned around.

'Incredible!' she said, looking around at the exterior of her ship. The *Eclipse* looked faintly ridiculous, perched in the middle of nothingness. 'Are we inside the moon? Or somewhere else? Are you coming?'

Jim joined her, and then bent down to touch the ground, it was cold, like marble, but with no texture. There was no visual feedback that he'd touched anything, no give in the surface at all. He tried shining the glo on it at close range, and got the vague impression that it was some kind of translucent material, but he couldn't analyse it further. He opened up the portascanner and tried to take a reading. It showed nothing but the hull of the *Eclipse* immediately beside him.

'You getting anything?' Rebecca asked.

'Nothing. I can't get a reading on this at all. Let's walk around.'

'Be careful though, I don't trust this... whatever it is!'

They stepped around the outside of the ship, holding on to it as a precaution. Jim got a newfound appreciation for how big Rebecca's ship actually was. It took them a while to navigate around to the rear.

Smoke was pouring from one of the primary engines, the dark fumes drifting straight upwards into the air, there was not a breath of wind. Here and there external panels were buckled, cracked and blackened, particularly where they surmised the accelerated plasma had struck the ship.

'My poor ship!' Rebecca exclaimed. 'Look how banged up it is now! I think I'm going to be in the market for something new...'

Jim didn't respond, he was looking ahead.

They had come around to the *Eclipse*'s starboard side. In front of them was another ship.

It was the *Falchion*.

It too had smoke drifting from it, the forward hull had received the brunt of Rebecca's attack. It also appeared to be resting on the strange white surface. Jim judged it to be about three hundred metres away. It wasn't resting on its undercarriage as would be normal, like their ship it was still in flight configuration, as if it had been arrested in mid flight.

In the case of the Imperial Courier, that meant its nacelles were extended. Normally this would have caused a structural collapse under a gravity field of this strength, but the Imperial Courier appeared to be supported somehow.

Rebecca joined him, her knife in her hand, looking around carefully.

'No sign of Zerz, and the ship looks as dead as ours. Where did he go?'

Jim edged out beyond the *Eclipse*'s starboard quarter. Rebecca saw his mouth drop open and she hurried to look.

Away, at a distance impossible to gauge due to the strange environment, a beam of intense energy was rising vertically from the 'ground'. Significantly brighter than its immediate surroundings, it slowly faded into obscurity as it rose. It looked like a pillar of light. Other than that, there was nothing else visible.

'What is that?' Rebecca breathed.

'Raxxla,' Jim said in awe.

'Are we going to have a look then?' she said, ever practical.

'I suggest we check the *Falchion* first, I don't fancy having Zerz creep up behind us.'

Rebecca looked nervously at the gap between the two ships. 'If you think so.'

Jim gingerly began to walk out towards the *Falchion*, cautiously at first, but with increasing confidence as it became clear that the 'floor' continued to support their weight. It wasn't like ice, as there was plenty of grip. Picking up their pace they reached the *Falchion* after a couple of minutes.

It didn't take them long to find the open airlock in the forward hull, just below the bridge. The *Falchion* appeared to be as dead as the *Eclipse*. None of the running lights were on, the interior lights were out, and no sounds could be heard.

Cautiously they searched through the interior of the ship, it appeared to have been abandoned. The *Falchion* reeked of smoke, it had been extensively damaged in the fire fight. Rebecca saw, with grim satisfaction, that the splendour of the staterooms had been shattered beyond repair.

'It appears the same thing happened to Zerz,' Jim said. 'I wonder where he's gone?'

'Raxxla. Where else? Come on.'

Rebecca turned aside, heading towards the heart of the ship.

'Where are you going?' Jim inquired.

'I need something,' Rebecca said, quickly walking towards the witchdrive core.

'What can you possibly...'

Jim followed her into the core. She was crouched down, looking for something near the alignment system. Jim could see a dark splatter of blood on the far wall.

*She was prepared to die for me. That tells me all I need to know...*

'Here we go!' Rebecca said brightly, holding something up. 'Shoes! I'm not walking all the way over there freezing my feet off!'

She promptly began bashing the shoes against the alignment system, snapping off the high heels and deliberately knocking two of the alignment rods out. They clattered to the floor.

'Oh, shame,' she said, with a pout. 'Knocked his alignment out again.'

'You're incorrigible,' Jim said with a grin as she put the shoes on.

Afterwards neither Rebecca nor Jim were able to recall how long it took them to walk across the featureless landscape. It was like walking in a blizzard, but without the uncomfortable precipitation. Their eyes were constantly trying to find reference points and being denied them. It was bewildering and disorienting. Jim began to see strange shapes hovering in his vision, the result of cellular debris floating around inside his eyes. The lack of anything else for a reference point made them distracting.

For a long while the light ahead of them appeared unaltered, and, had it not been for the *Eclipse* and the *Falchion* slowly receding behind them, they would have started to wonder if they weren't on some absurd cosmic treadmill.

Slowly the light in front of them began to grow larger and more brilliant. As they approached they were conscious of a sound, or perhaps more a vibration, a pulsating rhythmic thrumming that seemed to be associated with the beam of the light.

That too was taking on a form of its own. They could now perceive movement in the beam, pulses of brightness moving downwards towards the ground.

There was an overwhelming sensation of power, they could even feel a static charge building up in the air around them, Rebecca's hair began to float around her head.

They began to perceive that there was a dip in the landscape, a depression or bowl from which the light was issuing. They could just make out the curve of the opposite side, a slightly brighter whiteness than their immediate surroundings.

Almost before they realised it they had reached the edge of the bowl. A quick glance over their shoulders showed that the *Falchion* and the *Eclipse* were only about half a kilometre behind them.

Rebecca and Jim shielded their eyes and looked in.

The bowl was more like an amphitheatre, around a hundred metres in diameter, with a set of perfectly contoured ridges running concentrically around its interior, getting smaller each time like a set of stairs, or perhaps a row of seats. The rings were cut at intervals with deep channels arranged like a series of spokes radiating out from the centre. Each channel was around ten metres wide through which rushed a bright blue form of energy, akin to a witchspace flux, or perhaps a Q-Bomb. It almost looked like gushing water, swiftly travelling away from the centre. Jim counted eight such channels.

*What are these for?*

At the point of convergence there was a mesmerising sight. It was a globe of whirling energy, perhaps five metres across, appearing to be the source of the eight spiralling energy streams. The enormous beam of light that they had first seen appeared to be feeding the globe.

Jim squinted. He couldn't be sure, but he almost felt that he saw short-lived images of planets and stars, perhaps even ships within the spinning carousel of light.

*Is this a machine of some kind? Or is this it? Is this Raxxla?*

'What is it?' Rebecca whispered, looking completely bewildered.

Jim had no answer for her.

They both slowly stepped down into the amphitheatre, dazzled by the energies flowing around them.

Rebecca was staring into the globe. 'I can see planets!' she exclaimed. 'Look! Tionisla! I'm sure of it, look there's the graveyard... Hey! It's gone!'

'And Lave! There! Onrira...!' Jim said, moving his head to follow the swiftly changing images.

'Strangely compelling isn't it?' said a voice. 'To step in there, and lose yourself in another world?'

Jim and Rebecca whirled around. Zerz stepped out from behind the globe.

'We've caught you now,' Jim said, calmly levelling his laser at him. 'Now it's our turn.'

'Didn't I kill you?' Zerz asked, with a wry grin.

'I got better,' Jim gestured with the laser.

'Indeed,' Zerz shrugged. 'Unless you have a power source that I don't know about, you'll find your weapons are as powerless as your ship.'

Jim squeezed the firing stud on his laser. Nothing happened.

Zerz studied Rebecca's face with a frown. 'You're looking surprisingly well.'

'No thanks to you!' Rebecca said, drawing her knife. 'My turn to dish out scars!'

'You can't beat me in a fight,' Zerz commented drily.

'We'll see about that...!' Rebecca started, before Jim caught her by the shoulder, shaking his head.

Zerz backed away cautiously and turned his attention to the spinning globe, studying it intently. 'Have you figured it out yet, Jim?'

Jim looked back at the whirling globe of energy. 'The fabled portal of Raxxla.'

Zerz looked disappointed. 'That much is obvious.'

Jim took out his portascan again, attempting to take a reading. 'It's off the scale, but it reads as a witchspace flux.'

