

## The Key to Deliverance

by Sean Boyle

They say there's no sound in space, and that when a pair of starships are duking it out with particle cannons and quantum distortion blasters, you can't hear a thing. That might be true out there in the vacuum, but nothing is farther from the truth when you're inside a tin can the size of an office building on the receiving end of energy bursts that could atomize a city.

The entire *Brahe* shook with a crash as another charge hit. The bright blue flash, picked up by starboard camera four and displayed only partially by the bridge's main viewscreen, flickered violently throughout the bridge. The ship's reactive energy shields deflected the brunt of the force, but the backlash from the tangible defensive electromagnetic burst reverberated through the hull. I clutched the arm of my chair so hard it hurt, almost as much as it hurt knowing there was absolutely nothing I could do.

The captain was worried, panic held in check only by his years of training and a chirpy optimism common to all Blunda. He, too, was gripping his armrest, but instead of crushing the dark leather he was raking tiny gouges into it with his claws. A dozen scenarios and strategies were running through his head, his mind running even faster than his mouth would normally.

While I usually respect the captain's privacy, I couldn't help myself. If he didn't choose wisely, we'd all end up dead, and then I didn't think anyone would care that I'd read his mind. Besides, with how high his emotions were running, it was hard to block it out. Was he going to try further evasive maneuvers? Redirect power to the shields, and play a defensive game and hope those pirates gave up? Or take an even bigger gamble, redirecting power to weapons and trying to take them out fast? We had a small complement of antimatter missiles, but they were pretty much useless until the Graviks' shields were down.

The Gravik ship, the *Hunter's Stalker*, was bigger than ours by a factor of ten or more, and had us outgunned. Initial tactical scans numbered their distortion bolt launchers at a dozen compared to our six particle beam turrets. The one thing that might save us was that they weren't equipped with Quadrajump. The problem was, a 4D navigational solution took time to acquire, and that was time we didn't have.

The captain seemed to have made his decision. "Bring us about, 180° to starboard, full ahead sublight two!" The Gravik ship's bulk meant it would take longer to come about and pursue, but it could still catch us if we stayed in real space much longer. Its engines were bigger, and Gravik ships didn't worry about things like "real space" and "relativity." They'd just hit their accelerators, and catch us no matter how far we ran.

"Evasive pattern delta, see if we can shake them up a little." The captain's voice was squeaky and fast, almost too fast to follow, especially in the stress of the situation. "Redirect all shield power to aft return fire as weapons charge and for the love of fruit get us a course out of here!"

It would be dramatic to say I could feel the ship as it banked in space, executed a barrel roll, and soared past the larger, bulbous, asymmetrical copper Gravik vessel. That makes these space battles exciting, doesn't it? But honestly? The only thing I could feel was an empty hollow deep in my gut, a looming sense of dread over whether I was going to survive the next few minutes. Inertial compensators are standard equipment on pretty much every single space-faring vessel; without them, the acceleration to any speed reasonable for interstellar transit would smooch every occupant and probably half the ship's systems.

It was reassuring how the tactical officer, Sigmund, remained so calm. I latched on to his calm, let it become my own, as he ran the *Brahe* through the tactical maneuvers. Shield power built up on the aft quarter of the ship as another salvo shot out of the pair of ventral turrets on the Gravik vessel as we sped under it. The blasts were so close, they shook us so violently I could feel it in my teeth. Standing at his station, Sigmund almost fell over. I bet if he hadn't had his tail docked he'd have a better time keeping his balance. He grunted and barked out, "Returning fire, Captain. At this range, the backlash from their own weapons is weakening their shields."

"Good, good," Captain Emkee said with a curt nod, never taking his eyes off the tactical display near his command chair. Even in this dire situation, he reminded me of a young child in a high chair, his little feet not even reaching the edge of his seat.

Sigmund punched in a firing sequence, and the *Brahe's* limited arsenal of particle beam turrets unloaded a salvo of their own on the enemy. I call them the enemy only because they fired on us first, you see. UFESF and the Graviks generally get on well enough, as long as Ferceans aren't part of the equation. But I digress.

Our four bolts drained the *Brahe's* weapon batteries to dangerous levels. We're a science vessel, not outfitted for heavy combat. As a warship, the *Brahe* was designed to fly in a formation of several other cutter-class vessels as escorts for larger ships. Being out here, alone in space and too far from any civilized system to

call for help, the hope was that our weapons would be enough to deter attacks like this or let us hold our own long enough to escape.

