

STARFARERS
and
THARNIANS
in Space

David Hearne

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DEDICATION

For Mum and (in memory of) Dad

To the old gang at QPIX. It has been a long journey from Ruminations the book to the screenplay to Starfarers and Tharnians in Space.

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Chapter 1 – The Survivors Flee

The planet Callon: sand as far as the eye could see: a veritable dustbowl under a raven-coloured sky. If someone had thought to put in an ocean, some palm trees, and those heady drinks with little umbrellas, this could have been paradise. Alas, it was anything but.

A strong breeze whipped the sand around the dime-a-dozen dunes. Breaking up the relentless vista, a battered, faded-crimson hovercraft-like vehicle sat idle, entrance open. Acrid smoke billowed furiously from the hull.

Outside the vehicle, lying face down in the sand, a man showed no signs of life, only those of a battle lost. Whatever went down here, for this fellow, it hadn't ended well.

'Whine!' A shimmering, hulking ice-grey ship drifted into view, like a gigantic, metallic scorpion blessed with wings, whipping the sand below into a frenzied protest. With a 'crash' it descended abruptly then, 'crunch', hit terra-firma, a ramp emerging almost simultaneous to the landing.

Four creatures burst from the hatch and raced down the ramp with purpose. They clutched powerful blasters in their claws. All stood over seven-foot and were clad in battle armour. Their harsh, russet-coloured coats and luminous eyes complimented their fangs and claws.

They stomped past the body of the dead man. One kicked the cadaver on the way past: perhaps to ensure the body didn't flinch, perhaps for pleasure. Once past, unseen by the creatures, the man slowly rose to his feet. Adorned in a tattered military uniform, the human in his late twenties had a wave of blond hair and an anchor earring. He looked like a surfer who had taken a wrong turn somewhere in life. He smiled grimly and lit a cigar.

A cigar? What kind of dinosaur are you, Ky? Don't you know these things can kill you? Knowing was one thing, stopping

another.

He sucked in deep, enjoying the hit. He knew he should have been dead several times over, so what he was about to do wasn't as preposterous as it seemed. The chosen one was among them, he mused, wishing for a moment it was him. If his only purpose was to protect the chosen one, then so be it.

Some were here to be the jester, the fool, the stooge. Others were needed to keep the simple things in place. Grand things were not intended for all.

Atop a rock, another man, a burly tower and ham-fisted brute sporting a crew-cut, watched on. Aptly named Eclipse, this man was another survivor who shouldn't be here. Sleep-deprived and in a crumpled uniform, he appeared an equally crumpled man.

It had been a long, tiring haul to carry on.

He sat clutching a rifle with a long muzzle, a sniper's weapon. He looked through the scope, nestled the stock into his shoulder, and adjusted the scope so the view tightened on one of the creature's heads.

He considered the plan. He pondered how the wheel had spun and the path had opened up before them. Survival: nothing more. When you should be dead, breathing became something more than an unconscious action. To stay alive depended on how they performed today. It was showtime.

Their bold and daring plan, formed by the chosen one, had to work. A chosen one so unlikely, yet here they were.

He eyed his yellow-haired compatriot, Ky, who the creatures hadn't seen yet.

He took a deep breath. Death was not a welcome release – it was rolling over and giving up. He had never done such a thing – and he was not about to start now. If the creatures won, so be it, but he would make a point of going down swinging.

He began to squeeze the trigger.

The monsters continued to advance with suspicion.

‘Crack!’ One of them fell to the ground. The other three turned to see the blonde man *jump to his feet*, alive and now wielding dual silver pistols. The fire in his eyes was now unleashed at his enemies.

“Welcome to the jungle!”

‘Crack’ after ‘crack’ sounded as the pistols erupted – white-hot energy striking another one of the abominations who fell. The young man, careful not to lose his cigar, grunted in triumph. The other two creatures returned fire while running for cover.

Two more humans, a man and a woman, appeared from behind a dune, yelling.

The man, older than Ky and Eclipse, was in his early forties with a receding hairline and enough worry lines around his face to tell a hundred stories, none of them ending favourably.

He wore a golden pendant with an eagle and a bear, and his name was Jarre. If you looked closely at the pendant, perhaps the eagle looked part lion, potentially barking back to Babylon of old. The lion was perhaps a memory of the Medo-Persian Empire that feasted on Lydia, Babylon and Egypt in the annals of history. On the other hand, perhaps they simply represented nations? Or was it possible that they represented only the majesty and worthiness of the animals they depicted? To this question, only Jarre knew the answer.

He fired his pistol at the creatures, wincing and missing. A shot was returned and narrowly missed him. He hurled himself into an ungainly roll and popped up next to the woman. He looked a little unsure of himself as he raised his weapon.

“You ain’t Chuck Norris,” she muttered.

The woman was in her early thirties, strength juxtaposed with softness, her disciplined body and tight ponytail didn’t match the purple ‘girly’ daisy-like flower in

her hair. If there was anything a man could do better than her it's clear she'd love to see it.

The barrel of her weapon spun and sizzling energy bombarded the two remaining aliens. One of them fell dead while the other took heavy fire and a round in the leg. With a snarl, the surviving creature growled and went on all fours, leaping away with surprising alacrity, rolling twice before finding his paws. Pulling a dagger from his boot, he threw it at the blonde man.

The dagger 'whizzed' over the surfer's shoulder and he dropped one of his pistols. He trained the other on the creature, which was now running toward him. The creature leapt, the blonde fired, energy flashed, and the alien dropped to the ground.

"Another one bites the dust," said Ky, blowing the barrel of the pistol, more for effect than anything else. "Did what I had to do," he managed, remorseful for a moment.

The woman smiled. "Don't feel bad. They're killers."

"Not more so than us," Jarre muttered cryptically.

The tower-like man arrived by the surfer's side first. He looked down at the dead creature. His voice boomed. "Nice job, Ky. They'll be coming in numbers. Time to move out."

The woman smiled, ponytail whipping in the breeze, with the older man in tow. Ky fired him a look. He regretted it at once – knowing the man before him, Jarre, was *the chosen one*, yet for the sake of ego he decided to deride their only ticket to staying alive: this was, after all, his plan.

"Nice shooting, relic! I think you even got a rock back there. You see that, Ganna?"

He looked at Ganna, imploring her to pay kudos to 'looks over brains'. Just once. She reminded him of nicer times.

You've had her sister. Why not her, too? You know why not! She is for the chosen one! She has no interest in you, fool!

The woman grinned wryly. "Save it! Jarre's our best

chance off this rock.” She looked over at the scorpion ship then at Jarre, the oldest of the quartet. “You reckon you can fly that bird?”

Jarre shook himself off, his face creased as he squinted against the sun. He looked at the ship and bit his lip. He took in the dead creatures and enjoyed a few deep breaths. They were alive!

He studied Ky, the blonde surfer who seemed to ‘ooze’ coolness. A pang of envy ran through him. This guy had the looks and was probably one of the ‘cool kids’ that would never usually hang out with someone like him, under normal conditions. However recent conditions had been anything but normal and they had become unlikely friends.

His eyes moved on Eclipse, the giant. When push came to shove, few shoved better. Brute strength was an underestimated commodity on a hostile, alien world. In close quarters, the man had done his bit to keep them alive.

Finally, he sized up Ganna, who was waiting for a response. His heart softened as he took in her splendour.