Rebecca saw new images flashing in the maelstrom of light and energy. Images of Oresrati, Tianve, a Coriolis station, the battle against the Thargoids over Lave, a Boa class cruiser with an escort of tatty ships...

'It's reading my mind!' she whispered, not paying attention to Jim or Zerz, but staring into the globe, one arm outstretched. 'Jim, I can see my family's ship!'

She took a step forward, a scant metre from the boundary of the globe.

Jim grabbed her. 'Rebecca, you don't know what that will do to you! Suppose it drops you into a vacuum on the other side!'

Zerz was nodding sagely. 'She's right though, Jim. Whoever built this designed it to react to thought. Step through there and you'll be ... somewhere else. You just need discipline to manipulate it.'

*Built it?*

Zerz focused on the globe. The whirling of the energy noticeably diminished. The image of the Boa was swept aside to be replaced by what appeared to be a large conference hall, filled with delegates. Jim recognised the many historic flags of the Far Colonies. The clothing of the delegates looked needlessly extravagant and ridiculously impractical. The decoration of the hall itself seemed baroque and over-styled.

'The signing of the charter of the Galactic Co-operative of Worlds,' Zerz said grandly.

'But that was in....' Rebecca said, trying to remember her edu-classes.

'2696,' Jim finished for her.

'Over four hundred years ago,' Zerz nodded. 'Or this...'

The images whirled again, before settling on a half-completed Coriolis station.

'The first ever station, operational around Lave in 2752.'

The images moved again, a view of octagonal Thargoid vessels devastating a planetary surface.

'The first Thargoid invasion in 2851.'

Jim was astonished, but quickly gathered his thoughts. 'You can visualise places and events that have been, but...'

'You can't for events yet to transpire?' Zerz seemed amused. 'You can ask it questions Jim, if you understand the language.'

The images changed. A pitched battle, ships of every type involved in a fire fight; space stations of city size proportions dwarfing even the mighty Torus station of Jim's home planet; the emblem of Galcop emblazoned on a flag, going up in flames; a man wearing the Galcop Presidential regalia, signing some kind of declaration whilst under armed guard.

*How does he know how to do this?*

'3174,' Zerz said, his voice low. 'Galcop is rescinded.'

'How do you know all this, you haven't had the time...' Rebecca started to say.

Zerz threw his head back and laughed. 'How can you be so obtuse! This is a time machine!'

'But...'

'It's quite obvious, if you have the capability to work it out,' another voice echoed from the opposite side of the globe. Rebecca and Jim turned to see Zerz, another Zerz, come walking around the perimeter.

He was older, greyer, more careworn, but bore the same implacable sense of purpose. He carried a svelte-looking weapon in his hand.

'My future self,' the original Zerz said, with a wry grin. 'He has had plenty of time to study this phenomena. He proved quite enlightening. You're not the only ones with assistance from the future.'

The older Zerz brought up the weapon.

'It's satisfying to know I get to see you die now,' Zerz said, with great delight, 'and then can look forward to performing the act myself in time to come...'

Rebecca and Jim had backed away from the older Zerz, almost against the now quiescent globe; there was nowhere to run to.

'It's been a long chase, but this is the end of your story,' the older Zerz intoned.

Jim's brain was whirling with possibilities and outcomes. He recalled Jacob's words...

*You'll need more time...*

He grabbed Rebecca's hand. She looked up at him in despair, and then frowned at the look on his face. He winked at her.

The older Zerz squeezed the trigger on his gun, as Jim dragged her backwards into the globe.

Rebecca screamed as colour and noise spun around her. She felt as if she had been sucked into a tornado, being lifted off the ground and thrown into oblivion. She was just becoming conscious that Jim's hand still firmly held her own when she suddenly hit the ground hard.

She looked up, catching her breath. Jim was still beside her, they were just outside the spinning globe of energy, exactly where they had been before. She craned her head around. Both the younger and older Zerz had disappeared.

'What happened?' She asked, bewildered.

'It worked! My God! It worked!'

'What are you talking about? Where did they go?'

'They're not here, at least, not yet!' Jim said, scrambling to his feet. 'The globe was controlled by mental imagery, just imagine it and it would generate it for you. I imagined what the portal would look like, just before we arrived.'

'You mean?'

'This is ten minutes ago,' Jim nodded. 'Look!'

Rebecca looked across and saw an Imperial Courier sitting on ground about half a kilometre away. It was exactly where Zerz' ship had been when they first arrived. It was Zerz' ship.

'My brain is starting to hurt!' she cried. 'So, are we here too, I mean, us in the past?'

'We're there!' Jim pointed. Rebecca followed his direction and saw her Cobra Courier spiraling down towards the ground, in the grip of some strange energy effect. Just before it hit the ground the ship steadied, levelled out and settled gently.

'But... what do we do, Zerz is, I mean will... No! He has....'

'We've got ten minutes to figure out what we're going to do.'

'As long as Zerz is mine,' Rebecca said ruefully, 'I don't care!'

Rebecca and Jim had hidden themselves in one of the channels, and waited for Zerz to appear. It hadn't taken long. Almost the moment he arrived, his older counterpart had also appeared from the sphere, much to his obvious surprise. He'd recovered quickly though, and they were deep in whispered conversation within moments. Rebecca and Jim couldn't overhear what was being said. Then both the older and younger Zerz looked up in the direction of the *Eclipse*, and moved behind the energy globe.

Rebecca and Jim watched in amazement as their earlier selves appeared at the rim of the amphitheatre. They paused, the other Rebecca asking a question of Jim, before slowly and cautiously walking down towards the energy globe.

'This is so weird!' Rebecca whispered. 'I just did that, didn't I?'

Jim nodded. 'We need to pick our moment precisely. When we catch up with where we were...'

'So, when we walked down here before, we were hiding in here too? Lucky I didn't look – it would have really freaked me out!'

'Shhhh!' Jim scolded.

'Does my hair really look like that from behind?'

Jim turned in amazement. 'You're worried about your hair at a time like this?'

The other Rebecca and Jim had now been confronted by the younger Zerz. Presently he was joined by the older version of himself, who aimed his weapon at them.

'Almost there...' Jim whispered, straining to hear the conversation.

The older Zerz was grinning. 'It's been a long chase, but this is the end of your story.'

Rebecca and Jim saw their counterparts grasp hold of each other's hands. The older Zerz squeezed the gun's trigger and they fell backwards into the sphere. The gun hadn't fired.

'The 'stards!' the younger Zerz said. 'Where did they go?'

'This wasn't supposed to happen...' the older Zerz said, confused. 'I remember seeing them killed when I was you!'

'Now!' Jim snapped under his breath. They both leapt out of their hiding place.

Zerz was knocked flying by a blow from Rebecca, who leapt at him from behind. Jim likewise, ran from the opposite side, knocking down the older Zerz. Both were taken by complete surprise.

The older Zerz went down like a canister in a high grav field, his weapon skittering across the glowing surface, stopping a scant half metre from the spinning globe.

The younger Zerz got to his feet first, and scrambled towards the weapon. Rebecca tackled him by his legs, bringing him back down to the ground. Zerz kicked out with his feet, half stunning her. Her head spun as she tried to regain his senses.

Meanwhile, Jim had knocked the older Zerz out cold. He scrambled to his feet, ready to launch himself across at the gun.

The younger Zerz stepped across and picked it up. Jim froze.

'A good try,' he said, training it on Jim. 'But to no avail. Curiously, the fact that you were warned about me implies that I have been successful in using Raxxla already. I was also warned about your own counterparts from the future! This time their intervention will fail. I shall be successful again!'

'Give it up, Zerz!' Jim shouted. 'It's too dangerous! We don't know what we're dealing with!'

'Galcop must survive,' Zerz grated out. 'Galcop WILL survive! If I dispose of you now, you will be unable to come back and interfere again.'

'Zerz, Listen! Our older-selves didn't tell us much, but they did say at a crisis develops in the future,' Jim said, trying to reason with him.

'The Selezen crisis, I know about that. The wormholes collapse, Jim! Galcop is finished. Our President signs a humiliating resignation and rescinds our constitution in 3174. This much I already know. It will not allow it happen!'

Jim's mind was racing. He saw Rebecca sidle slightly closer to Zerz, trying to move behind him.

