

# ETERNAL DOCTRINE

## PART IV

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

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## CHAPTER 18

# PIECE OF JUNK

December 16<sup>th</sup> 2155, Sol, 175.2 : 145.0

Upon returning to Sol, the Vindicator contacted the starbase as usual. The hyperwave network had been re-established so they could now initiate instant communications from the edge of the solar system without having to use the ansible.

*“Glad to see you’re back in one piece again,”* Hayes greeted them. *“Before we go any further there’s something you should know.”*

Gruber had heard that phrase before. It was one of Hayes’ trademarks.

*“Just a few hours ago, without warning, a squadron of Arilou ships had arrived here. They mysteriously requested that one of their Skiff vessels would be allowed inside the hangar, explaining only that they had some cargo to deliver. We had no reason to object so we let them in. One Arilou individual came out of the ship carrying a small red spherical object, claiming that it was the Rosy Sphere we required. I tried to ask them how they had acquired it, but they refused to go into details.”*

“That’s great news!” Zelnick triumphed. “I’ll be sure to buy them a beer.”

The Arilou were known to be rather fond of regular beer, but drank it only when a human offered it.

*“You’re too late for that,”* Hayes replied. *“They left as soon as they had delivered the ball. Their emissaries here*

*claim that they know nothing of the matter, although I'm pretty sure that they're lying."*

Telling obvious lies was also a trait of the Arilou. It was unclear whether they understood that everyone knew they were lying.

"So... how's the Ultron?" Zelnick asked.

*"We haven't tried putting the pieces together yet. We are running some basic tests for the sphere first. I think Dr. Chu and his pals want your input on the matter."*

Zelnick rubbed his hands together.

"I can hardly wait."

Some hours later the Vindicator was back at the starbase. The red sphere was only five centimeters in diameter and, just like the Aqua Helix, its shape was perfect. It was composed of blood-red translucent substance and it had atypical ferromagnetic properties while remaining utterly non-conductive.

"An interesting piece of work," Chu concluded his preliminary report.

"I still don't see how this object would be related to the Aqua Helix or the Clear Spindle," Gruber spoke his mind.

"Well, let's bring all the pieces here and see if we missed something," Zelnick suggested.

Junior Scientists Edward Hawkins went into the next room and soon returned carrying the Clear Spindle. He placed it on the table next to the Rosy Sphere. He then pushed a few buttons and a robot worker brought them the Aqua Helix, which was too heavy to be carried by one person. The three artifacts were now all lined up next to each other and all the people in the room looked at them in silence for a while.

"Well?" Gruber demanded, expecting Zelnick to know what to do next.

“I don’t know,” Zelnick uncomfortably confessed. “Maybe we should look at the Ultron wreck again.”

The same robot that had brought them the Aqua Helix went away for a while and soon returned with the piece of scrap metal also known as the late Ultron. It laid the object next to the others.

And then Gruber saw **it**. He didn’t have to check with the other, he knew that they had to see **it** too. It was all so simple, so obvious. The Ultron wasn’t broken. It was simply missing these three pieces – not one and not two, but exactly all three of them. They wouldn’t even have to reassemble the Ultron, just *combine* it with the three artifacts... just... *put them there*. It was somehow too trivial for words.

“This is...” Chu began, putting his hand on the parent device. “This is simply amazing. Such ingeniousness. Such modularity. Such... multi-purposeness.”

It was the most divine moment of Gruber’s life. The sense of revelation and enlightenment was indescribable.

“The Precursors sure knew their stuff, huh?” Zelnick commented.

Gruber couldn’t have agreed more. Indeed what they were witnessing went beyond human understanding. He couldn’t even say how and when exactly the artifacts were put together, but as sure as he was standing there, the Ultron was whole again. No tests were necessary to confirm it. There were simply no other possibilities.

“So now what?” Zelnick asked, looking at the Ultron as if expecting it to do flips and tricks.

“Ho-ho-ho,” Chu laughed like a certain merry character living north of the Arctic Circle. “Now, my friends, it’s time to practice science.”

...

<<I wish I could have been there,>> Lydia enviously sighed as Gruber explained, or rather, tried to explain what had happened with the Ultron.

<<What **were** you doing, by the way?>> Gruber asked out of simple curiosity.

Lydia gave him her usual unreadable grin that was tauntingly full of encrypted information.

<<Making friends,>> she replied.

<<Any luck?>> Gruber pushed.

Lydia made a V-sign and showed the screen of her communicator. Judging by the amount of portrait-style photos and messages attached to many of them, she had come up with some kind of friend-tracker software. Gruber took the communicator into his own hand as Lydia was clearly expecting it.

<<Did you program this by yourself?>> he soon asked, impressed by the quality of the software.

Lydia beamed with pride.

<<I sure did,>> she said. <<And look who's at the top.>>

Gruber scrolled to the top and saw himself in a picture that was probably taken without him being aware of it. A smile crept on his face.

<<Very nice,>> he commended her.

He then scrolled down towards the end of the list. He stopped in the middle for a while when he saw Matthewson's face as there was something wrong with it. It took Gruber a few seconds to realize what it was, but finally he got it: Matthewson was smiling.

Gruber nodded to Lydia in acknowledgement and then continued scrolling. He quickly reached the end and was just about to give the communicator back to Lydia when the last image on the list caught his attention.

<<Admiral Zex?>> he asked.

<<Ding, you are correct, mister,>> Lydia cheerfully replied. <<Zex is a very nice guy.>>

Gruber got worried. Zex was the smoothest talker he had ever met. It seemed like only a matter of time until Hayes would give Zex the key to the starbase.

<<Zex is a puzzle,>> he said. <<Be careful with... him.>>

Lydia took her communicator back.

<<Don't worry,>> she assured. <<I'm not looking to replace you.>>

After parting with Lydia, Gruber felt a great urge to talk with Zex. He didn't see any reason to resist the urge so he went straight to the alien containment area. He passed the cell of the Thraddash captive and checked that the prisoner hadn't been disposed of yet... Nope, there the creature still was, smoking a cigar. Gruber still had no idea where the cigars came from, but he had more important things on his mind at the moment so he continued forward.

He soon reached Zex's cell and saw that the admiral already had company. The visitor was sitting right in front of the cell's bars and Zex was sitting on the other side, very close to the man. Both of them were leaning a bit forward, completely silent. Gruber decided to stay back for a while and observe.

It took Gruber a while to figure out that the man was Trent. As he realized that, he got even more curious to see what the two greatest strategic minds of the quadrant were up to.

Soon Trent moved his arm a bit between the two and then fell motionless again. After a while Zex made a similar motion. Gruber ran out of patience and approached them. Both Zex and Trent stood up as they noticed Gruber and then he saw what they had been doing.

They were playing chess, Trent playing black, and Zex seemed to be winning. Gruber had played with Trent a few times in the past, but Trent had been way out of his league.

"More visitors, what a treat," Zex remarked.

"Sir, this guy is killing me," Trent commented. "I explained the rules of the game to Zex only two games ago. I

won our first game easily, second I lost after a great struggle, and now I'm being made a fool of in the third."

Gruber felt a strange sensation of satisfaction since there was someone out of Trent's league as well. But he also had wished that Trent was the greater genius of the two. Maybe chess didn't relate directly to war strategy, but still...

"Let's talk business, shall we?" Zex proposed.

"We're always eager to hear Hierarchy secrets," Trent replied.

"What do you have in mind?" Gruber asked Zex.

Zex leaned towards the bars.

"A little bird told me that you need a great deal of portable solar energy," Zex said.

Gruber and Trent didn't say anything.

"And I know where you can get it," Zex continued.

Gruber and Trent followed the protocol – *Do not interfere when the enemy is revealing secrets.*

"The question is..." Zex delayed. "How well do you know the Mycon?"

Now Zex seemed to realize that the humans wouldn't join the conversation at this point and had to continue.

"The Mycon are a nasty bunch and we prefer to keep them at a distance. Unfortunately, their sphere of influence nowadays almost reaches the border of our patrolled space and therefore we know more of them than we would want to. For instance, we know that they thrive at a temperature around 300 degrees centigrade and that they have an unpleasant habit of artificially creating those temperatures on their preferred colony planets."

The story seemed like it could get interesting any second, so Gruber listened carefully.

"And why is that unpleasant, you might ask," Zex acknowledged the audience. "It's because they prefer to do that to planets very much like your home planet... or ours. And do you know of a similar planet, the home world of a

certain race, whose temperature suddenly rose by a few hundred degrees some decades ago, forcing that race to abandon their formerly beautiful world?"

This was turning out to be quite an accusation, Gruber thought, although he continuously had to remind himself not to trust Zex so blindly. But the admiral had a way of talking too damn convincingly.

"Beta Copernicus I," Zex concluded. "The former home of the Syreen. And before you ask, yes, I am implying that the Mycon destroyed the Syreen homeworld. Or rather, I'm not implying, I'm straight out telling you."

Now it was appropriate for Gruber to intervene.

"You said that you knew where we could get portable solar power," he focused on the point.

Zex seemed pleased that the audience was listening.

"I'm sure you see the relation," Zex remarked. "When the Mycon colonize a planet, they first send a spore pod down there which, in time, shatters the planet's crust. They call these pods 'The Deep Children'. The resulting uncontrollable volcanic activity is usually enough to wipe out all former inhabitants. When they have the planet to themselves, they set up some kind of device into the planet's orbit. With that device they are able to control the surface temperature at will, usually boosting it all the way up to 300 degrees. We have every reason to believe that the device in question radiates energy which, when placed in orbit, rivals that of the star – a solar manipulator if you like."

Gruber remembered what *Captain* Tanaka had said. Zex's story seemed to match that perfectly.

"So," Gruber began, "are you saying that the device is still at Beta Copernicus I?"

"No, no," Zex replied. "The Mycon have destroyed many worlds after that. To get to the point, according to my latest intel, they began the process at Beta Brahe I not too long ago. I'd bet my freedom the device is there as we speak."

That was quite a statement from someone behind bars.

“And if we went there now,” Trent began, “would the Mycon give the device to us if we asked nicely?”

The admiral laughed.

“Probably not,” Zex answered. “It seems that when the colonization process is ongoing, about half of the entire Mycon fleet is guarding the planet – or more specifically – guarding their ‘Deep Children’. I dare say they would rather die than abandon those pods. And **that** is their weakness. **That** is what you should exploit.”

Now they were in Trent’s domain and Gruber decided to leave the conversation to the experts.

“So we should strike when the Mycon are transporting their ‘Deep Children’ to another world,” Trent pondered. “If what you said was true, they wouldn’t need the solar manipulator right away. It might be left with fewer guards while the major part of the fleet is escorting the pods.”

“Precisely,” Zex agreed.

Trent fell silent for a while. He was obviously coming up with a master plan.

“If we knew where they were going to migrate next,” he then began, “we could ambush them there. If they indeed guard their Deep Children with such ferocity, we might have a chance to wipe out a major part of their fleet in one swift stroke.”

“How could we know where they were going?” Gruber joined in, too excited to remain silent.

The admiral chuckled.

“The Mycon are suckers,” Zex said. “If you were to simply tell them of a planet that would suit their needs, they would take your word for it and start preparing for the trip.”

Gruber inadvertently rubbed his hands together. Then he realized that he, again, had trusted Zex completely, against his own conviction.

“We would need a genuine planet,” Trent speculated. “Otherwise the Mycon would realize too soon that something’s wrong.”

“I agree,” Zex said. “Sadly, I don’t know of any appropriate planets near their region of space – excluding the Vux space of course. I’m sure you understand why that wouldn’t work.”

Trent nodded.

“That, and we don’t have the ships to set up the trap,” he concluded.

Gruber remembered that they were actually on a side-track here.

“But if all that holds, we **could** still steal the solar manipulator,” he pointed out. “That is unrelated to the actual trap, isn’t it?”

Trent and Zex both nodded.

“True,” Zex said. “But it would be a shame to waste such a tasty opportunity for a huge victory.”

An obvious question came into Gruber’s mind:

“Why are you telling us this?”

Zex looked at him and tapped the bars of the cell.

“There are two things in particular I don’t like,” Zex began. “The Mycon, and being behind bars.”

It was a valid motivation in Gruber’s opinion, but there was one thing he had to point out:

“You do realize that we’re not letting you out of there just because you told us all this, right?”

Zex sighed.

“I understand it will take time to convince you that I’m your friend. But I’m off to a good start, aren’t I? I have footage of the Mycon launching the spore pods into a planet if you’re interested.”

Indeed the admiral was off to a good start.

“We’ll see,” Gruber said.

Gruber then typed into his log.

*We need to find an Earth-like planet somewhere near Mycon space. And we need a fleet of counter-Mycon ships for the trap.*

Unfortunately they didn't have that many ships that would do the trick. The Earthling Cruiser was too slow to avoid the Mycon Podships' homing plasmoids, although they could provide support from the back lines. The Spathi Eluder would be ideal, but they only had one of those. The Orz Nemesis would probably work fine, but the Orz were too unpredictable and therefore unsuited to form the core of an operation like this. The Zoq-Fot-Pik Stinger was too weak and it could be used only as a secondary unit. The Pkunk Furies might work, but the Pkunk weren't in the Alliance and they only had four of those fighters. The Arilou Skiffs would be ideal, but, again, the Arilou weren't in the Alliance.

*If only the Syreen Space Patrol was here, Gruber thought. The Syreen and their Penetrator starships would be well suited for this operation. But wait! Didn't the Syreen say that their ships weren't destroyed at the end of the war, but instead stashed in some hidden vault? That's right! Now we just need to find the vault.*

Gruber checked that Trent agreed with his reasoning and then they explained the plan to Hayes and Zelnick.

"This is great stuff," Hayes commended them. "The Syreen might be more willing to help us now, knowing that they could get revenge against those responsible for the destruction of their home world."

"But we still need to find their ships," Zelnick remarked.

Gruber read from his notes:

"The ships are supposed to be in a vault on some random planet whose sun is either red or orange. And the system couldn't be farther than 200 hyperspace units from Betelgeuse. If we assume that the Ur-Quan didn't take

detours to confuse the Syreen while they were flying blind, we could focus the search on a ring of – say – 150 to 200 hyperspace units.”

They all checked the star map.

“And I think it would safe to assume that it’s not towards the area of Alliance races,” Trent continued the thought.

Hayes made some markings on the star map and then highlighted some stars.

“There are about ten candidates,” he observed, “and most of them are in Ur-Quan space.”

Now was the time to show everyone that the New Alliance of Free Stars was more than just the Vindicator’s fleet.

“This is a job for the Zoq-Fot-Pik,” Gruber said. “Most of the candidates are practically on their back yard.”

A few days and a vigorous testing marathon later they knew that the Ultron was in fact the ‘Appendages of Dawn’, an artifact mentioned in a Precursor fragment found in Rigel in 2123. It was described as a ‘Mental Amplifier’ which focuses mental energies of the holder ‘for the purpose of discreet change’. Unfortunately it was evident that human brain emanations were not compatible with the Ultron and neither were those of any Alliance races present at the starbase.\* Perhaps the Utwig would be a better fit since they valued the device so highly.

They wanted to make haste so they could bring the fixed Ultron to the Utwig before it was too late – before they decided to commit mass-suicide with their Precursor bomb. And of course they hoped that the Utwig would be so

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\* It was a bit unclear if the Orz had truly understood what the fuss was all about. Quite possibly they had just taken the path of least resistance and went with the crowd. Further testing on them was deemed unnecessary since everyone silently agreed that amplifying the mental powers of the Orz wasn’t a good idea.

pleased that they would give the Alliance the bomb in return, and preferably join the Alliance.

The only problem was that they didn't know where the Utwig home world was. It seemed inappropriate to deliver the Ultron to Zeta Hyades, the system where the Utwig supposedly kept the bomb. Last time they encountered Utwig ships in Epsilon Aquarii, so that would be one place to start looking. Also, there was supposed to be a rainbow world at Gamma Aquarii, right next to Epsilon Aquarii, so they could possibly get two birds with one stone by going there first.

After jumping from true space to hyperspace, hyperspace to quasispace and from quasispace back to hyperspace, they had travelled from 175.2 : 145.0 to 775.2 : 890.6 in three days. The quadrant felt a lot smaller than before. The effect was similar to the way Earth suddenly got smaller after the invention of airplanes.