Like we were *trying* to do.

I shot a quick glance at the sensor readouts. Most of the ship's systems were on minimal power, reserves having been channeled into the defensive systems, but I still had some passive sensors. "Captain, their ventral shields have been weakened," I announced. "I'm reading their effectiveness at 40%."

We'd already passed under the ship, and were coming around above and behind it, a good hundred kilometers away. We weren't in any position to target that weak spot, and both the captain and Sigmund knew it. But maybe the Graviks didn't, or didn't want to risk it. That's what the first officer was thinking.

"Captain," she said, speaking the thoughts I'd picked up from her an instant before. "With their shields weakened, they will most likely move to protect their vulnerable spot. It may buy us a brief respite from their attacks."

Emkee nodded again. "But they can still outrun us even while they make tactical adjustments weakened shields don't keep them from shooting at us."

Commander Theena shook her head in response, the myriad baubles dangling from her elaborate headdress clinking gently, like wind chimes, lending an air of peace and tranquility to the tense bridge. "Technically, yes. But these brutes are mere pirates. They do not have military precision or discipline. Do you think they won't panic, even a little bit?" Her lip curled ever so slightly. She understood people, and loved being right about them; she knew she was this time, too.

Captain Emkee regarded her for a moment. His dark little eyes darted across her features: the smooth, blue-gray skin, the deep, dark eyes, her expression confident and knowing. He trusted her judgment; when had she ever been wrong? Then, he turned over his shoulder. "Lieutenant Sigmund, do it."

The Canisian tactical officer nodded. "One step ahead of you, Captain," he replied stiffly.

Stars on the main viewscreen swirled and blurred as the *Brahe* came around for a feint at a strafing run, diving and rolling "down" to come to bear on the Gravik ship's weak point.

"Ensign, how's our astrogation course coming?" the Captain inquired as the belly of the enemy vessel blurred overhead.

"Almost done, Captain. The gravitational distortion of the Graviks is making the plot difficult." Ensign Mungalsingh was doing her best, but was flustered and utterly terrified.

UFESF officer training tries to prepare you for moments like these, but your first real combat, if it ever comes, is always a harrowing experience. I wondered if she'd need a change of undergarments after this. It didn't help that she was fresh out of cadet school, still "wet behind the ears," I believe the saying goes, and very much unsure of herself. Now, the *Brahe* and its crew of thirty were almost entirely in her shaking, sweaty hands. I could feel panic flowing from her, clouding her vision and judgment. Her dark brown hair, the color of her eyes and cropped short, was beginning to cling to her forehead, and she absently took a hand from her console and wiped it back.

"Take your time," the captain replied through gritted teeth. I could detect the intense sarcasm, even without ESP.

The Gravik ship rolled away as Sigmund brought our weapons to bear. He fired twin beams at the larger ship, which flashed relatively harmlessly against a stronger area of shielding on the Graviks' hull. This time, we didn't take any fire as we continued in a straight line, away from the enemy.

"Captain," Ensign Mungalsingh piped up, "I've got an astrogation vector!"

"Well, then," the Blunda chirped back, "what are you waiting for? Get us out of here!"

The shaky ensign forewent the formality of acknowledging the order and punched in the initiation sequence for Quadrajump. As space began to multiply around the *Brahe*, Sigmund couldn't help but take a few last parting shots at the distant Gravik ship, which had begun coming around to chase us down. I got a glimpse on my sensors of negligible damage impacts against the Gravik shields before we left this universe.

Okay, so let me back up. I guess some explanations are in order. I am Lieutenant Tusbeh Siebzehn, Chief Science Officer for UFESF exploratory vessel *Brahe*. I won't bore you with serial numbers or ship call signs. I'd been serving aboard the *Brahe*, under Captain Emkee, since I graduated UFESF academy three years before. We'd had a few run-ins with unsavory types, but this was our first major combat engagement. Honestly, I was glad that it was so short-lived. We'd escaped with our lives, which is something to say. Space is a dangerous place.

I'm a Phorellan male. From a distance, I suppose I look human enough. I'm about the same height and build as a typical human male, though I guess a bit leaner; Phorellans don't have the same muscle mass as humans. Our mass went straight to our heads, with a good 10% additional brain. It helps us remember and analyze things a bit better, and it's also useful with the psychic abilities we all have. I'm one of the lucky ones,

and I'm a full-fledged ESPer, rather than just what you might call a "psychic."