*Keep him distracted! Eight channels. Eight streams of witchspace energy. All being generated from a single source. What does it mean?*

'They said it was your fault! You cause it!'

'I have done nothing but try to preserve Galcop. It is your interference which has prevented me from succeeding!'

'Zerz you know as well as I that time travel has to be the most dangerous tool imaginable, how can we predict all the consequences of our actions...'

'Enough!' Zerz was clearly past the point of reason, a man obsessed. 'I have been to the future, and I will go again. Technology will save Galcop. We will retain our premier position. You will not stop me! This is over for both of you!'

'Zerz, wait!' Jim shouted.

He raised the gun, glaring at Jim. 'You first!'

'Don't fire! You don't know...!'

Rebecca launched herself towards Zerz with a cry of anger. Her foot swept out in a high kick at his arm.

Zerz was knocked off balance as he fired the weapon at Jim. Jim had seen it coming, and leapt out of the way across one of the channels. He misjudged the jump in his haste, not running quickly enough to gain the other side. He slammed into the opposite side with a crushing blow and slid back downwards. He struggled for grip and was left hanging precariously over the edge, just above the whirling torrent of energy.

The gun spiralled through the air, dropping into the energy channel near Jim.

Zerz struck back at Rebecca. But she moved back in time, regaining her balance. She held out the knife.

'Just you and me, Furvel,' she said coldly. 'No shields, no tech. Let's see what you're really made of.'

Zerz drew himself up to his full height, he was over a foot taller than her. He cast his cloak aside.

'I should warn you that I am schooled in many off-world forms of hand to hand combat,' he said dismissively. 'You would do well to give up now. I'll make it quick for you.'

'I'm the one with the knife!'

'Very well. Let us proceed with this foolishness.'

She fainted with the knife, Zerz retreated. She stabbed forward. Zerz retreated again.

Rebecca swiped at Zerz and then reversed the direction of her thrust, catching Zerz on the arm. He jumped back, nursing a long cut just above his wrist.

'You continue to surprise me, *fâché*,' Zerz admitted. 'You fight as you fly. The mistress of feinting.'

Jim was struggling to climb up the smooth sides of the channel. He could get no purchase with his feet. His struggling was making the situation worse as his grip on the edge was tenuous at best. He was slowly slipping backwards. From his vantage point he could see Zerz and Rebecca circling each other.

He was also conscious of a strange hum that was growing in strength from somewhere nearby. Looking down he could see the gun that had dropped into the channel. It was lying in the midst of the energy stream. It was beginning to glow. He didn't like the look of it.

*I need to get out of here!*

Rebecca had inflicted two more wounds on Zerz. One across the chest and one on his other arm. He charged her, striking out with his fists. Rebecca danced away. He staggered momentarily.

'Not so confident now?' she mocked.

In an instant he turned, sweeping his leg out. It struck Rebecca at the ankles and she went down. She was back on her feet in an instant, but not before Zerz had grabbed her by the wrist.

'Your confidence is your weakness,' he whispered, squeezing his grip tighter. 'You have still not learnt your place.'

Rebecca gasped in pain as his fingers dug into her wrist. Blood welled up as his nails punctured her skin. The knife tumbled from her grip. Zerz dealt her a backhand swipe across the face and she was flung to the floor.

Zerz picked up the knife, advancing on Rebecca. Rebecca retreated, scrambling backwards. Zerz held out the knife in front of him.

'I will be rid of you!' he snarled at her with almost animal-like vehemence, passing the knife from hand to hand. 'I am going to take you apart! One slice at a time! Break every bone in your body! Eviscerate you in front of your eyes!'

The hum below Jim had increased to a shriek of noise. It was the gun, overloading. Jim was expecting it to explode any second. Desperately, he struggled. More by panic than good sense he managed to get a leg up onto the edge of the channel and pulled himself up and over.

'Zerz! No! Leave her alone!'

Zerz reached out and grabbed Rebecca's ankle. He pulled her towards him with one arm and whipped the knife across with the other. Rebecca screamed as he slashed the skin on her outstretched leg. He raised his arm for another swipe.

The gun exploded, the ground shuddering violently.

The energy stream reacted violently, spewing out tendrils of energy which struck out, shorting back along the path of the energy channels, striking back into the spinning globe immediately behind Zerz. More tendrils flickered around them.

Jim, Zerz and Rebecca flinched and desperately tried to avoid being hit. Jim was hurled aside, Rebecca screamed as a tendril flickered across her body. Zerz' outstretched arm was also hit. He yelled in pain and the knife went flying.

*If one of the channels is disrupted...*

In a split second the globe contracted, replaced by an impossibly bright point of light, like a miniature supernova. For a moment everything became still.

Rebecca rolled over and saw the knife had landed nearby. She grabbed it, but not before Zerz secured his grip on her ankle again. Jim slowly got to his feet, stunned by his fall. He was too far away.

A rippling wave of blue actinic light, framed by lightning, began expanding from the point of light, like a miniature slow-motion Q-Bomb.

Rebecca stared in dread, shock and surprise. She pointing behind Zerz. 'Behind...'

Zerz looked amused. 'Foolish girl, you can't possibly think...'

Zerz half turned, sensing movement and then looked, seeing nothing but a blue wall of energy, expanding towards him. He became conscious of a screeching sound, a high pitched tone signifying imminent danger, and a tremor running through the ground.

'No...!'

He tried to move, but the expanding sphere had already made contact with him. He shrieked as the energy effect began dissolving his body.

'If I die, you're coming with me!' he cried, yanking Rebecca towards him. 'I swear it! I've never broken my word!'

Rebecca desperately scabbled for grip on the smooth floor. Her fingernails scratched on the surface.

She twisted around; the knife was still in her hand.

She stabbed upwards. The knife went straight into Zerz' unprotected chest.

'There's a first time for everything!' she snarled, twisting the knife viciously. 'ROT IN HELL!'

Zerz let out a short gasp, his expression turning vacant. With shocking suddenness his head and torso were swallowed by the blue energy sphere. The grip on her ankle loosened and she backpedalled away as Zerz' arms disappeared.

The blue energy field was expanding just a little faster than walking speed, a slow but inexorable widening of its diameter, within it the white material that had formed the ground was melting away like dry ice in a hot blast of air.

Rebecca saw it touch the form of the older Zerz, and saw his body disintegrate in a flash of scintillating energy. It was just a few metres away from her. She was paralysed with shock, she idly watched the blood dripping out of the slash on her leg.

'Rebecca!' Jim shouted, throwing himself towards her. 'Get out of there!'

The blue flickering energy field was growing faster now, expanding from where the globe had been, subsuming it, smothering it. Rebecca managed to get to her feet and was slowly backing away as if in a daze. The energy field quickly reached the edge of the stepped area and kept moving. Rebecca limped away, tripping over her own feet and falling onto her back.

'Move!' Jim cried out. He finally reached her, grabbed her arm and bodily dragged her backwards. The edge of the blue energy field was only centimetres away by the time she regained her footing.

They scrambled up to the edge of the amphitheatre, sparing a glance backwards. The column of light had now taken on a distinct blue and violet tinge. A wind was rising, blowing backwards towards the energy field, growing swiftly in strength. Around them was a scream of noise, a pulsing cacophony of tortured reality.

'Look!' Rebecca shouted in dismay, pointing upwards.

Overhead in the far distance, where the column of light presumably met the top of the space they were enclosed in, something was happening. The whiteness was rolling back, revealing a gaping hole, through which stars were beginning to shine through.

'The whole place is disappearing!' he yelled over the deafening thrumming around them, 'We've got to get out of here!'

With no further hesitation they turned and ran towards the *Eclipse*, the whiteness unravelling and disappearing behind them. They were conscious of the air rushing past them with increasing vigour, everything around them was beginning to disintegrate. The temperature was dropping sharply, thin wisps of moisture were whipping past, coating them in chilling moisture.

They staggered on, almost bent double against the wind. Rebecca reached the airlock first, struggling against the buffeting of the airflow. It was almost like getting caught in a decompression, so violent was the flow of air. There was a wind-shear around the edge of the *Eclipse's* flank, gusting fiercely.

Conversation was impossible. Rebecca grabbed hold of an exposed handle and gestured for Jim to grab on to her, her hair whipping around her face. He was a few metres behind her.