There were no hyperspace spoors on the radar, so they set course for Gamma Aquarii.

## CHAPTER 19

# THE EXCHANGE

**January 3<sup>rd</sup> 2156, Beta Aquarii, 863.0 : 869.3**

*December 31<sup>st</sup> 2155: New Year's Eve. There were no Utwig ships at Gamma Aquarii, but there was another rainbow world. We're rich.*

*January 2<sup>nd</sup> 2156: Success at Epsilon Aquarii. The Utwig we met told us right off the bat that the Ultron should be delivered to a specific temple in their home world which is at Beta Aquarii I. They refused to take the Ultron themselves and also were reluctant to say anything more since it was their high proctors' duty and privilege to communicate with the Ultron.*

*January 3<sup>rd</sup> 2156: We're entering the orbit of the Utwig home world. So far nobody has paid any attention to us. Let's see what they think after we present ourselves...*

Gruber sat in the shuttle along with the landing team again. According to the Vindicator's scanners, the atmosphere should be safe for humans without any additional equipment. The temperature at their landing site was currently a pleasant 24 degrees and no clouds were on sight.

The Utwig weren't celebrating yet. They said that the festivities would begin only when the leader of their high proctors would hold the Ultron in her hands. Until that moment, they would all continue to wear the mask of Ultimate Embarrassment and Shame.

Gruber's orders were clear: *Do whatever it takes to make the Utwig give them the bomb at Zeta Hyades.* He would have to improvise how to handle the negotiations. The Ultron was their only bargaining chip and they knew next to nothing about the Utwig.

Jenkins announced that they would land in a few moments. They had been instructed to do so on a specific mountain top where the infrastructure resembled that of the Incan Empire at its prime.

The Ultron was tightly strapped to the floor in front of Gruber. Even if the shuttle were to rapidly spin around all its axes, the Ultron would definitely be safe – if the shuttle stayed intact.

Soon there was a thump which indicated they had touched down. Gruber took one final moment to admire the simplicity of the Ultron's structure and then ordered the crew to release its straps. It was important to do this while the shuttle's ramp was still closed since, who knows, maybe the Utwig would consider it blasphemy to restrain their holy device in such a forceful way.

As the ramp got lowered, the inside of the shuttle was bathed in the green light of the local sun. As usual, their eyes quickly got used to the color of the natural light and the green effect faded away. Gruber was the first one to exit the shuttle and take a look at the surroundings.

There was a long row of identical-looking creatures in front of him. It felt as if there was only one creature and its image had been copy pasted dozens of times into an extremely organized formation. The creatures were wearing purple robes that bore a resemblance to the ones used by Ku-Klux-Klan in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the exception that their hats weren't pointy.

It was ghostly quiet. There wasn't even any wind to make background ambience. All the aliens were just silently looking at the humans. Gruber almost expected for

someone's communicator to beep. In fact, he found himself hoping for it – anything to break the silence.

Gruber looked back as Hawthorne and Robinson appeared from the shuttle carrying the Ultron. He expected a roar of applause, but there was none. He expected some unorganized muttering and shifting, but there was none. At that moment he started to suspect that all the creatures in front of them might be mannequins.

Hawthorne and Robinson carefully laid down the Ultron between the humans and the Utwig/mannequins. Not a single word had been said so far. Gruber contemplated whether he should start talking or approach the aliens and, if he got no response, nudge one of them to check that they were alive. He had some recent practice with staring contests, thanks to Lydia, so he wasn't too much in a hurry.

Finally one of the creatures took a step forward. It was the one at the exact center of the row. The alien approached the Ultron with slow, but steady pace. Gruber waited, standing right next to the Ultron.

As the creature got close, Gruber took note of its eyes. They were watery, as if the creature was silently crying its heart out. The creature then crouched and put its hand on the Ultron's surface.

Immediately as its hand touched the device, the creature started shaking. **Then** began the unorganized murmur Gruber had hoped for earlier. The creature touching the Ultron started making strange noises and the others appeared to be whispering to each other.

Suddenly the creature stopped trembling and fell silent for a second. It then took the Ultron into both its hands, stood up and lifted the Ultron above its head as lightly as a human would lift an empty sack.

"It is a miracle!" it declared.

Now came the roar of applause. All the other Utwig took off their masks and threw them in the air. Their faces

resembled that of a particular extra-terrestrial in an old movie whose name Gruber couldn't remember.

"Oh happy day!" the one holding the Ultron rejoiced and turned to face Gruber.

Hawthorne and Robinson seemed ready to dash and dive if it looked like the Utwig would drop the Ultron.

"Joyous occasion!" the Utwig continued. "You will be immortalized as the blessed figures that delivered unto us our future!"

*Don't haggle with yourself*, Gruber thought. *Let them offer something first.*

"The Ultron sings to me again," the Utwig said. "Such a beautiful voice... oh, how I have missed it! And there is so much to do... Indeed, it seems that you should proceed to the second moon of the sixth planet of Zeta Hyades and take what you find there. We no longer have need for it, but the Ultron reveals that you will."

*"That went well,"* Zelnick commented over the radio.

"But wait!" the Utwig continued. "The Ultron throbs and whistles! Matters of significance are being relayed to our brains. It has been so long since we communicated with the ultimate in such a manner, but slowly the truth is revealed... our destiny!"

The rest of the Utwig were now silently listening again, as were the humans. The one with Ultron continued:

"We have been directed to join with our Supox allies and attack... You!"

The long row of Utwig individuals all turned their heads to look at each other. Gruber gripped his sidearm.

"No, wait, that's wrong, sorry!" the Utwig with the Ultron corrected. "We don't attack **you**; we attack **your enemies**... The Ur-Quan and the Kohr-Ah..."

*"Phew",* Zelnick said.

"No, wait, that's still wrong," the Utwig said and Gruber gripped his weapon tightly again.

*What now?*” Zelnick commented.

“It seems that,” the Utwig continued, “we should strike only the black ships. Yes, now I’m sure of it. We will take our Supox allies with us and immediately launch a major offensive against the Kohr-Ah. In addition, we will join your alliance and grant you the boon of our Jugger starship designs, as well as a supply of trained starship captains. I can also say with certainty that the Supox will give you the same assistance.”

*“That’s better,”* Zelnick said in a relieved tone. *“Impressive negotiations, Mr. Gruber.”*

Gruber was pretty sure he hadn’t said anything.

“I’m sure my role in it was significant,” he replied.

The Utwig with the Ultron turned to face Gruber again.

“Now we must go, as should you,” it instructed. “We must proceed to perform our essential service for the universe. And we must hastily organize a decree regarding a temporary mask of Joyous Reunion.”

With that said, all the Utwig began to scatter. The one holding the Ultron turned around politely, but efficiently, and walked away.

*“Mission accomplished,”* Zelnick summed it up. *“Return to the ship ASAP, we have a bomb to pick up.”*

Three days later the Vindicator entered the vortex leading to Zeta Hyades. A pack of Utwig and Supox emissaries were aboard the Vindicator, ready to captain new ships the alliance would build. Almost their entire fleets were already on their way to attack the Kohr-Ah at the Horologii constellation. Hayes pointed out that this was most unwise, as the alliance should wait until they were all ready for a full-scale offensive. The Utwig, however, trusted the Ultron’s guidance above that of the humans and the Supox had a history of following the Utwig everywhere, so they left and there was nothing the alliance could do about it.

It wasn't necessarily such a bad idea, though. Zoq-Fot-Pik scouts had reported that the Kohr-Ah were pushing the Ur-Quan hard and that without intervention, the Kohr-Ah would probably win the doctrinal conflict within a few months. The Utwig and the Supox might be able to give the Ur-Quan – and the alliance – a bit more time and, not incidentally, force the Ur-Quan and the Kohr-Ah to weaken each other even more.

The Utwig could also confirm that the Kohr-Ah were indeed the true enemy. According to them, the Ultron had enlightened them on the subject and revealed that the goals of the Kohr-Ah are mutually exclusive with their very own existence. They also claimed that the only ones who could truly stop the Kohr-Ah were Captain Zelnick and the Vindicator – a statement that seemed to put a lot of pressure on Zelnick.

The Vindicator's destination was the second moon of the sixth planet. The planet was a gas giant and it had only two moons, so the *second* moon meant the one whose orbit was higher. According to the Utwig, they had already abandoned their guard station and the bomb should be currently unattended.

There were ships in orbit of the second moon, though – ships of unknown type. There appeared to be five of them, but there was no way of telling if there were more behind the moon or on the surface.

The ships were long and thin. Their silhouette somewhat resembled that of a trumpet. As they noticed the approaching alliance fleet, they turned so that their long shape was pointing towards the Vindicator, making them appear very small. They soon hailed the Vindicator and Zelnick answered the call.

*"We are the Druuge of the Crimson Corporation,"* the alien introduced themselves. *"The planet you approach*

*belongs to us. All other claims are hereby rendered invalid and uncontestable. Depart."*

The alien looked disturbingly like the devil in Christian mythology as portrayed in popular culture.

"So you're the Druuge," Zelnick replied. "We've heard about you. We were planning on purchasing the Rosy Sphere artifact from you, but our friends, the Arilou, beat us to it. It worked great, by the way, thanks! But what makes you say that—"

*"So it was **you!**"* the Druuge interrupted. *"Befriending thieves and frauds makes **you** just as guilty."*

"Whoa, whoa, slow down," Zelnick defended against the sudden accusation, "what are you talking about?"

The Druuge squeezed an odd ball that was displayed on a stand next to the creature.

*"The Rosy Sphere..."* it began, *"It wasn't purchased from us... It was stolen from us, by these 'friends' of yours. Our price for it was 100 able bodied crewmen, which these 'Arilou' immediately agreed to pay. They sent exactly 100 of their kind to our trade vessel and we, as honest merchants, gave them the Rosy Sphere. Without a word their ships then departed the system and, simultaneously, all these crewmen they had provided us vanished as well."*

"Er..." Zelnick hesitated.

The Druuge let go of the sphere.

*"But, we are willing to overlook this crime on your behalf,"* the alien continued, *"provided that you leave... now."*

Zelnick tapped the armrest of his chair.

"Very well," he then said. "We will leave as soon as we have picked up something from the surface."

The Druuge took the same sphere in its hand and threw it forcefully on the floor, breaking it.

*"What kind of a fool do you take me for?"* it demanded. *"We know what's down there and we know very well its*

*value. And most importantly, it belongs to the Crimson Corporation. Your presence here can only be interpreted as an attempt to deprive us of what is rightfully ours."*

In Gruber's opinion the conversation seemed to be leading to an ugly outcome.

"The Utwig gave it to **us**," Zelnick made his case. "What makes you say it belongs to you?"

The Druuge laughed.

*"The Utwig cannot give you something that isn't theirs,"* it claimed.

Then the alien seemed to calm down somewhat.

*"Since you appear to be genuinely unaware of the circumstances, I will explain... We came here years ago to sell the Ultron – a useless piece of junk – to the Utwig. Already back then we knew of the weapon on the surface below us. That was to be our price. But the Utwig used a clever ploy to cheat us!"*

The Druuge took a replacement sphere from somewhere and put it where the one that was now in pieces on the floor used to be.

*"I had convinced the morose Utwig fools that the Ultron was the answer to all of their pitiful dreams. 'Super powers?' HAR-HAR-HAR! Oh, of course. I told them that it would grant them the powers that they craved – the Second Sight. The Ultron would allow them to see into the past and the future. The Ultron would slowly imbue each of them with unique secret powers of great significance. The Ultron would ensure that their race's huge potential for greatness would be fulfilled. And they believed it all. They capered and laughed at their good fortune. But then... Then I made a mistake."*

"What mistake?" Zelnick asked.

The Druuge took a deep breath and the pitch of its voice lowered as it continued.

*“The self-doubt and lack of clear reason left the Utwig vulnerable to our every manipulation. We had expected the Utwig to fall for our sell – to buy the **useless** device – but never with such gusto. Before I could announce the price, the Utwig High Proctor begged to hold the device, just for a moment. The fool I was, I permitted this – to close the deal... a grievous mistake.”*

“Why was it a mistake?” Zelnick asked again.

The Druuge sighed.

*“The moment the High Proctor touched the Ultron, her body arched and her eyes rolled back in her head. She began to babble meaningless phrases and howl like a beast. We could do nothing but observe this act in silence. After a while her body relaxed and her eyes slowly closed. When they re-opened, they shone with a wild and frightening light. She declared that the Ultron was all they could have dreamed of, and more.*

*I tried to say a word about the price, but she interrupted me, claiming that the Ultron fed my thoughts directly to her brain and that spoken words were unnecessary. She insisted that she knew what I desired... What could I say? That the Ultron was a farce and could do no such thing? I was stunned and silent.*

*Me and my associates were lead to a small vault. The High Proctor declared that I desired and object of great antiquity, secret function and high value. She ceremoniously opened the door to the vault and explained that because we had been of such great service, all of the treasures within were ours.*

*What we found inside was a hodge-podge of ancient and useless artifacts which were of no value to us. I could see no way to salvage the disastrous situation at that time, so with tears in our eyes we carried the junk to our ship and left. Ever since then we have tried to sell this junk to random travelers, with little success. When the Arilou bought the*

*Rosy Sphere – one of these artifacts – we thought for a second that our luck had turned. But then it turned out that they had tricked us as well. It was then that we decided we would correct the injustice and come here to pick up what was rightfully ours.*

*There. You have heard our justification. It is valid and unassailable. Now leave.”*

It was a sad tale in Gruber’s opinion. Usually he found it pleasing when the tricksters get tricked themselves, but there was some cruelty in the Druuge’s story. What was even sadder was that it seemed highly likely that they would have to fight the Druuge over the possession of the bomb.

“I sympathize,” Zelnick assured, “I really do. However, we really, really need the bomb. If we don’t get the bomb, we all die – you too. So can we please have the bomb in peace?”

The Druuge made a scary face.

*“No, you may not,” it replied in a strict tone. “We know your soul, young captain. It is no brighter than ours. We acknowledge our greed. We revel in it. You are the dishonest one. Hiding your shame in shadows, you fabricate justifications and rationales, but in the end, we are just the same. Since you won’t listen to reason and continue to stand in our way, you leave us no choice but to forcibly move you.”*

The Druuge cut the transmission.

“They’re shooting at us,” McNeil immediately observed.

“The Projectiles are fast,” Dujardin noted. “Too fast! Evade!”

Zelnick was ahead of her and had quickly maneuvered the Vindicator sideways. The Zoq-Fot-Pik Stingers were such small targets that it was unlikely the shots would hit them at such a long distance. Gruber was also sure that Fwiffo would have no trouble dodging these shots, but he was worried about the two Orz Nemeses and two Earthling

Cruisers – the Cruisers in particular were poor at evading shots like these.

One shot missed the Vindicator at a safe distance, but four other projectiles were targeted at some other ships – on all four sides of the Vindicator. Gruber knew that in their current formation the Seraph was *below*, the Anna 53 was *above*, the Star Runner and the Stingers were on the port side and the Nemeses were on the starboard side. Pkunk Furies were in the shuttle bay, inside the Vindicator. He could not see any of the other ships from the windows on the bridge so he checked the tactical display.

Four enemy shots had passed their formation, which meant that one had had to hit. It was strange, though... The particles had such great momentum that it felt improbable they would just stop at a small ship, such as the Vindicator's escorts. Even if they had hit, Gruber would have expected to see them on the display, passing the formation.

*"We're hit!"* Captain Wu of the Seraph reported.

There was something wrong with his voice, as if it took great effort to talk. Gruber checked the monitor where Wu's image was and saw that Wu was somehow hanging from his seatbelt, as if a strong force was trying to pull him from his seat. Gruber checked the tactical display again and noticed that the Seraph was spinning and drifting backwards, apparently out of control.

*"Permission to engage the enemy?"* Captain van Rijn of the Anna 53 requested.

*"Granted,"* Zelnick hastily replied and then opened a channel to all the ships. *"Take them out!"*

*"We... No control..."* Wu tried to report. *"Lost... inertia... Uhh—"*

Captain Wu passed out. Gruber noted that the Seraph was missing two of its four engines and was spinning so fast that if they couldn't control their inertia nullifier, the crew inside would experience at least six G's, possibly more.

“Captain, we have to stop the Seraph from spinning,” Gruber said. “And we have to do it fast or we lose the crew.”