I'm average height, by human standards, a bit under two meters. Skinny, I might even say gangly thanks to my undermuscled heritage. I've got five fingers, five toes, two eyes, a nose, a mouth with teeth and everything. But I guess to humans I look a little bit weird, sort of a cross between a H'mthett and a human. Bigger head, but only by a little, smaller ears, nose and mouth, and really big eyes. My eyes, like all Phorellans', are entirely black, I suppose like a rat or rabbit. They're bigger than a human's, and almost wrap around to my temples. I've got brown hair, but my hairline is a bit further back than it might be on a human of my age. Thankfully, male pattern baldness seemed to have been bred out of my people. I kept my hair efficiently short, almost a buzz-cut, which made me look almost bald anyway. I'm not sure why I worry about baldness.

I was born on 4L, a planet we've always simply referred to as "Home," raised by my parents alongside my younger sister. My parents were both scientists, studying archaeology on our homeworld. They were obsessed with uncovering Phorellan evolution and ancestry. It's funny that we don't seem to have much history at all. But that's a story for another time. In any case, I picked up my scientific interest from them, I guess. My primary education was at the Level Two Psychic Academy. I then applied to UFESF Academy on Sol-III - sorry, *Earth* - as soon as I could, and got accepted right away. A college degree in Xenosciences and three years in the Academy, and I was on my way to my first assignment. Up to the point where we were attacked by Gravik pirates, everything had been fine. I had learned a lot, contributed a lot, and explored unknown space.

Then we were sent to investigate an uncharted sector out near the Aquila Rift, a dark molecular cloud about 300 parsecs from UFESF Central. We were in the neighborhood, so it didn't take us long to get close. We did our research, as usual, shopping around in the nearest civilized areas for any freelancers who had any information to share about our destination. It was a lot of vid-calls, asynch messages, and face-to-face chats in bars or shipyards. Ultimately, that led us to a Gravik ship that supposedly had traversed the entire Rift and had plotted a few points of interest. So, using another Gravik middleman, we set up a rendezvous.

That was when things got dicey.

I'm not entirely clear on their motivations. I might be a mind reader, but when a ship is a few thousand meters off and I'm seeing something over a video screen, I can't exactly pick up any psychic vibes. In any case, it seemed like they only wanted to lure us, a valuable UFESF research vessel undoubtedly carrying technology and research they could sell to the highest bidder, into a trap. They and the captain hardly exchanged more than a few words before they started exchanging fire.

While he has his share of personality quirks, I have a great deal of respect for Captain Emkee. It's hard for a tiny little creature like a Blunda, most of which look more like a child's stuffed toy than a sentient being, to advance their careers in UFESF. Humanoid species tend to have trouble taking them seriously. I mean, how seriously would you take a half-meter-tall orange puffball herbivore that sounded like a squeaky toy on stimulants? Emkee's high-pitched voice was always chirpy and, like all Blunda, he spoke in rapid run-on sentences. He was bright orange, like his kin and the large melon-like fruits indigenous to their homeworld. He had tiny black paws with sharp little claws suited for climbing trees, black ears, and a long, skinny tail, striped black and white and tipped with a spotted tuft of fluff. His belly and a splotch on his snout were white, and his vertical-slit mouth was ringed with black. While many people think all Blunda look the same, I could definitely tell the captain apart; his ears and deep brown eyes seemed unusually small, which leant him a perpetually squinty, angry expression.

He was a good leader, though. Confident, commanding, and charismatic. Something I'd picked up early on was that, consciously or not, he overcompensated for his diminutive size and the lack of respect he earned as a species. He could have probably commanded a larger ship, and had the tactical skill for a more combat-worthy vessel, but for some reason he liked the *Brahe*. It was his first command, and he had no intention of giving it up. I could feel his pride in his tiny little crew, and he knew everyone by name. He was the ship's self-appointed morale officer, and organized all sorts of events to keep us entertained and happy, especially on long trips.

That's the thing about space: it's vast. Unimaginably vast. The galaxy itself spans over thirty thousand parsecs. UFESF space spans a radius of about five hundred. The rest of the galaxy is unexplored, at least by our alliance. Within the explored regions are dozens of intelligent, mostly space-faring peoples, and there are certainly thousands more yet to be encountered. Some are friendly, others not so much. Those Graviks, for instance, I'd put on the "not-so-friendly" end of the spectrum.