*Hurry, Jim!*

It was getting hard to breathe. The air pressure was dropping fast. They would be in a vacuum before long! The cold wind and freezing liquid was leaching the heat out of her hands, she could see the tips of her fingers were going blue. Frost was forming on them. The thin dress she was wearing was no defence against the merciless battering.

*So cold...*

She couldn't hold on. Slowly by degrees, she lost feeling in her hands. Her grip faltered and she fell to the ground.

She started sliding backwards along the ground, She desperately tried to stop her movement, but she was helplessly skidding towards the energy field which seemed to be drawing everything towards it. She shouted, but her voice was swept away in the gale.

*No!*

Jim lunged out and simultaneously caught her hand and the exposed handle. With agonising slowness, he pulled her towards him. He looked into her eyes.

*Don't you dare let go!*

He could feel her hand slipping through his. He could see she was in a bad way, her strength failing. He could feel his arms going into spasm as he struggled to pull her back. His arms shuddering involuntarily.

*Just a bit further...*

Despite excruciating pain he managed to pull her to him, shielding her as best he could from the ravages of the freezing wind. She was almost limp in his grasp. Together they both managed to pull themselves into the airlock. Jim hit the emergency close and the door rolled shut. Moments later blessed air poured into the room and they drew huge shuddering gulps into their lungs, lying on the floor, panting hard and shivering violently.

'We've... g-got ... to ... k-keep... m-moving...' Rebecca gasped through chattering teeth, trying but failing to stagger to her feet. She was almost frozen, her lips blue and her body being racked by uncontrollable shudders.

Jim pulled off his jacket, and wrapped it around her, pulling her against him. Her body felt like ice.

'You're...b-being....v-very.....af-af-affect...tionate,' she gasped, trying to smile.

'Body heat,' he replied, holding her tightly. 'If cold blood from your arms and legs hits your heart you could have a heart attack...'

'Th-thanks... f-for.....that.'

Lights inside the airlock flickered for a moment, and then came on, power seemed to be flooding back into the ship. The airlock snapped closed and the hum of the on-board computers and life management systems reassuringly filled the air. Hot air blasted into the airlock, reviving them.

Rebecca's shuddering eased, and she relaxed in his embrace. 'I'm o...okay. Thanks.'

'Do you think you can make it to the bridge?' Jim asked.

'I think so,' she said uncertainly. 'We'd better hurry!'

They made their way back up through the ship as fast as they could. Jim headed for the co-pilot's seat as the instruments began to come back to life.

'No time for pre-flight,' Rebecca said, making a quick scan of the readouts. 'Let's hope nothing too serious is broken!'

She fired up the engines and activated the view screen. Many of the status indicators showed red.

The rippling wall of energy was still expanding towards them. The *Eclipse* lurched, and began to move, buffeted by the extreme winds outside. It was snowing now with almost blizzard conditions, the moisture condensing out of the rapidly cooling air. Stars were visible through the swirls.

*Snow? In space? Bizarre!*

Quickly she corrected using the attitude adjusters and the *Eclipse* steadied. The engines were still running up to operating condition.

'Come on baby, do this for me,' Rebecca pleaded with the ship. 'Give me everything you've got left.'

'Look!' Jim shouted, pointing at the starboard viewer.

The energy wall had reached the *Falchion*. The Imperial Courier tilted as the whiteness beneath it evaporated. For a moment it lolled drunkenly, before it slowly began to cartwheel end over end, sucked in towards the intense light at the centre. They saw it enter the energy field. Flashes of light crackled up and down its hull, panels exploding outwards, conduits burning away. One of the nacelles completely detached, exploding silently, the debris instantly sucked away. The energy wall was only a few tens of metres from the *Eclipse*, closing rapidly. It was moving faster now, an exponential increase in its rate of expansion.

'Get us out of here!' Jim yelled.

'Here goes nothing...'

Rebecca needed little encouragement, she fired up the thrusters, yawed the ship around and punched the engines up to full power, heading towards the least turbulent area she could see, clearly showing the stars. The *Eclipse*, still suffering from damage the *Falchion* had inflicted, limped slowly away.

'I'm over-burning the coils,' she said over the rising roar of the engines. 'If they let go before we can get away...'

The blue energy field closed relentlessly, devouring the space behind them. The rear viewer showing nothing but a chaotic turbulent blueness.

'We're not going to make it!' Rebecca cried, looking in horror the astrogation scanner. 'We don't have enough speed!'

*Chased by a blue wave of death again! My luck stinks!*

The *Eclipse* began to shudder and vibrate around them. Rebecca and Jim braced themselves for oblivion once again.

## Chapter Ten

The *Eclipse* was silhouetted, framed in a glowing blue discharge. Its engines howled, straining desperately, as the ship tried to outrun the leading edge of the expanding energy field.

In front of them, clear space beckoned. Rebecca had overloaded the engines in a do or die attempt to escape. The engines were ripping themselves to shreds, there was nothing to be gained in sparing them now.

Before them, the 'inside' of the sphere they had been enclosed in seemed to be getting closer. It was still impossible to judge its distance or composition. It suddenly flashed past them with virtually no transition. It was as if the sphere had no thickness at all. The stars awaited them.

The final energy bank drained away, the engines spluttered as they lost power. Plasma and quirium fuel was streaming from multiple rents in their internal mechanisms. The blue fire surged up behind them, mercilessly pursuing them right to the egress.

The engines provided a final burst of thrust and cut out. The *Eclipse* was adrift. Rebecca hit the rear viewer.

For a moment they both saw the surface of Lave's moon, or at least a part of it. It looked as if the moon had been hollow, with nothing more than the thinnest crust of an exterior. Through the aperture via which they had escaped, they could see the blue sphere expand to fill the remaining volume of the moon. Other apertures appeared, spreading, widening. The surface of the moon flickered, cracked and began to melt away. Lave's moon became a sphere of blue white smoothness, lacking any distinguishing features at all.

With shocking suddenness the light faded. There was pulsation, a suggestion of a witchspace flux, and the moon was as it was before.

The *Eclipse* tumbled gently in the void of Lave system space, immobilised, but out of danger.

It was as if nothing had happened.

'...and in breaking news! A sensational report that Lave's moon has suffered some kind of severe energy disturbance! Ident cameras from a number of ships and ground-based telescopes caught the moment as the moon appeared to be enveloped in plasma radiation!

'There are no reports of personnel or ships in close proximity to the moon at the time, and the infamous hydrogen processing plants were unmanned. Galcop reports no distress beacons or escape pods in the immediate area. Eyewitness reports are yet to come in.

'We understand from the astrogation experts on Onrira that the Lave System is in no immediate danger as a result. The moon was in a distant orbit and had little direct influence on the planet. So far, the orbit seems unaffected.

'This strange explosion on the moon raises serious questions as to safety management in the quest for new energy sources.

'Last year in our investigative report into the underhand way that the money for the hydrogen processing plants was raised, we discovered that permits were granted and permission given to 'mine' the moon in most unusual ways. We uncovered serious irregularities in how this whole affair was conducted. Cost-cutting measures in the construction of the controversial hydrogen plants may have led to this accident.

'It has also emerged that bizarre and unexplained problems with the moon's orbit, mass readings and instability have been covered up. It has been alleged that INRA was experimenting with static jump gate technology in order to provide a way to accelerate in-system transport, tapping into the interior of the moon and something went wrong.

'We have requested an interview with both the Lave Licensing Authority and the planet-side authorities. So far they have declined to comment.

'As we know more, we'll bring it to you.

'How will Lave handle its burgeoning energy crisis in light of this incident? Truth is, we don't know. This is Anna Mereso, reporting live on an explosion on the surface of Lave's moon for the *Tionisla Chronicle*, wideband channel three-eight-five-point-two...'

Rebecca had managed move to the *Eclipse* into a safe elliptical orbit around the moon, and away from the space-lanes originating near the inbound witchpoint marker. It had taken a while. Only the basic attitude thrusters were working. There she stood down the ship.

It was in a bad way.

The engine coils were virtually burnt out, the hull was leaking air from a number of breaches, three out of five energy banks were non-responsive and so many of the on-board systems were damaged she was wondering whether it would be cheaper to repair them all or chop the ship in for salvage and buy a new one. She and Jim had made some basic repairs so that the ship did not come

apart around them, with a view to limping it into one of the Coriolis stations for repair. It would be a long trip, the torus drive was also a hopeless pile of junk.

