

RUMINATIONS OF A WAYFARER – REBOOT

David Hearne

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Acknowledgements

This book is dedicated to the memory of Lloyd Rodney Hearne.

Mr Wardle (blame him). My Indonesian teacher who, whilst I was in high school in Goulburn, NSW, read several (of my hundred-or-so) short stories in 1985 and took an interest, loaning me a typewriter, fuelling the fire within and encouraging me to pursue my dreams. You, sir, are a legend.

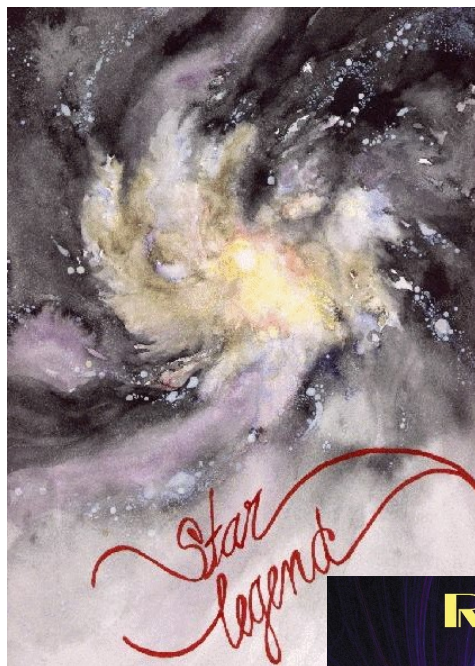
Cover design by Janet McNulty.

Why the Reboot?

I finished *Ruminations* in 2000 yet the end left Jarre, the lead character, in limbo. I decided to go back and close this chapter out. There are some other minor changes as well. In particular, even though I was a vegetarian when I finished this book, a universe where advanced races still eat animals just doesn't make any sense – those elements had to be corrected.

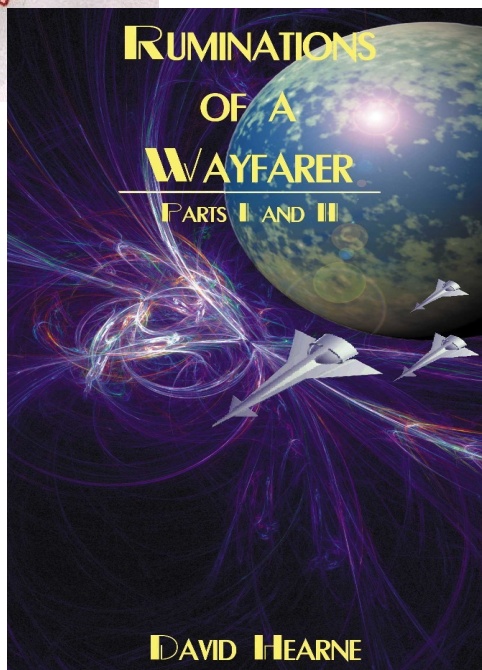
While my more recent books reflect the twelve stages of the hero's journey and follow expected paradigms from a screenplay (I didn't know about those things when I wrote this) this story was written on the fly and even I didn't know what the hero was in for as the story unfolded. I also added a game of blazer into the book, a violent future-sport harking back to my love of the Parramatta Eels (Rugby League would be the greatest sport in the universe were it not for Cricket).

Previous Versions



Sharyn Stephson did the first cover for the version I wrote between 1985 and 1999 called Star Legend (one doesn't like to rush these things).

Rebecca Redelsheimer did the next cover for the 2000 re-write which included part II.



PART I

Prologue

March 4, 2355.

Log Entry 1147: First Officer Claude Jarre.

“There must have been a mistake. An astonishing but breathtaking gaffe.

In short, I just can’t believe that I’ve been selected. General Forbes has never liked me and I won’t pretend I think much of him either. So why plump for me? Whatever the *raison d’être*, I’m in. Forbes will lead our expedition to chart nameless space. Also present will be my good friend Ky, who is the best tactician out there when he’s on song. Sadly, that isn’t often. Still, I did recommend him in my report though I don’t suppose that carried too much weight. There are lots of people I don’t know of course.

One I would like to know a little better is Ganna. She’s something and I’m sure there’s some kind of connection between us. I lack the mettle to ask her out or take things further but perhaps that will change. She seems to like spending time with me. Perhaps she’s spying for the General. Why else would she want to spend time with me? Why did I write that? I’m tired of second-guessing myself. I read over these last couple of lines and feel like a dumb kid back at high school. I’m a far cry, though not necessarily an improvement, from that. At this point I should be writing more about the mission and less about the girl, but I feel compelled to dwell on her further. I trust my log will accommodate this indulgence.

So, Ganna and I will be on the ship together. Hmmm. If I try to take things further and she’s not interested then I will be forced to see her for the duration of the mission. I don’t care for that contemplation. Although our friendship is groovy (the use of that last word is undoubtedly a failed attempt on my part to come across as remotely contemporary), I feel that something deeper lies beyond the affable surface. But if it’s all in my head and she tells me to ‘get lost’ then I’m in a real bind. I will automatically want to wipe her completely from my

mind yet I will be stuck on the ship with her. And for who knows how long? Then I'll have to pretend I'm OK with being rejected and I don't think I can do that. If she doesn't want me then that's fine but having to remain in such close proximity? That is something I wouldn't handle well. Where would I be able to hide? Nowhere is where! So, I don't think I'll show my hand just yet. Better to take things slowly. Ky says I'm good at that. Enough about the girl: have I lost my grip on reality? Since she came along I can't sleep and don't feel the need to eat. How can another person become as vital, as imperative to your very subsistence, as the blood that runs through your veins? Sheesh! What's with me? Back to the assignment.

I can't help worrying. About the mission and everything else. I put on a brave face and I think most of them buy it. They say I'm arctic and hard-nosed behind the controls of a ship. They think I'm focussed. I'm glad they can't really tell what's going on inside my head. Why do I care so much about what other people think? This is a worthless preoccupation of mine.

I seem to lack social grace (Ky tells me this often enough). Sometimes I think I'm getting the hang of communicating with people, almost starting to gel even, and then I have to close my eyes and sleep. When I reopen them, all progress is lost, as though my soul was robbed as I slept, and I have to start all over again. It's pointless writing about this glitch in my persona. It's as irrelevant as it is impossible to remedy.

Cudex assisted in the evaluations. That man really hates me. I must have done something to upset him but I don't care. I don't have time for fools. Cudex is a fool. A well-educated fool but a fool nevertheless. Did I mention this man is a fool? I hope he can't access my personal log. If wrong, this may be the last entry.

Now that it's time to go, I don't want to leave. I wanted this assignment so badly when I thought I had no chance to go. Once I got it, I decided I didn't want it. Why is that the story of my life? I think I fear fear. No, that is not a misprint.

The presence of General Forbes on this mission is purely a public relations exercise. He doesn't even want to go. I don't want him to go. There would, in reality, be no one on the entire planet that wants him to go. So why must he go? I don't want to be under his command. I'd rather take orders from 'Lucky', my cat who I am sending to board with my parents forever if I'm 'lucky'. I will make a point of being too busy to pick the cat up when I return. If I return.

No more time. This will be my final entry before the mission is underway. I am so excited yet when Ky spoke to me the other day I pretended I couldn't care less. Why do I do that? I can be so cold. I don't like to appear weak in any way. If I can convince others I am so 'callous' then why do I fail to believe it myself?

I lose it with the narrative in my attempt to make these journal readings more interesting. Why do I bother? Who else would want to read them? I should just record facts instead of feelings, which I fail to comprehend anyway. Ever wish you were born a robot?

I really feel the need to finish today's entry with something bold. Let me see. "I welcome the new frontier with open arms!" That's clueless! What else? I'm sure I have no idea so let's move on. I hope the mission goes well and we don't encounter any hostile aliens. If we discover something of value then that's just a bonus. Next time I'll be writing from beyond the stars. Now that's exciting! What an exhilarating meditation. I'm desperately trying to sound all 'pumped up' about the mission but it's hopeless. I refuse to lie to my journal. It's not going to go well at all and I feel we're all doomed to die on some wretched planet light years from home. I can hardly wait.'

End Log Entry 1147.

Jarre checked the clipboard he currently held and continued to walk through the corridors of control central. He was supposed to report to Dr. Lambert's reception in five minutes for his final medical assessment. A green light meant he would be taking his place alongside the others for the journey into space. A red light and ... that just wasn't going to happen.

“Hey, buddy!”

Jarre twirled around, sighting Ky and another man hurrying toward him.

“Hey, Ky, and Eclipse isn’t it?” he checked. Ky and he were old friends and Eclipse was about to become one of their shipmates.

“That’s right,” the tall Lieutenant returned. “Looks like we’ll be dusting off real soon.”

“Yeah,” said Jarre unenthusiastically. Accountable for security, Eclipse was unlikely to have any difficulty controlling the crew. The thickset, alien fiends he had seen in his imaginings might not be so easy to subjugate, however. “Provided I pass my medical,” he continued.

Ky appeared confident. “You’re a shoe-in! Once we’re out past Pluto we’ll have a scream!”

Jarre raised both eyebrows. There were those fiends again, scampering about in his thoughts. “I hope that won’t be because we’re being consumed by cantankerous extraterrestrials.”

Eclipse laughed. “You’re not the only one!”

“You’re such a misery,” Ky said. “Nah, it’ll be great fun! Who knows what we’ll find?” He gave some thought as to how he was going to spend the rest of the day. If he could convince Eclipse, perhaps they would go out to one of the chic nightspots like the *Zebra Bar* and enjoy drinking the darkness away. Ever since Udaya, Ganna’s sister, had left him, he didn’t like arriving home sober. There were too many memories: none of them pleasant: not anymore.

“There are some sunny people coming,” Eclipse said. “We’ll be in good company, come what may.”

“Except for the General,” Ky said impertinently. “What a codpiece. Talk about an authoritarian personality. Harris and Winters aren’t much better.”

Eclipse cringed as Forbes appeared behind Ky wearing an expression that suggested he had heard the slur. He noticed Jarre recoil as well.

“Well, don’t you think?” Ky asked, turning to see the General. “Hello, General—goodbye career,” he whispered.

“A codpiece?” repeated Forbes, dressed smartly in his uniform. The assorted medals pinned to his pockets were impossible to miss. “A word in your ear, Lieutenant,” he continued, walking into a nearby office.

Ky followed, pulling a face and rolling his eyes jadedly. “Here we go. You’re a dreadful human being, I find you insufferable, why don’t you depart this life, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera,” he mumbled.

Eclipse smiled after Ky entered, the door slammed, and the shouting began. “Thankfully they’re not all like him. Take Ganna for instance. Nice bird.”

Jarre looked down at his boots awkwardly. “Really? I guess.”

“Come on, pal,” Eclipse said, nudging him with his elbow. “Ky told me you’ve got a thing for her.”

“I . . . that’s not quite how it is,” Jarre said, becoming flushed. “Besides, I told Ky in the strictest confidence,” he said eventually.

Eclipse laughed. “And he told me, Truth, and Mitchell in a confidence that was equally stringent.”

Jarre’s cheeks ballooned as he nearly choked on a series of shock-induced coughs. If he didn’t die of embarrassment here and now he would murder his ‘buddy’.

“Don’t get overwrought,” Eclipse said, glimpsing at his timepiece. “I won’t say anything.” He smiled cheekily, evidently amused. “I’d better go. Be seeing you.”

Jarre watched Eclipse march down the passageway and shook his head. His appointment forgotten, he stood outside the office door to his right and waited patiently. After a couple of minutes, during which time Ky was reminded of his responsibilities numerous times, the door opened and both the fulfilled General and the hangdog Ky appeared.

“What are you doing out here?” Forbes demanded.

“Waiting for *that*,” replied Jarre, pointing a reproving finger at Ky.

The General nodded. “First Lieutenant Jarre, my counsel to you is as follows. Elect your acquaintances more vigilantly.” He walked briskly away.

“What a berk,” Ky said. “That line’s straight out of the core regulation handbook.”

Jarre rubbed his hands together slowly. “Component three of module nine, article twelve, folio nineteen—subsection three to be precise.”

Ky shrugged his shoulders and stretched. “At least I got off with a warning. Again.”

Jarre frowned. “I’m glad he didn’t kill you,” he said.

“Thanks, buddy.”

“Because you’re mine,” he finished, advancing on his ‘buddy’.

Ky was going to laugh but saw Jarre’s expression matched the most threatening of tempests. “You wanna have a piece of me now?”

Jarre nodded. “That’ll do for a start. You told Eclipse how I feel about Ganna. And Truth. And who knows who else!”

Ky bared his teeth, the muscles in his neck reacting to his unusually persuasive smile. “See ya, buddy,” he offered, running down the corridor as fast as he was able.

Jarre set off in pursuit. “Get back here!”

Racing down the corridor and around a bend, Jarre collided with an older man and sent him reeling. He watched Ky escape and resisted the urge to let loose with a string of verbal abuse. He turned back to help the man to his feet and then recognised him.

“Jarre,” the man said, frowning.

Jarre smiled weakly. “Dr. Lambert.”

Log Entry 1148: First Officer Claude Jarre.

I know I said that the next log entry would be from space but I decided I’m not even going to take the log with me. Someone else might read it up there. So, it stays here and this could be my final entry. Period. Ky has told some of the others how I feel about Ganna. I trusted that louse! I’m more concerned about ‘my secret’ than the mission I will undertake tomorrow. I heard a rumour that this mission ... no, I don’t even want to think about it. Forbes chewed-up Ky earlier today. Hee, hee. I met Eclipse again; he seems like an equitable sort of chap. Not much else to write about really. Just that I’m scared but in denial of my fear. So, what’s new? My refutations are probably foolishness but they keep the fear at bay.

Whatever we find out there, I hope it’s friendly.’

End Log Entry 1148.

General Forbes closed the door to his office and sat down at his mahogany desk to examine the touch-screen now before him. He considered Lieutenant Ky and gave some more thought as to whether or

not he should be accompanying them on their journey to the ‘unknown’. As it happened, the destination of their ship, the *D.K. Lillee*, was not as unspecified as most believed.

He checked the assignment’s timetable, the vessel’s payload, and finally the senior personnel register. He had no interest in the sizeable infantry and artillery attachments. They were there only to get the ‘job’ done if required.

‘General Forbes; Jason.

Colonel Jinksy; Andrew.

Captain Truth; Peter.

First Officer: First Lieutenant Jarre; Claude.

Second Officer: Second Lieutenant Odora; Ganna.

Security Officer: Second Lieutenant Eclipse; Vanein.