The sight of a beautiful woman could do funny things to a man, and it was unlikely she knew what power she had over him. If angels lived amongst them, he was sickly sure she was one of them. He was also aware that, like most women he’d met, the juxtaposed angel had a demon that came in the same package. Which you found depended on complex scientific events and computations, such as which way the wind was blowing and the state of any moons in orbit of the sphere you walked upon.

“Well?” she said, her brow creasing. “We don’t have all day!”

Jarre focused on the ship once more. “Tharnian technology we know nothing about, other than it’s better than ours; I’ve never even seen inside a merzer, let alone flown one.” He smiled. “Let’s find out.”

Ky shook his head and patted the burly man on the shoulder. “Hey, Eclipse, I told you he’s a lunatic!”

The giant was dubious and ignored Ky.

Eclipse sized Jarre up. A man of peace, so it seemed, yet he had

killed and would kill again. This enigma, with his mercy to animals and his, at times, contempt for mankind, challenged his way of thinking.

Jarre didn't profess to be one of the 'good guys' and seemed to think humans wore the black hats more often than the white. Sometimes it seemed he despised himself during the journey – that he was everything he hated – yet he still pushed on to do whatever it took to keep them all alive. He'd pulled off some grand things; would this be another or had his luck run out?

Eclipse shook his train of thought. “If you can't fly it?”

“If he can't, we're dead,” said Ganna flatly. She motioned her head towards the ship, her piercing eyes catching Jarre's gaze. “You go ahead. We'll keep lookout.”

Jarre nodded and ran towards the ship. “Here goes nothing and everything.”

Doing what he could to keep his mojo together, Jarre picked up the pace. What he'd give for a strong hit of coffee right now! A rich cup of java, even under a roasting sun, would be living in the lap of luxury right now. Did these chumps really think he could fly an alien vessel?

Did he really think he could fly that ship? What would happen if he failed? How would he face the others again? These and more nagging self-doubts pervaded his every sense as he did his best to shake them off and keep himself together.

He tripped in the sand and had to pick himself up. He looked back, full of self-doubt and fear. Had they seen him? He supposed Ky could have leapt over to the ship in four swift bounds, killed ten more tharnians on the way, saved a trapped child from a lava pit, repaired the hull of the ship with an evo-welder for good measure then piloted the vessel without missing a beat. Yet despite the bravado of Ky, it fell on *his* shoulders to scheme their way out of tight corners.

'The chosen one.'

He hated that term which is why they didn't use it around him. He had simply defied his poor genetics by working harder than most.

More than that, when it came to analysing the current state of ‘screwed’, only he had found a strategy that kept them breathing, time and time again.

Why?

Ky had the confidence, Eclipse the strength, and Ganna, well, she was indomitable.

As he took in some deep breaths and wiped some sand from his mouth he wondered if he was jealous of Ky in particular. The answer was ‘of course!’. Usually it was the ‘Ky’ dudes of the universe who saved them all and got the girl. He grinned at the irony of it all; not only had he kept them alive, *he* had got the girl. Would they have a chance to be *together* again? He suddenly felt distracted.

One thing at a time, buckaroo. Now let’s get this crate off the ground!

Ky looked at Ganna, who kept her back to him and didn’t slacken her grip on her rifle.

“I guess I gotta give it to ya,” he said begrudgingly, looking Ganna up and down; a little more than a casual glance. “This was *his* plan. Didn’t ever expect him to put his hand up for this nor that they would let him come!”

Ganna didn’t even acknowledge him.

Say something worth hearing or take a hike.

Ky, undeterred, continued. “I reckon he only came because of you? Could be a ‘Crazy Little Thing Called Love,’” he crooned badly.

Ganna rocked her head back, bumping Ky in the face.

Ky flinched and put up a hand to soothe his nose. “Oww!”

Bitch!

Eclipse looked up into a menacing crimson sky, holding his rifle distrustfully. “He’s kept us alive for months. You know I heard he got a bronze star four years ago, during the ‘Damocles’ incursion.”

Ky grinned. “Wasn’t for marksmanship, that’s for

freakin sure.”

Eclipse continued. “I’ve been trying to get me one of those all my life!”

“Aim higher!” spat Ky. “There’s silver and gold after that, you know.”

Sand in a dune moved, almost imperceptibly. Ganna swivelled around, rifle ready. A tiny lizard scurried past. The small reptile looked back at them with beady eyes then dashed away. She kept the weapon trained on it, just in case, as she spoke.

“Why do you think we listen to him instead of General ‘Simulator’?”

Forbes! Talk about ‘send in the clowns’.”

Ky grinned. “Yeah. We roll ‘em out like a fresh deck of cards – guaranteed a joker in every pack. Dick-head alert. He’s coming now.”

Eclipse smiled. There were two jokers in each pack, traditionally, and Ky was the second. Difference was, Ky did contribute when he was on-song. The same couldn’t be said for Simulator. Where there is darkness, there is darkness indeed.

Forbes, a man in his mid-forties, swaggered towards the group. With four stars on his collar, his uniform was black and if the scowl was anything to go by, his heart blacker.

“Good work, troops.”

Ky shook his head palpably. “I’m sure it looked quite spectacular from the safety of the ship, sir.”

“A general can’t direct a battle from the front line, 2nd Lieutenant. You wouldn’t understand, being a strictly-operational jumper monkey.”

Ky mumbled something imperceptible though probably not complimentary.

Forbes started toward the land-vehicle then stopped. “Where’s

Jarre?”

Ganna smiled thinly. “Scoping the takedown. He’s going to try and pilot the merzer.”

Forbes stammered. “Damn him! That was never part

of the plan!”

Eclipse, Ganna, and Ky looked at each other tellingly. It was always part of Jarre’s plan.

And their plan.

Forbes got it. “I see. Well, at least it was never part of *my* plan. Screw him, we’re not sticking around – let’s move out!”

Forbes stomped back to the vehicle, eyeing the scorpion ship in disgust. He fumed as he gave thought to Jarre, the millstone of a man who should be dead, dead, dead! How dare they listen to that knucklehead over him?

Ky shrugged his shoulders. “We gotta go back with Forbes, officially he’s still in charge. The nancy said he could fly it, what’s the problem?”

Eclipse smiled as he walked after Forbes. “He’ll find a way. That’s why he’s got a bronze star. And you don’t. You talk the talk then walk in a different direction.”

Ky waved a fist after Eclipse and stumbled after him. “You ... why ... get back here! You should have seen me on Delta Prime! I was hot stuff! Saved an entire colony!”

“And I bet the ants were thankful,” retorted Eclipse, not turning. Ganna squinted and retreated carefully, eyes-on for anything, rifle not lowered for a second. She looked at the merzer with troubled eyes. “Don’t let me down. We’re counting on you, Mister.”

Inside the vehicle it was confined and dark, as though the craft was in stealth mode. Ganna finally relinquished her weapon. “No sign of Jarre yet.”

A man, thin and wispy, balding with the demeanour of a bad dentist, watched Ganna. “The tharnians will know something’s wrong. They’ll be coming. We’re kaput! I told you this was a bad idea!” He hugged a conduit.

Ky thumped the conduit. “Shut-up, Elvin, you freakin’ harbinger of doom!”

Ganna confirmed the worst. “Here we go. We’ve got their attention alright. Looks like at least one patrol. If he can’t get the bird off the ground he should cut his losses.”