Zelnick seemed preoccupied with the controls.

“You handle that,” he hastily replied.

“Sir, the enemy ships are all moving away from us,” Dujardin reported. “It seems that their cannon bears a great recoil.”

Given the velocity and the apparent mass of the projectiles, the Druuge starships would have to be at least as massive as the Vindicator to manage the reaction force resulting from firing. The Kohr-Ah ships also fired large projectiles at great velocities, but their ships were so big that they endured the recoil – or had some other means to cope with it.

The Seraph was drifting away at a velocity that indicated the entire momentum of the projectile was absorbed.

“Their projectiles must be like hollow-point bullets,” McNeil speculated.

Anyone could make a weapon whose projectiles would pierce the target and keep on going afterwards. They would make a hole in the target, sure, but most of their momentum would be left in the bullet and the target would not necessarily slow down much. The idea with hollow-point bullets was that they expanded, or even shattered, on impact, transferring their entire momentum to the target and thus providing a lot more stopping power. It was Newton’s third law of motion at its finest.

Gruber contacted Fat-Pot-Mik, the commanding trio of the Tracker.

“Can you attach yourselves to the Seraph and use your thrusters to bring it under control?” he asked.

*“We should be able to, yes.”*

*“Stinger-tongue to the rescue!”*

The Tracker set off in the direction of the Seraph. Gruber recognized that there was nothing more he could do about it so he focused on the battle itself.

“Captain, how about sending in the Pkunk Furies?” he asked.

The Pkunk ships were small and very fast. In theory they should be ideal against opponents like these. That is, if the enemy didn’t have any pesky secondary abilities.

“Good idea,” Zelnick agreed and gave the Pkunk pilots the command to take off.

A nuke was fired from the Anna 53. The Voyager and the Seeker accelerated towards the enemy, along with the Orz Nemeses \*Flamenco\* and \*Fox\*. They were soon passed by the four Pkunk Furies: Joy, Love, Fortune and Harmony.

*“I don’t think I should go there,” Fwiffo suggested. “The Spathi Eluder is designed for running away, not for chasing.”*

“Agreed,” Zelnick acknowledged. “Go see if you can help the Tracker in stopping the Seraph from spinning.”

*“Will do,” Fwiffo replied.*

There was little the Vindicator could do. It was such a large target that chasing the Druuge ships would be risky. The enemy ships were still moving away. They fired some more shots towards their pursuers and thus picked up even more speed, but not enough to outrun the nuke.

There was a flash in the distance, indicating that the nuke had detonated. The number of enemy ships on the tactical display was reduced to four.

“They seem vulnerable to your nukes,” Zelnick said to van Rijn. “Fire a broadside!”

*“They’re already too far,” van Rijn explained. “But it looks to me like the enemies gain more and more speed as they shoot. Given their current trajectory, I’d expect them to eventually come out from the other side of the moon.”*

True enough, even though their shots hadn't hit any of their pursuers so far, the Nemeses and the Stingers were barely even catching up to the Druuge ships. The Furies, on the other hand, had just reached their reported firing range. Soon they would end up behind the moon and communications would be lost.

Zelnick opened a channel to the Pkunk pilots, but couldn't give them any orders, because all the Pkunk were screaming.

*“—Fool! Idiot! Jerk! Loser! Moron!—”*

Gruber remembered that the Pkunk had claimed their weapons were actually their negative spiritual energy which they created by whipping themselves into an emotional frenzy. Perhaps insulting their enemies played a part in that.

*“—Baby! Dodo! Nerd! Nitwit! Stupid!—”*

Whatever it was the Pkunk were doing, it seemed effective. All four of the Furies swarmed around one enemy ship, burning it with bright beams of light. Their prey couldn't do anything to defend itself and its hull soon cracked with a showy explosion.

*“—Twit! Wimp! Cellist! Worm! Dummy!—”*

The other Druuge ships fired at the Furies while picking up speed again. The distance between them was now so short that there was no time to dodge the shots. The Pkunk would just have to steer clear from the enemy's firing sector.

Unfortunately one of the shots hit. The image from the Harmony went blank and the insults of its pilot, Yompin, ceased. Another bright explosion indicated that there would be little to salvage and no hope of survivors...

...But then there was another bright light. Suddenly Yompin's image came back on the screen.

*“I reject!”* she screamed.

Now there were four Furies again. Just then, the moon eclipsed the battle.

“Wait, what just happened?” Zelnick asked.

Dujardin played back the recording from a few seconds back. It was just as Gruber thought he saw the first time. The Harmony was hit and it got destroyed. A moment later there was a flash and then the Harmony was intact again.

“An illusion?” McNeil suggested.

“An illusion that absorbs a projectile like that?” Gruber shot down the idea.

The Nemeses and Stingers returned from behind the moon. The commanding trio of the Seeker explained:

*“The enemy outrun us.”*

*“There was nothing we could do.”*

*“The Pkunk are still in pursuit.”*

*“I could swear the enemy got one of them, but there it still is...”*

Captain \*Heavy\* of the \*Flamenco\* joined in on the conversation in their own weird way:

*“Pkunk \*bubbles\* won’t go away. First time fun in \*slow time\*. Orz want to \*smell\* Pkunk more.”*

Impressing the Orz wasn’t easy, so the Pkunk had a remarkable trick up their sleeves.

“Ok, let’s put that aside for now,” Zelnick decided. “They should come back from the other side of the moon in some time. Let’s get ready. Fwiffo and Fat-Pot-Mik, how are you doing?”

*“Ready to start tonguing!”*

*“He means that we are just about to attach ourselves to the Seraph, hang on... There.”*

The Tracker was now spinning with the Seraph.

*“Engaging thrusters...”*

The spinning slowed down.

*"We have it under control."*

"Excellent work," Zelnick commended them. "Fwiffo, organize a team to take care of the wounded. Van Rijn, if the enemy does appear from the other side of the moon, you be sure to greet them with nuclear explosions."

*"Of course,"* van Rijn replied.

Some 15 minutes later they could see the Druuge ships again. Now there was only one left, flying straight towards the Vindicator, rear first, with great velocity. The Furies were still on its tail.

"McNeil, do your thing," Zelnick gave the command to the weapons officer as a nuclear missile was launched from the Anna 53.

McNeil took aim and...

"Sir, a message from the enemy ships," Ozerova reported.

...fired.

"Displaying it now," Ozerova continued and set it up on the main screen.

*"I surrender!"* the Druuge on the screen pleaded.

"Van Rijn, cancel the nuke!" Zelnick quickly ordered.

The nuclear missiles of the Earthling Cruiser could be remotely disabled, but the Hellbore Cannon of the Vindicator had no such capability.

"Impact in three... two... one..." McNeil counted until the Hellbore Cannon's shot hit the enemy.

"A direct hit," he then reported.

"The enemy ship is destroyed," Dujardin checked. "No chance of survivors."

Zelnick didn't look pleased.

"They brought it on themselves, captain," Gruber reminded him. "Events such as these are common on the battlefield."

“I know,” Zelnick assured him, even though he probably didn’t know.

Meanwhile, Captain Wu had regained consciousness.

“*We’re in bad shape,*” he reported. “*I don’t have the numbers yet, but I fear we’ve lost some crew.*”

“We’ll get right on it,” Zelnick said.

He then turned to Gruber.

“Organize the bomb retrieval and the scavenging,” he ordered.

## CHAPTER 20

# MIGRATION

**January 8<sup>th</sup> 2156, quasispace, vortex leading to 190.9 : 092.6**

Retrieving the bomb wasn't exactly a spectacle. The device was set within a simple defensive grid, but the grid got neutralized when Jenkins accidentally landed the shuttle on top of it.

The artifact itself was a black cylinder, roughly the same size as the Ur-Quan warp pod they had retrieved from Alpha Pavonis. It was covered in Precursor script and although they could translate it only partially it was evident that the message was a warning, repeated again and again. The energy readings from the bomb were so unorthodox that they all agreed not to experiment with it until they were back at the starbase.

The Seraph had sustained heavy damage and nine crew members were found dead. The ship was deemed damaged beyond repair without a dock so the remaining crew members were transferred to the Vindicator and what was left of the ship was towed back to the starbase. The wreckages of the Druuge ships had been recovered and stashed into the storage bay, with the exception of the one that was hit with the Hellbore Cannon and could only have been picked up one particle at a time.

Gruber was writing his log as the Vindicator was about to enter the vortex leading from quasispace to a region near Sol in hyperspace.

*The Pkunk performed well in the skirmish with the Druuge, although we still don't know for sure what happened with the Harmony. The Pkunk 'explained' that Yompin refused to go away, so when her body died – which was when the Harmony got destroyed – her spirit refused to leave this world.*

*Apparently that happens often to the Pkunk, and since the spirit would have a boring time without a body, the spirit would also refuse to let the body leave this world. And what's more – again, this is according to the Pkunk – the body would have a boring time in the vacuum of space without a ship, so the spirit would also refuse to let the ship leave this world.*

*...And the most ridiculous thing is that, of all the theories regarding what happened to the Harmony, this is so far the most feasible one.*

*But now I think would be a good time to tap ourselves on the back and say that this mission was a success. We now have the bomb that supposedly carries enough power to destroy the Sa-Matra. We also have two new allies who are currently marching towards the Horologii constellation to attack the Kohr-Ah with the intention of evening the odds in the doctrinal conflict.*

*There were casualties, sure, but I dare say they were a small price to pay for what we got.*

*And, let's not forget, we now know that the Pkunk Furies can be extremely deadly in combat. Even though we currently have only four Pkunk ships in our command, I believe we could make the Pkunk join our cause in the long run.*

*About the bomb... If I would have to describe it with one word, I'd use the word 'scary'. It has a strange aura – the kind that makes it difficult to stand near it. In fact, it makes*

*you wish you and the bomb were in different star systems. It sends chills down my spine every time someone even touches the device.*

*The Utwig don't seem to know anything more about the device either. And speaking of the Utwig, upon boarding the Vindicator the only thing they cared about was to find some fitting material they could fashion masks out of. So now they are all walking around wearing white bed sheets that have two eye holes in them.*

“Jumping to hyperspace... now,” Samusenko announced.

They landed at coordinates 190.9 : 092.6. It was two days from Sol and one day from Alpha Centauri where they could sell the location of one more rainbow world to the Melnorme.

“Sir, multiple contacts on the radar,” Dujardin reported.

In Gruber's opinion it was a rather plain way of phrasing what they were actually witnessing. The hyperspace radar looked like there were hundreds of ships all around them, maybe even thousands. Or more precisely, there were countless ships towards the negative Y, but few on their route to Alpha Centauri. But still, they were surrounded.

“What the hell is this?” Zelnick demanded. “Who are they?”

“They are all moving in the same direction,” Dujardin observed, “towards the positive X.”

Gruber calculated that they had about ten minutes until the closest spoor would pull them to true space. He notified the captain.

“Shall we jump back to quasispace?” Samusenko suggested.

Indeed they could use the 10 fuel units for the jump again and try their luck at the next closest exit which, unfortunately, was in the middle of Ilwrath space.

“Let’s wait a while,” Zelnick said. “These ships are coming from the region where the Ilwrath are attacking the Pkunk. Danielle, does the speed of these spoors match that of either the Ilwrath or Pkunk ships?”

Dujardin observed for a while.

“A perfect match for the Pkunk,” she reported.

“The final migration,” Gruber guessed. “Captain, do you remember? The Pkunk claimed they were making preparations for some kind of a *Final Migration*, which would solve all their problems. Maybe we are now in the middle of that?”

Zelnick looked like he remembered.

“Let’s ask what they are doing,” he decided. “Samusenko, fly us towards that nearest spoor.”

A few minutes later they were so close to the spoor that both parties were pulled to true space. There they immediately saw that they had indeed encountered the Pkunk.

*“Ah, you are the human everybody is talking about!”* the Pkunk said. *“You have caught us at the second most important event in our history. Congratulations! No, wait... I think this is after all the **third** most important event. But still, we congratulate you! No shame in third place!”*

“Greetings,” Zelnick formally said. “What is this important event? What are you doing? Where are you going?”

*“Since you are a perceptive individual, you might have noticed that we, the Pkunk, are physiologically similar to the Yehat.”*

Gruber hadn’t noticed, but then again, he wasn’t said to be the perceptive one. Sure, the Pkunk and the Yehat were both avian, but that seemed to be the extent of the similarities.

*“This relationship is not a coincidence,” the Pkunk continued, “for indeed in the Harmonic Realm of Creation, there is no coincidence. To be more specific, we are an off-shoot of the Yehat species – a peaceful, empathetic off-shoot – which fractured from the Yehat race early in its space age. You see, we create peace, tranquility and harmony whereas the Yehat are birds of prey who live in a constant balance of terror with their fellow creatures.”*

Zelnick turned to Gruber.

“She lost me there,” he whispered. “Did she answer any of my questions?”

Before Gruber could reply, the Pkunk continued.

*“We have decided that our Yehat siblings are in need of our love and good counsel. We have waited far too long to return home and heal the wound that has kept our race apart these many centuries. When we arrive in the Serpentis constellation, we will greet our Yehat brethren with warm hugs of affection which I am sure shall be returned in kind.”*

“So you, er...” Zelnick hesitated. “You’re migrating to Yehat space, am I right?”

“Yes we are!” the Pkunk joyously replied. “And by ‘we’ I mean all of us.”

“And by ‘all of you’ you mean... your entire race?” Zelnick wanted to clarify.

*“You are most correct!”*

“What about the Ilwrath?” Zelnick asked. “Won’t they invade your home system?”

The Pkunk waved her wing as if to brush off the thought.

*“Nothing but material possessions, captain,” she confidently replied. “We Pkunk, having risen to the ninety-ninth psychic plane, plus a tad, are far beyond trapping our spiritual needs with crude matter.”*

Zelnick scratched his head.

“Well, if you say so,” he semi-agreed. “Good luck then, I guess.”

“*Thank you and you too,*” the Pkunk replied. “*Farewell.*”

Zelnick cut the transmission and turned to Gruber.

“Contact our Pkunk pilots,” he ordered.

The next day they arrived at Alpha Centauri, sold the coordinates of the rainbow world at Gamma Aquarii for 500 credits and filled their fuel tanks. Since they now had an abundance of credits and the Vindicator’s module slots were almost full, they decided to finally buy the last piece of technology the Melnorme had for sale – the designs for a double-capacity fuel tank module. All topics of information they thought useful would have been unaffordable. In Gruber’s opinion it was unlikely that they could get anything more out of the Melnorme, other than fuel.

The Pkunk that were stationed on the Vindicator had agreed to stay and continue on the *holy quest* until the exciting end, whatever that was.

Two days later the Vindicator was back at the starbase. The first thing they did was to transfer the bomb to Dr. Fredrikson’s lab for testing. Gruber felt a great relief when the bomb left the Vindicator, even though he was certain that if the bomb accidentally went off, it wouldn’t matter whether it was at the starbase or on Mars. His relief didn’t last long though, since he himself went to the starbase on the next shuttle.

The shipyard got straight to work modifying the Vindicator’s fuel tanks to the new double capacity variant. After that operation the Vindicator could store enough fuel to take a tour around the Ur-Quan sphere of influence. A squadron of Utwig ships was also put in the production queue and repairs were started on the Seraph.

*Captain* Tanaka had been busy. Gruber didn’t count them himself, but he was told that there were over a hundred

Shofixti on the starbase already. A section of the living quarters had been dedicated to them, but it was evident that given the growth rate of their population, some other solution would be required and soon.

“One thing has been bugging me,” Zelnick said to Gruber as they were on their way towards Admiral Zex’s cell. “Why are we placing so much value on the Shofixti? I mean, it’s nice to see their race resurrected and all, and I hear they grow up really fast, but in terms of war... We don’t have the time to train them, do we?”

Zelnick raised a fair point in Gruber’s opinion, given that he probably didn’t know the most interesting facts about the Shofixti biology.

“You are half-right,” he answered. “Normally, following Star Control guidelines, it would take years to go through the training of a starship crewmember, not to mention the training of a fighter pilot. But the Shofixti are a special case.”

“How so?” Zelnick asked to keep Gruber talking.

“There are two reasons,” Gruber explained. “First, it only takes a month or so for the Shofixti to reach maturity. Even though some of us humans would consider them child soldiers, taking up arms in an early stage is part of their culture.”