Tactical Officer: Second Lieutenant Ky; Tobias.

Technical Officer: Second Lieutenant Harris; Reginald.

Science Officer: Second Lieutenant Winters; Maron.

Medical Officer: Second Lieutenant Hope; Jamie Michelle.’

Other than Jinksy and himself, they were all relatively wet behind the ears.

That was how control central wanted it.

He would be called upon to make assessments and determinations of magnitude, and if anything happened to him, the responsibility would fall to the Colonel. Both men were capable—both knew what was expected. He touched the screen before him to go over their objectives once more.

‘CONFIDENTIAL:

Mission: ‘Sapphire Dawn.’

Primary objective: Reconnaissance. Investigate the planet Callon for forthcoming invasion projection. Preliminary data indicates the sphere is suitable for the expansion of the SIGMUS IV program. The computer will make the analysis and render a conclusion according to the pre-programmed criteria.

Secondary objective: If the sphere is found suitable, and if opposition is nominal, use attached infantry and artillery units to secure world. All indigenous life, whether passive or hostile, is disposable. Repeat: Disposable.

Crew: Expendable (from Colonel below). The crew's survival must not take precedence over either of the two objectives. If conflict occurs from any crewmember, they are to be removed. The survival of the crew is not to be considered essential at any phase.'

The General frowned sceptically. Even he didn't know what the SIGMUS IV program was. And if he didn't know, then *who* precisely did?

Chapter 1

June 2, 2355.

For most species in the cosmos, the year 2355 came and went uneventfully. Certainly the Telreikans were given a year to remember with their sun going supernova. Then there was the mysterious collapse of an S star, a red giant, in the Equabus system that attracted zealous attention from cosmologists. The Adders obtaining the universal blazer cup was also a significant event. By and large, however, the earth calendar year itself was unremarkable for most. Unfortunately for the Callonites, 2355 was a year they would prefer to forget although that was, regrettably from the point of view of a Callonite, no longer possible because in order for a species to forget something at least one member of their race must survive.

On the planet Callon, the Tharnian Empire now reigns—their sovereignty already beyond doubt. The previous inhabitants were no longer required. The Empire's policy in relation to its acquired worlds is straightforward enough. If an inhabited planet is invaded and deemed unsuitable, it is destroyed. Should the planet be found suitable, the populace is to be either eliminated or enslaved. All action taken is in strict accordance to the order of the unprecedented Sojan, the greatest Tharnian Supreme Commander to have graced the Empire.

When the Empire arrives, usually effective opposition is minimal. Callon hadn't proved to be an exception. Conceivably, surrender had seemed like a good idea at the commencement of the invasion but as the populace was of no value to the Empire, it only expedited the exterminations. Had the Callonites chosen non-cooperation and subversion against the inevitable it is doubtful the culmination of their subsistence would have been divergent.

From here, things should have gone as planned. However, after the invasion, the humans arrived and dissonance began. A mere non-indigenous group of insects that would not stand against the Tharnian Empire for more than an ephemeral moment but a niggling pestilence nonetheless.

“Right! You, move it,” yelled Ky, his razer pistol levelled. The operation to capture Maron Winters was unfolding favourably but time was of the essence. If they didn’t get away from here soon the place would be crawling with Tharnians.

Winters stared blankly at him. “I’m not moving. Kill me if you want, but I’m not going anywhere!” He wondered how prudent his last sentence was. He had betrayed the people before him and they wouldn’t need much of an excuse to dispense with him now. He gazed at the faces before him. Ky, late twenties, supposedly a tactician though no one could remember him doing anything momentous. Ever.

‘Give a punk a gun and get an attitude for free,’ he supposed.

Forbes, the *‘past his use-by date’* General who expected this mission to be trouble-free but found the soft, cute, fluffy rabbits found in space were hard, ugly, and equipped with claws and fangs. Eclipse, the young Security Officer who was literally larger than life. The giant had a temper to match his frame and would probably savour introducing him to the apex of pain. He looked around but couldn’t see Ganna, Harris, or Jarre. Perhaps they were already dead. Ganna had once been his friend; how pretty she was: Harris he never wanted to know; how bland he was: Jarre should have been drowned at birth; how unpleasant he had always been.

With a nod from Forbes, Eclipse moved over to Winters, raised his hand, and struck the cowering figure down with a swift backhand. He then proceeded to haul Winters’s body over his shoulder. The group then started back out into the icy, piercing wind.

Outside lay several Tharnian bodies, victims of the short battle that had occurred.

The winds howled as Ky looked back.

Jarre was still inside the merzer.

He turned back and hurried inside the alien craft. He found Jarre, who was busy scanning the console’s array of flickering lights. “Jarre, we’ve got to move. We’ve got Winters.”

Jarre didn’t seem to acknowledge Ky’s presence. Ky grabbed his shoulder. “C’mon, buddy, we’ve gotta move. *Now!*”

Jarre frowned. “You go. I’m going to try to follow you in the merzer.”

“Come on!” exclaimed Ky. “You’ll never manage to fly this

thing!”

“Then I’ll die trying,” Jarre replied. “For this technology, it’s worth the risk. Move out, Ky.”

Ky didn’t like it. What chance did Jarre have of getting the alien vessel off the ground? They knew little about Tharnian technology other than it was intended to kill promptly. “But I—”

“Move it!” ordered Jarre, breathing heavily as he scanned the controls. “I know what I’m doing.”

“You’ve lost the plot, more like. Well, good luck,” offered Ky biting his lip indecisively for a moment before scampering out into the wind. He didn’t want to leave his friend behind but knew him well enough to accept that it was pointless trying to argue.

“Hey, what’s going on back there?” shouted Forbes, struggling to be heard above the wind.

“Jarre’s going to try and pilot the merzer. He’s crazy? Tell me something I don’t know! I couldn’t stop him so I don’t suggest you try,” answered Ky as he proceeded into their vehicle, the *Tornado*.

Forbes hesitated for a moment. He could not go back for Jarre, of that, he was convinced. General Jason Forbes was originally in charge of the troop, and officially, that remained. Conversely, Jarre came up with the solutions. It was he, and he alone, who had envisaged the strategies that had kept them alive. The contemplation of losing him was alarming but there was little or no point in giving him an order that would never be obeyed. He took a final glimpse at the merzer, noting the crimson pennant of the Tharnian Empire by the entrance thrash about in the inclement airstreams vigorously, almost contemptuously, as though prophesying Jarre’s inevitable doom. He spat at the soil, an appropriate gesture to farewell a recalcitrant man, before rushing into the *Tornado*.

Ganna moved her hands expertly over the multitude of switches that projected from the control panel. “No sign of Jarre yet,” she said, somewhat fretful as Ky moved by her side to examine the scandar. They both stepped down as Harris, their only technician, began his watch.

“What does he think he’s doing?” said a dumbfounded Ky, more to himself than to anyone in particular. “We’re going to have Tharnians swarming all over the place any second!”

“Rhetorical questions we don’t need—Jarre we do,” said Ganna

icily.

“Activity to the west; looks like at least one patrol, maybe two,” said Harris. “They’re coming.” He didn’t know whether he was exultant or poignant that Jarre wanted to stay behind. On one hand, Jarre was a survivor, and he had kept them alive. On the other, he was unbalanced. Harris didn’t like that sort of *intrinsic worth* in anyone.

Forbes stepped up to inspect the scandar. “Looks like ground vehicles. Air support’s also closing from extreme range.” He paused, considering Jarre for a moment longer. “I think it’s time to leave.”

“He’s right,” yelled Eclipse in a thunderous voice that matched his powerful frame. “We gotta move!”

Forbes almost afforded a smile. He was back in command.

“What about Jarre?” said a concerned Ky. “We can’t just ditch him.”

“If Jarre thought he could pilot that ship then that’s his call. If he’s right we’ll toast him, if he’s wrong we’ll bury him. Punch it, Ganna!” Eclipse yelled.

Ganna shot a worried look at Forbes who scratched his chin thoughtfully for a moment before nodding his confirmation. She took the wheel before her tentatively.

She didn’t want to believe she had seen Forbes masking a smile.

Ky watched the merzer vanish as the vehicle’s engine hummed to life and the vehicle rushed back en route for their hideaway. “So long, buddy.”

Zor, the Tharnian commanding the assignment known as the *daborjen* incursion, sat alone within the security of city seven’s command centre. His brutish face, with bark-like skin and scales, garishly coloured eyes and cruel mouth equipped with fang-like teeth suggested that the giant claws at the end of his arms were not intended for peaceable deeds. His mind cycled through the events of the past three months.

Callon had been an ideal target. There were no complications and little resistance, as expected.

Then they came.

A group of humans that had no entitlement to exist yet alone be here. It *seemed* they were on a mission to explore unknown galaxies, and their expedition had brought them to Callon. While primordial, these humans had developed space travel. Their craft had been seized for

study upon its capture. Most of the intruders were incarcerated and offered a choice. Cooperate or expire. The number that had opted for death was disconcerting and unexpected. Even more disturbing were the group that had managed to escape in the mother ship's surface vehicle. Although small, it was swift and unpredictably well armed. It posed no threat to a potent Empire, and its capture was imminent, but it seemed to be constantly making well-planned strikes against insignificant targets. Two months had passed and the vessel was intact and its crew alive. Their most recent attack saw them capture one of their own kind, a scientist who was one of the few that had agreed to obey the Tharnians. He would undoubtedly be killed for defecting and deserved no better.

As much as he required their demise, Zor was enjoying this slight diversion. These humans were cunning. Rarely had he encountered such resistance from an enemy so inconsequential. They also pointed to another developed civilisation, although clearly not as advanced as his own. Even so, the possibility of another short and bloody campaign excited him.

The current hideout was located within a cave set into the foothills of an area christened Key South. It had been Jarre's idea to establish their hideaway here, and thus far, they had not had a Tharnian patrol pass within a two-mile radius. The rubble-strewn floor of the fissure had various pieces of salvaged equipment set up indiscriminately. As a base, it wasn't structured or systematic, but it served its purpose. Seated behind one of the pieces of equipment, a scandar unit, Ganna stared at the screen in silence.

Ky crouched beside her. "Anything?" he whispered.

"Nothing," she responded distantly, her eyes not leaving the scandar's display.

She didn't want to lose Jarre.

Not only for the sake of the others but also for herself. He was someone to her. She suspected that underneath his at times glacial exterior was a man of sensitivity and compassion. A man who already cared about her more than he did himself. There was something between them and she hoped that Jarre felt it too. Heck, she knew that he felt *something* for her—one of her former shipmates had told her as much, and he'd heard the story from Ky, Jarre's best friend. Why did he have to try and pull off the impossible?

Seated at a table nearby, Winters watched as Forbes continued to pace back and forth. He'd always reviled Forbes. The military-minded idiot lacked the ability to tie his own shoes yet alone direct others. Yet, now he would have to answer to him for his desertion.

Forbes circled the traitor, arms folded. "Maron Winters, man of science. Dedicated, in fact, to his own fellow man."

"Save your cynicism, Forbes. I don't owe you any explanations," said Winters dryly, attempting to mask his fear.

"You've betrayed us, Winters. Selling us out to those monsters!" yelled Forbes. "How could you turn your back on us? Tell me!"

Winters remained expressionless. "It was all right for you, General. You escaped—I didn't. You didn't see what they did to Truth and the others. If I didn't cooperate, I'd be dead."

"Oh when we're through with you, you'll wish you were," threatened Ky. He had wanted to rough Winters up, for old times sake if nothing else, but the General hadn't come to the party.

"Ganna, we were friends," said Winters weakly, desperate for an ally. If he could get one, just one of them onside he might be able to wriggle his way out of this one.

"You're right—we were," spat Ganna, turning away from the prisoner's stare.

"The Tharnians are your only friends now," said Ky. "And they're not here to protect you."

Winters heaved a sigh. "Surely you could use a scientist? I'm more valuable to you alive than dead."

"I won't be happy until I see your head on that wall," said Ky, pointing to a wall in an attempt to add a dramatic touch to his threat. It was a hollow threat, and he already felt asinine having made it, but he was quite enjoying this grilling.

"This is my interrogation, Ky. If you don't mind," snapped Forbes. The chain of command had been re-established and he would not have his authority commandeered again. How Ky had even been selected for this mission in the first place was a mystery he would have solved if they ever returned. Someone in personnel would be *much* better off if they never made it off Callon.

Ky manufactured a wounded expression. "Sorry! Didn't mean to cast a shadow over your solitary moment of glory," he returned.

"And *just* what is *that* supposed to mean?" demanded Forbes in

anger.

“It means that with Jarre not being here right now, the jack has come out of the box. Think I liked you better when you were in the box.”

The General frowned. “Listen up, Ky, and listen good. I outrank you all, and Jarre has always played second fiddle to me.”

“Not in the orchestra I’m hearing,” challenged Ky, praying that Jarre would return to rescue them from the leadership of this buffoon.

“Don’t push me, Ky,” threatened Forbes, his temper rising.

“Forbes and Winters,” muttered Ky under his breath. “Control central’s teams are just like a deck of cards. You get two jokers in every pack.”

Ganna snickered. She hadn’t meant to. Their predicament alone meant that Callon was no place for a smile.

“I heard that!” snarled Forbes. He contemplated punishing the loser in front of him when they returned.

If they returned.

“The ears of an elephant and the brain of a flea,” mused Ky, almost causing a smile to appear on the face of Winters. That bothered Ky. He vowed he would wipe the half-smile from the turncoat’s face but first things first. He loved nothing better than taunting the clueless General and he now had the ascendancy.

“That’s it!” snapped Forbes, stepping towards Ky who stood his ground. He would put an end to Ky’s insubordination here and now. “I’ve had it with you.” He had wanted to introduce Ky to his fists, *knuckles* and *thumper*, for some time.

“A ship, looks like a merzer, is heading our way,” interrupted Ganna, barely able to contain her excitement.

“Must be your lucky day,” said Ky, now face to face with Forbes. He walked across to Winters. “I can’t say the same for you, though. When Jarre gets back and finds you’re still alive ... you’ll wish you weren’t.”

Winters raised an eyebrow. If there was one person in the entire universe he didn’t want to see, it was First Officer Claude Jarre. If *‘psychosis’* wasn’t his middle name, it ought to be.

Morock approached Zor in a state of apparent shock. His Commander would not be pleased. “Commander. Merzer 411 has been ... stolen.”

“Repeat that?” snarled Zor in astonishment. Tharnian vessels were not *stolen*. Such events did not take place.

“Merzer 411 has been captured by the humans, Commander,” reported Morock again, his voice a little unsteady.