For a frantic couple of hours they had been literally fire-fighting as system after system became a priority assignment. Jim had seen to Rebecca's leg, where Zerz had injured her and the energy discharge had also given her an unpleasant burn. Jim found the Raxxla file amongst the scattered debris on the bridge, now looking rather second-hand and tatty. He placed it on the console.

Exhausted, they had time to reflect and decide what to do next.

'So, what happened to Raxxla?' Rebecca asked. 'Did we make things worse?'

Jim had some ideas, but he couldn't see any way for him to test their veracity. He sighed, 'I'm not sure. I'm not even sure if I know what Raxxla was. I'm finding it hard to believe that time travel is possible, even given what we saw! If it was capable of manipulating time, it was capable of manipulating space as well.'

'Did we... well, destroy it?' Rebecca said, aghast. 'I don't want that on my record!'

'Maybe, that explosion triggered something all right, but I would have thought whoever designed it would have thought of protecting Raxxla from something like that. My guess is we activated some kind of self protection system.'

'Or maybe they were so advanced and otherworldly they didn't even think somebody would be so stupid to think of bringing a gun inside there. Still, it's gone now...'

Rebecca looked out at the viewer, her expression pensive.

'I'm sorry,' Jim said.

'Sorry? What for?'

'You didn't get a chance to try to go back and save your family, with Raxxla...'

'Maybe it's better this way.'

Jim looked at her in surprise. 'Better?'

Rebecca looked at him, her expression resolute. 'Yeah, better. Maybe the past should be left as the past. I have a life to lead now. If my family hadn't died back then, what guarantee do I have that my life would be better now?'

*And maybe I've got a future worth having...*

Jim frowned. 'But... your family would be alive!'

'I miss them,' she answered slowly. 'Dad butting heads with the Oresrians, Lance and Jenner bickering about ship designs, Jante cussing at Galcop Viper pilots, even Coran – I spent so long trying to get a rise out of him! My brother, Red...' her voice broke up again and she seemed to be once more on the verge of tears, 'I used to hate how he seemed to always be on my case, the perfect older brother! He used to nag me so much about being responsible and all that, looking out for friends and family, being loyal. I thought he was so full of it back then. But he was really just looking out for me... I should have listened to him more.'

'Perhaps we'll get another chance to...'

Rebecca shook her head. 'No. Red understood choices. He gave me a chance. He died to save me, and how did I repay him? Deliberately endangering myself on a selfish quest....' Her voice faltered, and she swallowed. 'He wouldn't have approved of what I've done since.'

'I wish I could have met him,' Jim said softly.

'You're quite like him in a lot of ways,' Rebecca said, 'which is probably why...'

She stopped, and looked away for a moment, blinking back tears.

*Frak this! It's so stupid! Just say it...*

'I've thought it through,' she continued abruptly, looking him directly in the eye. 'If I did get my family out of the way, I'd never have been involved in the Q-Bomb business would I? What would have happened then?'

Jim cast his mind back. 'I guess I'd have been intercepted by the Vipers on my own, and since they had 'shoot to kill' orders, I'd have probably been destroyed without you to fly the ship. I'd have never even thought of trying your mis-jump trick. Zerz would have killed me.'

Rebecca's face looked pale and drawn at the mention of Zerz. 'At least we stopped him...'

She shuddered.

Jim reached out for her. 'Hey, it's okay.'

'I've never killed anyone like that,' she whispered, wringing her hands. 'It was so... brutal, so ghastly. He...'

'He forced you into it.'

'I know,' she looked up at him. 'I can't do this any more. Too many lives, it's horrible. I don't want to kill any more. It's too easy across a few kilometres of space, just lasering down a ship. Up close like that...'

Jim turned her head gently towards him. 'You acted in self-defence. He would have killed you, as would all of those pirates you've fought.'

'I deliberately went after them!' Rebecca was trembling. 'I went out of my way to hunt them down! I murdered them all...'

'You're not a murderer! You're just protecting those you...'

He faltered, looking at her. Her eyes glistened, and she looked at him expectantly, almost desperately. The moment passed. The sparkle had gone out of her eyes.

*Just tell me Jim, is it really that hard? I need to hear this! It might be all I've got left...*

'You did the right thing,' Jim said, trying to reassure her. 'Who knows how many more people would have died if he hadn't been stopped.'

'I don't want to be the one who decides who gets to live and who gets to die,' Rebecca said, 'I don't want to mess about with Raxxla again! Things should stay as they are.'

'I think that's... wise,' Jim managed to say. 'If you hadn't been involved back then, the attack on Achenar might have gone ahead, the Thargoids might have destroyed Lave. We could be living in a war zone now...'

'And we would never have met,' Rebecca said, stretching out to take his hand. 'You were right, Jim. Giving up the revenge was the right thing to do. You were giving me the same advice Red would have done. I was too stubborn to listen. I wasted two years of my life that could have been... well, better spent.'

'I was worried about you,' Jim admitted. 'I tried to stay in contact.'

*I don't want to hear you were worried! I want to hear...*

'I knew you wouldn't approve. But when you were shot...' her voice began to waver, her eyes welling up, 'when I thought I'd lost you as well... Jim, I don't want to lose anyone else ever again!'

Jim reached across and pulled her into a close embrace. 'It's all right.'

She sobbed, shuddering in his arms, no longer from grief or despair, but from sheer release. She grasped him so tightly that he found it hard to draw breath.

'You must think me such a fool,' she said after a minute had passed, smiling despite herself, tears streaming down her cheeks. 'You're supposed to be so tough as a trader, never giving an inch, living on the edge, don't let them see a weakness! I've never cried so much in my life as in the last day!'

'Then it's long overdue,' Jim replied.

She pulled back slightly, and rested her forehead against his. 'I did want to come back and see you, you know.'

'I...'

'And it was bloody torture!' she scolded, laughing through her tears. 'You messed me up good and proper! I cursed your name so many times!'

'I was pretty messed up myself, to tell the truth.'

'If I'd known it was going to hurt so much...' Fresh tears began to well up in her eyes.

'I love you, too,' he said simply.

She stared at him, eyes wide. 'Jim...?'

Jim stopped her with a kiss. It left them both oblivious to everything around them.

When it was over Jim leant back and regarded her for a moment. 'So, these dozen or so men around the galaxy you mentioned...'

She looked chastened, almost desperately sincere. 'They don't mean anything! Just some people I know, really...'

'I was only...' he grinned.

'Hey! No teasing. That's not fair!' she said in mock outrage, her eyes sparkling again. She was about to punch him playfully when the ship trembled slightly, rocking gently back and forth. Then it jolted sharply.

Both of them looked at the scanner, it was blank.

'What was that?' Jim asked.

'That felt like an engine wake,' she said, worried. She rubbed her eyes and cheeks to clear the tears away.

The forward viewer flickered, and a ship appeared out of nothing. It was an Ophidian class yacht. The classic retirement vehicle favoured by those with an eye for comfort, style and a bit of luxury in old age. It looked sleek and new, untainted by the battles that had left the *Eclipse* a near wreck.

'Cloaking device,' Jim muttered. 'Jacob and Reba?'

Rebecca looked over the instruments. They were effectively dead in the water.

'I hope they're still on our side,' she lamented. 'We couldn't outfight an advertising droidship in our current state.'

The narrowband comm panel beeped for attention. Rebecca took a deep breath and opened up the channel.

'You look like you could use a tow,' came a rough gravelly voice.

The two ships docked, base to base, their airlock clamps locking them securely together. Atmospheres equalised and the hatches opened. Rebecca and Jim looked into the interior of the other ship.

A man, old and grey-bearded, awaited them. It looked like Iacob, but older, less vigorous.

'Iacob?' Rebecca queried.

'Iacobus, to you, young lady,' he replied sternly.

'Iacobus?' Jim queried, confused. 'Not Iacob? But you're me as well?'

'Yes, yes and yes,' Iacobus replied with a grin.

'Then...' Rebecca began, and then stopped, confused, 'what are you doing here?'

'My dear, from your perspective we met a handful of days ago. From mine, just a moment has gone by. I also knew precisely where you would be at this point in time.'

Jim looked at both of them. 'You two have met before?'

'Yes,' Rebecca said, suspiciously, 'I haven't had time to explain it. Iacobus here is from the Dark Wheel, he... you... he sent me on this mission in the first place!'