They reached the elevator and Gruber set the dial to the alien containment area.

“Second,” Gruber continued, “the Shofixti are born with a certain set of talents – inherited from their male parent. If the male parent was, say, an excellent archer, all of the offspring would know how to use a bow efficiently without anyone ever teaching them. And now, luckily for us, Tanaka is the male parent of the entire first generation.”

Zelnick seemed impressed.

“So you’re saying we have a horde of Shofixti-babies who knew how to fly a starship before they knew how to walk?”

The elevator reached the cell block.

“That is exactly what I’m saying,” Gruber summed it up. “Their new civilization has to start learning other skills from scratch, though.”

They passed the cell of the Thraddash captive. It was empty. There was still a faint smell of cigar in the air. Perhaps the prisoner had been deemed to be of no further use and was disposed of. Gruber and Zelnick didn’t discuss the matter.

As they reached Zex’s cell, the admiral got up to greet them.

“Ah, my favorite visitors,” Zex said. “How can I be of assistance?”

They had agreed to get right to the point.

“Tell us about the Yehat and the Pkunk,” Zelnick requested.

Zex leaned against the bars.

“Well, I know the Yehat pretty well,” the admiral began, “but I have never met the Pkunk. I have only seen them on a few scout reports – when some of their ships had entered Yehat space.”

“What did the reports say?” Zelnick inquired.

“That the Yehat destroyed them...” Zex continued, “...opened fire on sight.”

Gruber wasn’t too happy about this report and made little effort to hide it.

“They might have just been unlucky, though,” Zex suddenly said, probably to cheer up the humans.

“What makes you say that?” Zelnick asked.

Zex leaned more towards Zelnick.

“The Yehat aren’t as unified as you humans or us Vux. Their people are organized into many different *clans*, with

many different cultures. If one clan opens fire on the Pkunk on sight, it doesn't mean that all clans do."

Gruber of course knew this, but he also knew that Zelnick didn't.

"The Yehat have a history of bloody clan wars," Gruber explained. "The wars came to an end when a single queen was able to unite the clans. But that still doesn't mean that they have to like each other."

"And indeed they don't," Zex contributed. "Every clan mostly keeps to themselves as much as possible. And according to my little birds, there is quite a lot of dissatisfaction with the queen nowadays."

"So how long has that queen reigned?" Zelnick asked.

Gruber and Zex quickly exchanged looks.

"There have been many queens," Zex said.

"Supposedly the first queen came before their space age," Gruber remembered. "But the Yehat claimed that their current queen – or the queen that they had 20 years ago – was descendant of that *original* queen."

"Veep-Neep is her name, by the way," Zex specified. "The current queen that is. It's the same one that surrendered to the Ur-Quan at the end of the Great War. And I know from reliable sources that many clans considered that act highly shameful. Their shame was then magnified to the extreme by the courageous last stand of the Shofixti... On that note, it would be highly interesting to see what the Yehat would do if you showed them that the Shofixti have been 'reborn'."

Again Gruber had to snap out of trusting Zex so completely. But still, there was much promise in those words. If there was any chance of getting the Yehat back to the alliance, it was worth a shot. Gruber checked his communicator to see if *Captain* Tanaka was available.

He wasn't. According to the not-available-message, he had been out of range for several days now.

Incidentally, Gruber's communicator beeped just then, indicating an incoming call. The caller was Leonov from the control room. Gruber answered the call.

"*The Sa-Matra has been found,*" Leonov announced the huge piece of news like it was the score of a minor-league football game. "*Zoq-Fot-Pik scouts located it from Delta Crateris. There's a briefing in two hours.*"

Since Gruber was unprepared for an announcement of this magnitude, he hadn't made any effort to prevent Zex from hearing it.

"Ah, so you **do** know about the Sa-Matra," Zex remarked.

Gruber thanked Leonov for the information, and also thanked him for sharing the information with their prisoner. Then he closed the connection, hoping that Leonov would feel guilty.

"What do **you** know about the Sa-Matra?" Zelnick asked Zex.

The admiral let go of the bars and took a step back.

"You know, I'd really prefer to get out of this cell," Zex declared.

Zelnick looked at Gruber in a *you-handle-this-situation* kind of way.

"You must understand that we cannot let you leave," Gruber said.

"Oh, by no means," Zex replied, sounding sincere again. "I have nothing to gain by escaping as I have nowhere to go. I don't want to leave this base, I just want out of this cell."

Zex appeared disturbingly harmless.

"So you're saying that you spill the beans on the Sa-Matra only if we promote you from prisoner to guest?" Gruber summed up the deal.

Zex leaned towards Gruber.

"That's a fine way of putting it," the admiral commended him. "I don't want to sound mean, but I've been very co-

operative these past weeks and I'm still stuck in this tiny cell."

Zex looked at Zelnick.

"Our **relationship** cannot go further unless you trust me," Zex continued.

"Trust you?" Gruber said. "You have already betrayed us once. Why should we trust you now?"

Zex looked back at Gruber.

"When you suddenly came to my home, my hand was forced," the admiral replied. "But I understand that you are unable to see the events from my point of view."

"So what is your point of view?" Zelnick asked to join the conversation, which seemed to cheer Zex up.

"I had a plan," Zex began, "a plan that would have enabled me to take over the High Council in a matter of years. However, that plan flew straight out of the window when you unexpectedly showed up. At that point I saw only two possible options: Either I would run away from my political enemies, or I would let myself be captured by the enemies of my political enemies."

Zelnick nodded.

"And you chose us," he said.

Zex nodded.

"The enemy of my enemy is my friend," Zex replied. "And besides... I like you."

Zelnick blushed.

"But what do you have to gain from all this?" Gruber asked. "How would it help you if we defeated the Hierarchy?"

Zex sighed.

"It wouldn't, if I'm stuck in this cell," the admiral explained. "I assume that if you defeat the Ur-Quan, my people will surrender. You would then probably impose some sanctions for the former battle thralls. When that happens, I plan to be on your good side and negotiate a very

favorable deal for the Vux. By taking advantage of that publicity, it would be easy for me to take down the current High Council and set our people free from their bigoted tyranny.”

Gruber and Zelnick took a moment to take in the explanation. Zex sounded extremely convincing... again.

“I’m sure we would rather see you as the ruler of the Vux,” Zelnick bought it.

Gruber decided to remain silent since he recognized Zex had gotten the better of him again.

“We’ll discuss your release in the next Command Council’s meeting,” Zelnick continued.

The aforementioned meeting began two hours later. The only thing on their agenda was supposed to be the Sa-Matra. This was also the first formal meeting where the Utwig and the Supox were present. The Shofixti were not represented this time.

The Zoq-Fot-Pik had sent numerous scouts deep into Ur-Quan space, but none had returned. However, one of the scouts had managed to send a short burst transmission that went as follows:

*Target found at Mrragh-ahah, Zeg-paue, Jingle-Yoyo.*

According to the Zoq-Fot-Pik emissaries, in the standard coordinate system that meant 620.0 : 593.5, which points to Delta Crateris.

There was also one image included in the transmission. It was a photo, taken from the edge of the star system, zoomed in on one of the planets. The image wasn’t sharp, but it was enough to reach two important conclusions: First, there was something huge in orbit. Second, it was guarded by a ridiculously large fleet. The photo was still being analyzed, but even with a quick glance one could say that there were at least a hundred ships – and that was only the ones visible on that one hazy image.

“This confirms our earlier suspicions,” Hayes began. “Obviously we can’t just march in there and drop the bomb at their doorstep. We need a diversion.”

“We need the Dnyarri,” Gruber added.

“And we need more intel,” Trent finished.

Zelnick nodded with everyone else.

“Perhaps the crystal ones could tell us more,” the Zoq said.

“Absolutely,” Trent agreed, “and about the bomb as well. They specifically said that we should send all data we have on the bomb to them if we ever acquire it.”

“They might even know something about the Dnyarri,” Gruber stuck to his subject.

It seemed like the alliance had a purpose again.

“All of you are right,” Hayes wrapped it up. “The Vindicator should travel to Procyon as soon as possible and discuss everything with the Chenjesu. Meanwhile, we need to send more scouts to Delta Crateris.”

“Unfortunately we don’t have much to spare anymore,” the Zoq said.

“Yeah, we sacrificed all of our best scouts already,” the Pik continued.

Gruber also felt that the Zoq-Fot-Pik had done their part on this matter already.

“I’m sure we can be of assistance,” one of the Arilou representatives said.

“As can we,” the Utwig representative followed. “Our forces are battling the Kohr-Ah as we speak. I’m sure that the Ultron guides them to find some additional information on this Sa-Matra.”

“Excellent,” Hayes commented. “That settles our main agenda. Is there anything else?”

Zelnick hesitated for a while before standing up.

“There is,” he began. “About our prisoner, Admiral Zex...”

After the meeting Gruber and Zelnick made their way back to the containment area. The council had agreed that if Zex gave the alliance crucial information on the Sa-Matra, Zex could be let out of the cell. The admiral would still be confined to the starbase, though.

Gruber had also asked about Tanaka's whereabouts. Hayes was able to tell him that after Tanaka had succeeded in his ultimate duty, he wanted to finish his old mission and report to the Yehat. There was no reason to deny that to him, so he had taken his old ship and set out towards Yehat space. It seemed likely that he would never be heard from again.

Zex got up and took hold of the bars as Gruber and Zelnick approached. Zelnick explained the deal to Zex and beckoned the admiral to start talking.

Zex got straight to the point:

"As I'm sure you know, there is only one Ur-Quan commanding each Dreadnought. All of their crew consists of their slaves, such as us, the Vux. The Sa-Matra is different, though. I know that the Sa-Matra is crewed entirely by the Ur-Quan – probably because they consider it a holy artifact. Anyway, I personally witnessed the Sa-Matra in action at the end of the Great War. So great was its power that, even though it was used against my enemies, I considered it unfair."

Gruber made sure he was recording all this.

"Describe its capabilities," he instructed.

"Of course," Zex complied. "I saw it fire blasts of fusion energy that resembled the Dreadnought's shots in composition, but their speed and mass were both much greater. And what's more, they homed in on their targets. I doubt even your ship could evade them. Small fighters would have a much better chance at that, but then again, no such enemy fighters ever got even remotely close to the

Sa-Matra, so I don't know if it has some other form of defense against them.”

“Go on,” Gruber urged.

“I saw the Sa-Matra destroy targets several light-minutes away,” Zex continued. “It also didn't seem like it would run out of ammo or combat batteries any time soon. I suspect it can keep on firing for hours.”

“What about the rate of fire?” Zelnick asked.

“Hmm...” Zex tried to recall. “I believe there was a lag of about a minute or so between shots.”

Gruber imagined the devastation the Sa-Matra could do before its enemies could even see it.

“Does it have a weak spot?” he asked.

“None that I know of,” Zex answered. “I can say for sure though that no conventional weapon could penetrate its armor. You need to come up with something else... something sneaky... And in my experience, that's what you humans do best.”

Zex's praise made Gruber feel proud.

“Is there anything else?” he checked.

Zex was eyeing the lock of the door to the cage.

“I can't think of anything else right now,” Zex replied. “I'll tell you what... If you let me out now and show me around this base, I will tell you where the Ur-Quan stashed all the Syreen ships.”

This proposal came as a pleasant surprise, especially since Gruber was about to let Zex out anyway.

“That sounds like a deal,” he said and opened the door.

## CHAPTER 21

# ZOMBIE BLOBBIES

**January 29<sup>th</sup> 2156, Beta Orionis, 197.8 : 596.8**

*We're about to activate our dead man's brake and approach the Umgah homeworld. Since this is an extremely risky mission, I think it would be appropriate to recap some of the interesting things that we have learned in the past few weeks... Just in case we die here... in which case nobody would ever get to read this log, so why am I doing it?*

*So... Our new friend, Admiral Zex, claimed that there are dozens of Syreen Penetrator starships hidden in a huge underground vault at the moon of the first planet in Epsilon Camelopardalis, 593.7 : 393.7. It fits the description the Syreen gave us – a red-or-orange star no further than 200 units from Betelgeuse. Now that we know the Mycon are responsible for the destruction of the Syreen home planet, the Syreen might be eager to get their hands on their ships. I can't wait to tell them.*

*Speaking of Zex, Lydia told me that she spends a lot of time with the admiral and that they get along really well. I don't know what to think about that. Hayes assured me that he is constantly keeping an eye on Zex, but I fear that if Zex wanted to, Zex could outsmart us.*

*We had a short, but meaningful discussion with the Chenjesu and the Mmrrnmhrm. They were very interested and knowledgeable regarding the bomb. Unfortunately they had some bad news though... According to their*

*calculations, even this frightening bomb we have is not enough to destroy the Sa-Matra, but, they claimed they could amplify it to make it equal to the task. Unfortunately – once again – they would have to be on the same side of the slave shield as the bomb to do that. If we trust their word on this, it seems that we must acquire the solar amplifier the Mycon supposedly have and boost the hybridization process of the Chenjesu and the Mmrnmhrm, even though they are not too excited about the idea.*

*Surprisingly they also knew about the Dnyarri and warned us that the Dnyarri are the embodiment of evil – at least according to legend. They also knew that the Dnyarri indeed possess strong mental powers that could help us against the Ur-Quan and the Kohr-Ah... if we can find a way to tame the Dnyarri's power.*

*Now that the Pkunk have left their home, we can only speculate what the Ilwrath are going to do. They have recently been increasingly active near Sol and therefore the defenses of Sol are being fortified, which needlessly drains our resources. If we could find a way to get rid of the Ilwrath, it would help us a great deal.*

*On a lighter note, we just received word from the starbase that the Shofixti population has quadrupled since we left. We must hurry in finding a place for them. The only habitable and accessible planet we know of right now is the former Androsynth homeworld, so we're planning to send the Shofixti there on a colonization mission soon.*

“Let's go through this one last time,” Zelnick decided before pushing a big red button. “Gruber, would you mind?”

“Not at all, captain,” Gruber replied. “Once the *dead man's switch* is active, we must push this button once every minute, or the Vindicator will automatically perform an

emergency warp and fly to Sol on autopilot. Captain van Rijn has in her possession a remote trigger for the switch, which she can use if she has a reason to believe that we here are being manipulated to keep pushing the button. The switch will be activated when we push this button for the first time. Deactivating it will require the captain, myself, and Mr. Skeates to input a code into the system – a personal code known only to us.”

Zelnick seemed satisfied with the setup.

“We’re not taking any chances with the Dnyarri,” he addressed the officers on the bridge. “Our mind shield appears strong, but obviously we can’t be sure without testing it. And we can’t test it without approaching the Dnyarri. And we probably can’t approach the Dnyarri without kicking a few ass-equivalents in the process.”

The captain got a few chuckles.

“Knowing what happened to the Thraddash, we have to be extra careful. That’s why we have this complicated insurance scheme – this *dead man’s brake*.”

Everyone seemed ready.

“Alright then, Mr. Samusenko, take us to the first planet,” Zelnick ordered and pushed the button.

It was a pain to fly several hours in true space, having to push the damn switch every minute. After 34 minutes\* Zelnick was ready to crack and asked if they should disable the switch entirely after all. Gruber was able to motivate him by explaining that trains of the 20<sup>th</sup> century all had a similar switch the driver had to keep on pressing. After an additional 81 minutes Zelnick suggested that they would use duct tape or some other Boy Scout solution to make the button stay pressed. This time Gruber motivated him by explaining that many train drivers had done something of the sort back in

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\* Gruber took time

the day and – if caught – had received severe punishments. Of course he didn't actually know this, but it made a good story.

One lonely Umgah ship happened to be on their path. It didn't react to their presence. It was just sending out a constant signal with a single message:

*“Nothing. Happen. Very. Boring. Depart. Never. Return. Funny. Ha. Ha. Ha.”*

They ignored the message and continued.

Finally they reached the orbit of the first planet. There were Umgah ships here and there, but their positioning and movements appeared strange – as if they were randomly moving around the entire star system. Zelnick and Gruber had agreed that they wouldn't try to contact any of the ships yet. Instead, now that they were at the Umgah home planet, Zelnick ordered the communications officer to send an invitation to chat on the common hyperwave frequency, directed at the surface.