“That is impossible. They would be unable to apprehend or pilot it! Why do you speak this madness? Have the sub-zero airstreams frozen your mind?”

“Merzer 411 is under their control, Commander. It has been confirmed,” reported Morock again. He wanted to growl at Zor’s jibe but did not.

One who wished to take their next breath freely did not anger Zor.

Zor frowned though guardedly. This was not part of the arrangement. He had given the humans their former crewmember, and although they didn’t know it, Maron Winters was a walking beacon. As anticipated, the creatures had attacked the merzer’s crew and taken their hostage. The detainee was still with them; thus they could be located and destroyed. Again, he had underestimated their canniness. The risk was negligible but the diversion was now becoming something more inauspicious. The lingering humans had to be destroyed. “We have the location of their sanctuary. Destroy it at once.”

Morock nodded and turned to leave. He was grateful to be leaving Zor’s presence.

“Wait!” hissed Zor. “Send four of our best pilots to find the merzer under their control. Have it destroyed. *Lynn* is to lead the squadron.”

As Morock shuddered and turned to leave once more, Zor raised his clawed hand.

“Morock, you were in charge of this operation. How is it possible they captured our vessel?”

Morock took several seconds to respond. “I do not know, Commander. Every precaution was taken.”

Zor sat deep in thought for a moment. This was inconceivable. He waved his hand to dismiss Morock, who nodded again and left. He stretched, a petite smile forming on a face any human would find bestial and unpleasant. He leant back in his chair, the smile still brewing. He couldn’t help himself; this had been a tremendous little diversion. Alas, its end was drawing near.

Jarre pushed his way past the hugs and greetings and made his way to Winters. “What did you tell them?”

Winters stretched in a similar fashion to that of a contented feline. “Well well, if it isn’t Jarre. I might have known you’d still be alive. You are goi-”

He stopped in mid-sentence as Jarre produced a razer pistol and levelled it at his forehead.

“As you insist. The coordinates of Earth, our technological state—whatever they wanted to know,” managed Winters nervously. He knew he had to try to escape. It was only a matter of time before someone decided to kill him.

Jarre’s rage attempted to entice him into squeezing the trigger, but he refused to yield to it. That would make him even worse than this traitor. He shook-off temptation’s final whisper of *‘why not?’* and assessed the consequences triggered by the craven-tongue before him. The Tharnians now knew where to find Earth. This base human had sold out his race in order to save his own worthless skin.

All of a sudden, Winters leapt at Jarre, both hands going for the pistol. The two struggled before the weapon discharged. Everyone looked on in dismay as Winters fell to the ground then, in unison, back at a bemused Jarre, who had the pistol in hand.

“You’ve killed him,” Forbes said in disbelief.

Ganna bent down to check for a pulse as Jarre took a reality check and failed. He opened his mouth but the words did not come out.

“He’s dead,” Ganna announced to the surprise of no one.

Jarre closed his eyes for a moment. He hadn’t intended to kill him. Surely, the others knew that? He forced himself to manage, opening his eyes and regaining the use of his vocal cords. “Everyone into the merzer. We’re leaving.”

“What?” said Forbes, still a little bewildered at having seen his prisoner die. How could he cross-examine the prisoner now?

Jarre fired an austere glare at the General. “They know where to find Earth. If we don’t warn them, we won’t have an Earth to return to. We move; we live; we stay; we die. Not the hardest of decisions you’ll have to make today.”

Forbes stood his ground, but it was of no advantage. One after the other, Harris, Ky, and Eclipse rushed from the cavern. Ganna put her hand on Jarre’s arm, her expression informing him that it wasn’t his

fault, and followed the others.

His pride hurt, Forbes felt like being foolish and insisting on staying here with the *Tornado*. “What if I insist on staying here?” he asked pensively.

Jarre frowned. “Then you die here. I’m leaving and I think we both know who the others will follow.”

“You really think you’re something, don’t you?” Forbes said pithily.

Jarre appeared to gather his thoughts and then abandon them, as though he couldn’t be bothered responding. He didn’t, after all, need to say anything further.

“There will come a day when I’m back in command,” the General said finally, annoyed by his First Officer’s silence.

Jarre nodded curtly, as though accepting the possibility. “And may God help us all when that day arrives.”

“Your death will come sooner,” the General declared brusquely.

Jarre approached him. “Maybe. But there is something I’d like to say to you before I go, and now suddenly seems as good an opportunity as ever. If we don’t make it off this dirt ball, and that’s always been the most likely conclusion to our struggle, I’ll die believing you knew a great deal more about this operation than the rest of us.” He had wanted to say that for some time. The considerable infantry and artillery attachments that had been pulverised by the Tharnians on arrival for one thing. The course that took them *straight* to an allegedly uncharted world another.

The General’s expression gave away nothing. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” He paused. “And even if I did, I wouldn’t be either able or prepared to discuss it with you,” he added sourly.

Jarre met his stare. “I think you came here for something,” he said. “Don’t ask me what, because I’m sure I have no idea. But something. Problem was the Tharnians beat you here. You still deployed our infantry and artillery regiments: like lambs to the slaughter they charged into a species so brutal, they could only do one thing. Die.” He struggled to contain his anger. “If I had of left you in command you’d have sent us all to meet the same fate.”

The General almost nodded. “I have no comment to make. Not to you—not to anyone.”

Jarre decided to let it go.

For now.

Once they were back on Earth, if anyone would listen to him, this would be mentioned again. “In that case, I suggest you either leave or expire. Now which is it to be?”

Forbes’s gaze fell to the floor. His sense of self-preservation forced him to swallow the caustic taste of humiliation. Slowly, he ambled out. Jarre followed. Maron Winters did not.

Galkway, the Tharnian combat technician, grinned as he looked up at Morock. “Phase matter targeted, sir.”

“Fire,” said Morock, looking down at the ground, his face a portrait of defeat. He had done what he could to keep the humans alive. The Legion he served needed more operatives within the Empire. He could do no more without exposing his true motives.

An enticing cherry-coloured button stopped blinking as a robust claw pushed it. Galkway had received twelve certifiabiles at the *Darksphere* academy. When it came to phase matter, he was unsurpassed.

There was no tremendous explosion, nor were there any kinds of fireworks. Yet in a few seconds, a large part of Key South would simply cease to exist.

“Is she difficult to fly?” asked Ky with a victorious grin. He couldn’t believe Jarre had pulled it off. Was there a chance that this nightmare was going to end?

“So far, so good. I used to train on an obscure simulator, Elite, that was amazingly similar. I bet this thing even has a docking computer. I haven’t figured out the weapon systems yet, though,” Jarre said, seated in the Captain’s chair. Forbes had wanted the chair for himself but Jarre had been most insistent.

“How’re you doing over there, Ganna?” shouted Ky as Harris walked by, mumbling he’d never seen anything like it.

She glanced up at Ky for a brief moment. “I’m getting there,” she said. “Readouts seem pretty straightforward.”

“Can this thing get us back to Earth,” quizzed Forbes, his voice demanding the authority he craved. He continued to gaze at the Captain’s chair. He would be seated in it soon enough. Before long, the others would follow their General again. It was just a matter of time.

“It had better,” threatened Jarre.

“Command, we have the enemy merzer on visual. Awaiting your orders.”

Zor entered and gave the order that Morock could no longer delay.

“Engage and destroy.”

Nothing more needed to be said. Tharnians began to resume their duties. Four elite pilots, flying in more advanced merzers than that of their target, would not be evaded by the humans that could barely pilot their stolen craft.

Zor exhaled noisily. They had struggled well but the ripple was out of the now still waters. His eyes found Morock and noted how uncomfortable he looked.

“We’re out of Callon’s atmosphere.”

Jarre’s statement brought relief to all except Ganna. “Don’t get too excited just yet. I’m not entirely sure but I think we’ve got company. It looks like the Tharnians are in pursuit. At a guess, I’d say they’re merzers.”

“Great,” said Ky, suddenly dejected. “Looks like all bets are off.”

Jarre’s forehead became a roadmap. “How many?”

“Four, I think,” she replied. “You’d better figure out how to power up our weapons or it’s *basta la vista*.”

“Well somebody do something!” said Harris, looking from Jarre to Forbes.

Ky grinned. “That’s rich. Coming from a man who has never done *anything!*”

“In case you’ve forgotten I am a technician,” snapped Harris, glaring at Ky.

“Oh I *hadn’t* forgotten,” Ky retorted.

Forbes approached Jarre, suddenly finding some audacity. “Now then, our venerated superman. Can you get us out of this one or is it really *au revoir?*”

Jarre didn’t reply. Instead, he wished for a sticker marked ‘stupid’ that he could place on the General’s forehead. Then at least everyone else would know what sort of questions to expect from the man.

“Just how many languages do you speak?” Ky asked.

Forbes put a hand to his shirt's collar. "Three, as a matter of fact." He had no time for Ky but it was only natural the simpleton would be impressed by his trilingualism. Adding to this his comprehension of linguistics, pragmatics, and semantics, he had to wonder if there was any extremity to his intellectual capacity.

Ky's mouth formed a grin. "Yet you can't string an intelligible sentence together in any one of them. I think you got ripped off, buddy."

Despite their situation, a few nervous chuckles resulted.

Lynn, the leader of the squadron in pursuit of the renegade merzer, snarled in satisfaction at his computer's readout. The enemy was in range and he had instructions to tear it down. These imprudent humans should have avoided Callon.

"I have acquired the target," announced Krekdas, Lynn's wingman.

"Squadron is to remain on target. Fire at my command," ordered Lynn, keeping his merzer steady. His squadron's formation remained tight as they closed in for the kill.

Jarre ripped open a nearby panel in desperation. So far, every unmarked switch had been pressed or flicked. Everything from the climate control to the self-destruct sequence had been put into action (and in the last instance, quickly aborted). The panel revealed three switches, all of which looked significant but there were no markings to indicate their functions. The first one was activated.

"Here goes nothing," he said doubtfully.

Lynn watched as the escape capsule was ejected from the enemy merzer. The humans were more foolish than he had thought. "I will deal with the escape capsule. Remain on target and destroy the merzer at will."

"Acknowledged. I am engaging now," Krekdas responded.

At once, three of the four ships opened fire, streams of lethal trifle resulting.

Jarre hit the second switch. A message appeared onscreen.

'EXHAUST PORT EJECTED'

It was not hopeful. At that moment the ship rocked violently.

"This is good," Ky said derisively.

Lynn watched trifire strike the merzer as he moved his ship out of formation. He stared in disbelief as the rear of the enemy craft grew from a distant light to a raging inferno. They had ejected their exhaust section! He pushed his merzer's control stick down harder as his ship was struck. The other three didn't have a chance and vanished as the intense heat consumed them.

He heard his vessel power-down and quickly checked the damage report.

*LEFT WING DISABLED
ENGINE ONE DESTROYED
ENGINE TWO DESTROYED
PHASE MATTER CANNON DESTROYED
TRI FIRE CANNON ONE DESTROYED
TRI FIRE CANNON TWO DAMAGED 87 %
REPAIR UNIT NOT OPERATIONAL
LIFE SUPPORT SYSTEM DAMAGED 17 %
POWER BEACON FOUR RUPTURED
HULL DAMAGED 45 %
COMM UNIT DESTROYED'*

He bellowed in anger as his prey vanished. Not at all grateful for his life, he operated his distress beacon. Commander Zor would not be pleased, and when Zor was angered, those responsible often died.

"I don't believe it. You've destroyed them! Jarre, we're free!" squealed Ganna, running over to hug him.

Jarre returned her embrace while studying the display in front of him. He smiled as they disengaged the hug—it had been worth getting them off Callon alive *just* for that. "Without our exhaust system we seem to have lost some power, and I doubt we'll be able to enter any planet's atmosphere, but I think we can make it back to Earth."

Ky pulled at his dishevelled shirt and ran a hand over his short hair. "I can't believe we shook them. That was unbelievable!"

Harris refused to sound satisfied. "Does the ship's computer accept coordinate input?" he asked sceptically.

"Yes," said Jarre. "Yes, I believe it does."

There was a brief silence as the six occupants looked at one another. Ky began a bout of shadow-boxing while even Forbes found

himself smiling. Jarre glimpsed at Ganna, his eyes lost in hers for a moment.

“That was pretty impressive,” she said with a smirk.

Jarre managed to return the smile. “And just a little providential.”

“How long till we get home?” asked Eclipse, flashing a newly formed grin. “We are going home, right?”

“Yes,” answered Jarre. “My best guess? About forty days,” he added.

Forbes was the first to yell with excitement. He would deal with Jarre later. And Ky. Right now, it was time to celebrate!

“Let’s make merry and kiss Callon goodbye,” said Ky, looking up to the viewscreen, which displayed the vanishing sphere.

“Anyone fancy a Tharnian wafer?” asked Eclipse, waving a box he’d found earlier.

Ky laughed. “They ain’t pizza but bring ‘em on!”

“I’ll check the hold,” offered Ganna. “There’s *got* to be some more delectable food onboard.”

“And find something to drink,” instructed Ky, licking his lips in anticipation.

Harris drew alongside Jarre. “I do believe it’s party time.”

Jarre withdrew in his own silence, seemingly unaware of the joy around him. The revelry was a little too premature for his liking.

At control central, New York City, Private John Froyd studied the scandar in front of him with a frown. Although he had notified his Sergeant some ten minutes ago, there was still no sign of his superior officer. He expected nothing different from a would-be brass hat. Taking your time when there was a possible crisis was a privilege of rank that he had seen exercised all too often. He looked around with increasing impatience, finally sighting Speering who marched toward him.

“This had better be important, Froyd. Protocol and midnight wake-up calls hardly complement each other.”

“Sarge,” he said with a rushed salute. “We have detected an unidentified vessel. It has just stationed itself outside our atmosphere.”

Speering remained silent as he moved across to inspect the scandar’s readout for himself. Froyd tended to become unnerved at the first sign of nothing, usually. Once he’d put the entire complex on alert

over a speck of dust that had attached itself to a display.

“Sir,” yelled another Private, almost forgetting he was addressing a Sergeant. “They’re attempting to make contact with us.”

“Open all channels and arm the defence sphere,” barked Speering.

The room fell silent. Whoever they were, it was their move. Over the years many unidentified vessels had appeared. Only one had proven noteworthy. Mostly it was just another ship trying to return home unnoticed.

The receiving monitors crackled to life. *“This is General Jason Forbes, previously the Commander of the D.K. Lillee. Are you receiving me, control central?”*

Speering felt tempted to cheer, but thanks to many years of discipline, was able to contain himself. “This is Sergeant Speering of control central. We are receiving you, General.”