'Closing the loop,' Iacobus said, with a grin. 'It becomes important to make sure that events have continuity.'

'You could have told me what was going to happen!' Rebecca scolded him and then turned on Jim. 'This is your fault!'

'My fault?' he echoed in surprise.

'He's you, isn't he?' Rebecca said, half amused, half angry. 'Or a future version of you who comes back to give me grief! When it's your turn you can be straight with me in that bar!'

'We tried that,' said another voice, warmer and smoother. It was Reba, though not Reba. She was also slightly older, greyer and more frail, 'amongst other things. You didn't believe us, who could blame you really! It still sounds crazy to me even now. In fact in one iteration you lost your

temper so badly you actually shot Iacobus and stole his ship. It was most inconvenient. Took us ages to unravel that one!

Jim grinned, despite himself. 'Surely not.'

Rebecca glared at him.

'I really was a hothead wasn't I?' the woman grinned at Rebecca.

'Rebka...' Iacobus began.

'Oh do loosen up Iacobus,' Rebka snapped. 'You know as well as I do that there is no longer a harmonious time line, if there ever was one!'

'We shouldn't tell them any more than we have to!'

'So you're from further into the future than Iacob and Reba then,' Jim surmised.

Iacobus sighed. 'Indeed. We're from 3199. It is fair to say that the Raxxla affair spans a number of periods in our... in your lives. That's one of the reasons for the name changes, it does get extremely complex to keep track of events.'

'Reba and Rebka I can see,' Jim complained. 'But what on Lave possessed you to decide on Iacobus?'

'Youngsters never know their history,' Iacobus lamented. 'Iacobus is the ancient form of Iacob, which is a translation from the old Earth name Jacob, which is...'

'...the old-fashioned version of James,' Jim acknowledged and then whispered to Rebecca, 'Don't let me become a complete pedant in my old age!'

Rebecca smiled, and then asked of Iacobus, 'So, we didn't destroy Raxxla?'

'Destroy it?' Iacobus sounded amused. 'You can't destroy Raxxla, my dear.'

'Then what happened?'

'Zerz was right about a number of things,' Rebka said, obviously keen not to let Iacobus do all the talking. 'In particular, he was right when he found out that Raxxla moves.'

'Raxxla moves according to a complex set of variables,' Iacobus said. 'All you did was trigger a move somewhat ahead of schedule.'

'Move?' Rebecca said. 'But the moon's still there.'

Iacobus smiled at her. 'The moon yes, Raxxla no. It's not quite as straightforward as you might suspect. You won't get into Raxxla again by that route...'

'The eight channels,' Jim said, 'one was disrupted by the gun...'

'Temporarily collapsed is nearer the truth,' Iacobus stated. 'And with the wormhole conduit blocked...'

'Wormhole?' Rebecca asked.

'You've already worked it out, Jim,' Rebka said with a smile. 'Go on.'

Rebecca looked expectantly at him. 'Oh yes, do allow us brainless clots to catch up...'

Jim frowned. 'Those eight channels containing the witchspace energy...'

'Yes, yes. Keep going,' Rebka encouraged.

'And there are eight wormholes, linking the galactic charts,' Jim continued. 'Witchspace energy being sent across the eight charts? A point from which all the galactic witchspace wormholes are sustained!'

'Spot on,' Iacobus seemed pleased. 'Raxxla is the mechanism that keeps them open, generates them in the first place. It's not a portal, or even a time machine by design, but it is an alien construct that underpins the very fabric of witchspace. It is linked to space and time. Witchspace itself is a manufactured construct.'

'So Raxxla is a hub, a centre point for those wormholes,' Jim mused.

'That's one of its functions. Built aeons ago by some alien race, linking parts of the galaxy together. We only discovered it and used it, it's beyond our means to create a technology like that. Every time you take a galactic witchspace jump, you're passing through Raxxla...'

'And where are these aliens now?' Rebecca asked.

'Where indeed,' Iacobus said mysteriously, his voice as clear as a bell.

'Well, at least the mystery of Raxxla has been sorted out,' Rebecca said. Iacobus and Rebka exchanged a glance.

'Or not?' Rebecca asked.

'Raxxla has many more facets,' Iacobus countered, his voice shifting to an almost trance-like tone. 'Many, many more...'

'So what next?' Jim interjected.

Rebka smiled. 'You'll have to wait a few years before you learn what happens next.' She laughed at Rebecca's crestfallen face, 'Don't worry, there are lots of interesting things going to happen to you in the meantime...'

'Rebka!' Iacobus said sternly.

Rebka pulled a face at Iacobus and then clasped Rebecca around the shoulders. 'She's had a tough life, she deserves something to look forward to.'

'And what about Zerz?' Jim asked.

'You stopped him from interfering with the correct course of events in this time frame,' Iacobus said. 'You can consider that a success.'

'Is he dead?' Rebecca asked, with a sharp edge to her voice.

'It's not quite that simple,' Iacobus said carefully.

'What's that supposed to mean? I stabbed him! That usually does the trick!'

'You already know that being killed is not necessarily the end of the story when Raxxla is involved. Time is not an ordered sequence of events, with effect following cause as we are tempted to understand it,' Iacobus said gently. 'Zerz had successfully used Raxxla before we intervened to stop him, you even met his future self.'

'Multiverse theory,' Jim acknowledged.

'Normal person speak please?' Rebecca hissed.

Iacobus nodded at Jim and he continued, 'It's the idea that for every decision that is made, every possibility is played out in a separate but closely similar universe. You go left or right, and another universe is created to play out the results of your decision.'

'Raxxla proves the theory,' Iacobus said. 'It allows you to cross quantum-level realities.'

'So when we jumped back in time ten minutes...' Jim began.

'You moved universes,' Iacobus said, nodding. 'Remarkable concept isn't it?'

'And there was a universe in which we didn't jump back, and Zerz killed us.'

'Precisely,' Iacobus continued. 'And there also exists a universe in which you were killed and we didn't come to your aid...'

Rebecca looked across at Rebka as Jim and Iacobus debated, each trying to have the last word. Rebka smiled, rolled her eyes and shook her head.

'Some things never change!' Rebka whispered and then looked more seriously across at Rebecca. 'Is there anything you want to ask me?'

Rebecca looked back at her in surprise. 'I don't know. I guess there's quite a lot, but...'

Rebka nodded encouragement.

'...you know what happens to me. You've lived my life. Should I ask?'

Rebka smiled. 'It's not like that Rebecca. I never met me, my older self like this, when I was your age. Our lives will be different. There are an infinity of possibilities. Your future is still what you make it.'

Rebecca thought about it for a moment.

'I'd like to know, you know, about my family and friends on the Boa.'

'You already answered that question,' Rebka said sadly. 'You were right.'

'Right?'

'If you save them you change other things.'

'Jim,' Rebecca said quickly.

'Killed by the Vipers as you surmised. There is a war between Galcop and the Imperials. It's very messy. You end up conscripted into the Navy, you're injured and live out your life as a half-mechanical paraplegic. I met that instance of 'us'; burnt up with regret, anger and frustration. You don't want to go there.'

Rebecca looked aghast. 'In that case, I don't think I want to know any more! If this whole episode has taught me anything it's to make sure I live in the here and now, not chasing after a future that might never happen!'

Rebka smiled broadly. 'In that case, I feel happy about giving you this.'

She handed Rebecca a small data-tab.

'The future?' Rebecca said. 'What was the whole point of that conversation we just had then? I don't want to know...!'

'I needed to know whether you were smart enough to know when to use it. Call it the edited highlights of my life. Trust me, there are some things you will want to know in advance,' Rebka looked wistful for a moment. 'I... we...' she paused. 'Well, let's just say that Iacobus isn't the only one who needs to close a loop. Please.'

Rebecca looked her in the eye, there was something urgent and compelling about her gaze.

'Okay.' she replied uncertainly, biting her bottom lip.

Rebka looked at her with a raised eyebrow. 'One more question?'

'You know what I'm going to ask.'

Rebka smiled. 'You still have to ask it though.'

Rebecca sighed and looked up. 'Do you know what happened to my mother, our mother? Dad said he'd tell me one day, and Red knew something he never let on. They were always so protective of me. Is she still alive?'