“We're getting a response now,” Ozerova soon reported. “The signal is coming from the surface. Establishing connection... Ready.”

An image of the Ur-Quan's talking pet – a Dnyarri – appeared on screen.

*“What do you want?”* the Dnyarri asked.

So far it was going better than they had expected. Now they didn't have to search for the Dnyarri or anything.

“We come in peace,” Zelnick announced. “We want to talk about overthrowing the Ur-Quan Hierarchy.”

The Dnyarri appeared pleased to hear this.

*“Good idea!”* it commented. *“May I just say I'm behind you 100 percent! But unfortunately the Umgah are all too busy to come to the hyperwave caster right now so, er... Come back later... **Much** later.”*

The other ships in the Vindicator's fleet were positioned as close to the Vindicator as possible, since they didn't have any factual data on the range of the Taalo mind shield.

"It's **you** we want to talk with, not the Umgah," Zelnick explained. "We know of your crash at Alpha Pavonis. We know what you are, Dnyarri. Let's get to the point. We—"

"*Argh!*" the Dnyarri interrupted him. "*Why didn't you just leave when I gave you the chance? I cannot let you interfere with my plan, not when I'm so close...*"

Suddenly Gruber felt a strange and powerful unpleasant feeling. As if a strong, cold wind gushed inside his head.

"*Aiee!*" the Dnyarri screamed. "*I cannot compel you; your mind is closed to me! What the hell are you aliens, descendants of the Taalo?*"

"We're—" Zelnick tried, but the Dnyarri cut him short again.

"*Never mind, I'll just resort to more primitive measures.*"

The screen went blank.

"They cut the transmission," Ozerova announced.

"Captain, all the Umgah ships have now set course towards us," Dujardin reported.

"Of course," Zelnick commented. "Well, we're prepared for this, aren't we?"

Zelnick then opened a frequency to all the other ships in their fleet.

"Let 'em have it," he ordered.

They had assumed that their relatively small fleet could take down a vast number of Umgah Drone vessels without exposing themselves to any great danger. However they had not expected the Umgah ships to move as if piloted by novices. It wasn't even a battle. It was a slaughterhouse.

It didn't take long until the enemy ships stopped approaching them.

“We’re being hailed from the surface,” Ozerova reported and Zelnick gave her permission to answer the call.

*“Well, hello there, **friendly** starship captain,” the Dnyarri began. “You will never believe this, but somehow, when that Ur-Quan Dreadnought crashed, the injuries I suffered triggered some kind of a... personality transformation. I became evil and spiteful! Cruel and nasty! Whimsically unpleasant!”*

There was no point in interrupting the alien now. It looked like this was turning out to be quite the apology.

*“But now I’m cured! I don’t know exactly how, but when you were fighting with the Umgah, a chunk of ceiling fell upon my head and gave me quite a whack! Ouchy-oochy... It still hurts...”*

The Dnyarri was as convincing as Fwiffo had been in a similar situation.

*“When I awoke, the universe had ceased to be the dark and hostile place I previously thought it to be. Instead, I was overwhelmed, yes, even awed by the beauty and perfection of it all! I also discovered that I had completely lost those wicked ‘temporary psychic powers’. I can now look forward to a new life, filled with happiness, butterflies and goodwill for all!*

*Your job is done, oh noble starship captain. You have saved me! Thank you, thank you, thank you! Now you can safely turn off your psychic protection.”*

“You’re right,” Zelnick smiled at the creature. “I will never believe that.”

The Dnyarri gave Zelnick a hostile look.

*“Okay, okay, so I was lying,” it admitted. “Boy, are you a **pain**, you know that? So what exactly was it that you wanted? My life?”*

Zelnick stood up.

“We represent the New Alliance of Free Stars,” he proclaimed. “We are going to strike a fatal blow to the Ur-Quan and we need your help to do that.”

The Dnyarri seemed to cheer up.

“Bravo,” it commended Zelnick. *“It appears our goals are aligned. I too wish to see the Ur-Quan beaten, humiliated and destroyed. Now that you demolished my own plan, I have no choice but to go with yours. What kind of an arrangement did you have in mind?”*

“You will come aboard our ship,” Zelnick began. “When the time comes, you will use your powers to confuse the Ur-Quan to our advantage. After that you are free to do as you please. But any tricks and you’ll be sucking vacuum.”

There was a strange smile-like expression on the Dnyarri’s face.

*“No tricks, Captain Zelnick, \*hehheh\* no tricks,”* it assured. *“I’m on your side now. If you don’t mind, for my own protection I’d prefer to keep the Umgah under my control until I’m aboard your ship.”*

The Dnyarri boarded the Vindicator in a small craft that appeared to be specifically designed for transporting small cargo between the surface and orbit at a planet with an atmosphere. The creature was stashed in the cargo hold in a sealed compartment with an airlock. The arrangement was made in mutual understanding – the Vindicator’s crew wouldn’t bother the Dnyarri and the Dnyarri wouldn’t bother them.

Soon the Dnyarri’s effect on the Umgah seemed to wear off as the movement of their ships started to make sense. Not long afterwards, the Vindicator received a transmission from the surface.

*“All hail savior!”* an Umgah declared. *“The killer of the wicked Dnyarri in our presence! Hail!”*

Gruber had almost forgotten how weird the Umgah really looked. Their purple bodies could best be described as ‘random’. If you gave a chunk of wet clay to a small child and then attached any amount of eyes, mouths and tentacles to it\*, the result would be an Umgah.

“Uh, yeah, that’s us,” Zelnick lied. “It’s good to see you’re okay... I think.”

*“Hail! Hail! Hail!”* the Umgah kept on chanting, which made Gruber feel uncomfortable. *“We must reward superior hero! But what do we have to give? We are simple blobbies. We Umgah have nothing but vast amounts of biological skills and data.”*

“Well...” Zelnick began, but the Umgah interrupted him.

*“Have it! Have it! Genetic modification! Yes, it perfect gift! Listen, human Earthling! We add some extra eyes! A few tentacles! Other organs of whatever size and shape you desire!”*

“Eh, thanks,” Zelnick tried to honor the proposed gift. “I’d rather take the biological data, if you don’t mind.”

The Umgah seemed extremely disappointed.

*“Just plain raw biological data?”* it said in disbelief. *“What you do with it? Oh, well, you hero. Whatever you want, you get.”*

After just a few seconds the communications officer reported that the Umgah were trying to send a very large data package. Zelnick approved the transmission and soon the Vindicator’s data banks were filled with – hopefully – biological data.

“I’m sure the Melnorme and Mr. Rigby will be very interested in this,” Zelnick said to Gruber. “Have the man go through this data.”

Gruber relayed the orders to Rigby.

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\* the clay, not the child

“Another thing,” Zelnick said to the Umgah. “We heard you tricked the Ilwrath into attacking the Pkunk.”

The Umgah laughed.

*“Har! Har! Har! That long time ago! What an old joke. Wait! That makes it even funnier! The Pkunk must be extinct! Har! Har! Har!”*

“Er, yes... ha-ha...” Zelnick forced a laugh. “Could you tell us how you pulled that off?”

*“Oh, that easy,”* the Umgah replied. *“We use this powerful hyperwave caster at outskirts of Ilwrath home system. We transmit on channel 44, giving commands as Dogar and Kazon.”*

“Could you undo it?” Zelnick asked. “The Ilwrath are beginning to be a pain in our asses as well.”

The Umgah suddenly showed its teeth – on all four of its mouths.

*“Undo joke? UNDO JOKE? Oh no, human hero make fatal mistake!*

...

*Har! Har! Har! Good joke, eh? Scared you! No, cannot undo joke. Spoil-sport Spathi stole our super cool hyperwave caster. The Ilwrath out of control and can't do anything about it! Har! Har! Har!”*

Gruber felt uncomfortable with this conversation and obviously so did Zelnick.

“That’s... funny,” Zelnick humored the alien. “We’ll just be going then, unless, of course, you have some big Hierarchy secrets to tell us.”

Now the Umgah seemed very cooperative.

*“Sure, we’ll tell our secrets,”* it assured. *“Now let me see... What **are** secrets? Oh yes!... remember! It about Mycons! You see, Mycons only other race we know of that have same kind of biotechnical skills as Umgah. But amazing thing, they do all with their own bodies, don’t need tools. They just **think** genetic modification, and it happen!”*

“That’s incredible,” Zelnick commented. “I mean... no, it’s not... It doesn’t make any sense.”

“Agree!” the Umgah said. *“We found that pretty hard to understand too, so when nobody looking, we clonk one on head, bring it back here and slice it up for detailed study. And what we find... Those guys not product of any natural evolutionary process. They constructs! They some kind of multi-purpose biological tool. We don’t know who made them or for what purpose, but they way beyond anything we ever heard of. We not figure out much more before tissue samples all gross, so guess that pretty much all of big secret.*

...

*Oh... do us favor? Please not tell anybody about clonking Mycon. It kind of against Ur-Quan laws, and not want get Mycon mad at us.”*

“I promise,” Zelnick convincingly said.

Neither of them said anything for a short while.

“Say...” Zelnick then began, “how about joining the New Alliance of Free Stars?”

“*Har! Har!*” the Umgah laughed again. *“No. Good joke. You are funny human, even with your appearance.”*

Zelnick seemed unshaken from this response.

“Come on, why not?” he insisted.

“*We in your debt, great hero,*” the Umgah explained. *“But already we tired of worship. If we were friends, every day we would say ‘Hail great hero!’ That boring. If we were enemies... Great Enemies... That funny. We prefer funny.”*

“Huh? Excuse me?” Zelnick said.

“*Har! Har! Har! To arms! It our Great Enemy! Attack!*”

And then the Umgah cut the transmission.

“They’re not really attacking us, are they, Danielle?” Zelnick wistfully checked with the radar operator.

“Enemy ships all around as are getting into formation,” Dujardin reported.

Zelnick hit the arm rest of his chair with his fist.

“Those ungrateful sons of bitches,” he cursed. “Patch me through to the Dnyarri.”

There was a monitor at the Dnyarri’s compartment. Soon the image of the creature was displayed on screen.

*“I want to complain,”* the Dnyarri said right off the bat.

“I don’t care,” Zelnick brushed the creature off. “Can you employ your powers against the Umgah for a short while again? Those backstabbing blobbies turned on us.”

The Dnyarri rolled its eyes.

*“Hello? Hello, you idiotic creature,”* it replied. *“Why do you think I haven’t compelled each and every one of you already? And why do you think I have this TERRIBLE HEADACHE!”*

“We’re not turning off the mind shield, quit acting,” Zelnick called the possible bluff.

*“Fine, believe what you want,”* the Dnyarri said. *“But the fact remains that right now I cannot compel anyone any more than you can, so if you don’t have any more stupid questions, keep quiet and let me sleep.”*

Zelnick cut the signal.

“Asshole,” he declared.

Gruber couldn’t remember seeing the captain this angry before. Right then Captain van Rijn opened up a link to the Vindicator.

*“Shall we run or fight?”* she asked.

Zelnick sighed and asked for Gruber’s opinion.

“We have nothing to gain by fighting here,” Gruber counseled.

Zelnick nodded.

“Mr. Samusenko, start the emergency warp,” he ordered.

While the emergency warp unit was charging, the rest of the Vindicator’s fleet gave cover fire to keep the enemy at bay. Their fleet was strong enough to pull that off without any great difficulty. It would have taken a few additional minutes for the Umgah to get into more dangerous positions.

When the emergency warp was ready, the Vindicator pulled all of its escort ships along with it into hyperspace.

Two weeks later they entered the vortex leading to Alpha Tauri, the Ilwrath home system, at 022.9 : 366.6. They had not seen any Ilwrath ships on the radar, which was consistent with their current calculated sphere of influence. Apparently the Ilwrath had mobilized their entire fleet to attack the Pkunk and left the hyperspace region near their home system unpatrolled.

The Vindicator had made a short stop at Gamma Normae along the way to contact the starbase via ansible. They had agreed that trying to replicate the Umgah trick was worth the shot. After all, it was likely that the powerful hyperwave caster they had was the same one the Umgah had used. If they were successful in imitating the Ilwrath gods, they could order the Ilwrath to retreat from the vicinity of Sol – or maybe even commit mass-suicide.

The system looked peaceful. There were five planets orbiting a green dwarf star. There was every reason to believe, though, that the innermost planet was far from peaceful. The location of the Ilwrath homeworld was known already in the Great War because the Chenjesu had made contact with the Ilwrath before the arrival of the Ur-Quan.

“Here goes,” Zelnick said as he got ready to transmit. “Katja, set the hyperwave transmitter to channel 44.”

Zelnick and Gruber had had lots of time to prepare their speech. Since they didn’t know how the Umgah had acted and what kind of characters Dogar and Kazon were made to be, they had decided to keep their messages simple.

“You’re good to go, sir,” the communications officer reported.

Zelnick acted the part of Dogar and Gruber played the part of Kazon.

**“Ilwrath!”** Zelnick exclaimed in a deep and mysterious voice.

There was no benefit from changing one’s voice, as the translation computer chose the voice on its own. But if it helped Zelnick to get into character, there was no point in denying that from him.

“Heed these words!” Gruber joined in with an almost neutral voice, but not quite.

They waited for a response, which didn’t take long to come.

*“Attend!”* an Ilwrath frantically shouted. *“The Cruel Twins Of Pain And Death Have Returned To Instruct Us! Acolyte! Turn The Volume To Maximum Immediately!... Dogar And Kazon! What Can We, Your Humble And Devious Servants, Do For You?”*

A promising start, Gruber thought. He and Zelnick checked their script-tree from the branch where the Ilwrath swallowed the bait completely.

**“Our evil children,”** Zelnick began with the same silly voice. **“Leave this place!”**

**“Seek new prey!”** Gruber continued, noticing that he accidentally used the same kind of voice as the captain.

The Ilwrath made some clicking and clapping sounds.

*“Oh Mighty Dogar! Oh Mighty Kazon!”* they all worshipped. *“We Hear Your Words And Obey Your Divine And Cruel Insights. The Pkunk Are Unfit For Our Sacramental Tortures! We Relish The Prospect Of Killing Worthy Prey!*

...

*But Who Shall We Prey Upon Next? Who Shall Suffer Our Inspired Torment?”*

Zelnick pointed at the dialog branch where they went after the jackpot. Gruber nodded in agreement.

**“Towards the core!”** Zelnick began. **“For too long have you lived at the mercy of your masters!”**

**“No, that is not living,”** Gruber continued, completely engulfed in character. **“That is someone letting you live.”** Strange screams could be heard from the Ilwrath.

*“Evil Dogar! Cruel Kazon!”* they shouted. *“We Pray Thee Gods, Forgive Us For Our Worthlessness!”*

**“It is time to break those chains!”** Zelnick declared like someone finishing up an emotional political speech.

**“Rise up!”** Gruber followed. **“Follow your intuition! Kill gloriously in our name!”**

Now the Ilwrath were cheering.

*“From The Chambers Of Pain We Hear Your Words, Cruel And Evil Lords Of Darkness,”* the Ilwrath speaker said. *“And As Your Voice Crackles Out Of The Speaker Boxes, It Sends Thrills Across Our Carapaces. Our Hairy Quills All Stand Erect And We Pant And Wheeze With Holy Fervor!”*

*“Kill! Kill! Kill!”* the rest of the crowd chanted.

*“Your Divine Guidance Has Shown Us The Way,”* the speaker continued. *“The Ur-Quan Hierarchy Is No Longer Off-Limits! Those Loathsome Umgah Once Mentioned A Race Near Their Region Of Space And They Shall Be Our Next Prey. The Thraddash! We Will Go And Kill All Of Them! This We Shall Do In Your Names!”*

*“Evil Dogar!”* the crowd cheered. *“Hideous Kazon!”*

Gruber thought that the mission was accomplished and that they should try to end the conversation...

...Unfortunately Zelnick’s new power over the Ilwrath seemed to have gone to his head.

**“We require changes!”** the captain practically shouted.

This seemed to excite the Ilwrath even more.

*“Your Will Is Our Inspiration! What Shall We Do?”*

Gruber tried to whisper to Zelnick to ask what the hell the man was doing, but he was unsuccessful.

**“You are no longer the Ilwrath,”** Zelnick began while gathering attention for his next line. **“YOU ARE NOW THE DILL-RATS!”**

Gruber hastily forged a (figurative) wire model which clearly indicated that Zelnick should stop talking immediately.