“Sergeant, it is a delight to hear your voice again. We have so much to tell you, but first, we need a ship to rendezvous with us. The craft we have acquired is sophisticated but due to some damage, caused by my First Officer, I don’t think we’d make it past the geocorona if we attempted to enter the atmosphere. Care to oblige?”

“It would be a pleasure. I’ll have a transcarrier rendezvous with you in thirty minutes.”

“Make it the H.D. Bogart. We’d like to return in style,” requested Forbes, requesting the most distinguished transcarrier ever commissioned.

Speering echoed the smiles of his subordinates. “Of course. I’ll see to it at once.” Although he knew that everything within the walls of control central was confidential by decree, the Sergeant couldn’t wait to get home to see his wife, Hazel, and tell her the good news.

“Excellent. I shall see you soon, then.”

“You shall, General, and welcome home!” said Speering, glancing over to Private Froyd. “Let’s bring ‘em in.”

General Forbes was giving the orders once more. Jarre was no longer the man with the answers: he was a pilot and nothing more. They had made it back to Earth, a sanctuary that understood authority. Here, Jason Forbes was a name that people knew.

He was a General dammit!

He was the one who had led the exploration mission for his

world. The transcarrier would arrive shortly, and he would be back on his remarkable planet. Earth: the name itself so delightful. At last, things would return to normal and he would return a hero. A tickertape parade would be only the beginning. Then there would be all those interviews to attend. He looked away as Jarre seemed to notice his glare of repugnance. He began planning a speech, knowing his world would remember and treasure it for years to come. He would go down in the history books.

With the discovery of Zenite, we knew we were not alone in the universe. We expected to find many other civilised societies in our stellar neighbours, but found only disappointment. Our mission took us beyond the universe as you know and understand it. Outside what you have seen, there waits a hostile universe, where the race for supremacy is the only one being run.'

He paused for a moment, uncertain if his world was ready to be exposed to the frightful truth. If they were not ready, they would not be told. Unawareness was the only trait that prevented *Joe Public* from surrendering the illusion of lucid comprehension. From the 1947 cover-up at Roswell to the attempted infiltration that was thwarted in 2278, the government had excelled at keeping secrets that the masses were neither ready to comprehend nor able to acknowledge. It was for their own benefit, after all.

Three months passed, ninety-two days to be exact, few of which Jarre had enjoyed.

One good thing had happened to him though, an event surpassing anything he'd ever hoped for. Ganna asked him to marry her and in doing so, offered his life the completion it needed. Perhaps she was grateful to him. Conceivably the question had been asked while her judgement was still being clouded by sentiment. Jarre knew he shouldn't distrust her motives. When he was in the company of Ganna, he felt vulnerable and enjoyed that emotion tremendously. By the standards demanded by the world, he wasn't a desirable man. He lacked fundamental social skills and wasn't likely to acquire them.

She was the complete opposite, so why did she walk down the aisle with him? While Jarre could not altogether fathom out her motives, he took advantage of her delirium and answered her proposal in the affirmative. They then married that very day. Ganna, who by her own admission was a *'take charge kinda gal'*, had made all the arrangements in advance,

obviously confident that he would assent. He *may* be insane but he *wasn't* crazy. They had been going out regularly over the last couple of months but he hadn't expected their relationship to flower so speedily.

While she became the colour in his day, replacing his prior-habitual solitary shades of grey, all had not gone to according to the script. Just three weeks after the bliss began, she moved out and took it with her. She had said she would never leave him but couldn't live around him until he promised to stop living his life for the Tharnians. She would return when he agreed, but Jarre knew that day could never come. That day would be preceded by the advent of the destroyers. When they were through, there would be no more *days of wonder* for anyone. He anticipated his wife would be his ally, and at first, she was. However, while she planned trips, activities and a family, he planned strategies to force control central into action against the pending Tharnian menace. Ganna would have to wait, and this she could not accept.

He didn't like it.

She was his world and so much more, but he was certain he must press on. The Tharnians had to be stopped before they brought to the Earth what they had delivered to Callon.

He was brought back to his immediate reality.

"This won't take long, provided you cooperate," intruded the voice.

Currently in one of the interview rooms at control central, Cudex, the interrogator who answered only to General Forbes, was again questioning Jarre. A slight, near-skeletal man with unoccupied eyes, concave forehead, and tapered cranium; his coldness was, by reputation, unrivalled. He wore a modern designer suit that, using unobtrusive sensors, changed colour to match the mood of the wearer. Therefore, it was always overcast.

Always.

Cudex was devoid of ethics and compassion, partial to unscrupulous *medical* research and if any of the current rumours were true, adept at intimidation, brainwashing, torture, reprogramming, and other behaviour modification techniques. The interrogator was also outspoken on several contentious and divisive issues and an active proponent of ageism, euthanasia, abortion, and infanticide. He was also one of the principal lobbyists that had successfully campaigned for the

restoration of capital punishment back in 2339.

“Jarre, you’re a hero. You’ve survived the encounter with the aliens and you’re home. So, tell me, because I am *most* curious, why can’t you start getting on with your life again?”

Jarre considered his answer before replying, though his answer was not the issue that needed contemplation, it was more the obtuseness of his fellow man.

Their story had been whitewashed. The press had their instructions and in turn, the people had been told that the *D.K. Lillee* had been caught in freak anomaly within a planetary nebula. Most of the crew had been killed and were it not for the heroics of General Forbes; there would have been no survivors.

In short, an impetuously trumped-up fairy-tale.

The story was full of holes rather than credence but as the government controlled the media, they knew better than to question it. The rest of the world simply didn’t know any better. The truth itself, which seemed to have become misplaced, had been taken with much salt. Many heads had been nodded but it seemed the administration was more interested in the merzer spacecraft than anything else. Excluding General Forbes, every survivor had been told to stick to the fictitious chronicle and enjoy his or her life. Everyone had been given a sizeable bonus along with an immediate pension and seemed agreeable to go along with the plan. All and sundry but Jarre, that is.

“Well?” said Cudex, his thin frame crouched forward.

Jarre took a deep breath. “The Tharnians will come and be assured if we’re not ready for them, we’ll be destroyed.”

“Yes, so you say, Jarre. Do you really think they’ll even find us?”

“Yes,” repeated Jarre. “Y-e-s.”

Cudex frowned, his hollow eyes perhaps attempting to challenge Jarre. “How can you be so sure?”

Jarre resisted the urge to yawn. He had answered these questions before. Many times. “Winters gave them the coordinates.”

“Yes,” Cudex agreed. “And you killed him for that?”

“I *didn’t* kill him,” Jarre said obdurately. “There was a struggle and,” he paused, “he lost. That’s how it was. He attacked me and tried to take the weapon.”

“Forbes recalls the incident somewhat differently. I think Winters would have told you whatever you wanted to hear.” The

interrogator's lips thinned. "I know I would have if I had a gun in my face."

Jarre shook his head. "Winters was telling the truth."

"Again, Jarre, how can you be certain?" Cudex asked priggishly.

Jarre's chest rose as he took in some more oxygen. How long would this nonsense go on? "He had no reason to lie."

Cudex picked up a clipboard and proceeded to drum his fingers on it. "And the statement made by Forbes?"

"The fabrication of a born story-teller who detests me."

"Oh, I see," came the reply. Cudex now discarded the clipboard. It was doubtful he needed to retrieve it in the first place. But Cudex did many things for the sake of appearance. More than that, for the sake of upping the ante in the mind-games he loved to play, nay, dictate.

Jarre refrained from hammering the desk in front of him. "I don't think you see at all. Unless we prepare ourselves for this assault, we'll all die. Plain and simple. Everything that you know will be decimated and cease to be."

"We've stepped up our patrols," offered Cudex with a slight smile. "What more would you have us do?"

"We need to contact our allies," said Jarre, blinking slowly. "If we don't act soon, it will be too late."

Cudex nodded, walking reticently about the room. "Summer has moved on. Why can't you do the same?"

Jarre sighed. This was futile. "If only I could."

Now the interrogator came closer. "Why can't you just take your bonus and resume your life like the others? Are we asking too much of you?"

"You speak of life without a future," remarked Jarre coldly.

"Do you smoke, Jarre?" asked Cudex, offering him a cigarette as he lit one for himself.

"My lungs indicated that I may still require them so I quit," replied Jarre, not welcoming the deviation from the topic.

Cudex actually smiled. "Good for you! Mine told me the same thing so I had them replaced."

"It would seem a pity to replace your lungs while leaving your brain untouched," retorted Jarre dryly. It somehow seemed quite appropriate for Cudex to be carrying the lungs of a convicted criminal. They were probably more at home now than they had ever been.

“Pessimistic humour. It goes well with your personality,” Cudex said dryly. “Forbes told me you’d be difficult. You’re not a very joyful man, Jarre. Has anyone ever told you that?”

“Yes. You have. Just now. My dysphoric mood is likely to be matched by everyone else on the planet shortly.”

“Do you know why you’re so disconsolate? Could it be something that stems back to some unpleasant childhood experience?” asked Cudex, putting out his cigarette.

“I don’t recall meeting you as a child,” replied Jarre cynically.

The interrogator’s eyes fell to the ashtray before returning to Jarre. “Amusing. I want an answer, Jarre.”

“I don’t remember,” replied Jarre evenly. “Does it matter?”

“I think it does,” Cudex insisted. He had already determined that his subject was suffering from a mental disorder. “Would you say that either of your parents had a ... disorganised personality? Do you ever hear voices? Experience hallucinations perhaps?”

“You’re wasting your time and mine,” seethed Jarre. “You may be paid for asking these nonsensical questions, but no fiscal recompense will make me sit here and attend to them.”

The interrogator nodded unhurriedly. “Let’s talk about your upbringing then, and about the interplay between biology, psychology and culture. The factors that shaped your disturbed persona.”

“Let’s not,” returned Jarre firmly. He rolled his eyes about and tried to find some further patience within his now-depleted internal reserves.

“You would prefer to talk about the Tharnians and forget about your distressing childhood experiences?”

“The Tharnians are about to give you some very distressing adulthood experiences. One minute you’ll be eating your last meal, the next, this world could be obliterated from orbit.”

“That’s nothing more than conjecture,” argued Cudex. “We used to tell our children that the universe started with a big bang and that we evolved from apes. You must understand that your theory, although you believe it to be fact, is merely a fantasy.”

Jarre refused to back down. “Yet they will come.”

“This false idea you sustain, based on incorrect inference about external reality goes against what *everyone* else who was with you believes and against what constitutes as incontrovertible evidence to the

contrary,” offered Cudex, rubbing his hands together. With a deadpan reaction, he could see his words had fallen on stubborn ears. “Very well,” he said, taking a softer line. “Why, in your infinitesimal opinion, will they come? To get revenge on you? To enslave humanity?”

“*You know why!*” insisted Jarre. This bonehead had read the report.

Cudex raised an eyebrow. “It’s your delusion. You tell me.”

Jarre spat his reply. “They’ll come to fight. Not for gain or some atypical mineral. They’ll come for the thrill of war. One that will be short lived if we don’t prepare ourselves.”

“So now you’re an authority in exobiology are you?” A snort. “This preposterous theory of yours—”

“It is not a theory! It’s an impending inevitability. The Tharnian Empire will—”

“Listen to me, Jarre,” Cudex said with a sneer. “You may have been hot stuff back there in the middle of a crisis but let me tell you something. *The crisis is over.* Now, you have killed one of our top scientists and ever since your return, you have insisted on making trouble for yourself and control central.” He paused, trying to ascertain if any of his words were getting through. “We can and will let your activities go unchecked, but only to a point. If you keep pushing this Tharnian drivel down our throats then we’ll have you dealt with. You *need* to learn to sort and interpret stimuli and select *appropriate* responses. Any rejoinder involving a host of alien invaders is *not* considered apposite. Understand?”

Silence.

Cudex blinked several times, ready to take the next step if needed. Not only would he take it ... he’d enjoy it. “Do you understand me?”

“There are *other* people I can talk to. People who are willing to listen,” Jarre said, considering contacting an acquaintance at bandit radio.

“Yes,” Cudex agreed, flashing his best smile, which was both overcast and grim. “But then we’d be forced to detain you for *treatment*, wouldn’t we? Schizophrenia is a mental disorder, Jarre. This condition can make it difficult for a person to tell the difference between real and imagined experiences, to think logically, to express normal emotional responses and to behave normally in social situations.” The interrogator now frowned severely. “I say—you seem to have *all* of those

symptoms.”

Trembling, Jarre didn't reply. Instead, he searched for additional courage within. People who frequently ruffled the government's feathers predictably ended up in a cerebral asylum with the only release program in sight involving the agitator leaving in a casket.

That was how it was.

He shook his head slowly, determined not to believe a word the malicious man before him had said. He was *not* suffering from a neurological brain disorder.

There was nothing wrong with his mental condition. Was there?

“Psychoanalytic psychotherapy is still the preferred option, along with some fundamental antipsychotics including serotonin and dopamine antagonists, but in your case, I think I'd prefer to try sustained, intensive electroconvulsive therapy,” Cudex continued. The archaic psychoactive drugs like haloperidol, chlorpromazine, and fluphenazine had been superseded by more successful drugs like halmalenazine and chlormaphexazine, which would doubtlessly help, but the likes of Jarre didn't deserve conventional therapy. Shock therapy would be far more ... appropriate. Once the initial condition had been remedied, he would address Jarre's bipolarity. Who knew what else would be found after that? Assessing the subject colloquially and metaphorically rather than conventionally, the man was both a basket case *full* of neurobiological disorders and a fly in the ointment. “I'm telling you to drop your invasion supposition and get on with what's left of your life. Now let me ask you again. Do you understand me?”

Jarre closed his eyes, whispering, “*Shove your mandate.*” He opened his eyes again, and responded. “I understand.”

The interrogator appeared satisfied. “There's a good boy. Next thing we know you'll learn how to roll over and fetch a stick.” He laughed at his own remark. “We *can* and *will* help you control the psychosis associated with your condition, in particular your delusions and hallucinations, *if* we hear that you've been speaking of these things again. Big Brother is concerned about you.” A pause. “You have been warned.”

“As have you,” retorted Jarre as stood up. “You're a small-minded man, Cudex.”

“Really?” said the interrogator. “Most people think I'm perspicacious. Like my wife, for instance. A brilliant woman.”

Jarre tried to form a grin but failed. Cudex's wife was an astrophysicist and supposedly one of the brightest people who roamed this sphere. "If she married you then she doesn't think full stop." He turned and began to walk away.