Rebka rubbed her chin thoughtfully. 'All I can say is that you will find the answers. I know, it's not what you want to hear! Right here, right now it's the best I can give you. It was her that gave you your gift.'

'Gift?'

'That stunning piloting skill of yours?'

'Dad said I was born in a flight simulator,' Rebecca grinned.

'Well, you sure as frak didn't learn it at edu-class did you! Spent most of the time dreaming about Rafe Jameson two cubicles up as I recall...'

'Shhhh!'

'...when you weren't in attitude adjustment therapy. Anyway, the answers are all wrapped up with...'

'Don't tell me – Raxxla! I'm so sick of that name... fraggin planet... thing... whatever it is!'

Rebka grinned, and looked across at Jim and Iacobus. 'We'd better stop these two from debating for the rest of time...'

'Jim can out-talk an Oresrian,' Rebecca acknowledged.

'He only gets worse, I'm warning you!' Rebka said with a laugh. Her face turned serious a moment later though. 'He's a good man, make sure you look after him.'

Jim and Iacobus were still deep in conversation.

'Was Zerz right? About the technology?' Jim was asking.

'He was indeed,' Iacobus replied. 'Technology was drifting from the future into the past, and causing us a great deal of trouble. The Dark Wheel spends much of its time trying to re-establish the correct outcomes of events, unpolluted by transfers of this type. Zerz himself was one of the worst.'

'The plasma weapon.'

'Indeed. That particular monstrosity wasn't invented until 3164. You thought the Q-Bomb was bad? Wait until you discover the whole saga around the huge plasma accelerator. Quite a caper.'

'And the Selezen crisis? The wormholes collapsing?'

'Also true. It seems Raxxla is breaking down. We're using the wormholes in ways for which they were never intended. All these trade ships moving around are degrading the links. Unless we find a way to repair the damage...'

'And how do you repair an alien technology you don't understand?'

Iacobus smiled, 'If we had the answer to that question...'

'Well I hope there is a universe somewhere out there where this all does make sense!' Rebecca said, raising her voice and interrupting the two men to Rebka's obvious delight. 'So what now?'

'We've got to get back,' Rebka said, standing close to Iacobus. 'This is not our time after all. It's been good to be here. I always liked this time-period – before everything got complicated.'

'Before everything got complicated?' Rebecca shot back, incredulously.

'Just you wait and see,' Rebka said with a wink.

'Just you wait and see?' Jim repeated, with a smile. 'The curse of the old on the young!'

Rebka flashed a grin at him.

'How are you going to get back? Using Raxxla?' Rebecca asked.

'Naturally,' Iacobus replied, 'unless you're aware of any other means of time travel we could use...'

'So you know where it is now,' Rebecca queried.

'Yes.'

'And you're not going to tell us.'

'Most definitely not. Events must be allowed to unravel as they should, as much as is possible,' Iacobus returned smoothly. 'Your mission is complete, for now. I have transferred your payment as promised. The Dark Wheel will be in touch.'

'And what are we supposed to do in the meantime?' Rebecca insisted.

'First,' Iacobus said sternly, picking up the manilla Raxxla file from the console and brandishing it at them. 'You return this to the President. Make sure you ask him to look after it this time!'

'Then what?' Rebecca continued.

Rebka leaned in close. 'I suggest staying out of trouble, and start enjoying yourselves by spending those five million credits! I know I did.'

'Five million credits?' Jim echoed, looking at Rebecca in amazement.

'My price for this mission,' Rebecca preened.

'You got the Dark Wheel to pay you five million credits?'

'Five million,' Iacobus acknowledged with disapproval, 'even in 3199, that's a lot of money!'

'Trader's instinct,' Rebecca said sheepishly, with a grin and a shrug. ' 'Cause I'm worth it.'

Iacobus and Rebka had helped with basic repairs, patching up the *Eclipse* as much as was possible in space. More importantly they had provided some fuel, allowing Rebecca and Jim to proceed to Lave for repairs. They had then returned to their ship. Rebecca had spotted the name on the hull of the Ophidian before it disappeared behind its cloaking device.

*Argent's Folly.*

Rebecca laid in a course for one of the Lave Coriolis stations. Without a working torus drive there was no point in staying away from the shipping lanes, so she had fallen in not far behind two big 'Oo-Haul' freighters called the *DaddyHoggy* and the *Ryke*. Both were accompanied by a series of fighters for protection on contract from some firm called *TGHC Escorts*. One of the escort ships was an unusual design. She frowned.

'What is that?' she said, curious.

'Never seen one before,' Jim admitted.

She angled the *Eclipse* onto an intercept course, and the ship grew slowly larger on the screen. Jim had never seen anything like it. It was an aggressive design, its hull streamlined from a narrow cockpit that flared out into swept-back wing sections. It sported two stabiliser fins giving the ship a rakish, interceptor style look. Two enormous engines gently pushed the ship along in the convoy. It looked deadly, even more intimidating than the Imperial Courier.

'Wow!' Rebecca said, her eyes wide. She rebooted the ident computer.

Ident computer initialising. Please wait... Ready.

Unknown vessel type, interrogating Galcop astrometric database...

Please wait... done.

Vampire Mk1 : Isis Interstellar manufacturing prototype : 'Killer Wolf'

Mass 290 metric.

Speed .2 LM.

Rebecca looked over the specs of the ship, pulling up the references on the console from the Galcop databases. Her eyes were alight with enthusiasm.

'I have got to get me one of these! Isn't that the most gorgeous thing you've ever seen?'

*No, it's not, you daft girl!*

Jim regarded her with fondness. 'I thought you were ready to retire?'

'Well, I've got to provide for my retirement, haven't I?' she said unconvincingly. 'I'm not going to be happy flying a junk-heap old Ophidian around in my old age! Give me some credit!'

'You and your ships!'

Jim left her to it, it was clear she was going to be engrossed for a while. He looked contentedly out of the viewscreen at the planet Lave slowly rotating in far the distance. For a few minutes he relaxed into his co-pilot's seat before he caught sight of the Raxxla file once again. He'd left it filed safely against the Cobra's astrogation console.

Doubtless the President would be wanting it back, but Zerz had left it unlocked, so there was no reason he couldn't retain a copy, for backup purposes only of course.

It brought his mind back to all that they had just experienced. Perhaps the President might believe what they had seen, but no one else would.

*Just like all the other reports of Raxxla! We have no mem-recs, no visios, no artefacts; nothing to prove our story! How many other people have really been there and been forced to stay quiet for lack of evidence? Is that what the Dark Wheel is really for? What do we do next? Seems hard to believe we just wait...*

'I wonder if the future is really changeable like they said, or whether some things have to happen in a certain way,' he mused, almost to himself.

Rebecca looked up from her ship specifications, as if a thought had just occurred to her.

'I guess we'll never know,' Jim sighed.

'Maybe we can,' Rebecca interjected, with a mischievous grin.

Jim frowned, turning to look at her. 'What do you mean?'

'I'm not sure I can tell you,' Rebecca explained in a teasing tone.

'What have you got?' Jim asked suspiciously, lowering his voice.

'No need to be like that. It's a data tab. I think Rebka meant me to know something particular about the future. She slipped it to me as we were leaving. Good to see I keep my cunning in my old age!'

'Iacobus definitely wouldn't approve, and since he's me, I'm not sure I approve either!'

'Are you telling me you don't want to know what it contains?' Rebecca dangled the data tab in front of his eyes.

'We might cause a paradox, alter the course of future events, create the wrong universe...'  
Jim looked at her pouting expression, and considered for a moment. 'All right, you win. Stuff him. He was always trying to get the last word anyway.'

'I wonder where he gets that particular trait from, eh?' Rebecca said with a smile.

Now it was Jim's turn to act outraged. 'Hey!'

Rebecca giggled, and slipped the data tab into the console. As she suspected, it was full of information. She scrolled down with interest.

'Thargoid movements, tactics, ships' specs...' Rebecca said, fascinated. 'Look, even fleet strengths and positions. Definitely going to need that Vampire now!'

Further down was a significant entry. Jim and Rebecca read it in horror.

'Oh my God!' Jim's face had gone white.

If you do not avert it, Jim will be 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 will be officially claimed it was a life support malfunction, he will actually be assassinated by a cartel of struggling Q-Bomb manufacturers. Without his intervention, the Aesbion uprising will escalate into a full-blown civil war, over five hundred and twenty vessels will be lost. Over sixty percent are destroyed by the Q-Bomb during a terrifying cascade reaction caused by the positioning of combative ships. You can avert this by...