*“We, The Dill-Rats, Bow And Scrape Off Our Appendages In Your Honor, Mighty Dogar And Kazon!”*

Gruber figuratively rubbed the figurative model in Zelnick’s face, bringing the captain to his senses. Gruber then decided to take initiative.

**“We return now to the fetid darkness,”** he informed the ~~Ilwrath~~ Dill-Rats. **“Obey our commands!”**

The cheering quieted down somewhat.

*“Farewell, Oh Great Gods Of Evil And Darkness. We Are Awed By Your Malevolent Presence, And Swear Unto You To Commit Even More Vile And Treacherous Deeds Tomorrow Than We Did Today!”*

Gruber took the liberty of cutting the transmission and giving the captain a disapproving look. Zelnick at least seemed to be ashamed.

“Let’s get out of here,” the captain commanded. “Inform the starbase and set course for Sol.”

## CHAPTER 22

# THE CAMELOPARDALIAN

February 18<sup>th</sup> 2156, Betelgeuse, 412.5 : 377.0

*We're close. And I don't mean close to the warm bodies of the Syreen, even though we **are** close to them as well. I mean we are close to being ready for the final push. There are just a few more things to take care of. And then... this war might come to an end – one way or the other. I'd prefer the other.*

*Someone pointed out that today it has been exactly one year since the Vindicator arrived at the starbase for the first time. Time sure flies, huh? They say that happens when you're having fun. I remember having fun once... it was awful.*

*...Jokes aside, we have been able to confirm that the entire Ilwrath armada is on its way to the Draconis constellation. Even though the Thraddash were ultimately a quite sympathetic race and posed only a small threat, we have every right and reason to hope that the Ilwrath and the Thraddash wipe each other out. At the very least, they should keep each other busy while we go to war with both of the Ur-Quan sub-species.*

*The Dnyarri has been pretty passive these past three weeks. While I'm glad that the mind shield works, we have to come up with a means for the Dnyarri to use its powers against the Ur-Quan when the time comes. I don't trust the Dnyarri enough to disable our shield, even for a few*

*seconds, so we'll probably have to get the creature off the Vindicator to do its thing.*

*So why have we come to Betelgeuse? Here's the deal: We will inform the Syreen about the whereabouts of their ships and, with all the dirt we have on the Mycon now, we let them know that it was the Mycon that destroyed their original home planet, not a natural disaster. Of course we cannot be absolutely sure that it was the Mycon, but it fits the big picture. If we have to, we can confirm it with the Melnorme and I'll be damned if there isn't any proof of Mycon activity on the surface of Syra.*

*Ultimately we need to get the Mycon colonization fleet on the move. When they reach their destination, the alliance will be waiting for them there. Meanwhile, the Vindicator will go to Beta Brahe and steal the solar manipulator – assuming they haven't moved it. So now the real question that remains is... Where do we set up the trap and how do we lure the Mycon there?*

Zelnick claimed that before going down to business he had some personal stuff to take care of with the Syreen Starbase Commander Talana. Gruber and the rest of the visiting team didn't mind spending some off-time with their hostesses, so there were no complaints. Surely business could wait.

Without getting into too much detail, when Zelnick finally returned with Talana (and with a stupid grin on his face), all the men were brisk and ready for anything.

“Now then,” Commander Talana began as all the high-ranking Syreen officials and the humans were present, “what was this important piece of information you wanted to tell us?”

Gruber took care of all the talking. He told the Syreen about the stashed Penetrator starships and the theory on what happened to Syra, the Syreen home planet. Judging by the

reactions of the Syreen, their late home world was a touchy subject. Once it had sunken into them that the Mycon were actually responsible for their homelessness, things got a little emotional. A lesser man would have been glad that pleasure was taken care of before business. Gruber considered himself a greater man, though, so he decisively thought about nothing but ocean until things had calmed down a bit.

“The Mycon will pay,” Talana summed up the thoughts of her people. “Oh, they are so going to pay.”

“I take it you want us to transport a team of your captains to Epsilon Camelopardalis then?” Gruber checked.

Talana nodded with a scary amount of determination in her eyes. In Gruber’s opinion women with too much determination were dangerous – especially if they had psychic powers. He wouldn’t want to disagree about anything with Talana now.

They agreed – or rather, Talana decided – that the Vindicator would leave as soon as the Syreen captains and a bunch of equipment was on board. While they were away, Talana would come up with details about the trap they were going to set up.

While there was lots of scenic beauty at the Syreen starbase, Gruber was relieved when he set foot on the Vindicator again. He hadn’t seen the Syreen in such a state of mind before and he didn’t know how to handle that. He hadn’t discussed it with the captain yet, but he got the impression that Zelnick agreed with him.

But at least everything was so far going as planned. There were a few dozen strong-minded Syreen officers making themselves at home at the crew pod in module slot 11, which had more empty space than the one at module slot 4. The Vindicator suddenly had a majority of females on board, which was quite rare.

It was common knowledge that only females of the Syreen had the psychic ability they used in combat to distract their enemies. It was on another level than the power of the Dnyarri, though. The Syreen had to be very close to the enemy ship for their power to work and even then they could only make the enemy forget what they were doing – not control their minds. And currently, with the mind shield active, they couldn't do that either. Instead, all of them complained they had a headache.

Luckily there was a quasispace exit portal only one day away from Epsilon Camelopardalis, so the trip wouldn't take too long. Also, they had little risk of being spotted by the Ur-Quan while flying through their patrolled region of space. Of course they didn't know what kind of a vault was waiting for them, not to mention if the information was even reliable. If the place would turn out to be too heavily fortified they would simply retreat and think of something else. However, it was also likely that there were no guards there. The Camelopardalis constellation was on the edge of the Ur-Quan sphere of influence and if the Ur-Quan Kzer-Za were being pushed hard by the Kohr-Ah, they probably had concentrated their forces near the Crateris constellation where the Sa-Matra was. And who would they guard the ships from? Only the Syreen could fly them, and they were supposed to be stranded on Betelgeuse.

The Syreen were all invited to the bridge to see the Vindicator make the transition to quasispace. Most of them were in awe, but some seemed a bit frightened. Gruber was of course ready to comfort ladies in distress, but there was unfortunately no need for that.

Utilizing quasispace the Vindicator and its fleet arrived at Epsilon Camelopardalis in two days. Hierarchy presence was not detected. There were only two planets in the system

and according to Admiral Zex, the Syreen ships were stashed on the moon of the first planet.

It took them roughly ten hours to reach the first planet, whose orbit pretty much resembled that of Mars. Unlike Mars though, this planet appeared green when viewed from afar. The color wasn't caused by plant-life, though. A quick analysis of the planet revealed that the cause was solid chlorine, which covered the entire surface. The moon, on the other hand, looked like a dull rock, but it did have an atmosphere.

Then came the interesting part. Everyone held their breath as Dujardin ran the energy scan, looking for signs of the vault.

"There!" Zelnick exclaimed and jumped up from his seat as the scan was finished and highlighted one particular area near the equator. They all saw it very well even without the captain pointing it out, though.

"Anything on the bio-scan?" Gruber asked Dujardin.

"Nope, nothing on the large-scale one," the radar operator replied. "I'm zooming in on the energy reading now."

Image of a small area around the energy source was displayed on the main screen. There were some visible gases in the atmosphere, so the image wasn't as crisp as it could be. But still, they could make out a landing site of some sort. Comparing the site with the surroundings made it evident that it was the only place within a few hundred kilometer radius where the Syreen ships could have landed. Nothing else could be made out of the picture.

"Hold on," Dujardin suddenly said. "I ran a focused bio-scan on that site and picked up something."

"What is it?" Zelnick asked.

Dujardin switched the bio-scan view on the main display together with the telescope view.

"There's a single entity there," she interpreted the image.

“What kind of an entity?” Zelnick demanded.

Dujardin focused on the highlighted part of the bio-scan view.

“I’d say it’s between a cat and a rhino in size,” she calculated.

As soon as she had said that, the target was lost.

“Now it must have gone underground or something,” she speculated.

“What if it’s with the Hierarchy?” Zelnick raised a question. “In that case we need to go down there quick before it can alert the Ur-Quan.”

Indeed there was little they could gain by waiting. The weather might never get any clearer.

“Or, more likely,” Gruber thought out loud, “if it alerts the Ur-Quan, we need to get the ships before the Ur-Quan arrive.”

Zelnick nodded.

“Speaking of which,” the captain began, “you have a habit of getting into trouble on surface missions. You’re probably still our best guy on dealing with aliens, but do you want to go?”

Gruber wasn’t sure whether Zelnick was being serious

“I appreciate your concern,” he played it safe. “I prefer going. Shall I get the landing team ready?”

“Please do,” Zelnick acknowledged.

Soon two groups of people – one human and one Syreen – were assembled at the hangar. Gruber’s team’s primary objectives were to locate the entrance to the vault and secure it. A secondary objective was to locate the life form they saw on the scanner and make sure it wouldn’t interfere with their primary objectives. One of the Syreen captains would join the human team and the rest of the Syreen would wait on board the Vindicator until the area was secure.

“And finally, here’s the conditions down there,” Gruber announced. “Temperature is a pleasant -50 degrees with an atmospheric pressure of roughly 1.5 bar. Gravity is close to 0.5 G and the day lasts approximately eight hours. The sun will come up on our landing site in less than an hour, so we can leave right away. We are expecting pretty bad weather with strong winds, occasional lightning and visibility of about 200 meters.”

“A typical weather where I come from,” Ahmed joked. “No need for suits.”

Gruber assumed the man was joking, but replied seriously nonetheless.

“Unfortunately the air is toxic,” he said. “Avoid skin exposure.”

There were no other comments.

“Let’s get going then,” Gruber ordered. “First team, board the shuttle.”

With Belov and Kilgore gone and Witherspoon out of commission, they had had to assign new people to the landing team. Everyone’s favorite Filipino, Tai, was one of the lucky ones. Tai wasn’t his real name, but since that one was impossible to pronounce, everyone called him Tai. Another new recruit was a middle-aged Russian lady named Galina Volgina who, as a fun fact, won the silver medal in fencing at the Wellington Olympics in 2128. Gruber could only hope that they would someday have a use for that skill. The last available seat was taken by a pristine Syreen individual called Alia. Gruber took steps to ensure that he would sit next to her on the shuttle.

Jenkins checked that everyone was strapped in and then steered the shuttle out of the hangar and towards the planet. There were the usual sounds and bumps as they entered the atmosphere. After one particularly bumpy phase, Gruber, as a gentleman, had to check that Alia’s wardrobe hadn’t malfunctioned.

“Approaching landing zone,” Jenkins announced after the ride had calmed down.

The passengers could only wait, so they did exactly that. Soon the shuttle touched down and they all checked their gear before lowering the ramp. Cuvelier and Ahmed then went outside first and secured the site, followed by the rest of the team.

The weather was as bad as they had forecasted. There was a semi-thick fog that moved fast with the strong winds and every now and then they could hear thunder. There was a thin layer of a snow-like substance on the ground and the area around the shuttle was soon filled with footprints.

Dujardin confirmed over the radio that the landing team was at the right coordinates and that there was currently nothing on the bio-scan. They split up into small groups and searched the area for anything out of the ordinary, hoping to find the entrance to the vault. The vault door couldn’t be too well hidden, since it would have to be big enough to fit a Syreen Penetrator starship. Gruber had teamed up with Hawthorne, Robinson and Alia.

*“I got something over here,”* Rigby was the first to report. *“It’s a small building – very small... about the size of a shower unit.”*

Gruber couldn’t see Rigby over the fog.

*“You’d all better get over here,”* Rigby soon continued. *“Someone’s been here.”*

Everyone had homed in on Rigby’s location and was now looking at a small booth with a barrier next to it – like a checkpoint. The booth had a door, a window, a table and a chair. On the table there was some sort of a contraption, about the size of a football, whose appearance bore a slight hint of Spathi design. But the most noticeable thing in the whole scene was the footprints leading in and out of the booth. Or rather, it was evident that the prints weren’t made

by human feet, but something had definitely moved there recently.

*“These prints must belong to whatever it was we saw on the bio-scan,”* Rigby stated.

Gruber took the contraption from the table into his hand and inspected it.

*“Captain, we should get Fwiffo’s comments on this,”* he suggested.

Zelnick agreed and the image from Gruber’s helmet camera was relayed to the Star Runner.

*“Wow, an Entertain-o-matic!”* Fwiffo excitedly said right off the bat. *“I used to have one of those.”*

*“What does it do?”* Gruber asked.

The whole team gathered around him.

*“It is, or was supposed to be, all your entertainment needs in one box,”* Fwiffo explained. *“There was a vast supply of active and passive stories, interstellar communications, coffee-equivalents, virtual companions, impressive defensive capabilities and a special motivational program. You would never get bored with one of those.”*

Gruber couldn’t understand how that one object could do all that, but alien technologies had proven to be quite alien in the past.

*“Why did you say ‘supposed to be’?”* Gruber realized to ask.

*“Prior to the Entertain-o-matic’s release, there was a remarkable marketing campaign,”* Fwiffo continued. *“Millions of Spathi were in line when the shops finally opened on the release day. I’m sure you know how it usually is when a hyped product comes to the market and there are not enough of them for everybody... This was different. Everyone who wanted one got one if they could afford it. Some even got two. In one day the developers had become the richest Spathi that ever lived.”*

*“So what was the problem?”* Gruber asked.

Rigby organized the rest of the team to a simple defensive formation so that they wouldn't be caught with their pants down while Gruber was on the phone.

*"The device was, I'm afraid, very short-lived," Fwiffo said. "In just a few months all of the Entertain-o-matics had ceased to function. You can imagine my disappointment as well when I was in the middle of a most amusing interactive experience and then the device suddenly broke down."*

Gruber could imagine.

*"So are you saying that this thing is broken?"* he clarified.

*"I'm afraid so,"* Fwiffo replied. *"If it's not, it has most definitely alerted its owner of your presence already."*

Fwiffo had a way of finding comforting words. Gruber then took another look at the footprints and Fwiffo confirmed that they belonged to a Spathi.

*"So we have a Spathi guard here,"* Rigby summed it up. *"I guess that's appropriate."*

There was nothing special visible in the direction where the footprints lead. If they wanted to follow them, they had to hurry before the wind erased them completely.

*"One more thing,"* Fwiffo suddenly said. *"It's been almost 20 years since the Entertain-o-matic's launch and they were only sold for a few months. Whoever brought that thing there must have done it a long time ago."*

It was an interesting piece of information, but not too helpful in their current situation.

*"Let's follow the footprints,"* Gruber decided.

The wind got stronger as they walked. Visibility was already down to just ten meters or so and the footprints were barely visible. They would soon have to call it quits and return to the shuttle to wait for a better weather. Without navigational equipment they would undoubtedly get lost in the blizzard, but with the systems integrated into their suits,

they could easily find their way back to the shuttle even with their eyes closed.

Then Gruber realized he couldn't see the footprints anymore. He was about to give the abort mission command, but then he noticed that the footprints hadn't been blown away by the wind, but instead just plain ended at the point where he was standing. He crouched and brushed the snow-like substance off the ground.

There was metal underneath.

*"Would you look at that,"* Rigby commented, crouched next to Gruber and started brushing as well.

Soon everyone was on the ground, trying to find out how far the metal reached. After a short while it became evident that they wouldn't find its edge any time soon. Instead, they had probably been walking on it ever since they had landed.

There was some kind of a hatch where the footprints ended and no windows anywhere. They also couldn't find any means to open the hatch – no handle, no control panel, nothing.

*"One thing's for sure, though,"* Rigby began. *"We never would have found this without the trail we followed."*

Everyone stood around looking like they had nothing to do.

*"Should we blow up the hatch now or what?"* Tai suggested.

Gruber did a simple substance check for the metal alloy.

*"I don't think that would work,"* he said. *"This material seems to be the same the Ur-Quan Dreadnought's hull is made of. Sure, we could punch a hole through it with the Hellbore Cannon, but that would also decimate everything beneath – including the Syreen Penetrator ships if this is the vault we are looking for."*

Gruber then remembered their Syreen companion.

*"Alia, can you sense anything?"* he asked.

Alia kneeled down next to the hatch and remained motionless for a while.