"You're the embodiment of misery," the interrogator said, eyes watchful. "You're ineffective in social relationships, your coping skills are nonexistent, and never mind working with others, you can barely communicate with them." Cudex took a breath and his gaze remained condescending. "Now that you're unemployed I can't help but wonder how far poverty and homelessness are from your door. They go so well with your personality. You could have been destined for greatness ... but you're determined to die a despised labour-class slave."

"You know what your quandary is?" returned Jarre "Your soubriquet is complacency. And if you're suggesting that *greatness* comes from taking part in a cover-up and watching on lackadaisically while my world gets trampled underfoot by aliens then you can keep it." He took another step and thus far, he hadn't been asked about the merzer. Perhaps Cudex was slipping.

Cudex held up his hand. "One moment."

Jarre stopped but didn't turn to face his inquisitor.

"The vessel you piloted back. As you know, we can't get it working. It almost appears to be dead," he said. "The same way we found it, in actual fact."

"Work out your own problems. I managed to fly it back, but perhaps the journey was too much for it," suggested Jarre, his back still turned.

"I guess that makes you a very lucky man, Jarre," Cudex said, reaching for another cigarette. "But then you do lead a charmed life. Be assured that if we meet again, you will not walk away from me so easily. That will be all."

Jarre didn't reply as he left the room. He resisted the urge to curse Cudex and settled for kicking over a waste bin instead.

"Temper, temper," Cudex said, having heard the clamour. He sucked on his cigarette and watched the smoke dance enchantingly around him. What almost passed for a smile hovered on his threadlike lips.

Sitting in his modestly furnished apartment, Jarre examined the glass in

his hand. It was empty, the prior contents now settling.

He was now certain that his place was being watched.

He knew he made certain people within control central uneasy. He felt tempted to sit back and watch their disquietude turn into fear. Enslavement or destruction would soon follow. Sadly, there would be no seats available on the sideline.

Why did he always have to do everything alone?

Why was he the only one who could see the harrowing future that was assuredly inevitable? He had been in contact with all of his former colleagues several times since their return. Often, they had called in at first, and initially most of them agreed that something must be done about the Tharnians. As the weeks passed, it seemed that no one wanted to hear about the approaching conquerors. With time came complacency, it seemed. He understood *why* they didn't want to think about what had transpired on Callon, but ersatz contentment couldn't alter the truth. Nor could abjuration protect them from the pending incursion.

Something had to be done!

Pushing acute anxiety to the virtual stern of his mind, he recalled his conversation with Eclipse.

"Yeah, but they might not come. We can't be sure. Winters was filthy, he would've said anything to save his own skin."

"He told them, Eclipse, and they will come. You once knew that as well as I do now. They're brainwashing you. They want to make you think that it never happened."

"They're not, Jarre. I know what went on but it's time to move on. I have to live again."

"Enjoy it while you can."

Harris.

"Look, Jarre, I suppose I owe you for what happened on Callon and I'd like for us to stay friends, but if you don't drop this invasion theory of yours then I'm afraid it just won't be possible."

"As you wish."

"And please, call me before you visit next time. My wife thinks you're kind of ... strange."

"She married you yet she thinks I'm strange? Fascinating."

Forbes.

“Oh, Jarre. Haven’t had any memory recollections vis-à-vis our merger, I suppose? Can’t get the damn thing off the ground. Strange how it seemed to stop just like that. Jarre, are you still there? Jarre?”

Ganna.

“Can’t you see you’re obsessed? I know the threat seemed real but-”

“It is real, Ganna. This is something that won’t go away, as much as control central would prefer for you to believe otherwise.”

“Jarre, you’ve got to let go. You’re only hurting yourself.”

“So, you won’t help me?”

“Jarre, I love you and I want to come home, but I’m not going to live for something from the past that should have stayed there!”

She had a valid point. She was the realist and he, the dreamer. Without her, his dreams and aspirations were worthless and without purpose. And yet...

“I thought I could count on you, Ganna.”

“You can, but you’ve got to let go. Call me when you’re ready to talk about anything other than Tharnians.”

“You know you’re all I want to do, Ganna.”

“I need more than words. You need to live for us, Jarre, not the Tharnians. I won’t share you with them.”

Ky.

“You know I trust you. You’re there, buddy! I don’t know anyone who could have handled that merger the way you did. You kept us all alive.”

“So, you’ll help?”

“Well, I’m kinda busy at the moment but the minute you get some evidence, the minute something happens, give me a call. We’ll get onto it once it starts.”

“By then it will be too late, Ky.”

“Call me if and when the sky gets dark, Jarre. I hope it doesn’t. A black sky full of Tharnian ships means it’s goodnight for us all. You’ve got my number.”

From her glider’s window, Ganna took a moment to look down and appreciate Roosevelt Island as it rolled by below her. She sat back, closing her eyes and breathing-in deeply, knowing the autopilot was even more competent at piloting the vehicle than she was. A glance at her timepiece revealed the need for haste. “Accelerate to 1000 kph.”

"Confirmed," replied the computer calmly.

Ganna hated those calm inflections. She imagined that if the day ever came when her glider was plummeting through the sky to its doom, the computer would give her a disembodied countdown to impact. Computers were incapable of panic, one of their supposed strengths. Why couldn't they at least fake it when required?

"Check mail," she said casually, hoping to fill the few moments between now and her arrival with a new, worthwhile message.

"You have 5 new messages," said the computer in *that* tone.

"Woo-hoo! List senders. Display only."

The visual net's screen displayed the names of the senders. One was from Ky, the others from various businesses that would undoubtedly contain marvellous offers and exclusives just for her.

"Delete all messages except for Ky's," she ordered "Send an official unsolicited mail warning to the other four senders. Attach the control central logo to my signature."

"Messages deleted. Unable to comply with your second instruction."

"Why?" Ganna demanded, wanting to rip out the inauspicious computer and assume manual control.

"Request for use of official control central logo denied."

"What's wrong with them? Send warnings to the other four senders without the logo then."

"Confirmed."

She sighed softly. "Display Ky's message. Full presentation."

Ky appeared on the screen with a smile tacked on his lips.

"Ganna! Tonight! My place! My party! I'm sure you haven't forgotten but just in case... here I am to remind you! I thought you might like to ask Jarre along. Let me know if he can tear himself away from the Tharnians long enough to at least say bello. See ya!"

The screen blanked. Ganna felt a little awkward even calling Jarre these days. He refused to make any sort of compromise. His one purpose in life was to impede an attack that would probably never take place. She needed more from him. A husband devoted to anything or anyone other than her was unacceptable.

"We have arrived at City Hall Plaza. Parking bay located and reserved at level five."

"And not before time," she said, keen to stretch her legs and keep her appointment.

The glider landed smoothly, only the tumultuous hiss of the air brakes disrupting Ganna's thoughts. Her vehicle needed that service. And soon.

Udaya glanced at her watch, wondering what was keeping her sister. The peculiar waiter was approaching her table again.

"Would madam care for another drink?"

"I haven't finished this one yet," she replied.

After a few awkward moments, in which the waiter hovered around her table like a perplexed insect, Ganna finally arrived, causing the waiter to step back in surprise. Identical twins often caused such a reaction.

"You're late," said Udaya wryly as the waiter scurried off to get another menu.

"I'm sorry. You know how it is when you're shopping in Manhattan," apologised Ganna weakly, sitting down opposite her sister. She had to admit, her sister looked great. "I found you something nice, though."

"Let me see," said Udaya in excitement, Ganna's misdemeanour suddenly forgotten.

"It's a surprise," smiled Ganna. "You'll have to wait until next week."

"I thought we were going sailing on our birthday?"

"We are. We'll halve the chartering costs as usual but this year I thought I'd buy you something special as well."

"And you're not going to allow me the smallest clue?" protested Udaya.

Ganna smiled. "Nope," she said. "You'll just have to stew."

"Oh all right," complained Udaya, knowing when to soften. "I have already ordered. What are you having?"

On cue, the waiter appeared with menu in hand.

"Thanks," said Ganna, taking the menu and casting her eyes over the delicacies on offer. "Just a coffee, I think. A short black if you'd be so kind."

The waiter took back his menu, hiding his offence admirably. It always bothered him when people wasted his time. He had presented the menu judiciously and had all of his phrases prepared. He hadn't even been given the opportunity to recommend his personal favourites. He

supposed she would be a small tipper as well. Some people were not worth the effort.

Ganna watched the waiter as he put his head back and vanished as though an invisible hook had caught him by the collar before being swiftly pulled.

“Why are you wearing your hair like that?” asked Udaya, not accustomed to seeing her sister’s long hair tied back.

Ganna, wearing a cashmere turtleneck sweater and an embroidered skirt with velvet trim and reflective sequins on the pockets, shrugged her shoulders. “I just felt like a change today.”

“It suits you,” Udaya said, not believing her own words for a moment. She kept her own hair short but had thus far been unable to convince Ganna to try a similar style. She was attired in apparel that was more formal; a two-tone acetate twill ankle-length dress complete with thin spaghetti straps, back slit, and princess seams. Her shoes, chunky though elegant, dressed down her appearance a little.

“Thanks.”

Udaya’s expression suddenly became a little more solemn. “Any new prospects on the job front?”

“Control central just don’t want me around. I’ve almost given up on them. Maybe I’ll go back to Fordham,” Ganna said, preferring that option to the numerous offers she had received from other companies.

“You’ve done your share of study. I think you should consider that offer from Australia.”

Udaya was right. It was an offer that wouldn’t come around again. A supervisory role within their space program may not offer the prestige that one associated with control central, but it was still a tremendous opportunity.

“I could come and visit,” offered Udaya. “I just looove Melbourne.”

“I can’t see my husband approving of such a move,” said Ganna, dismissing the opportunity once more.

Udaya bit her top lip delicately. “How are things with you and the iceman?”

“Jarre,” corrected Ganna scornfully.

“Sorry,” offered Udaya, knowing that she had expended all her persuasion without success before the wedding. She had tried to talk

Ganna out of the marriage but upon failing knew she should support her. Yet it was so difficult.

“He hasn’t come around yet. I’m going to ask him to a party over at Ky’s place tonight.”

“Good luck,” said Udaya, taking her sister’s hand and squeezing it gently.

“He’s been through a lot. It was no picnic on Callon,” defended Ganna, always ready to make excuses for her husband.

“You’ve been through a lot yourself,” said Udaya, taking a sip of tea delicately.

“How is Mark?” asked Ganna, eager to change the subject. “I haven’t seen him in a while.”

“He’s fine. He’s been busy with work lately. ACI’s not the most understanding of employers.”

Ganna believed that. The Asimov Cybernetics Institute might offer its employees a distinguished career and a salary second to none but it demanded long hours and a lifestyle that verged on obsessive. According to their CEO, Damon Sinclair, true cyberneticists wouldn’t want it any other way. Newly married spouses of ACI employees were expected to be supportive not demanding.

“We are going to the ballet next week though,” said Udaya, now her turn to defend.

“That’ll be nice,” smiled Ganna warmly as her coffee arrived. “Thanks.”

“How is Ky?”

Ganna looked up from her coffee, surprised by the question. “He’s still not over you, if that’s what you mean,” she said, enjoying the aroma emanating from her beverage.

“He seemed to be fully recovered at the reception,” said Udaya, holding her sister’s gaze.

“You mean that blonde on his arm?” laughed Ganna. “She was for your benefit, I’m sure.”

“I’m not. Before you went on your last mission, I thought Ky was shifting his affection toward you,” said Udaya boldly. “I thought he might make a move on you out there.”

“Not likely,” said Ganna, enjoying the coffee and conversation immensely.

Udaya smiled, appearing to relax a little. "I was worried," she explained. "They say no one can hear you scream in space."

"Will you stop!" said Ganna; her full lips entertaining a smirk that Ky would probably consider unkind were he present.

"What happens if Jarre doesn't accept your invitation tonight?"

"Then I'll go alone," answered Ganna, hoping it didn't come to that.

"He's not worth it," said Udaya, unable to help herself. She hated it when she couldn't keep her tongue reigned.

"Let's not start that again," said Ganna wearily. "Come what may, I'm staying with my baby. We've been down this road before."

"But you're already virtually separated," protested Udaya, getting in deeper.

"Enough already," said Ganna, firmly enough for Udaya to drop the issue.

"OK, OK. I worry about you is all," said Udaya as she retreated into her small voice. Her sister would not be swayed and she would have to accept that. At least for the time being.

"I know you do," said Ganna, smile back in place. "But I'm all right."

Udaya nodded. "Are we still on for tennis tomorrow?"

"You bet," said Ganna with a grin. "And you're going down."

"You're dreaming, girl," returned her sister as the waiter closed in with her vegan lunch. It was mashed avocado with slices of pumpernickel bread, mustard and thousand galaxy dressing. Chilli-tomato and cashew dip sat on the side with wafers.

"Why am I suddenly pleased that you ordered enough for two," Ganna said shrewdly.

Udaya's smile bettered that of her sister. "Help yourself."

Ganna did exactly that, piling some choice pickings onto a napkin.

"You realise you're paying half the bill now?" Udaya said with a wink.

"Stop it already," Ganna said, setting to work on the wafers.

"This is something."

Udaya started on her toast. "You wanna stop by Café 59 once we're done? If we're lucky Reshmi and Taz, the spice queens, will be on deck!"

“Yresth,” Ganna replied, with mouth full and hands a mess.
“Latte,” she managed after swallowing.
Udaya laughed. “You’re all class, sis.”

Forbes saw the approaching reflection in the window and remained staring through it as he spoke. “Well?”

“Nothing,” said Cudex, sitting on the edge of the desk. His body language suggested a confidence he always fabricated well.

“Nothing?” repeated Forbes, turning to face Cudex. “Damn him!”

“Well,” the interrogator replied, “I assume you already know he suffers from a schizophreniform disorder. In fact, I don’t believe I’ve ever met anyone with as many psychotic, ‘loss-of-reality’ symptoms. A basic SRI wouldn’t be a bad idea.”

“SRI?”

Cudex nodded, though he suspected Forbes wouldn’t allow Jarre to be treated *yet*. “Medication that slows the re-absorption of serotonin by neurons in the brain; allowing serotonin to remain in the synapse longer. It *might* help him to function more conventionally.”

Forbes suppressed a scowl. “I don’t care about his mental condition. All I want to know about is the merzer.”

“If he knows something about that ship then he’s not talking.”

“We’ll just have to approach the problem from another angle,” said Forbes, walking over to a large map on his wall and glancing at it, as though the answer may somehow lie there.

“I suggest we search his premises,” Cudex said. “Perhaps he has left some clue.”