Her lips pursed. “Get your arse back here, soldier!”

Forbes moved over to examine the display for himself, pushing Ky aside as he did so. Ky gave him a filthy look. “They’re coming in fast! Get us out of here!”

No-one moved. Forbes fumed. “That was an order, people!”

For Forbes, this was a chance to leave the ‘so-called’ chosen one behind. Then they would fall into line, surely? Every story needed a villain and every chosen one an adversary to take them down. Sometimes it was even part of the chosen one’s destiny to have the villain, perhaps even a traitorous one, take to the stage and play a part in their undoing!

In time, he too would take his place with Mir Jafar, Marcus Junius Brutus, Ephialtes of Trachis and Benedict Arnold.

Ganna spoke up. “What about Jarre? We can’t just ditch him!”

Forbes snarled. “Sure we can. Just-like-that,” he said, snapping his fingers.

Ganna didn’t move. She looked up at Forbes, the indecision evident.

Forbes pulled out a pistol. “I’m in command here, not Jarre! Anyone who has a problem with that, say so now, and you, me, and ‘Bad Nermal,” he eyed the pistol, “will have a brief, decidedly terminal conversation about it.”

He put the pistol against Ganna’s head. Her eyes tracked it, then her own weapon against the wall. Then back to Forbes. She thought she could take him, however a look over to Ky who shook his head, convinced her now wasn’t the time.

Why did the unscrupulous people end up ruling the world?

Sand churned as the vehicle sped away. The scorpion ship rested alone and immovable amid the dunes.

Jarre sat in the captain’s chair of the scorpion ship, working on the controls. Design was alien with holographic instruments, honeycomb panels, amber lighting, and

displays with indecipherable information.

“Come on! Talk to me!”

He'd tried several things, none of which had worked. Yet he felt he was starting to connect with the ship. Success wasn't far away.

Panic had tried to loom but he stowed it back with worry, unworthiness, self-loathe and 'who do you think you are'?

He knew who he was, why he was here, what was happening, and what he had to do. He tried another switch.

“Play nice!”

A screen came to life and a tharnian face appeared, eyes searching. Bigger and stronger than the other four monsters now eating dirt, he wore armour and a fearsome helmet. The helmet, bird-like in an Aztec kind-of-way, had a beak running down towards the creature's nose. It looked, incongruously, like the bird had eaten the cat.

“Rugor to 721. Report?”

Rugor's head tilted as he spotted Jarre. He bared his fangs.

“Rugor, eh? So, you're the king-pin around here?”

Rugor snarled. *“Where is the crew of this ship?”*

“Indisposed. Well, disposed of, actually. Rugor, this is very provocative action on Tharnia's part. Attacking peace keepers.”

Rugor's eyes narrowed. *“Humans! Such arrogance! You deposed Abaddon and seized control of Callon's resources! The truth – that was why you came! Profit dressed up as magnanimity!”*

“Our ships don't fly without tritenine, but that wasn't our motivation. Abaddon was a bad man – we liberated this world!”

“It was not yours to liberate,” snapped Rugor. *“200-million tharnian troops now oppose you because of the alliance you knew you were stepping on! You will pay for waking the dragon!”*

Jarre turned and suddenly Rugor sighted his pendant. He let out a 'hiss'.

“And the prophecy will not be fulfilled!”

Jarre considered that, turned his back to Rugor, and

scanned the controls before him. "Prophecy? Not sure I follow; just trying to save my arse, here."

Rugor snarled. "*You! I do not believe the prophecy of the 'chosen one'. The blood that is supposed to be on your hands, for one who proclaims peace; how can two such conflicting personas co-exist? No, it is but a fable and you shall surely die!*"

Jarre stopped what he was doing, the words triggering a memory.

He knew the creature had sighted his pendant. More than that, he knew the monster's eyes had betrayed him and moved to the panel that could get this ship airborne. An accident or something subconsciously deliberate?

He would have smiled had the memory not overtaken him.

Jarre could hear the clock tick. Dr. Hope, who sat opposite him, had an expression that was impossible to read. She waited patiently for Jarre to speak. The clock continued to tick, the sound amplified.

Jarre forced his mind to accept the bombshell that had just been dropped on him. He could see through the window what a beautiful day it was outside. The bluest of skies, white wisps of cloud majestically floating by, green grass of the city gardens caressed the feet of those taking a break from the bustle and bustle to sit on the thoughtfully provided benches and steal back a sliver of their own lives. Normality mocked him. How dare the grass still grow and the sun continue to shine!

"How long," he managed.

She took a breath. "It's hard to be precise however if you start treatment now you can still lead an active, almost normal life for a couple of years. After that time your condition will deteriorate rapidly."

"How rapidly," he asked softly. He sighted a bird through the window. Blue tail-feathers complimented green plumage. The feathered friend of all gave him pleasure and he decided he would miss such moments. The bird seemed to roll in the grass just for the sheer fun of it all before taking flight.

She glanced at the 3-d display on her desk, full of facts-and-

figures, none of them pointing to good news. "You'll end up hospitalised sometime in the next two to three years – you just won't be able to go on. You'll then spend a couple of months booked up to camasilon to help you manage the pain. Then ..."

"Don't spare my feelings, Doc," he mused.

"You know what the prognosis is, so then..."

It was Jarre's turn to take a breath. "Then; lights out."

He decided he would also miss sandwiches. Salad sandwiches on rye bread with tempeh and pickles were such a joy to eat. They gave comfort to the soul in addition to food for the stomach. Even the ulcer couldn't temper tempeh!

She remained stoic. "You can pass away quite peacefully in the right care. I recommend we book you into..."

Jarre put his hand up. "I'm not dead yet, Doc."

There was no avoiding the 'what happens next?' question. The fact was, no-one knew exactly when the motor would just stop running: only that it would.

Jarre had his beliefs and drew comfort from them. What did the atheist do in such times? No amount of reason provided solace when you thought you were just the result of chance, going back to the dust – to be no more – as though you never were.

The gates of heaven would open wide. There would be no 'Saints' to greet him, for they were no greater than him. Jesus Christ would await and welcome him with open arms; as a fallen creature who had not leant on his own deeds or understanding. Grace alone.

Yet if someone challenged him that his beliefs were more 'out there' than a faery tale, who was he to argue? Yet even thinking for himself, examining the evidence, it made more sense to accept a creator, an artist, than to accept you were part of some cosmic accident. Science was terrific but had no interest in providing a moral compass or making him anything more or less than the sum of his parts.

He remembered a story a professor once told him. If 'God' created all that was good then surely he also created all that was bad. On Phela-7 there was a creature that planted itself in the ear of all the members of a human colony that had been unlucky enough to set up shop there. For the first two years times were good and Earth had considered sending more people. After that, the creatures, which had

provided health benefits initially, turned on mankind, feasted on brain and the colony was wiped out. Did God also create these creatures? Were we all paying the price for Adam and Eve's sins?

What about so called 'good people' who dealt death and torture for the animals of the Earth, kindred spirits who needed care but were stripped of all rights a sentient being deserved only so they could end up in a graveyard the person's stomach had become? Torn from their families and murdered at a harrowing rate to fill bellies that don't need them, only taste buds that want them. 'Do unto others' and 'Thou shalt not kill' only applied to other people, it seemed. No wonder Mahatma Gandhi had once said, 'I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians. They are so unlike your Christ.' Compassion was or it was not, selective compassion was merely speciesism in disguise.