\*CLANK\*

The hatch suddenly opened, making everyone jump in surprise and draw out their weapons.

*"I didn't even do anything,"* Alia explained.

A figure casually emerged from within. It looked like it hadn't seen the others yet.

It was a Spathi – and it wasn't wearing a suit.

Gruber aimed at the creature, as did everyone else.

The Spathi took one more step and then stopped. It looked around and saw everyone pointing their guns at it. Then it looked at Gruber, who was standing closest to it, directly in the eyes.

The world froze for a few seconds.

*"YIIIIEEEEEE!"* the Spathi then screamed in terror and tried to dive back to where it came from.

*"Grab him!"* Gruber shouted and rushed to grasp the Spathi, but he was too far away.

The Spathi might have made it back in if it weren't for Alia who was able to cut it off. Gruber had trouble following the moves, but after some impressive hand-to-hand combat, the Spathi was lying on its back and Alia had her knee pressed on the Spathi's neck.

*"I'll talk, don't kill me!"* the Spathi pleaded.

Ahmed and Cuvelier rushed to tie the prisoner's claws together.

*"Where are the Penetrator starships?"* Alia angrily demanded.

The Spathi had its eye tightly closed.

*"They're right here,"* it frantically answered, *"in this underground vault."*

Gruber crouched next to the captive.

*"How many of you are there?"* he gently asked.

It was the classic tactic where the other interrogator was friendly and the other one was aggressive.

“Just one, I’m alone,” the Spathi said, having calmed down a little.

“*What are you doing here?*” Alia continued and put more pressure on her knee.

The Spathi made sounds which clearly indicated that in order for it to talk the pressure on its neck should be slightly released. Alia lifted her knee just a bit and the Spathi gasped the air which was supposed to be toxic for humans.

“I’m the guard-slash-caretaker,” it explained. “I keep this place tidy and alert my masters, the Ur-Quan, in case someone comes snooping around here. And may I ask that we move indoors since it is rather cold out here?”

“*Alright, continue talking,*” Gruber instructed as they got inside. “*Who are you and how long have you been here?*”

Having asked that, he looked around to check the surroundings. They were in a small room which had the appearance of an airlock. The hatch they came through was in the ceiling and another one was on the floor.

“Of course, of course,” the Spathi complied. “I am Pwappy, a proud member of the Spathi navy. I volunteered for a mission that was supposed to be a one year commission on a peaceful world with a complementary Entertain-o-matic as my company. I’m afraid I’ve lost my track of time since the aforementioned device broke down, but I think my replacement should arrive any day now.”

The story sounded believable in Gruber’s opinion.

“*A lot has happened after you arrived,*” he said. “*We are not your enemies. We even have a Spathi with us. Captain Fwiffo can vouch for our good intentions.*”

Gruber contacted the Vindicator and requested that Fwiffo join them via video link. Soon Fwiffo’s image appeared on the wrist display of Gruber’s suit.

*“Hello,” Fwiffo greeted Pwappy. “These fine folks saved me from a situation similar to yours about a year ago”*

Fwiffo and Pwappy talked for some time. It seemed that Pwappy enjoyed the conversation, which wasn't all that surprising, given that she\* probably had been alone for who knows how many years. It also turned out that her watch had begun in 2135 and for whatever reason her replacement hadn't arrived in 2136 as was scheduled. Since Pwappy didn't know how much time had passed, she had continued to perform her duty and sit at her checkpoint booth every day.

After the Spathi were done talking, Gruber requested that Pwappy show them the Penetrators they had come for. Pwappy then opened the hatch on the floor, and with that, she had fulfilled the request.

The hatch led to a catwalk in the ceiling of a huge cave. Of course the cave had to be huge if it was supposed to store dozens of Penetrator starships, but it was still hard to prepare for the sight. Currently there was light only in the area where they were, but it was enough to tell that the cave went on horizontally farther than they could throw a stone. Pwappy then flipped a switch and the lights were turned on.

It was another unbelievable sight. The ships they were looking for were right there, neatly lined up in two columns, ready for vertical takeoff. If Gruber had to guess, he would have estimated the cave to be about a kilometer in length and roughly a hundred meters in width.

*“They're all here!”* Alia rejoiced.

Gruber counted 42 ships – the magic number.

*“How do we get them out of here?”* Gruber asked Pwappy, who now seemed highly co-operative.

Pwappy pointed at a large pull-down switch a few steps away.

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\* It turned out that Pwappy was almost entirely female.

*“According to the manual that is supposed to open the entire ceiling,” she explained. “I have never tested it though.”*

Gruber could think of nothing more relaxing than pushing unknown buttons and flipping unfamiliar switches.

*“Wow,” Zelnick joined the moment over the radio. “That place reminds me of the factory on Vela. Should I send the Syreen team down there?”*

*“Wait just a second,”* Gruber said and walked to the switch.

He looked around to see if anybody objected to pulling it down. He also tried to read Pwappy’s face in case the whole setup was a trap and the switch was some kind of a self-destruct trigger. Unfortunately Pwappy had an excellent poker face, so Gruber had to rely on the luck that had brought them far already.

*“Here goes,”* he declared and pulled.

The switch didn’t move.

Gruber tried again with two hands, but was still unsuccessful. He could almost hear the switch laughing at him. It was a shame Belov had kicked the bucket at their mission to Zex’s menagerie, since he was the brute who could have forced the switch down if anyone.

He was then gently pushed aside.

Without a word Alia put her hand – that’s singular – to the switch and pulled it down like it was nothing.

Gruber could feel his manly ego falling down the holes in the grating they were standing on.

*“I’m sure you must have loosened it,”* Alia added insult to the injury, possibly inadvertently.

Gruber forced a smile and checked if anyone was laughing – hoping that if someone was, he could recover some of his lost ego with comical threats...

...No, it was worse. Everyone ignored the entire scene. They were all looking at the ceiling which was now slowly opening with a loud rattling sound.

*“Ok, send in the Syreen,”* Gruber said to Zelnick.

While they waited for the Syreen pilots to arrive, they explored the interior of the vault. Pwappy had made a primitive, but comfortable looking nest under one of the ships. Gruber couldn't help feeling bad for her. A human in a similar environment would surely have gone mad. But then again, Fwiffo had also been alone for many years on Pluto. Fwiffo and Pwappy might hit it off rather well, Gruber thought – if Captain Zelnick would authorize Pwappy to join them. As the thought entered Gruber's mind, he decided to check right away. He walked away from the crowd so Pwappy wouldn't hear the conversation.

*“What shall we do with Pwa—the prisoner?”* he asked the captain.

*“Hmm...”* Zelnick pondered. *“You didn't ask for my permission when you took Lydia with us.”*

Indeed he hadn't.

*“And as a reward, you assigned me to take care of her,”* Gruber remembered. *“So who will take care of this one?”*

Gruber could hear Zelnick talking to someone else, but couldn't make out the words.

*“I'm sure Captain Fwiffo will be eager to volunteer,”* Zelnick decided. *“Welcome her aboard if she wishes to come.”*

*“And what if she doesn't?”* Gruber raised a valid question. *“We can't be sure she wouldn't alert the Ur-Quan.”*

*“Right,”* Zelnick acknowledged the thought. *“Well, you can decide if it comes down to that.”*

Gruber hoped it wouldn't come down to that. He knew what he would have to do then, and it wasn't anything pleasant.

*"Roger that,"* Gruber said and returned to the others.

In a few hours the Syreen had checked the ships and deemed them capable of flight. Gruber and the rest of the landing team were at the shuttle, waiting for the ships to take off so they could close the doors behind them. That way if anyone came looking they wouldn't notice right away that the vault had been looted.

*"Is everyone clear?"* Alia checked as she was ready to start the engines.

Gruber counted heads once more and confirmed that everyone was with him at a safe distance.

*"You're good to go,"* he replied.

Soon they could hear the roar of the engines. Then, even though the weather was still bad, they could make out a bright light rising towards the sky. Once Alia's ship was high enough, the next ship blasted off.

The sun had already set when the last ship was away.

*"Finally,"* Rigby stated as they couldn't hear the roar of the engines anymore.

*"Alright, let's close this shop and get out of here,"* Gruber said.

Pwappy was still with them. Gruber glanced at her and noticed that she looked sad. He could tell, having spent so much time with Fwiffo.

*"Pwappy, I'm sure you'd feel a lot safer if you were with us,"* Gruber repeated Zelnick's words he had said to Fwiffo on their first encounter. *"Come and join us."*

Pwappy immediately brightened up.

*"Happy days and jubilation!"* she repeated Fwiffo's exact words. *"I thought you'd never ask."*

A few hours later they were aboard the Vindicator again, with the exception of Pwappy, who was transported to the Star Runner. Gruber was exhausted, but checked in at the bridge before hitting the bunk.

The Vindicator's hyperdrive was insanely powerful, but even it had its limits. There was no way to drag the entire Syreen fleet along. They would have to make their own way through hyperspace. The hyperdrive of the Penetrators wasn't among the slowest, so they should do just fine.

"I miss having the Syreen around," Zelnick said as Gruber reached his side.

"Think of it as an investment," Gruber comforted him.

Just then they received an incoming call from one of the Syreen ships.

*"Captain Alia, mother of Alura, reporting in from the starship Blue Sky."*

"Hello," Zelnick cheerfully answered.

*"We're ready to jump into hyperspace,"* she reported.

"We'll see you at Betelgeuse," Zelnick replied.

*"That we will. And hey, this is from all of us..."*

She blew a kiss to Zelnick.

"Thank you," she said with a soft voice and cut the transmission.

Zelnick blushed. Gruber put his hand on the captain's shoulder.

"You have a talent," he said.

## CHAPTER 23

# SUN DEVICE

**March 15<sup>th</sup> 2156, Betelgeuse, 412.5 : 377.0**

The crew of the *Vindicator* had a one week shore leave at the Syreen starbase as they waited for the Penetrators to arrive. The facilities were almost identical to the starbase at Sol, so there was no pressing reason to go back just yet. Gruber also thought, in all seriousness, that a little recreation would do everyone good.

The Syreen, in anticipation of seeing their ships with their own eyes, had watched the recordings from Epsilon Camelopardalis countless times. Gruber had the pleasure of telling and re-telling the story over and over again.

Pwappy and Fwiffo seemed to get along just fine, although Fwiffo hinted that Pwappy acted a little strange from time to time. As opposed to all other Spathi, she didn't believe in the Ultimate Evil and even laughed at the idea. She wore a black cape with red stripes and insisted that Fwiffo paint the *Star Runner* with similar colors. And she refused to sit down until she had first circled the chair two times.

Commander Talana had prepared a plan for ambushing the Mycon, just as she had promised. Her people had reviewed the recorded Mycon transmissions from the Great War and were able to confirm that the Mycon preferred worlds just like Syra or Earth. The trap would have to be set up at another planet of that type. Unfortunately, uncolonized planets like that weren't found in every other star system. But the Syreen had sources...

When the Syreen had surrendered to the Ur-Quan at the end of the Great War and explained that their homeworld was uninhabitable, the Ur-Quan had used their extensive astronomical data stores to find a planet that was just right for the Syreen. The best fit was the first planet at Betelgeuse and the Syreen settled down there. But Commander Talana knew that there was another one that would have suited them just fine – a planet that ranked just below their new homeworld. It was the first planet orbiting the green dwarf star Organon at 685.8 : 057.7. There, too, the air was pure and sweet and abundant life covered the surface which the sun gently warmed. It should be perfectly suited for the Mycon as well. Now the Alliance just needed to set up a trap there and lure the Mycon in.

Zelnick and Gruber discussed the details of the plan with Commander Hayes via the ansible. They all agreed on the big picture, but they didn't easily reach a consensus on how to lure the Mycon into the trap. Even though Admiral Zex had assured them that the Mycon would simply take their word for it, and Zex's information had proven reliable so far, they felt that something more was needed. It wasn't until Lydia casually suggested it that they even considered using Zex as a messenger. But the more they thought about it, the more feasible the idea turned out to be. Soon they agreed it was their best choice and not long after they thought it was an excellent one – the obvious one, even.

Zex was eager to play the part. Even though Zex claimed to hate the Mycon, Zex also assured them that the Mycon had no reason to suspect that. It would seem natural for a fellow battle thrall to inform them of good possibilities for expansion. Naturally Zex wouldn't go to Mycon space alone, though. The admiral would captain his\* personal

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\* The narrator gives in and uses the masculine pronoun from now on when referring to Admiral Zex.

Intruder, but the ship would be crewed by alliance members. On that note, Hayes reported that the Shofixti were still multiplying at an increasing rate, so they could and should be assigned to alliance ships as crew from now on. The colony ship to Eta Vulpeculae wouldn't be ready for a few more weeks so in the meantime the Shofixti had to be sent somewhere off the starbase or they would literally and very physically run out of space.

So it all came down to timing. The Vindicator could transport about a dozen ships to the Organon region quite swiftly through quasispaces, as there was an exit portal at the border of Mycon space, just a few days away from Organon. One star system, Delta Sculptoris (581.2 : 120.8), was right next to the portal, so it was an ideal place for a rendezvous point. Once a large enough fleet had gathered there, they would move to positions at Organon and Admiral Zex would fly to the Mycon homeworld at Epsilon Scorpii. Simultaneously an Arilou scout would set off on a reconnaissance mission to Beta Brahe (639.5 : 231.2) in order to verify that the solar manipulator was still there. After successfully getting the Mycon colonization fleet on the move, Zex would meet with the Vindicator at the Bellatrix system (545.8 : 191.6), which was on a direct line between the Mycon homeworld and the Vux homeworld. They would wait there until fighting would begin at Organon and then move in to Beta Brahe and steal the device.

Even though the Arilou Skiff vessels were extremely efficient against Mycon Podships, the Arilou refused to participate directly in acts of war. However they agreed to work as scouts and messengers and let the Vindicator know what was happening at Organon.

In Gruber's opinion the plan was as good as it could get. Time was against them, so they had to move as soon as the Syreen ships arrived. The Vindicator would first take as many of the Penetrators it could drag along and drop them

off at the rendezvous point before returning to Sol. Then the Vindicator would take a few trips between Sol and Delta Sculptoris until they deemed the task force strong enough to wipe out the Mycon fleet. Then they would wait...