“It’s worth a try,” agreed Forbes, picking up his pointing stick and fiddling with one end before placing it under his shoulder.

“If that doesn’t turn up anything then I suggest we attempt,” he paused, “another tact. Coercion.”

Forbes looked into the vacant, soulless eyes before him and then issued a nod for Cudex to continue.

“Ganna means a great deal to him. If he has information that will stop anything ... *unfortunate* from happening to her then he will share it with us.”

“Ganna,” repeated Forbes, not approving of the suggested line of persuasion. “I don’t like it.”

“There is also the possibility that Jarre entrusted some information about the ship to her. I assure you that I can obtain any such information.”

“Cudex, I’m sure you can,” Forbes said, “but I’d rather leave such an alternative until last. Let us exhaust our other options first.”

“You care what happens to Ganna?” asked Cudex with mild surprise. “After all we’ve seen and done I didn’t think anything could make you squeamish.”

“It’s not that,” responded Forbes carefully. “My old crew have high profiles. We must tread carefully.”

“I understand that, General,” said Cudex, having the urge to light a cigarette but accepting that this was neither the time nor place. “Our priority must be getting that ship off the ground, though.”

“I hardly need you to remind me of that,” snapped Forbes, forcing his hands into his pockets as he paced back and forth. “I have our President doing a more than satisfactory job.”

“I’m afraid Nicholson’s brilliance isn’t matched by his patience.”

“No. I think I’ll organise that search. Who knows? That might solve all our problems.”

“Let’s hope so,” agreed Cudex, folding his arms. “Otherwise we’ll be forced to take more extreme action.”

Forbes eyed Cudex with suspicion. There was something about the interrogator’s tone that he hadn’t heard before. “You don’t like Jarre, do you?”

“I neither like or dislike any of my projects,” answered Cudex with an indifferent smile that Forbes didn’t buy. “Jarre is no different.”

“Come on!” challenged Forbes. “Admit it.”

Cudex’s face appeared to twitch. “I remain detached and uninvolved. That is the only way to remain objective.”

“Even so.”

Silence.

“Even so, I dislike him considerably. He bothers me,” admitted Cudex finally. “Now you know my surreptitious *bête-noir*. I construe you share my aversion.”

Forbes nodded. “Anyone who meets him feels the same way. It’s as though you’re night and he’s day,” he added.

“Hardly an eloquent metaphor,” said Cudex as he considered it. “But you’re getting warm.”

“I know I am,” said the General. “I didn’t think he’d be able to get under your skin, though.”

“Let’s just say he has a talent for disturbing the furniture of my life. His fixation with these Tharnians can only compromise the security of control central.”

“What if he’s right?” asked Forbes. “Have you considered that?”

Cudex frowned. “No. You were there and you don’t buy it. Why then, would I?”

“That’s what I like to hear. He’s not right. On Callon, he was someone. Now, he’s just a plebeian citizen and a headache I have to contend with.”

The interrogator measured his words charily. “There will come a day when that headache is removed. Permanently.”

“I hope so. Are you going outside for a cigarette?” asked Forbes, somehow reading Cudex’s tension.

“Yes,” said Cudex, grateful for the unexpected opportunity.

Forbes wrestled with vacillation for several moments before continuing. “I think I’ll join you.”

“I thought you gave up,” said Cudex, rather enjoying his superior’s exposed nerves as they came to the surface.

“So did I,” returned Forbes.

“Don’t tell me. That Tunhantmut stock you bought has dropped again.”

“And how,” complained Forbes, putting his pointer down before he broke it in two. “They’re not worth a tenth of what I paid.”

“Is it at this point I remind you that I warned you not to buy?” asked Cudex daringly.

“Only if you wish to attend the global economy meeting in Tokyo next week instead of taking that holiday to Singapore,” threatened Forbes.

Cudex decided against a further taunt. “After you,” he said.

Forbes hurried out. The interrogator watched him leave before removing a small precious stone from his pocket. The intense cerulean glow generated from within seemed to pervade his very soul. It was a prized stone, and totally unique on this world. It was also the first of many he would receive from his new associates.

The Tharnians.

“Are you coming?” came the shout from beyond.

Cudex smiled, still preoccupied with Jarre. "I am," he replied, pocketing the stone carefully and hurrying from the room.

Only once before in his life had he resigned himself to defeat. It was occurring again, only this time it was worse. Before, Claude Jarre was the only one who suffered. This time, the entire planet faced extinction. Doubt had attempted to cloud his mind but he knew better than to let it gain the domination it desired. Yes, the Tharnians would come and war would ensue. Perhaps slaughter would prove to be a more apt term than war.

Jarre considered putting on his actuality mask for a quick game of Mercenary VI but instead decided to scan the 'unfilled occupations'. He glanced over to his touch terminal and sighed. "Display positions vacant, match requirements with my qualifications, and see if there's anything suitable." He didn't really want to bother with any of this until the Tharnian threat had been countered but as control central no longer required him, he supposed he should at least be seen to make an effort. Ganna in particular was concerned about his 'idle' status.

"One of Two hundred. There is a position available at McCray's Information Data Institute that you are qualified for. Do you wish to complete the desirable personal qualities review?" the computer asked.

"OK," he replied without fervour. "Shoot."

"Are you a can-do person?"

Jarre thought about it. "No. I'm more a might-do man."

"Are you a conceptual thinker?"

"Not really," he replied. "What sort of question is that?"

"Do you possess a high level of personal commitment, drive, and have excellent people-management skills?"

He sighed. "Not at all. I can't even manage myself."

"Do you believe you are the type of person who would enjoy making big waves in a large pond?"

"I'm not really a swimmer, so no," he answered.

"Can you explain yourself succinctly without froth and bubble?"

Jarre appeared jaded. "I have no idea. You'd have to ask a person I explained something to."

"Can you work with a minimum of fuss, quickly and efficiently, to resolve a range of complex and sensitive operational problems?"

"Huh?" he replied.

“Sanguinity, initiative, impetus, litbeness, and solidarity. What do these words suggest to you?”

He yawned. “That a synthetic smile and a few carefully-chosen buzzwords will get me the job?”

“Are you keen to make a mark in your field?”

Jarre nearly grinned. “I took part in a prank back at University where we made marks in a field. Wasn’t my field, you understand, nor my idea, and the marks we made were ‘fake’ crop circles in an attempt to convince the locals-” he stopped. “Sorry. What was the question again?”

“Thank you for taking the time to answer our questions. Although we do not believe we are the right company for you, we wish you every success in your search for employment and appreciate you considering us. Have a nice day!”

“Oh well,” he said. “I tried.” The visual net started beeping. He reached for his remote and took the call. It was his wife. Some well-applied cosmetics enhanced her naturally attractive looks. “Hi, hon,” she said.

“Hello, Ganna.” His tone was flat. He mentally kicked himself for sounding so defeated. It had not been his intention. He stared into the eyes of his world and managed a smile. “I’ve just been looking for work.”

“Any luck?” she enquired.

“No,” he replied. “Maybe I came across as too positive or something. Enough about me. What’s happening with you?”

“Umm, there’s a party being held at nest 33, you know, Ky’s place. I thought I’d ask you along. No Tharnians allowed.”

“Well, you asked,” returned Jarre nonchalantly.

There was an awkward silence; one of many Jarre had created whilst communicating. If silence was golden then he was King Midas.

“Sorreee! I just thought you might like to take your wife out now and again.”

He knew he was blessed to have the love of a woman like Ganna. Many men would follow her to the ends of the Earth and back again, he included. He noticed the hurt forming in her eyes and wanted to say something that would make it go away.

“Sorry, Darling, but I’m ... busy.”

Not especially pertinent but it seemed the best he could do right now. He wanted to embrace his sensitivity and discard the Tharnians yet he could not. He must not!

"You don't look busy."

'Should have stuck with the old audio net', thought Jarre to himself. His communications conveyer told him it couldn't be repaired the last time it broke down. Apparently, they stopped making parts for audio nets several years ago. Even Jarre's threat to switch to a rival carrier had failed to produce the required parts.

"Be straight with me," she warned him.

He took a deep breath. "I just can't make it, Ganna."

She tilted her head to one side, waiting for an explanation. Busy wasn't going to cut it. Not today.

Jarre took a moment to appreciate her loveliness and felt tempted to yield. His improbable pipedream had blossomed yet he was allowing it to dissipate and dissolve more each day. He wanted to waver; his love for his wife must come first, yet he knew they would both die if he allowed the Tharnians to succeed. "Ganna, our world is about to be hit by the Tharnian Empire, and you've got nothing better to do than go to a shindig? Well again, I'm sorry, but the gala mood seems to have eluded me!" He felt like turning away from the hurt in Ganna's eyes but held her gaze. No doubt, it made him seem cold. Perhaps he was.

"Well, IF we're all going to die, we may as well enjoy ourselves while we can."

It was weak logic coming from a virtuoso. A tear rolled down her cheek and they were both silent.

"Darling, I'm sorry, I—I—I ..."

The visual net's screen blanked. *She had hung up.* The conversation had hurt him too, though he doubted Ganna would believe so. And why should she? He swallowed hard and forced himself to believe there was more than one woman's feelings involved here. It almost worked.

"I—I—I," he repeated, shaking his head in disbelief. "That's a real comforting thing to say to your wife when you want to shoulder her pain," he said to himself. "You idiot."

Four days later, Jarre had become somewhat downcast with only himself for company. He felt that time was short. Every night he saw a Tharnian fleet closing-in on his world—only when he awoke did it peter out. He must act, but it would be better if he could find someone with whom he could share his madness. He had to confide in someone and decided upon Ky.

At present, he was on his way to collect his old buddy and bring him back for a genial game of zy cross and some judicious phi consumption. Naturally, his friend had agreed to come, and although he was no longer certain of Ky's steadfastness, he hoped he could bring him around. If unsuccessful, it would be time to chalk up yet another project for the solo man.

Sitting on the steps outside his apartment, Ky was deep in thought. He knew that Jarre had more than a game of zy cross in mind. It seemed his old friend had only one thing on his mind these days. Tharnians. More likely than not, Jarre had devised a plan of some description. Ky had enjoyed returning to his home, but beneath the contentment was a miserable existence. Most of the time, he was having too much *fun* or was simply too intoxicated to dwell on his life. That offered the illusion that existence was an easier game to play.

Anything seemed better than acknowledging the vacuum within.

There were at least nine different speakeasies that he called home these days. Things hadn't been easy since Udaya had decided they should spend some time apart. One week later, she determined that they should both move on. Good of her, he supposed, to make those decisions for their *mutual* benefit. She later managed to put their relationship behind her and marry Mark, which advanced her career considerably. Today, Ky was unable to deny his anguish. Some days were worse than others. Perhaps Jarre would offer him the chance to be someone again. But at what cost? Feeling empty and wretched in comfort was surely better than being given a purpose only to die. He sighted Jarre's tracer in the distance and commanded a smile to his lips. That was the person people wanted to see. That was the person he struggled to be.

Jarre lowered his tracer outside nest 33 and immediately noticed Ky sitting on the steps of his abode. He turned off the tracer's euphony computer, having enjoyed the jazz version of '*A Miracle's Coming*' on the way over. How he hoped it were true. Ky got in and offered an uncertain smile as the tracer hovered in the darkening sky and proceeded back to Jarre's apartment.

"Hey, buddy!"

"Ky."

“Say, do you think I’m getting fat?”

“Yep.”

Upon opening the door to his apartment, Jarre discovered his home in disarray. Ky walked through open-mouthed, staring at broken furniture and a paper-strewn floor. He had thought his own life was a mess. Sure, he may have lost his tracer permit for being intoxicated by phi seventy-one, but at least he kept his place tidy.

Usually. Sometimes. Rarely. Never.

That wasn’t the point! Jarre was a ‘spick and span’ person and this just didn’t add up. The transient loss of Ganna must be tearing him up, concluded Ky. Those sisters sure knew how to pound a heart. It took his mind several more seconds to deduce that the place had been ransacked.

“Took them longer than I thought it would. I guess I don’t go out much,” Jarre said to himself. He noticed his security probe hadn’t come down from the ceiling, as it should have in the case of an unauthorised entry. Supposedly, only the government were able to disarm civilian probes. Supposedly.

Ky shook his head. Perhaps that evening glass of phi fifty-five wasn’t such a good idea. “What happened here, buddy?”

Jarre continued surveying the damage. “It appears someone’s been looking for something.”

“For what?” asked Ky as his head began to clear.

“I’ve got a pretty good idea.”

Ky carefully examined the beverage distributor. *Rats*. It seemed to be broken. It appeared as though a kick, probably of frustration, had been delivered to it. He noticed Jarre appeared to be more composed about this intrusion than he should be. If someone did this to his place, he would be furious! Especially if they stole his collection of ‘Super Eel’ comics. He walked over to a nearby drawer. “Yeah, well whoever they were, they sure *weren’t* robbers. That drawer seems to have most of your bonus in it. Speaking of which, are you good for a loan?”

Jarre noticed his visual net seemed intact yet disturbed. He had also espied the damaged beverage machine, disappointed his craving for a cup of tea, lemon and ginger to be precise, would remain unquenched.

“I guess a game of zy cross ain’t looking good,” laughed Ky weakly, looking at the smashed, overturned unit. “We might have to

resort to a game of its antecedent. You still got that old chess board?”

“I’m sorry,” said Jarre, his mind still preoccupied by the intrusion. “What did you say?”

“Never mind,” Ky said as he picked up a plastic stool and sat on it. The antique Space Invaders machine alongside him chirped quietly as it rolled on endlessly in demo-mode. “You didn’t ask me over for a game of zy cross anyway. You want to talk about the Tharnians.”

Although his intentions had been discovered a little earlier than intended, Ky’s deduction was a good sign. “What else? This will be my final proposal. If you refuse, I leave without you.”

Ky nodded, appearing anxious. “Shoot. I know I’m going to regret this. Every time you open your mouth you rattle my world.”

“Sometimes our world needs to be shaken so we can see past our complacency,” Jarre said carefully.

“Maybe,” Ky said indifferently. “But sometimes it’s nice to go back to easy street after living on dangerous avenue for so long.” He laughed brashly. “I can’t believe I said that! I’m sorry, my head’s still clearing from ... well, it’s still clearing. Who are you? Where am I? The walls are closing-in. Three blind mice, three blind mice. See how they run. Hmm, hmm, hum, ho. Am I rambling here? Because if I am you can stop me at any time.”

Jarre nearly managed a smile. “Keep it together.”

“I want to climb a tree,” Ky said, looking at the door with enough restlessness to match a caged lion. “I want to *be* a tree.”