In spite of his beliefs, or perhaps because of them, 'fear of ceasing to be' gripped him. He thought he had so much more living to do. Should he be cremated? Should he be buried? Who should he leave all his loot to? Why was this happening to him? Why didn't he do more for the people and animals he so dearly loved? Who would look after his hens back home? Would his inglorious blazer team ever win anything again, ever? So many questions, and now, so little time to answer them. He supposed it was better to know. Rather than getting hit by a 'skybus' as it came in to land, he had time to prepare for the end.

She offered a thin smile. "There is no cure and you have to be prepared. Once you reach the final stage, you will not be of sound mind to make any rational decisions."

He nodded. "I understand. Thank you." The clock ticked.

The fissure had a rubble-strewn floor with equipment set up indiscriminately: it looked like a bomb went off and no-one had time to clean up. Inside it, Ky crouched beside Ganna who studied a scanner coolly.

"I've got something. Looks like a merzer, closing fast!"

"Damn it! Red alert!" snapped Forbes.

Ky yawned, hit a panel, and the interior went red. He broke out into a breakdance behind Forbes' back and

pretended to lick the General's ear. Forbes turned around and Ky faked studying the scanner intently.

Ganna studied the screen, suppressing a smirk. Ky wasn't as funny as he liked to think. "It's either a tharnian patrol or Jarre's done it. If it's the latter we're saved!"

"I like your optimism, missy, but if it's the former we're dead."

Ganna's eyes fired daggers at Forbes, who walked off to a corner and pulled his pistol out. He spoke in a hushed voice – just he and his psychosis were all that mattered at this moment.

"What's that, Nermal? We'll do us all if they find us? Of course we will."

Ky nodded to Ganna, his hand resting behind him, on the hilt of one of his pistols. She nodded in return and went back to the scanner.

Most important communication was non-verbal. In that moment they both knew that if Forbes came too close to the edge he would be neutralised. Being a mutineer was preferable to being dead.

Eclipse came across and studied the scanner for himself. Forbes looked up at him with murderous eyes, almost caressing his pistol. Eclipse wondered momentarily if he'd get the death sentence if he snapped the General's neck.

Surely it made sense: the life of Forbes was worth less than that of an animal, he was just a hater and a taker. A leopard with no interest in changing spots. No, he knew that was unreasonable yet the urge to snap the man's neck didn't leave him.

So violence was acceptable given the 'right' circumstances? No, never, unless you had to defend yourself. Pro-active defence?

Repercussions of 'snap or not to snap' were based on the dubious assumption they would get back to Earth alive.

A massive, gleaming tower on Callon stretched towards infinity, like a giant metal fist that said 'we came, we saw, we

conquered you, and here's this big fist to prove it. Get that into you!

A tharnian guard, eyes shifting left to right, shambled toward a titanic member of his race, a third taller than his counterpart. Seated on an elevated platform, the larger creature stretched.

“Commander Rodagog! As impossible as it seems, a merzer has been stolen.”

The massive Rodagog turned to his subordinate disbelievingly.

“Send fighters in pursuit. Bring it down! Rugor is to lead the squadron.”

The guard nodded and slunk away, breaking into a purr. That was that, Rugor would not fail them. He never failed. Perhaps that was why he had his own ship, a rank beyond many, a much-coveted parcel of land back on their home world, Tharnia, and a titanium, triple-level scratching post.

Jarre appeared with a grin and was greeted by high-fives and a hug from Ganna. Forbes watched on frostily, arms folded.

Ky grinned at Ganna. “Holding out for a hero and here he is!

Let's hear it for the boy!”

Ganna ignored Ky and gave Jarre a kiss.

Ky licked his lips then shook his head. “There ain't no second prize.”

Jarre afforded himself a breath. “Everyone into the merzer. We're leaving.”

Forbes raised a hand. Jarre faced him.

“Forbes, not now, we've just got to get back to Earth – this is a no-brainer.”

“Even for you,” shot Ky with a wink.

Forbes watched on in disgust as Ganna, Ky, and Eclipse rushed from the cavern. Elvin shrugged his shoulders at Forbes, and tip-toed out. Forbes fumed.

“Now why do they follow your orders when I outrank you?”

“General, we all want to stick around, that’s all this is. Survival.”

Forbes punched the panel next to Jarre, who stood his ground.

He’d known many men like Forbes. Threats and intimidation were supposed to make you shrink back. Screw that!

I’ll look you in the eyes and I won’t flinch.

Barbarians resorted to violence when they had little else – the easiest way for the simple to solve a problem.

“There will come a day when I’m back in command. Count on it. It won’t be a great day for you, comrade.”

Jarre stopped, his eyes narrowing. “As we’re speaking, freely, and now that it’s just the two of us...”

Forbes put his hand up. “Forget it, soldier! You’re not my type! Besides, I hear you’ve got a hairy arse.”

Jarre shook his head. “Better than a talking one. Why the hell did we really come to Callon?”

Forbes sighed and looked Jarre up and down. He pondered, as though considering letting the proverbial cat out of the bag. He circled Jarre. He owed this pleb nothing however was this his chance to brag? To show this insect, that some dared say was ‘the chosen one’, how superior he was?

Irresistible.

“Because you’re slow-witted, allow me to recap. One: Callon refused to abandon its engagement program. Two: it took provocative action against its neighbours, including the sacred world, and three: we moved in accordance with a United Planet’s resolution.”

“And now the tharnians have stepped in to chase us away. Why?”

“Does it matter why? We have the United Planets behind us. They might have won the battle but they won’t win the war. And war was, after all, what we wanted.”

War was what we wanted? What we wanted. Wanted.

Forbes exited with a grin. Jarre watched after him, confused. Why would anyone, let alone his own United Planets, want to provoke a war? The words of the creature troubled him. While he considered tharnians a blood-thirsty race of war-mongers, it bothered him that these creatures thought the same of his people.

His own 'righteous' people who bullied and murdered any living creature not as clever as themselves for food; when they weren't killing one another in the name of something-or-other that is. Earth were the good guys: yeah, right! Yet surely, this time, they were not lying?

He'd always felt a few things didn't add up about the 'why' questions surrounding this mission but assumed he was still sitting vacillatingly atop the shaky moral high ground. The question mark adding ambiguity to Earth's intentions inferred by the alien didn't help. He resolutely took off after the General, hoping the non-partisan chronicles of history in years to come would record the people of Earth wearing the white hats. More importantly, he hoped the account dealt only with the facts. The truth was the truth, no matter how unpalatable.

The merzer taxied away from the cave moments before a dazzling viridian beam struck and demolished the face of the cave. The explosion rocked the merzer.

Inside the merzer, the occupants were thrown about. Eclipse grabbed onto something. "Whoa! What was that?"

"Looks like they've just nuked the cavern. Nice timing," Ganna said.

Jarre sat in the captain's chair with helm controls before him. The controls were designed for big claws but he assimilated quickly.

Forbes stood behind him, arms locked. The fact that Jarre had been chosen for this mission astounded him.

While others might be able to see he had kept them alive, all Forbes could see was a usurper sitting in *his* chair. He looked down at his pistol. Perhaps he and 'Bad Nermal' would have a conversation with Jarre sometime in the near future. His top lip curled up.

"How'd you figure out the controls?" asked Ky.

"It's not as hard as it looks."