'Glad you let me look at this then?' Rebecca queried.

'Frak, yeah!'

'Me too,' she said. 'I'm not going to let you die twice. That would just be careless.'

Her voice was jocular, but there was a serious edge to it.

One particular item was highlighted in bold text with a date some years in the future. Jim frowned in surprise and looked more closely, and then looked back up at Rebecca. She was wearing a faint, but contented smile, her eyes glistening as she returned his gaze.

She reached out for his hand, pulling him towards her. The ship specifications and data-tab were forgotten.

'Kind of hoped that would happen,' she said, her eyes aglow.

## Epilogue

Rebecca Weston 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 and Galcop Congressional Medal of Honour for her defence of the Coriolis station there, in which she single-handedly destroyed five Thargoid warships, incredibly without being injured. Observers at the scene described her attack on the Thargoids as nothing short of miraculous.

*'They didn't stand a chance! It was like she had prior knowledge of their tactics – unnerving flying! Without her intervention the whole Navy contingent would have been wiped out. She was like something out of Raxxla, she was beyond 'Elite', she was more like a force of nature out there. I wish she was working in the fleet and training our boys. She can have a commission any time she likes!'* – Commander McLane, GalNavy.

*'I've never seen anything like it. Five Thargoids taken out by a single ship! I know the Vampire is a great ship and all, but I wouldn't have given her odds on three, let alone five of those insectoid scum! They were brutal, cutting through us like butter. I thought we were all dead. When those five broke through and made for the station I thought it was game over! There's three kids back on station five who'd be fatherless if it hadn't been for Rebecca. And guess what they want to do when they grow up!'* – Bob Lavellee, Galcop Viper Pilot.

*'Thank Randomius Factoria for Rebecca; she's our guardian angel. She will never be paying tax or landing charges on any of our stations again, that much I can tell you!'* – 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 successfully lobbied against the proposed use of the Q-Bomb in order to quell the Aesbion uprising. Historians believe

that without his efforts the Aesbion conflict could have resulted in a significant number of casualties directly attributed to the Q-bomb.

– 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 just prior to the Aesbion affair, where a major civil war was narrowly averted, the Q-bomb was already considered an overly dangerous weapon.

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, organized by Jim McKenna and bankrolled by his close companion, Elite combateer Rebecca Weston (most famous for her virtually single-handed defence of orbit space around Tionisla in the Thargoid war of 3151), appear to have forced the final resolution. Jim, speaking for the Karella Institute, was quoted as saying, 'It's taken too long, too long by far, but we are pleased with this outcome. I'm glad we were here to see it.'

When asked what he'd be doing next he declined to comment. His companion, Rebecca Weston, reportedly quipped, 'Oh I don't know, maybe we'll go looking for Raxxla.'

Is this the end for Jim McKenna and Rebecca Weston? Truth is, we don't know.

– Excerpt from the *Tionisla Chronicle*, Issue 1648, Volume 8, Year 3158, Editor-in-Chief: Anna Mereso.

## Author's Note

It's an author's privilege to waffle a bit at the end of a book, I have no intention of breaking this fine tradition.

Still here? Excellent.

This story is unashamedly a 'space opera' in the famous tradition. As such it will contain many recognisable clichés of the genre. This is entirely deliberate. The 'Elite' universe is implausible, and probably impossible. However, it does retain its own integrity as well as many other fantasy universes, and I've tried to stick to what little 'canon' material there is available by way of a backdrop. Where I've failed, I apologise in advance. It's not good 'Sci-Fi', and was never supposed to be – it's supposed to be entertainment.

Status Quo was never written with a sequel in mind, though all good authors make sure it's a possibility! Generally, I'm not a fan of sequels, as they are rarely as good as the original. Knowing when to stop is an important part of writing. Hopefully I haven't yet reached that point with Mutabilis – you tell me! I've included more characterisation where I think it makes sense, because the characters in Status Quo now have some history, and needed to be the product of that history.

Also, Status Quo had a point, such as it was. It was designed to be a story which 'educated' the player into what was different about Oolite, from the perspective of someone who had played Elite. It also had a lot of 'in jokes' for the cognoscenti. The Q-Bomb, fuel injectors and so on were 'explained' in the story.

Mutabilis is not limited by these requirements, so whilst it is a straight sequel, it is more of a story, and less of an addendum to the flight manual. In not needing to talk directly about the technology, ships and locations, I was free to decide what I wanted to write about, and develop the characters a bit more. You notice a change in pace and tone with this one. Hopefully you'll still enjoy it.

After I finished Status Quo, a lot of people asked me questions along the lines of, *'Why bother spending all that time writing a story about some dumb 80s computer game which you can't sell or make any money out of?'*

The answer to this question is manifold. First, Elite is not a dumb 80s computer game. It is THE 80s computer game. No don't argue, because you'll be wrong and you'll look silly.

Elite broke the mould of ‘3 lives, high score, and 10 minutes per game’. For its time it was technically innovative, but its real reason for success is that it treated players as people with imagination, rather than sales targets, allowing them to put something of themselves into the game.

Second, monetary reward alone is a really not a good reason for doing something. Our culture knows *the price of everything* and *the value of nothing*. We’re far too obsessed with money today; so many decent things could happen if we just donated a bit of our time to something altruistic. Don’t knock it until you’ve tried it.

Elite, in its various incarnations, gave me a lot during my youth. It was escapism first and foremost, away from the tedium of a stifling education system that said ‘conform or fail’; I neither conformed nor failed. Elite inspired me to write, to imagine, re-enforcing an enthusiasm for science, fantasy and space exploration that continues to this day. I owe Elite and I’d like to repay that debt.

Thirdly, Elite has stood the test of time. New people of all ages are discovering this great game. As I grew up I discovered a huge number of people were likewise affected by this game in their youth and wanted more. Maybe Elite 4 will arrive one day – until then, it’s just us holding the torch.

Things have changed, of course. There were legal complications that looked like preventing Elite continuing, or at times, ever being seen again. There were sequels, which while worthy, ‘weren’t quite it’. Better graphics undoubtedly, but nothing which captured the spirit until now.

Computers now have the capability do the astonishing, but only the authors of Oolite really grasped the significance of Elite from my perspective – Imagination and participation. Like the perennial Hollywood blockbuster, special effects are no substitute for a plot.

With sufficient knowledge you can craft your own part of the Elite universe as you imagine it, and get this – *as part of the game itself* – so others can join in and enjoy what you create. That instantly makes Oolite more compelling than every commercially created game available today. We couldn’t do that with Elite, it wasn’t possible, so it was just in our heads.

We all wanted to see the Tionisla Graveyard, see the fabled Generation Ships and Space Dredgers. We wanted other ships to have their own agendas, rather than just attacking us all the time. Of course, we knew this wasn’t going to happen in the 8 bit games, but part of us couldn’t quite accept that, you could never be quite sure – who knows what was lurking behind that next witchspace jump, just off the scanner? Such was the compelling nature of Elite. One guy even emailed me to say he’d spent weeks playing on a Commodore 64, traversing the eight galaxies looking for Raxxla, convinced it existed somewhere in the game... maybe it does.

Now, thanks to Oolite, nothing is impossible any more.

Both this book, and its predecessor, are largely based on others' imaginations and creativity. Credit where credit is due. Please see the 'Thanks' section.

Fourth, I hope to inspire others. I know that my previous book inspired folks to 'create' for the Elite universe, whether that be new stories or add ons for Oolite itself. That's a big reward for me, what could be better than the appreciation of your fellow fans? Keep passing on the inspiration to new folks, that's what I say.

Fifth, it's fun, it's art, and it really needs no defence. It just is. There are far worse ways to spend your time. If you don't get it by now, there's really no point in me trying to convince you any further.

If, on the other hand, you do get it, then you are an enlightened soul, and this story is for you. See you in witchspace and Right On, Commanders!

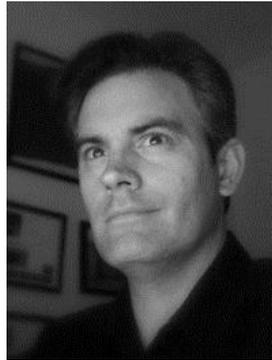
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