“I don’t think so,” Jarre said, apparently amused.

Ky looked at him blankly. “Meow.”

“Ky, enough.”

“You saying I can’t claim insanity to get out of *whatever* you’re about to propose?” Ky checked. “Says who?”

Jarre remained impassive. “If, of the two of us, one is insane, I think we both know who it is. Your eccentricities just don’t cut it against my broad sided lunacy, I’m afraid. If you don’t believe me just ask Cudex.”

Ky couldn’t argue with that. “Yeah, I hear ya. I’m just ... a little scared. That’s all. I’m not likely to forget Callon. No matter how hard I try, no matter how much I drink,” he said, sighing. “I just can’t forget what happened and I’m still afraid.”

“Your trepidation is understandable,” returned Jarre. “Tharnians

invoke a new level of fear that cannot be found on this world.”

“I’m more frightened of you than I am of them,” smiled Ky.

“Are you sure we can’t just hit the holosim centre? You could have a brand new start joining the United Planets and having a much better plot than your current life – you’ll be far less one-dimensional!”

Jarres shook his head. Should he be insulted by that?

“There are so many scenarios though, and you always come back in one piece. Take on the entity in a blaze of glory or live it up with Larry in the land of the lounge lizards or help every dog find their forever-human!”

Jarre folded his arms.

Ky sighed. “All right. Bring on the madness.”

Jarre appeared relieved. “The Zenites. We’ve got to get their help.”

Ky laughed out aloud. “The Zenites? Come on! You’re not serious?”

Clearly Jarre was. He said, “They’re our only chance.”

“They’ll never help us. Our government hasn’t contacted them in over three years. You know how our system works. *Our way or no way*. The President just didn’t like them and what he says goes ... and,” he coughed, “if you ask me, he was right about them. The Zenites can’t be trusted.”

“We made an alliance with them,” Jarre said, insistent.

Ky laughed once more. “You sound like a free-island radical. All the alliance means is that we don’t attack each other,” he said. “We’re talking about a simple non-aggression pact here. No one made any deals about assisting one another. Besides, those oversized chess pieces have never shown any interest in our supposed association.”

“Their lack of interest aside,” Jarre responded, “our agreement still stands. I don’t think our planet is capable of fighting the Tharnians alone.”

“You don’t *think*? You *don’t* think! There won’t be any fighting if they come here. Just a lot of screaming and then -- zero.” Ky took a deep breath and hoped it would help to calm him down. “How do you propose we contact them? No communication system we’ve got can reach them.

Jarre shrugged his shoulders. “Simple. We’ll have to fly there.”

“*Fly* there?” Ky said. “What are we supposed to do? Ask for a

ship? I can really see Forbes coming to the party.”

“Leave that to me. Are you in?”

Ky didn’t want to be *in*. In fact, never in his life had he wanted to get out of something more than this. “You’ll never do it! Our flying days are over.”

“Are you in?” asked Jarre, holding Ky’s gaze.

Ky was shaking. Sweat began to cascade down his shallow forehead. He knew Forbes and the powers that be would never give them a ship, and yet Jarre would not be swept under the rug as easily as the rest of them. Was the dispassionate unawareness to be found under that very rug so bad? Somehow, his friend *would* find a ship. And they would both die in it.

“Are—you—in?” repeated Jarre again.

Ky silently mouthed the word ‘no’, how he wished he had the sense to say it aloud, before speaking. “One condition. You meet it, I’m in.”

“I’m listening.”

“We all go. All six of us. I don’t think we’ll make it otherwise.”

Jarre appeared disappointed. “They won’t go.”

“Then neither will I,” Ky insisted with a determination he rarely displayed. “The six of us can survive together.”

“You’re talking nonsense,” stated Jarre. “They’ve all changed.”

“I’m not leaving without them!” Ky said. “It’s us or it’s you, buddy.”

“Fine. Then I go alone,” said Jarre as he turned to walk away. He wondered where exactly he would walk to. This was his place, after all. Perhaps he would go and shut himself in his bathroom and mope.

Ky watched Jarre amble about, looking uncertain. “Wait up!”

Jarre did so, the expression on his face suggesting the state was only temporary.

“If we stay, do you think we’ll die?” Ky asked plainly.

“Does it matter, Ky?” answered Jarre flatly.

Ky slapped his forehead with his hand. “Well duh! Of course it matters. Do you?”

“Yes. I do.”

Ky’s gaze fell to the mauve-coloured carpet as he took a few seconds to wrestle with his fear. “Then we’ll take them with us by force. It’ll be for their own good anyway,” he said finally.

Jarre remained unconvinced. “Not possible. Things can never be the same as they were.”

Ky nodded in agreement. He knew *that* only too well. “Look, I’m not just trying to romanticise your scheme. We’ll need them. If something happens to you, we’re both dead. I’m a tactician, not a pilot,” he explained.

“What’s your point, Ky?” asked Jarre, rubbing his left shoulder as though that may release some tension. He had plenty in need of relief.

“Your wife can fly. Now, there’s a pilot. She’s even better than you.”

Jarre’s frown indicated he was thus far unimpressed.

Ky continued. “Next there’s Harris. He’s a tech. Sort of. Eclipse is a trained fighter and weapons man. Forbes knows over five galaxies like the back of his hand, though admittedly little else. Here’s my argument. We are a team and I don’t think we can do this without them.”

Jarre considered what Ky had said. It was a plan of sorts. Not a brilliant one, but it had promise. It was also better than going alone.

Anything was better than that.

“They say people are struck by a moment of insanity at least once in their lives.”

“Say again?” said a surprised Ky. He wanted to laugh at Jarre’s rejoinder. Were he not so frightened he probably would have done so. If his friend’s profound statement were true then insanity must have checked into his head many years ago, found a room with a view and decided not to leave.

“It appears my turn has come. OK, we’ll do it your way,” Jarre explained. “You win.”

Ky tried to smile. “I was hoping you’d be your usual bolshie-self and insist on going it alone,” he said, suddenly disappointed in himself for putting up such an apparently persuasive argument.

“You’ve changed my mind,” smiled Jarre.

“Great. That’s just fantastic,” returned Ky weakly. There were times when he wondered what he would do without Jarre. There were other times he wished he’d never laid eyes on the man. This was one of the latter times.

“I think I’ll change,” Jarre said, walking to his bedroom. Minutes later he emerged wearing a bright, almost intense burgundy jumper that

appeared natty but equally lacklustre. Green slacks and black boots completed the outfit that made it clear he was a fashion victim rather than connoisseur. “How do I look?”

Ky’s head fell into his hands. “Don’t tell me. You’re off to Christmas Island to join your kinfolk for the march?”

“I look like a ... crab?” Jarre checked.

Ky nodded. Sometimes he behaved like a crab as well, though he decided not to say as much.

Jarre looked down at his jumper and was nearly blinded as a result. “An improvement then?”

“Absolutely,” Ky said with a smirk. “But I refuse to be seen with you if you’re wearing that! A hostage taker is one thing but being seen in public with a gaudy dresser? Forget about it!”

Jarre returned to his room to change once more.

Flying without a permit really didn’t bother Ky any more. The offence they were about to commit would make such a crime pale into something less than insignificance.

The abductions had gone well. Harris had found his excuse for family life disrupted when Ky popped in for a chat, only to pull a razer pistol on him. Eclipse had been more than willing to vacate his nest for a chat with Jarre. He hadn’t been *quite* so eager to enter the tracer at gunpoint.

Next stop was Ganna’s small apartment. Jarre stood at the entrance to the building and examined the visitor’s panel. He immediately summoned apartment twenty-three.

The sleepy face of Ganna appeared on the small screen as Jarre noticed it was late.

“I need to see you,” he said.

“Umm, sorry?” she returned with a yawn.

Jarre looked around, hopeful they weren’t being watched. “I need to see you now, Ganna.”

She shook her head (which, Jarre reflected, was still attractive, even if not fully awake) and wiped some sleep from her eyes. “Sure, hon, come on up.”

“I’d rather you came down here,” he said.

“What?” she replied in an astonished tone. “It’s cold outside!”

“Please,” he urged her. “Come down.”

She sighed. "All right, All right. I'll be down in a minute. This had better be important, Mister."

The screen went blank. Several long minutes passed before Ganna emerged from the entrance. She had given her hair a quick brush and was dressed in a loosely fitting, rather colourful nightgown. Her slender frame looked unnatural in such attire.

She offered him a circumspect glance. He was dressed in a greyish trench coat she had never seen before and having seen it, wished she hadn't. His thinning hair was slicked back, his features appeared on edge, and he had just put on a pair of ridiculous-looking dark glasses. If this were the future of the secret agent then soon they would join the dinosaur.

"Don't tell me. We're going to a masquerade ball," she said.

Jarre didn't smile. "Get in the tracer, Ganna. Please."

"Why?" she asked, seeming to awaken quickly.

"Darling, in the tracer. You're being abducted," he said.

She stood her ground. "If this is a joke please note," she paused, "that I'm not laughing."

Jarre took her gently by the wrist and helped her struggling form into the tracer. He hoped he was doing the right thing. Otherwise, he and Ky were headed for the sort of trouble that involved seeing the stars through bars and sharing showers with men named 'Brutus' and 'Clyde'.

Inside, Ky had his weapon trained on the others. Jarre took out his own pistol and assumed Ky's position.

Jarre said, "So far—so good."

"Where to now?" asked Ky, taking a sip from a can of drink that had been resting in his lap just moments ago. *He needed a little pick-me-up.* Better still, he needed to be anywhere else other than *here*, doing anything other than *this*. Commanding his teeth not to chatter, he took-in a gulp of oxygen and put on his best brave face.

"Control central, and don't spare the horses," returned Jarre. "I'll take the wheel once we get there."

Ky nodded uneasily. "Affirmative." He took the controls and set the vehicle in motion.

Ganna shook her head incredulously. "Oh, this had better be good," she threatened.

On the way to control central, Ganna and Harris remonstrated

wrathfully. Ganna more so, of course. She believed Jarre wouldn't shoot her. Harris believed no such thing. Between them sat the large frame of Eclipse, who had said surprisingly little. Jarre *hoped* it was because Eclipse had decided to trust him. Either that or he was waiting for a chance to pounce and snap his neck. At length, they arrived at the ominous gates of control central. Jarre activated his portable visual net and was unable to believe his luck.

It was Forbes.

Ky grinned. He too, was pleased to see the General. He never imagined a day would come when he could see the face before them and not feel the urge to vomit on it.

"I thought it was your tracer, Jarre. Not many thirty-two models left.

Thankfully."

"You never could appreciate style," said Jarre matter-of-factly.

"Is that right?" checked Forbes, awaiting an explanation for this visit, nay, intrusion.

"It is. For instance—that haircut. That uniform. Those unclipped nose hairs," said Ky with a smirk.

Forbes appeared blasé. *"Ky. Every would-be king needs a jester I suppose. What do you want, Jarre?"*

"Working back late, are we?" asked Jarre, ignoring the question. He needed to get Forbes to let them *cross the threshold* and he needed to kidnap the man. It seemed there was only one way he could achieve *both* objectives.

"Yes, Jarre, we are. And I am rather busy. I see you've brought the party with you, eh? Is this a reunion or something?" asked Forbes, his laugh ringing through the tracer. *"I thought the annual big-time losers convention was next week."* They all knew Forbes didn't like them, and they were right. He was the hero and they were the glory hunters. Only he had kept them all alive during the expedition. Why couldn't they all just vanish? He was about to tell them to do just that as Jarre spoke.

"The merzer, Forbes."

The General frowned apprehensively. *"You know something I don't?"*

Jarre nodded. "Many things."

"Very funny. About the merzer?"

"Yes," he replied.

Forbes became interested. *"And you're here to show me how to get it*

off the ground?”

“In a manner of speaking,” Jarre answered.

Somehow, Forbes managed a smile. Usually he only brought it out on special occasions. *“Well in that case, come on in. Come right on in.”*

The gates opened—Jarre didn’t wait for directions. He landed near the hangar in which he knew the merzer was kept. Some guards in their installations no doubt observed this, but obviously, the tracer’s presence had already been authorised.

“Ky, keep them here and keep them quiet. When you see my signal, you know what to do,” Jarre said. He hoped he could pull off the unachievable once more.

“Roger that,” Ky said with some conviction. His character of old seemed to be returning. Jarre found some encouragement in that fact as he departed.

“He’s mad. He has a fixation that the Tharnians are coming and if you disagree with him, you risk getting your head blown off. Listen, Ky. I don’t deny what we’ve been through, but we cannot go anywhere under the leadership of this madman. He’s determined to live this twisted fantasy out simply because he can’t fit into our society. He’s duping you! There is no menace on its way to kill us all. The only danger around this neck of the woods is Claude Jarre. Let’s get out of here so we can notify the authorities.”

It made sense.

Ky didn’t want to hear it, especially as it came from Harris, but it made sense. He denied his second thoughts. For better or worse, he had pledged his loyalty to Jarre. He hoped his ‘buddy’ would remember that faithfulness when it was time to share his buy-up at the maximum-security penal complex in Rochester.

“That’s not fair,” said Ganna softly.

“Just keep it shut, Harris,” managed Ky. “Jarre is my buddy, you are a bore, that is all.”

Eclipse didn’t speak but glared menacingly at Harris. He was unsure what this was about, but Jarre had saved his life and he could not concur with these lies. He was supposed to be part of the security team for the *a-ha* tribute concert but they would have to get by without him tonight.

The looming bulk of Eclipse coupled with Ky’s razer pistol seemed to do the trick, and Harris decided to be silent.

The merzer looked as impressive as ever. Beside it stood Forbes, and beside him stood two security officers.

“You have something to tell me, Jarre?” Forbes asked in a cavalier manner.

Jarre quickly pulled out his razer pistol from within his jacket. The first guard was shot before he could even react; the second *almost* got a hand to his weapon. They were only stunned, but Forbes wouldn’t know that. He trained the weapon on the man who had chosen to become his enemy. “Inside the merzer, Forbes, or you’re next. You buy it here and no one weeps. Maybe I even get a medal.”

Forbes looked around in shock, his voice quavering. “What on Earth are you doing?”

“Inside.”

Raising his hands, Forbes walked around to the merzer’s doorway and proceeded to enter. Jarre followed closely behind. Seating himself in the Captain’s chair, Forbes looked up at Jarre in despair. “You know you’ve just ruined what was left of your life, Jarre. I don’t know what this is all about but this behaviour will only serv-”

Jarre cut him off. “You will order control central to open the hangar port.”

“I will do no such thing,” steamed Forbes.