Everyone was thrown about as the craft hit turbulence. Jarre struggled to correct the ship's course.

"Okay. Maybe it is. Ganna, how are you doing?"

Ganna studied a series of holographic readouts, trying to make sense of them. "Getting there, give me nano."

Elvin wandered by, amazed. He stroked a conduit lovingly. "Listen to her purr! I can't wait to see what's under the hood." He looked at Jarre, almost with admiration, then remembered he was a disgusting sack of bone and fluid, just like the rest of them. He then took in Ganna, who was pretty, though equally flawed. Had he designed her then he would have made the cheekbones higher. He would have also replaced her body parts with cybernetic implants until she was more machine than human.

Then that pesky 'free will' would need the firmware upgraded to 'All_I_Want_Is_Elvin_4.1'.

Give Elvin the choice between stroking a woman and a machine and the machine won every time.

Jarre took the controls. "Let's see if this thing can get us back to Earth."

Forbes, chewing his cud, spoke up loudly enough to ensure everyone could hear him. "I order you to return us to Earth!"

Ganna smiled broadly. "Is there an echo in here?"

The tharnian guard listened to comms chatter, eyes wide. It was Rugor.

"Command, we have the enemy merzer on visual. Awaiting your

orders.”

Rodagog entered. The guard looked at him carefully but didn't speak.

“What are you waiting for, Inkarthu? Engage and destroy.”

Forbes watched Jarre with envious eyes. Ganna studied a display as though her life depended on it.

“We're out of Callon's atmosphere but don't get excited just yet – we've got company. Merzers coming in fast – they're fighters alright!”

Ky sighed. “Well they were hardly going to send the cleaners after us! Ah, nuts!”

“Stay with me,” Jarre implored him. “We're not done yet.”

Ky looked at Jarre but didn't respond. He wondered why he didn't like the man sometimes. At first it seemed obvious. He was 'different'. He didn't drink with the others. He didn't play cards. He was one of the people who wouldn't eat meat because he called it murder! He wasn't 'one of the boys'. He was also weak with hand weapons, a serious 'no no' for the enlisted, no matter the rank. Yet he knew Jarre could fly the pants off anything, and he alone had been the one who had 'thought strategically' enough to stay one step ahead of the aliens. He wished he'd had the vision to take such risks so he decided he resented Jarre because he was the 'better man'. That and the fact he had Ganna. Not that he wanted her; though she looked identical to his lover. No, it was more that no-one else could truly be 'relieved of their burden' in the most fitting manner, something he supposed was almost always unique to men, until they got home, except Jarre. Damn him! What he would give for anything remotely female about now!

He looked at Elwin and imagined him in a dress. No, there were limits.

This part of space, surrounded by purple nebulae with a white dwarf watching on, was about to be the vista for a battle. Merzer 721 had four smaller grey fighters in pursuit. Stars rushed by at extreme velocity. The lead fighter, in which sat Rugor, had yellow flames and skulls painted on it.

He growled as he searched for his prey. This would not take long.

Inside the merzer, Forbes paced like a hen waiting to be fed while Ganna looked at Jarre desperately.

“Jarre! Do something! Evasive manoeuvres won’t cut it today.”

Jarre’s brow furrowed. “I’m open to suggestions.”

Ky noticed three symbols, in alien script, set in a holographic screen. He pointed to one.

“Maybe it’s time to walk like an Egyptian?”

“Don’t touch them,” yelled Forbes. “We don’t know what they’ll do!”

Jarre took a breath and nodded thanks to Ky. Despite being right in front of him, he hadn’t noticed them. “Here we go. This one’s in the lap of God. I have no idea what I’m doing.”

“Yet the lemmings follow,” Forbes quipped.

“The only God I know lives inside my brain,” Ky quipped, then appeared confused. “Wait a second! Does that mean our fate is in the lap of my brain? We’re in trouble, folks!”

Jarre touched the first symbol. It glowed yellow.

An escape capsule departed the merzer. Rugor watched the capsule eject. He considered his options before speaking. “I will deal with the escape capsule. Remain on target and fire at will.”

A filtered response came. “*Acknowledged. I am engaging.*”

The three pursuing ships fired. Rugor's merzer broke away from the others and veered toward the capsule.

Inside the renegade merzer, Jarre kept his eyes on the view screen. Ky walked across to him. "What did that do?"

Ganna answered. "We've lost an escape capsule. Looks like we've still got three left. They're still coming!"

Jarre touched the second symbol.

The voice of the computer came to life. "*Warning – exhaust port ejected!*"

The ship rocked and all inside were thrown about. Ky grabbed hold of Ganna to steady himself. He gave her a look of 'thanks' and perhaps something more.

In space, the rear of merzer 721 detached and engulfed the three pursuing vessels, swallowing them whole. Quite rude, really, considering this was a battle they couldn't lose. Rugor's merzer swerved, taking some damage, surviving with the pilot uttering a short curse.

It spun out of control, Rugor's face agog amid the blur of stars.

Ganna ran over to Jarre. "I don't believe it. You did it! We're free!"

She hugged him and planted a kiss on his cheek.

Ky made a fist. "We're going home, yeah! Time for the safety dance, people!"

Ky broke into a rap, complete with robot-like movements. "We can dance if we want to, we can leave Forbes behind ..."

"You idiot," snapped Forbes, folding his arms.

Ganna grinned. "I do believe it's time to party." She looked over at Jarre. "You up for a good time, mister?"

Jarre allowed himself a sly smirk. "I could be tempted."

Jarre sat alone in the pilot's chair and watched the view-screen solemnly. Stars lolled by and broke up the blackness of space.

Ky sauntered in, approached Jarre, and sat opposite him.

"I suppose you feel pretty good about getting us off that hell-sphere."

Jarre didn't look up at Ky. The view-screen trumped him. "Lucky break," continued Ky, undeterred. "Still, I'll take it."

"Me too," surrendered Jarre, taking his eyes from the screen. "When we get back to Earth, I hope I can find some answers. I mean, what were we really doing on Callon?"

Ky grunted. "Getting our collective arses kicked, usually. Listen, who cares about the 'why' when you're about to 'get some'. Ganna looks ready to put-out to her Captain Marvel."

Jarre laughed. "Okay, maybe the 'why' can wait. Life is all too short, I've gotta walk in the green grass while I can. I should tell her though ..."

"Tell her what?" asked Ky.

His eyes narrowed. "Nothing. I've seen the way you look at her," he said, snapping back to the present and turning to face Ky. There was no menace in his gaze. He shook Dr. Hope from his mind.

Ky nodded. "Whatdoyouspect? She looks identical to my Udaya." He licked his lips. "Hmmm. Can't wait to see her." He looked out to the stars. "I wonder if she thinks of me when she's with them?"

Jarre turned his head, unsure what Ky meant. Should he ask? Ky was suddenly somewhere else. "Must be tough. I'm sure Udaya will be happy to see you."

Ky nodded slowly then stopped. He returned to the present. "Yeah. Until I'm weak, which I always am. Then, things go south." He took a deep breath. "Look, I didn't come to talk about our gals. I just wanted to say you did alright for a nancy. That's all."

Ky stood and walked out, carrying trouble on his shoulders. Jarre watched after him. "You did okay, too. For a pretty boy."

Chapter 2 – No Place Like Home

Earth, hundreds of years in the future, made a beehive look pedestrian. Thousands of aircars swarmed around New York City's futuristic needle-like towers. The future wasn't busy; it was an orchestrated convergence of controlled chaos.