*March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2156: We have been able to transport a strong armada to Delta Sculptoris and they are just about to start their voyage to Organon. We have a formidable number of Syreen Penetrators, Orz Nemeses and Zoq-Fot-Pik stingers. We also have a small fleet of Earthling Cruisers, Utwig Juggers and Supox Blades. While the Mycon colonization fleet will most likely be greater in numbers we can take them out if we play our cards right. Captain Trent is in command of the operation, so I'm fairly confident that things will go smoothly.*

*It's been a long time since I've seen so many friendly ships in one place. The Alliance is again a force to be reckoned with. But we must be careful not to get too cocky... The Ur-Quan and the Kohr-Ah forces are still grossly superior. If we are ever going to get near the Sa-Matra, we need the combined strength of the Chenjesu and the Mmrnmhrm.*

*Admiral Zex left a few hours ago to deliver the bait to the Mycon. We expect to meet Zex at Bellatrix in two weeks and by that time the Arilou should also return with the latest news from Beta Brahe.*

*April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2156: We arrived at Bellatrix without incident. There are four planets in this system, but none of them appear interesting. I guess we'll just be chilling then.*

*April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2156: This past week has officially been the longest week of my life. And I do mean officially, I have a certificate.*

*Sure, I have often travelled great distances and spent many weeks aboard starships, but never before have I just waited for this long. And to make it worse, we don't even have a set date when our wait will be over. The crew, me included, lacks a sense of purpose and it has a dramatic effect on morale. When we came up with this plan, nobody figured our task would be this demanding.*

*April 12<sup>th</sup>, 2156: I know Zex isn't scheduled to arrive for two more days, but I'm still feeling like calling it quits.*

*I remember this feeling from long ago... Whenever I had a date with Lily, I used to be at least half an hour early. Then, when it was still a few minutes before the agreed upon time, I felt irritated for having to wait for her so long, even if she finally arrived exactly on time. I know it makes me an idiot, but I can't help it.*

*April 14<sup>th</sup>, 2156: I wish I could report that Zex has arrived, but I can't. Instead, we heard something interesting from the starbase via the ansible.*

*Captain Tanaka has returned after reporting to the Yehat. He said that the Pkunk had arrived at the Serpentis constellation a bit before Tanaka. The Pkunk were being obliterated by the Yehat and they weren't even fighting back. Tanaka's sudden appearance and his testimony about the revival of the Shofixti race seemed to have triggered some kind of a reaction among the Yehat, though. The members of the Zeep-Zeep clan, with whom Tanaka met, declared that they couldn't live the lie any longer and that their clan would restore the honor of the Starship Clans.*

*If I understood correctly, the Zeep-Zeep clan was planning to start a revolution, which would suit us just fine. If the Yehat won't join our ranks, it's better that they at least keep themselves occupied.*

*April 14<sup>th</sup>, 2156: Another entry for today, because Zex's ship appeared! I'm dying to hear how their mission went...*

*...Apparently it was a great success. We watched the recording of Zex's conversation with the Mycon and if they weren't lying, they seemed to have taken the bait. After a nearly endless rambling of Juffo-Wup, Deep Children and just generally how great their genes were, they finally listened to what Zex had to say.*

*The Mycon were pleased and said that acceptable new worlds were a priority for the rapid and complete spread of Juffo-Wup, whatever that meant. They wished to hear more of the planet at Organon and Zex did a fine job with the sales pitch. The Mycon thanked Zex and assured him that the Birthing Fleet would be sent to Organon as soon as possible, accompanied by many ships to protect the Deep Children as they grow.*

*So, again, now all we can do is wait...*

*April 20<sup>th</sup>, 2156: The Arilou returned with a report from Beta Brahe. The situation was exactly as we had predicted. Initially there were a great number of ships protecting the first planet, but soon after Zex had delivered the message, most of the fleet took off. The Arilou could then confirm that there was some kind of a radiation source in orbit. When the Arilou left the system, there were only five Mycon Podships standing guard. Nothing we couldn't handle.*

*As a curiosity, if we have to break a few nose-equivalents in order to steal the device, it's not stealing anymore... it's robbing. We'll be robbers.*

*April 28<sup>th</sup>, 2156: The Arilou reported that the Mycon fleet is just a day away from Organon. It's time we took off. Our flight time to Beta Brahe is four days, so we won't be*

wasting any time. We'll get a new situation report once we're there.

*May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2156: We've reached Beta Brahe. It will take us five hours to reach the first planet. During that time we expect to receive news from Organon. I can only hope that Trent has achieved a great victory...*

*...This feeling of anxiety is completely different from our own battles, which must be the same phenomenon as with sports. When you play yourself, there is less tension, because you can influence the outcome with your own actions and you are preoccupied with doing your job. But when you watch a game, you are a helpless observer completely at the mercy of the players. If the stakes are high enough, the tension might become unbearable and you might even have to stop watching. I know a guy who missed most of the World Cup final of 2122 for that reason and he was the most devout football fan I have ever known.*

*May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2156: Great news! Everything went even better than expected. We can surely enjoy a full report once we're back at the starbase, but to sum it up, according to the Arilou we wiped out 90 % of the Mycon fleet with only minimal casualties. Our forces are now in pursuit of the enemies that managed to escape the system.*

*With a major part of the entire Mycon armada destroyed, I dare say we won't have to worry about them any time soon. Now we just need to do our part...*

"I can see five Mycon Podships," Dujardin reported as they got close enough to their target for their true space radar to spot the enemies. "There's also some kind of an object at the center of their formation."

“That’s our cue, ladies and gentlemen,” Zelnick declared. “Get everybody to battle stations and let’s see if we can wrap this up before dinner.”

“Let’s be sure not to hit the Sun Device,” Gruber reminded everyone.

*Solar Manipulator* was considered a bothersome name, so they had eventually decided to call it *Sun Device* instead.

The Vindicator’s fleet assumed battle formation and soon the Mycon noticed them too. The Podships turned to face their enemies, but they didn’t break their formation.

“Incoming transmission from the Mycon,” Ozerova reported.

“We’re not being diplomatic today,” Zelnick stated. “But if they want to plead for mercy, I’ll be glad to listen. Let’s hear it.”

The communications officer answered the call and an image of a Mycon appeared on screen. Out of all known races, the Mycon were probably the farthest from the humans in terms of biology – and that’s counting the Mmrrnmhrm. The Mycon were more like fungi than animals and their cellular structure was several levels above that of humans in terms of complexity. The difference between humans and the Mycon was like the difference between humans and bacteria, only in the other direction. Of course the same can be said about almost any species. The Mycon were simply unique. Too unique for it to be natural, as the Umgah said.

“*This is a special place,*” the Mycon said with a plain voice. “*We will not allow it to be soiled by the Non. You must go. Now.*”

“Interesting,” Zelnick said like a man staring at a concrete wall. “Do tell us more.”

For some reason Gruber assumed that the Mycon didn’t understand the concept of sarcasm.

*“This place is filled with Juffo-Wup, the power of life,”* the Mycon continued. *“It is hot warmth in the cold void. It flows through all things, binding them together, making them one. You are Non-Juffo-Wup, you cannot understand.”*

“McNeil, do you have a clear shot?” Zelnick asked.

“Indeed I have, sir,” the weapons officer replied. “Just say the word and one of those pods receives a one way ticket to oblivion.”

The Mycon Podships were, as their name suggests, spherical pods. They weren't mechanical constructs like most ships and not biological constructs like the Supox Blades. Instead, they were made of rock and molten lava. Inside they had a chamber that created super-heated plasma which they fired at their enemies. And somehow the plasmoids homed in on their targets, which was a mystery the Alliance had never figured out in the Great War.

*“Here is the pod of Juffo-Wup,”* the Mycon continued without asking. *“When we are cold, the pod opens and warms us. When it is dark, the pod clenches and lo, there is light. You are the Non. The pod is not for you. You must leave.”*

“Fire away, Mr. McNeil,” Zelnick ordered, ignoring the Mycon.

A bright ball of the Hellbore Cannon's fire was shot towards the Mycon formation.

*“We look to Juffo-Wup for direction, and it provides the pattern,”* the Mycon continued, ignoring Zelnick in return. *“Endless expansion with purity of achievement and intolerance of error.”*

“Send in the Pkunk,” Zelnick commanded.

The four Furies blasted off, probably throwing constant insults at their enemies.

The shot from the Hellbore Cannon hit its target and there were only four enemy ships left. Then all remaining Podships reacted and fired their homing plasmoids.

“McNeil, do your thing,” Zelnick said.

He was referring to their planned course of action. They would use the Vindicator’s Fusion Blasters to intercept and neutralize the Mycon plasmoids. Since their combat batteries were fit for the Hellbore Cannon’s consumption, they would be able to fire several shots with the Fusion Blasters easily.

“Aye-aye, sir,” McNeil replied, took aim and fired – four shots, one for each target.

Gruber watched the progress from the tactical display. The shots approached their targets and then... hit, hit, hit, hit. All plasmoids were out of the game.

*“I am Shloosh,”* said the Mycon as the communications link was still active. *“I was incinerated fourteen thousand years ago. I live now, for but a moment, and then I am gone.”*

The Mycon ships still didn’t break formation.

“We’re ready for another shot of the Hellbore Cannon in ten... nine...” McNeil counted down.

*“The Podships thrum with the plasma containment field whose offspring seek to transform the Non to Void. The Fields grow tighter and tighter... The bass rumble of the generators rises gradually to a high burning scream. Sudden silence and a flash of light announce release. The hot pulsing subsides slowly.”*

“...two...one...ready,” McNeil finished the countdown.

“Fire,” Zelnick ordered.

The Hellbore Cannon spoke again. The Podships were too slow to dodge and soon there were only three left. The communications link was still active though.

*“The Deep Children fall from the void, gathering speed for the penetration. The tough casing warms as it passes through the atmosphere, glowing white as it hits the surface. Solid rock flows like liquid, and the child slips into the warm, safe depths beneath the crust.”*

The Pkunk Furies had reached the enemy ships and were ruthlessly cutting them open from their backs. A single Podship was helpless against such agile fighters, but they could shoo off their pests from one another. There was a catch, though, which Gruber hoped to witness again after over 20 years.

One of the Podships fired its plasmoid against a Fury that was attacking another Podship. The Fury then quickly circled around its target, leaving the Podship between the plasmoid and the Fury.

“The Mycon Podships’ homing plasmoids don’t have a safety feature for avoiding friendly targets,” Gruber explained with a smile on his face. “Let’s watch.”

The plasmoid hit the unlucky Podship in its path, punching a remarkable hole in its surface. The plasmoids were rather weak when fired at targets far away, but the Mycon ships were pretty close to each other in their tight formation. From that distance the destructive power of the particle came close to that of the Hellbore Cannon.

“Nice,” Zelnick commented as there were only two enemy ships left and they hadn’t even broken a sweat yet.

*“Survival is a priority... Expansion is a priority... Processing is a priority...”*

“Oh, you’re still here?” Zelnick acknowledged the Mycon.

*“...Incorporation of dense amphibole fibers ensures survival in environmental extremes...”*

Zelnick cut the transmission.

“McNeil?” he checked.

“Ready,” the weapons officer replied.

“Fire at will,” the captain ordered.

A half an hour later all the Mycon ships were destroyed and the debris around the Sun Device had cleared enough for the Vindicator to inspect it closely. There was nothing to

salvage from Mycon Podships, so they could skip scavenging for resources this time.

The Sun Device looked weird. Its external appearance gave the impression of an impaled spider, whose size was roughly equal to the shuttle. It was mostly bright red, but there were some purple parts as well. The other end of the rod in the middle was obviously the place where the radiation emanated.

“Let’s get that thing to the storage bay and then make like a tree,” Zelnick commanded.

Iwasaki whispered something to Samusenko. Gruber couldn’t hear what it was, but he could hear Samusenko’s answer:

“It means we get out of here.”

It would have been tempting to fly to Organon to check with the fleet, but the Vindicator had its own mission to prioritize. The Sun Device needed to be studied at the starbase quickly so they could use it to help the Chenjesu and the Mmrmhmr as soon as possible.

Four days and one quasispaceship jump later the Vindicator was back at the starbase in Sol. It didn’t take long for Doctors Chu and Fredrikson to understand that they had another scary piece of Precursor equipment on their hands. The Sun Device contained a power generator whose output magnitude was simply mind-crogling. When activated (not inside the starbase), the device radiated energy at a level that could almost match that of a small star. When placed in orbit of a planet and directed towards the surface, the output would rival Sol’s. It was evident that if the Chenjesu and the Mmrmhmr required more solar energy, the Sun Device was exactly what they needed.

Gruber had to admit that Admiral Zex had proven his worth. Zex had provided the alliance with several pieces of

crucial information and had performed his part admirably in tricking the Mycon. Nobody questioned his loyalty anymore, although his position within the alliance remained unclear.

On the day following the Vindicator's return to the starbase, the Shofixti colony ship was ready to set sail towards Eta Vulpeculae, escorted by a squadron of Orz Nemeses. Many individuals of the first and second generation of the Shofixti had enlisted to crew alliance ships and some were given their own Scout vessels. A few females also stayed at the starbase just in case something happened to the colony ship. *Captain* Tanaka wasn't ready for retirement yet. He wanted to fight the Hierarchy to the very end and such pleasure was not denied him.

A few hours before the Vindicator was scheduled to take off, Gruber, Zelnick and Lydia were eating breakfast together at the starbase cafeteria.

"So you activate that Sun Device thing in orbit of the Chenjesu homeworld," Lydia recapped. "And then what?"

Zelnick glanced at Gruber.

"I don't know," the captain admitted. "I guess the Chenjesu and the Mmrmhrm will get more energy then."

"We hope it will speed up their hybridization enough so that they can assist us in taking down the Sa-Matra before it's too late," Gruber explained.

Lydia took her time sipping a can of apple juice.

"What if they can't help us in time?" she asked.

Gruber didn't like thinking about that possibility.

"Then we're in trouble," he put it simply.

"We're already in trouble," Zelnick pointed out. "But then we'd be in deep trouble."

"We have built a nice alliance, sure," Gruber said. "But the inconvenient fact remains that the Ur-Quan and the Kohr-Ah forces are still grossly superior. We might be able to get a lucky shot at the Sa-Matra and maybe even take it

down, but we still couldn't resist their forces if they focused them on us instead of each other."

Lydia kept on sucking her straw even though the can was empty, making a well-known unpleasant sound.

"Would the Chenjesu change the balance of power?" she asked.

Gruber recalled what the Chenjesu had said.

"Well, they boasted that they could single-handedly deal with the Sa-Matra and the entire Ur-Quan Hierarchy once their process is complete. And, to be fair, the Chenjesu did say that the bomb we have wouldn't be enough to destroy the Sa-Matra without their amplifiers."

"So yes, we believe they are the key," Zelnick summed it up.

"But they didn't want you to use the Sun Device, right?" Lydia pointed out.

Indeed the Chenjesu had insisted that their process had to be executed as planned or the results might be catastrophic.

"It is obvious that at their current pace they won't make it in time," Zelnick said. "They said it would take 35 years. The Kohr-Ah would kill us all decades before the Chenjesu and the Mmrrnmhrm were ready."

Gruber noticed that Lydia had that peculiar look in her eyes – the look which preceded a simple, innocent and effective solution to a problem.

"So we'll activate the device anyway," she casually said. "With or without their consent."

Gruber had thought about it, but hearing someone said it made the possibility much more real.

"If we don't use it, we die for sure, right?" Lydia continued. "And if we use it, we might or might not die, right?"

She had a way of making strong cases. Gruber thought she could easily become the president of Earth if the war ever came to an end.

“I can’t argue with that,” Gruber admitted.

“If you want to come with us on this trip that’s fine by me,” Zelnick said. “This time we’re not supposed to do anything too dangerous.”

Seven days later the Vindicator positioned itself in orbit of the second planet in the Procyon system – the home of the Chenjesu. They used the powerful hyperwave caster to contact the Chenjesu through the slave shield and told them everything, including their strong opinion on how they would all die if they waited 35 years.

*“We understand that there are no correct choices here,”* the Chenjesu commented. *“If we were given an infinite amount of energy now, we could theoretically crack the slave shield and live on as a single hybrid race. However, we cannot predict how the hybridization process would react exactly. There is still a significant chance that we would be destroyed.”*

Zelnick typed his answer:

*“We believe it’s a risk we have to take. We can see no alternative.”*

The Chenjesu took their time replying.

*“We cannot assist you any further in making this decision,”* they said. *“We also cannot prevent you from activating the device. The choice is yours.”*

Zelnick didn’t seem pleased with the outcome of the conversation, which was understandable. He, as the commanding officer, would soon have to give an order which would be a gamble on the lives of not just one entire species, but two.

Lydia had been observing the conversation on the bridge and now approached the captain and put her hand on his shoulder.

“Do you want me to do it?” she asked, sounding sincere, although Gruber could never tell just how serious she actually was.

Zelnick motioned that he was okay.

“Get the Sun Device ready,” he ordered.

A team of workers in space suits, led by Dougal Skeates, carefully pulled the Sun Device out from the storage bay and hauled it to a safe distance. They aligned the device so that its emission head was pointed towards the surface and checked that the remote control was active.

“*All set,*” Skeates informed the bridge over the radio. “*Just give us a few minutes to get back to the ship.*”

After those few minutes Zelnick, Gruber and Lydia were standing at the bridge’s window, looking at the Sun Device and the slave shielded planet below. Zelnick was holding the trigger that would activate the device. The trigger was traditionally designed as a red button under a clear safety guard.

“If this fails, everything we have worked for amounts to nothing,” Zelnick said.

“If this succeeds,” Gruber continued, “everything we have worked for gives us a chance to free the entire galaxy from the slavery of the Ur-Quan and the threat of the Kohr-Ah.”

“If this succeeds,” Lydia joined in, “I’ll treat you to a slice of cheesecake.”

Gruber could hear some of the officers behind him laughing.

“Then I hope it succeeds,” he said.

Zelnick flipped open the safety cover.

“All together, then?” he suggested.

They all put their hands above the button and looked at each other with smiles on their faces.

“On three,” Zelnick said. “One...two...**three!**”

They all put their hands down simultaneously to activate the Sun Device.

They looked out the window again and saw the device getting brighter and brighter... and brighter... too bright to look at...so bright that it illuminated the entire bridge.