Jarre shook his head. “Don’t try me, General.” He stepped closer. “I haven’t got time for any of your head-games. Not today. Comply or die.”

The General backed away. “You wouldn’t shoot me.” He’d tried to say it with confidence but he had no reason to believe his presumption.

“You are *indeed* mistaken,” Jarre assured him.

The raised pistol seemed a substantial enough tool and one Forbes decided not to argue with.

“Jarre wanted to do this with just the two of us,” explained Ky. “He and I were going to make this journey together. I did, however, convince him that we should kidnap you all and make the expedition together. Pretty sharp thinking, hey?”

“You’ll keep,” Eclipse said, making a fist.

Surrounded by livid glares, Ky winced. He looked away from

their stares with a cringe.

“Where does my husband intend to take us, Ky?” quizzed Ganna.

“Far away, Ganna,” was all Ky could manage. It sounded better than *‘to the dark side of his psyche’* anyway.

“He could have at least let me get a change of clothes,” said Ganna, looking despondently at her nightgown.

Eclipse smiled for the first time since his abduction. “It could be worse,” he offered.

Ganna rolled her eyes. “Really? How?”

Eclipse said nothing and grinned, his finger pointing to Harris, who wore a brightly-coloured shirt, which was flecked with several splashes of the rainbow. It may or may not have been a fashion statement from the 20th century. Despite the situation, they all managed a smile. All with the exception of Harris, that is. He was too preoccupied planning how to escape from the clutches of a madman.

“This is General Forbes. Are you receiving me, Central?”

Jarre and his internee waited several moments for a response.

“This is Lieutenant Maxwell here, sir. I am receiving you.”

The General frowned sombrely. “It appears we may have a way of operating this vessel,” he said, looking at Jarre and the weapon he brandished. “We intend to take it for a test flight. Open the hangar port.”

The reply didn’t come for several more moments. *“Sir, can we do that? I mean has it been authorised?”*

Forbes glimpsed at Jarre. The pistol was not lowered. “Who would need to clear this, Maxwell?”

“A General would need to clear this, sir,” came the reply.

“And what am I, Maxwell?” groaned Forbes. “Specifically, my rank.” He considered attempting to wrestle the weapon from Jarre’s grasp only for a moment. The last person he’d seen attempt such an action was no longer breathing. He had no wish to join the departed.

Another pause. *“You are a General, sir. General.”*

“Well then?”

“Yes, sir, the port is opening now, General Forbes, sir.”

With someone else on duty, Forbes may have tried to send one of the coded distress signals. With Maxwell at the helm, there seemed

little point.

Ky watched as the roof of the hanger slowly parted.

Jarre had done it.

How he'd hoped he wouldn't have been able to. Now they were really in it up to their necks.

All of them.

"Right then," he managed. "Let's move out. Madness awaits."

Eclipse frowned. "Madness?"

"Jarre then," Ky said carefully.

"Same thing," Eclipse concurred with a faint smile, which he flashed at Ganna in order to indicate he wasn't entirely serious. He *liked* Jarre, despite his quiriness, though this operation he'd put together would take some explaining.

Harris coughed and decided to speak up. "Not quite. Madness can be treated. Jarre will always be unbalanced and unstable."

"At least he's not a ferret." That from Ganna.

Ky laughed. Eclipse wanted to.

Harris folded his arms defensively. "No need to insult me."

"*Excuse me?*" Ganna said, close to savage. "You just called my husband unstable. That's utter crap."

Apparently Harris didn't know when to let go. "Cudex said tha—"

"Stuff that unfeeling psychoanalysing bean-counting stick insect," Ganna shouted, wanting to slap Harris down.

"Let's keep it civil, people," Ky said, taking a rare opportunity to play the diplomat. "We've got a flight to catch."

"He does realise the merzer's crippled, doesn't he?" said Ganna, offering Ky an angry glance.

"He should do," returned a wry-faced Ky. "He crippled it."

"The transcarrier will pick us up from here. Have it readied immediately. It will then proceed to take us outside the Earth's atmosphere, reference point two-one-zero-seven. Do you understand, Control?" Forbes said. How he wished Maxwell really did understand.

Again, there came the silence. "*Sir, are you sure this will be OK?*"

"Have you seen those pretty little pins on my collar than indicate my rank, Maxwell?" quizzed Forbes.

"*Yes, sir, General, sir,*" Maxwell announced.

The General snorted. "Well, if you ever hope to wear a uniform with similar pins on it, I'd suggest you learn not to question your superior officers."

"No, sir, I mean yes, sir. Sorry, sir. Transcarrier five is on its way."

Eclipse entered the ship. The others weren't far behind. Ky entered after everyone else, pistol still in hand.

"Here come the clowns," said Forbes in distaste, looking directly at Ky. "I should have known you'd be doltish enough to become a part of Jarre's absurd plans."

"Yes, you should have," grinned Ky, "but then you always were pretty slow off the mark. Now we've got the merzer and your attention."

"Let's see how far you get," quipped Forbes in a supercilious manner.

Minutes passed in which nothing was said. Ganna's eyes met her husband's, the censure palpable. He went over to her and stood by her side, whispering softly in her ear. "Trust me."

Harris took a matchbox from pocket and fiddled with it, attempting to sidetrack his nerves with the distraction. It didn't work.

Eclipse yawned and stretched as the ship's monitor broke the silence. *"Transcarrier Five is ready to receive you. Good luck with your test flight, sir."*

"We'll need more than that," Jarre said mellifluously.

The huge transcarrier glided through space. Even in such vastness, it still seemed gigantic. Inside, Jeremy Kyol yawned behind the controls. Life had become mind-numbing for Jeremy with every task of late being both monotonous and uninteresting. So, he was hauling the spacecraft that nobody seemed to be acquainted with. It was still something less than a big deal. Was he in this fantastic craft from another world? Was he the lucky Captain who would probably reach the final frontier? No, he was a transcarrier pilot. For him, this was as good as it got. Well, at least he did his job competently. This year the United States alone had four transcarrier collisions, of which one had been fatal. Pathetic rookies. Greenhorn kids thinking transcarrier pilots did nothing other than sit around eating and engaging the autopilot. Not like his son. His son had done him proud, following in his footsteps and becoming acknowledged by his peers as one of the paramount transcarrier pilots to have been commissioned. He brought the ship to a halt and initiated a simple drop

procedure. As usual, nothing went wrong. The ship had been placed flawlessly. After disengaging the snap cables, Jeremy Kyol and the transcarrier returned to Earth.

It was going, hitherto, as intended. Perhaps control central wasn't the fortress the media wanted people to believe it was.

"Ganna. Set our coordinates for the Zenite system," commanded Jarre.

He hadn't expected to get this far.

Eclipse cursed silently under his breath.

"Zenite?" quizzed Ganna without enthusiasm.

"Yes," Jarre answered. "Our own government refuses to take the Tharnian threat seriously: I think we should all know a little better. We have to get the Zenite's help. If we don't, Earth will soon become another part of the Tharnian Empire."

"And that's if we're lucky," echoed Ky. He was trembling but tried to mask his fear with a fake show of breeziness.

"So, why kidnap us?" asked Eclipse, clenching his hands together.

Jarre drew near the heavily-built man. "I seemed to have encountered some problems obtaining your assistance voluntarily," he returned.

Ky should have seen it coming but didn't. Moving unexpectedly, Forbes delivered a hefty backhand to Ky's face and instantaneously snatched his razer pistol. It was then trained on Jarre's back.

"Lose the weapon, Jarre! I wouldn't need much of an excuse to use this," the General said, his grip on the pistol tightening. "In fact, I'd rather enjoy it."

Nobody moved. Eclipse considered attacking but bided his time. Forbes would very probably use the razer on him as readily as he would on Jarre.

"You move pretty good for an old guy," Ky said, rubbing what would soon be a bruise on his cheek.

"The weapon, Jarre. I won't ask again," sneered Forbes, ignoring the taunt. For now, the universe played host to he and Jarre alone.

Jarre slowly lowered his pistol to the ground. Forbes smiled in response and marched over to the comm. The lighting, life support, communicator, and other humdrum functions all worked but the craft

itself refused to travel. It had been in this condition since their return. Forbes suspected Jarre had stolen a component, somehow disabling the engines. He activated the comm and cleared his throat. “This is General Forbes to control central. None other than Claude Jarre has seized this ship. I have managed to take control of the situation and request that you send another transcarrier and some police ships. If I fail to communicate with you again within five minutes then you are ordered to destroy this vessel.”

After several seconds, Maxwell responded. *“I’m with you, General. Police ships dispatched. Transcarrier to follow.”*

Flicking off the comm, Forbes afforded a smile. “Looks like I get to be the protagonist again. I can’t believe you expected to pull this off. I only hope you have the stomach for prison food, Jarre, because you certainly don’t have the brains for freedom.”

“You don’t realise what you’re doing,” Jarre said as his mind cycled through his now limited options. Right now, dying in an attempt to get the gun wasn’t the worst of them.

Forbes smiled watchfully. “I have the gun and now, I have this ship. I would say that puts me in complete control.”

Eclipse chose his moment and leapt toward Forbes, who turned and fired. The big man collapsed as a bolt tore into his leg but the distraction was enough, allowing Ky to seize his opportunity. Springing behind Forbes, he returned the previous *good deed* and struck him across the back with a vicious blow. The impact sent Forbes reeling—the pistol sliding to the floor. Jarre picked up his own weapon and trained it on the stunned General.

“Not only do I expect to pull this off, General, I also expect you to come along for the ride. I’ll warn you once. If you *ever* try something like that again, you will expire. Quite excruciatingly. Now get up.”

Forbes did so, though admittedly in a dazed state.

“I can’t tell you how much I enjoyed that!” Ky said with a wry smirk, mimicking the blow he’d delivered to Forbes as though in slow motion. “I swear if I wasn’t a tactician I’d have been some sort of kung fu master or something.”

“Ganna?” asked Jarre, requesting an answer without needing a question.

“Coordinates are locked in,” responded a shaken Ganna, reading her husband loudly and clearly. She *wanted* to tell him to give it up but

decided against succumbing to her futile brainwave. When Jarre believed there was a conspiracy brewing, he wouldn't yield; that much she knew. What she wondered, however, was *what* would happen to him once they were captured by the system and brought back to Earth. None of the hypothetical upshots that swept through her imaginings were especially propitious.

From within the recesses of his trench coat, Jarre produced a small sphere-shaped device and followed-up the presentation with a crooked smile.

Forbes cursed silently under his breath. *He had been right!* They knew the spherical power cell was missing but hadn't been able to locate it. *Damn Jarre!*

Jarre looked over to the technician, who was studying the device. "Harris, install this back into the drive unit."

"And just *how* did it manage to fall out?" queried a sardonic Harris.

Jarre didn't like having to state the obvious but decided to accommodate the technician. "I removed it before we were picked up, just in case something went wrong. I just love being right."

"You always were wily," grinned Eclipse as he hobbled to his feet.

"We'd better get you fixed up," said a concerned Ganna, going over to inspect Eclipse's wound.

Eclipse limped across to meet Ganna halfway. "It had better be superficial. For someone's sake," he said, looking at Forbes.

Ganna said, "Ouch." With a grimace, she set to work with the portable autodoc. "I'm sorry if this hurts," she offered apologetically. "Medicine isn't my area of expertise."

"That's OK," Eclipse said, his glare still fixed on Forbes. Any pain he experienced could quite readily be repaid with supplementary interest.

"Next time I'll aim for your head," threatened a still dazed Forbes.

"There *won't* be a next time," Eclipse assured him.

Jarre tossed the sphere to Harris who shook his head in disbelief. "Get on with it."

The two police ships had left the Earth's atmosphere. Originally this was

simply an escort mission but now their objective had changed. Their target ahead and their orders clear, the pilots made preparations to engage.

“Looks like the police are on their way, Jarre,” reported Ganna.

Jarre sauntered over to Harris. “How close are you to finishing, Harris?”

“This is *very* delicate work, Jarre. Easier to remove than install, I suspect,” complained Harris, for once with cause. Non-techs always demanded express results with no appreciation of the complexity involved in the work they directed.

“How long?” repeated Jarre without inflection.

Harris considered arguing with Jarre but noticed he still brandished the gun. “Another ten minutes or so.”

Jarre checked a nearby display. “You’ve got two.”

“It can’t be done. It’s not possible,” insisted Harris. “I’m a tech; not a genie.”

Jarre thought for a moment before speaking. *This wasn’t good.* Stealing a vessel to save humanity was one thing his conscience *could* accommodate. Terminating people was never part of the plan. “Eclipse, man the trifire cannon.”

Eclipse did so. In the journey back to Earth, he had practised on several asteroids. In such a craft, he had felt almost invulnerable. Settling for the targeter that he had found to be the most dependable, he awaited the arrival of the police ships.

“You’re not going to destroy them, surely?” reasoned Forbes.

Jarre’s eyes found the General. “You called them, Forbes. This is simply a consequence.”

Forbes turned to Jarre in shock. “You can’t be serious,” he said. “They’re police ships!”

“Their destruction will be on your conscience,” Jarre explained, wondering if Forbes actually had one. “You have left us with no alternative.”

“That’s pap! I won’t be pulling the trigger,” argued the General, glaring at Jarre in disgust. He wondered what Ganna could possibly see in him. He was certain everyone else who met the couple would ask the same question. There was no rational answer.

“I think it is,” reinforced Eclipse. “You squeal—we deal.”

The *IN RANGE* message appeared on a nearby display and flashed in a manner that demanded attention. Eclipse took the controls and lined up the first craft, at this point no more than a visual speck on the display.

“Use the culoyne missiles, Eclipse. Let’s give them a chance to see what’s coming,” said Jarre.

Ky’s gaze found Ganna who didn’t appear impressed. Yes, her husband was indeed in control again, but at what cost and to what end were the questions that troubled her.

The police ships continued closing-in on their target as the missiles were launched. Two escape pods were quickly released, one from each ship, and moments later the first vessel was a fireball in space. On autopilot, the other almost managed to turn away before meeting the same fate. The newly formed debris drifted peacefully in space, as though determined to deny what had just taken place.

The two pods fled back to Earth.

“Done. We’re ready to move,” said Harris. He didn’t expect Jarre to thank him and wasn’t surprised. “Engines are online and powering up,” he added.

Jarre seated himself in the Captain’s chair as the whine of the engines rose to a steady hum. He liked the feel of the chair and hoped it wouldn’t be replaced by an electric one on his return.

“Are we ready, people?” asked Ky with a grin.

Ganna pursed her lips tightly. “Do we have a choice?” she remarked coldly.

“No,” said Jarre. “We don’t.”