Inside a control room full of people, high-tech screens, maps, and gadgets, a private in his twenties, dressed in a crisp, military uniform, studied the scanner in front of him and frowned.

A Sergeant joined him, in his fifties with his face a roadmap of creases. "This had better be important!"

The private saluted. "You won't believe it, Sarge. I've got an incoming dragon ship!"

The Sergeant inspected the screens for himself. "They wouldn't dare; not after Callon." He blinked disbelievingly. "Hell! Open a channel and arm the defence sphere! Someone get me the President!"

In moments the control room bustled.

There was a filtered crackle. "*This is General Forbes. Are you receiving me, Central?*"

There were cheers and gushes. It was clear Forbes had been counted amongst the dead.

"General, this is Sergeant Speering! I can't believe you're still with us."

Ky's voice in the background, barely imperceptible. "*Me either.*"

The café in downtown New York announced elegance with fine furnishings, exotic décor and a waterfall cascading merrily in the background. The vista offered an escape

from the bustle of the city. Tables, chairs, and lovers of fine coffee were aplenty.

Ganna sat opposite her double – a near identical woman who was immaculately dressed and heavily bejewelled. Were it not for the fact that she had an eyebrow piercing and wore her hair shorter, you couldn't tell them apart.

I am not you, I look this different from you to prove as much, and while you conquer the stars, dear sister, I allow others to conquer far more basic instincts, for a price only the elite can possibly afford.

Both had coffee before them as they enjoyed the warmth of the sun on their bones.

"I'm glad you made it back," said Udaya. "Must be nice to be back on terra firma."

Ganna breathed in the aroma from her cup, her eyes narrowing. How delightful was coffee? "The United Planets aren't going to let those furballs get away with killing our forces on Callon. There will be a stern reprisal."

"Hmm. You know, I hate war! We just aren't happy unless we're fighting with someone!" She took a breath. "Give me a moment."

"Sure," Ganna said, having another sip. Unlike her sister, Ganna had no aversion to war. In the past, when they fought, Udaya used words rather than fists to try and work through problems. It had meant Ganna won most arguments when they grew up together back on 'Miguel-Carlos-Maxibon Ranch' in Sherwood. Ganna was happy enough to start with words, however, as an angry teen; a slap fest was never too far away when things hadn't gone her way.

"Sorry, I know it's been rough," Udaya said, checking herself. "You still fancy the iceman?"

Ganna's eyes opened wider. "Jarre? To coin a phrase, it's complicated. I haven't returned his calls since we got back, I had some second thoughts but I've got to ..." she paused, "never mind. How are you and Ky trekking? He's missed you."

“You call that an answer?” Udaya checked.

“Only one you’re getting,” Ganna said with a smirk.

Udaya laughed. “Then I’ll just wait you out.”

She flicked through a holo-magazine as Ganna watched on. Both sipped coffee. Birds chirped nearby, busy with their less-cluttered lives.

Ganna sighed. “Well, he’s nice, which is part of the problem, and I think we’ll be together again soon enough. If only because duty calls. Satisfied?”

Udaya nodded. “That’s a terrible answer, my dear girl. Duty? Since when did you owe Jarre anything? Are you feeling guilty about something? I found a special compartment for guilt – nothing gets out once I put it there. Not even for a nano.”

Ganna did what she could to change the subject. “We’re all guilty of something.”

‘Homewrecker’, Ganna thought. Many would consider her high-class escort sister as such – the object of marriages dissipating and dissolving as men and women poured their lust into her. Such a tag was unfair, after all she didn’t instigate any of it. Yet she imagined Udaya’s ‘special compartment’ was very full indeed.

Udaya’s eyes went to her coffee, then stared straight through Ganna. “Do you ever stop to think about the ‘cause and effect’ of our lifestyles? From filling our ships with tritenine to, well,” her eyes returned to the coffee, “driving such a demand for life’s little luxuries? Where one indulges, another suffers, somewhere.”

Ganna cocked her head to the side. “Go on, hippie. While I work on keeping us safe from bloodthirsty aliens doing the grunt work, you keep philosophising.”

“Stop it! Our lavish lifestyles here create a slave culture elsewhere... don’t you think?”

Ganna took another sip. She was sure her sister had a point. Udaya was a member of every ‘do-gooder’ society out there, and as anti-war as they came. She admired that about her, even though, to some, it seemed so contrastingly juxtaposed with her profession.

“I mean I can’t believe we still eat our animals just because they’re weaker and less intelligent than we are, that’s a reason why we should show them mercy!”

Ganna put her hand up to stop her. “You sound just like Jarre. If only for environmental reasons rather than compassion, less animals die now than once upon a time – the few that do are just there to stimulate the taste-buds of the elite. Now who won’t answer the questions! Ky? I asked you about him. Remember?”

She looked down and swirled the coffee in her cup. “He’s drinking again. I could live with that but he also takes stuff to ‘feel good’ all the time, no matter the cost.” She paused, taking a breath. “And worse, I suspect. If that wasn’t enough, he had eleven messages from a cadet a decade his junior, most of which were along the lines of, ‘when can I see you again’. We had a fight before he left and another one as soon as he got home. So, yes, things are peachy!”

Ganna frowned. She could kill him! “Maybe he’s not the one?”

Udaya laughed. “My dear sister, sometimes it’s you who are the naive one! He fits the bill for now; that hardly makes him unique, or qualifies him as a mystical ‘one’, when we all have many choices in the end. Some fit better than others, it’s true, but this notion of ‘the one’ is nonsense.”

“Yes but surely if you met the right one you would; wouldn’t, well...”

Udaya put her coffee down. “What? Exit the escort business? That’s a lot of k-credits you’re talking about, darling. Is any man worth that? Universe-forbid, what if I had to ever depend upon one?”

Ganna’s eyes retreated to her coffee. “Things will get better. He talked about you the whole time. Really!” She sipped from her cup and smiled. She went to put it down but could not – the taste reeled her back in before the cup could reach the saucer.

She supposed she wasn’t a good liar. Ky had talked about her

but hardly all the time. She had also heard most of the men came to Ky for the latest 'adult' film – of which he had plenty – of many persuasions – or so it was rumoured. It's a wonder he hadn't already burned a hole in his brain by now. She didn't like men without any control – and her sister could do better than Ky. Surely?

“And what kind of stuff did he say?” Udaya asked. “I do enjoy this hazelnut blend, it reminds me of better times.”

Ganna grinned and grabbed her hand. “You know. I'm the evil twin and you're the nice one. Rubbish like that. Mmm-mmm! I'm with you!” She sipped again.

Udaya nodded and delicately sipped her coffee. “I was worried he'd hit on you out there. We do look identical, you know, except I'm the one with the snappy haircut and the bling where it counts.”

Ganna didn't have any piercings apart from her ears, quite unadventurous, really. Despite playing her part to defend the planet in many ways she was far less risk-adverse than her sister. She also had many more inhibitions. Some of the 'experiences' Udaya had hinted at boggled the mind! Yes, of course she was curious but ...

“I'm glad he didn't chance his arm. They say no one can hear you scream in space!” Ganna said, smirking.

Udaya stuck out her tongue, flashing a star-shaped barbell embellished with a beautiful diamond.

The ‘Commodore Simulator Training Centre’ was where all the hopeful students studied their craft in the hope they would one day be aboard a craft, serving the cause. Jarre sat at his desk in an empty classroom, marking exams.

Flying a desk' was exactly what he didn't want to do; he knew that 'they' knew; and it was now a battle of wills, to see who would relent first. For him, relenting meant resigning, which he wasn't about to do. From a practical point of view if nothing else, he would stay. He needed the credits. He'd asked his uncle how he'd feel about having his 'favourite' nephew come stay for a while, maybe a few years. His uncle

had put a finger to his bead and pulled the imaginary trigger. He didn't plan to sell his soul, just rent it out for a couple more seasons.

A female chic recruit, early twenties wearing a hip skirt and natty top, marched up to Jarre. She held up a piece of holo-paper with contempt.

“I refuse to debase myself by even attempting to solve the ‘Achilles and the tortoise’ paradox. It’s ridiculous!”

Jarre barely looked up from his work. “Ah, Denise, who never fails to ‘ask the next question’. If what you say is true, should make it easy to debunk then.”

She put a hand on his desk and hovered tension over him until he looked up. “Movement has two elements, space and time, yet Zeno has ignored time completely! I will not be patronised, not by Asimov, not by Nation, and certainly not by you!”

The recruit tore the paper to shreds and stomped away. Jarre sighed, checked his watch, and started picking up the bits of paper. He looked up as a news broadcast came on.

A reporter, Ryder in his early forties, was a news-hound wearing houndstooth. While his checked suit and flamboyant tie clashed, they also inferred ‘conservative yet hip’. At least that’s what his stylist had told him.

“Urgent talks resume tomorrow as Tharnia refuses to withdraw from Callon. No apology has been issued for the attack on our peace keeping force and the Tharnian Empire has warned Earth not to return to Callon. With unrest in the middle systems at an all-time high, some of Callon’s neighbours are indicating they support the tharnian incursion.”

A tiny device in Jarre’s pocket hummed stridently. He answered it to see Forbes’ face.

A call from the grim reaper would be more welcome than one from Forbes.

“What do you want?”

“I won’t waste time waiting for a salute. I bring good news! We’re going back to Callon.”

Jarre stood. “I’d love to kick some tharnian tail but we don’t share the same vision.”

"We don't need to. You're enlisted. My vision is your vision. Besides, the President insisted you come along despite my objections."

The screen snapped off.

Jarre considered this turn of events. There was little risk this time yet he just wasn't interested. Initially he'd thrown himself at Callon because he had so little to lose. If his life was coming to an end then he may as well start making it count for something. Since his return he'd felt a little robbed, after all he shouldn't have survived, and surviving just to die seemed a waste. As a vegan he should be a super-human, surely? It seemed his genetics had caught up with him.

He'd asked lots of questions too and received no answers. Further, he'd been told to stop questioning his superiors. With the party line and the real reason for Earth to 'liberate' Callon seemingly poles apart, asking 'why' was the most important question he and others like him had. Were the tharnians really the bad guys?

Having ear-marked himself as an 'insurgent', a call-up back to Callon was the last thing in the world he had expected.

He didn't like the smell of this rat.

At an open field full of targets, soldiers stood behind Ky as he lined up a shot. 'BLAM!' A 3-D human-shaped target took one between the eyes.

'BLEEP!' Ky answered his communicator. Jarre appeared on the screen.

"I've already told you I am not going to rescue food-hens! Not now, not ever? Do you read me, compadre?"

"Forbes says I'm going back to Callon."

Ky grinned. "And you're telling me because ...?"

"I had to tell someone."

"I suppose I *just* qualify. And you reckon you're not in?"

Jarre shook his head furiously. *"No way. No how. I'm not*

going! Period!"

"Times infinity?"

"At least!"

Ky lined up another target. "Well, here's the thing. With the political bullshit machine cranked into overdrive, all the survivors from Callon are reunited." Ky popped another target. "That includes Ganna. That change anything?"

Jarre did a poor job at hiding his surprise.

"I've got some packing to do."

The screen blanked.

'BLAM!' Ky smirked as he nailed another target. A young private with golden locks took her place and let off a round.

"Hit me with your best shot!" Ky said. "Fire away!" She did; and missed. Ky grinned at her.

"I'll get better sir," she said.

Ky nodded. "Some private tuition might be in order," he said, knowingly.

"Really? Thank you, sir!" she said, preparing to fire again.

"Anything for the cause," he said, smiling.

She fired again and missed. Ky's grin grew wider. "You betcha". He'd enjoy banging her against the hangar door soon enough.

The insectoid creature stood before a striped amber and charcoal locust-like ship. The tiger-coloured fighter dripped weaponry and oozed menace, appearing hungry to devour prey unsuspecting and otherwise. A weapon was slung around the torso of the tall, pallid creature.

Two men looked down at the creature from an elevated platform. One was a slight, balding near-skeletal man with unoccupied eyes, concave forehead, and tapered cranium wearing a contemporary designer suit that, using unassuming sensors, changed colour to match the mood of

the wearer. It was currently overcast. Had it ever been any other colour? Forbes stood next to him.

“And you believe this creature, Goddard, can intercept Jarre, take what we have placed in his blood, and deliver it to Merevello?”

Forbes nodded. “Of course, Cudex. Goddard is the best hunter bar none, Jarre is locked in and will never be screened, and once he’s past Callon we can take him, extract what we need, and make the delivery undetected.”

Now it was Cudex’s turn to smile. “Our unwitting drug mule.”

Forbes smiled and spoke with anticipation. “So he’s finally good for something! I understand the extraction process is painful?”

Cudex’s thin lips formed a cruel smile. “That’s the understatement of the century.”

Forbes grinned. “Oh? Oh dear. Forget my payoff; this alone has been worth crossing the president for. It’s terminal?”

“Decidedly so,” Cudex answered.

Forbes laughed. “Perfect!”

They watched on as the insectoid alien approached them.

“How did it get the name ‘Goddard’?” Cudex asked, cautious.

Forbes became decidedly solemn. “It took on the name of the first human it ate, so I’ve heard.”

“Spooky.”

Night fell outside the Manhattan Centre’s Grand Ballroom. The immense construction was topped by bold entrances by immaculately dressed people. Aircars dropping off their guests looked like 24th century limos. Security ensured only the invited were admitted. ParaDroids, big rotund robots with numbers on them, buzzed about the air looking for trouble. The one bearing

the highest number, 999, appeared particularly formidable.

A poor person from one of the slums dared to approach. Once a man of means, he longed for those days again. Perhaps he could just glimpse those who mattered now? He tried to run as the ParaDroids seized him and discretely dragged him away.

“I was someone once too,” the man yelled. “Just let me in, just for a moment,” he pleaded, his voice fading.

One of the machines swept the grass that the man had disturbed. Soon, it was as though nothing had happened.

Inside, chandeliers hung from the ceiling, staircases made their way to heaven, enough booze flowed to send anyone to hell. Those without food or drink were served by eager waiters in moments. A big band played with passion and vigour on stage.

Jarre, Ky, Eclipse, and Elvin chatted. Elvin’s girlfriend, attractive in a ‘plastic perfection’ way, held Elvin’s hand. Elvin stroked her hand and head-wobbled in time with the music.

Ky struggled to stand and looked as full as a boot. “Welcome to the pleasure-dome! Last night on Earth, people. I’ll drink to that! Ching-ching!”

Eclipse took a swig from his pint glass. “This should be a freakin’ kick-arse counter strike! We’re stopping at Zenite en route. Who knows what our allies have in store for those frac-ing monsters?”

Jarre fumbled his drink and looked lost within the contents of his glass. “Sometimes I wonder what it all means, this parody, this life, so little time. So much unfinished.”

He was dying. That was about the only certainty in his life, that it was ending, and soon. Everyone expired, just like a parking meter, pop! Part of him just wanted to hit the booze and stay in a state where none of the facts were changed but he simply didn't worry about them as much.

Ky pushed him; hard. “Ganna’s coming. Chin up, soldier. Uptown girls don’t like it when all you do is take

them downtown.”

Jarre swigged his drink with verve.

Ganna glided into the room wearing a long, black and purple fuchsia beaded ball gown with enough slits to ensure many sets of eyes followed her every move. She wore a flower in her hair.

“Hi y’all.”

There were smiles and murmurs of greetings for her.

Ky turned away to hide his drink.

She looked at Jarre. “You wanna dance?”

Jarre nodded and the two headed off. Ganna took his arm and he smiled, reassured. Could this woman really love him?

Elvin watched after them. “I don’t want to spoil the mood but things haven’t been easy since Callon. Now we’re going back again!” He gulped down a shot of something neat and strong.

Elvin’s girlfriend registered confusion. “You’re going back to Callon? You’re never online when I need you!” Her diamond ear-rings sparkled as she turned her head.

Elvin went red. “I’ll be back before you know it.”

She frowned severely. “You’re nothing but a two-timing sub-routine! As it is written, in ‘The Road To Sentience’, ‘Never let the hand you hold, hold you down’.

Moving swiftly, she poured her drink in Elvin’s face, and exited. Some of the other guests laughed. Elvin watched after her, mopping his face with a handkerchief.

“Oh dear. I shall miss her.” He looked at Eclipse with forlorn eyes. “She’s a series 7000 pleasure-bot, you know.”

Eclipse looked at his beer and shook his head. “Wait a second! She’s a freakin’ robot?”

“What’s wrong with that? You’ve seen her parts!”

Eclipse raised an eyebrow and chuckled.

Ky laughed. “Clearly not all of them!”

Jarre and Ganna danced cheek to cheek on a lofty

balcony which offered panoramic views of the city. Music suitable for a slow waltz played in the background. They were alone.

“It’s a lovely night.” He looked at the vista, hoping to find inspiration for his next line of dialogue. “That daisy in your hair sure is pretty.”

Ganna took the flower from her hair and twirled it.

“It’s an Idaho mountain wildflower. Unlike many flowers that attract insects, these act as an insecticide. Its botanical name is ‘Erigeron asperugineus’.”

Jarre grinned. “Of course. I knew that.”

He knew that? Lying bound!

Ganna looked down at the flower then back to Jarre. She returned it to her hair. “It’s derived from the Greek: eri means ‘early’ and geron means ‘old man’. These flowers have grey, bushy leaves and stems.”

Jarre smiled. Did he have to bring up the damn flower? Now she was going to give him ‘War and Peace’ about the history and symbolism of the infernal weed. He tried to think of something to keep the conversation flowing and came out with, “So you have an old man watching over you with a fly swat?”

Ganna’s smile broadened as Jarre led her into a twirl. She was as graceful as a swan, though hopefully not as vicious. Jarre once had a bad experience with a hissing, angry swan that had wanted a piece of him. That swan still hunted for him in his dreams.

“I prefer,” she said, “to think the flower’s wild but also wise, able to keep bees away.”

He fumbled for something but his repartee was being stretched. “Don’t like bees, huh?” he offered lamely.

He quite liked bees, another creature humanity managed to exploit by stealing their honey and making them sick by swapping it for corn syrup in the hope they wouldn’t notice.

“What’s to like? They seek us out, try to taste our nectar, take what they want if we let them, then buzz off. If they return, it’s only because they want some more.”

He considered that. He was enjoying their wordplay yet felt she read him like a book and he had zero on what was going on inside her pretty head. He had indeed tasted her nectar and was keen to do so again but he hadn't 'buzzed' off.

Far from it, he was one love-sick puppy who would follow this woman anywhere. He already believed when the initial 'buzz' of love faded, the 'high' would be replaced by something much stronger.

Probably not best to blurt that out at this juncture; that would be akin to having 'stalker' tattooed on his forehead. He didn't know why but she hadn't returned his calls so if anything, she was the one who had gone cold. Now wasn't the time to try and work that one out.

"Nectar, you mean?"

Ganna took control of the dance and led Jarre. She stepped up the tempo. Jarre struggled to keep up.

"Of course," she snapped with a half-smile in place.

Jarre thought that sounded like a reprimand, possibly for something he'd done, something she knew he was going to do, or something he was about to think of. He didn't get women, this woman especially. Yet he wanted to find out more and time was of the essence.

Ganna drew closer to Jarre. Their eyes locked and they stopped dancing.

He took his chance. "I've missed some things about Callon, believe it or not. Nights with you in my arms while war raged all around us."

Ganna smiled. "I've been meaning to call you. I've missed those nights too."

Jarre leant to kiss her. She tilted her head to receive the kiss and their lips connected. He supposed he should tell her his time was short yet now wasn't the time. Right now the sun was shining and other feelings dominated. Feelings that he liked!

She saw something below and pulled away. "Uh-oh. My sister's here."

Below, Udaya approached the entrance. Ganna

frowned.

Jarre's eyes followed Udaya's walk which became a march. "She looks..."

Ganna. "Pissed."

He nodded agreement. "As does he."

Ky merrily knocked back another strong drink. Eclipse stood next to him, egging him on.

"The only thing in life worth standing for is your next paycheck, my friend. Look for which way the breeze is blowing and jump on board!"

Udaya marched towards Ky.

"Ky! You were supposed to pick me up! Hours ago!"

"Hey, babe! Yeah I forgot; sorry about that."

She fumed acid. "With you, everything's a laugh. Just like your last 'fishing trip' with the boys?"

Ky went red. "What's wrong with a little 'bloke time'?"

Her arms folded, perhaps along with Ky's spine. "Nothing, unless there's only one other person going with you, and their name happens to be Arianna, and the 'fishing' takes place in one of New York's finest hotels! Hope you didn't 'catch' anything!"

Eclipse mouthed an 'ouch'.

Ky lowered his gaze. "She ... blinded me with science! Do you really want to hurt me? Do you really want to make me cry?"

She slapped him hard, said, "we're finished," turned on her heel, and snaked away. He dropped his drink, watching after her; a man burnt by his own desires.

"You gotta be crazy, baby," he muttered, "to want a guy like me. Udaya ... you don't have to put on the red light. You don't."

Elvin watched on and mumbled, "From now on seems June 25 is hereby known as 'International Dump Your Man' day."

Eclipse watched after her. "Sorry, bro."

Ky licked his lips, pushed away hurt, watched after her, and looked down at the broken glass. “Forget it. Like she can talk, anyhow!”

A waiter stepped in and swept up the glass.

Jarre entered in time to see Udaya walking away. He put his arm under Ky to support him.

“Come on. Let’s get you home.”

A foxy lady in a somehow-sultry, of all things, chicken costume walked by. Her eyes locked with Ky as they passed each other.

“Now there’s one hen I would rescue,” Ky muttered.