Getting from one point to another takes a long time, even with modern propulsion technology. If it were possible to push a drive to its maximum output long enough, it would still take over two years of non-stop flight to travel from one edge of explored space to the other. Typically, we travel far below maximum speed, and stick to limited regions, and our journeys still last for weeks. So, most of the time, being aboard the *Brahe* is pretty boring. Moments of exploration and discovery more than make up for it, though. And, to be honest,

there's still a lot of work to do between missions: analyzing data, examining artifacts, cataloging discoveries, writing reports, the list goes on and on. And diversity onboard makes life interesting, even when there's nothing to do.

Commander Theena is the Dactyli first officer. She's probably the oldest member of the crew, and earned doctoral degrees in Xenosociology and Xenopsychology before applying to UFESF. Her understanding of people and cultures were quite helpful in our exploration and in situations like the one from which we had just escaped. Like my people, hers are partially psychic. I felt a connection with her as soon as I came onboard. Her abilities, though, are not as advanced as mine. She could pick up stray thoughts, and send simple ones, and possessed something of a "sixth sense," but her mind just wasn't wired the right way to do everything I had picked up at Psychic Academy. Still, she used her mental abilities to augment her already profound understanding of people.

The commander was attractive, I suppose. Her race is entirely female, and has a bizarre reproduction cycle involving touching brains and interlocking the tentacles they keep concealed under their elaborate *na'brut* headdresses. I've heard the psychic energies released during Dactylid mating rituals produce the greatest form of ecstasy known in the galaxy, but honestly getting involved with the commander never even crossed my mind. Not only was she my superior officer, but there was something about her that intimidated me.

Speaking of intimidation, that's usually what one thinks of when they think of Canisians, like our tactical officer Lieutenant Dolff Sigmund. I've always liked Canisians; they remind me of the pet dogs so many humans like to keep on Earth. Outwardly, Sigmund resembled a Doberman pinscher, with sleek black fur spotted with brown covering his humanoid frame, with a narrow pointed muzzle and intense dark eyes. His ears were a source of jealousy for the captain: his particular breed typically had long, floppy ears, and Sigmund's would have hung to his shoulders had he not had them docked when he was a pup. Now, they stood erect and tall, like a pair of sensor arrays atop his skull. I once asked him why he never got them docked shorter, and he replied stuffily, "The ears are almost as great an asset as the nose." As if to emphasize his point, his nose twitched, accentuating the brown markings sweeping back from it and resembling an old-timey mustache.

Sigmund's tail, like his ears, had been docked when he was a child. His breed was selectively engineered for sleekness, and it was thought that in his expected line of work long ears and a tail would be more a liability than benefit. These "modifications" were somewhat unusual for a Canisian, and had gone out of style for the most part, but his parents were traditionalists. That might have been one reason why Sigmund was so obsessed with the past: he was a huge history buff, and had an e-book collection numbering in the thousands of volumes on Canisian and Human war history. When it came down to it, he was a warrior himself, like virtually his entire species.

He wore a seemingly mismatched outfit of hand-made armor that he had crafted himself. It was dominated by a vest of chain mail, made from X-shaped rings of blued tungsten interlocked with hardened titanium wire rings. The shoulder pads were angular, one was anodized titanium and the other was plain steel, kept polished to a gleaming sheen. He wore gauntlets of heavy black metal, and greaves that looked like they'd been pulled from some sort of protective sportswear. Slung over his back on a thick leather strap was a large sword, roughly cut from a heavy plate of ship armor and sharpened to a razor edge, and on each hip hung a standard issue L<sup>3</sup> blaster. His sword-baldric was studded with pouches containing spare power cells for his guns. Occasionally, he donned a red and brass antique Human helmet of British make from the 1800's. Overall, his dress gave an impression of battle readiness but complete lack of aesthetic sense. And I could think of no one I would rather have at my back in a fight.

Sigmund ran a third systems check, and confirmed, "No damage to the ship, sir."

I finished up another sensor sweep, although the chances of pursuit by Graviks were astronomical. "No signs of pursuit, either, Captain," I said. "Looks like the Graviks still haven't gotten their hands on Quadrajump."

Emkee nodded rapidly, his head almost vibrating off his little shoulders. "Good, good, keep us on course on this heading, Ensign, and until we are outside of their effective drive range, then bring us out of quad-space and plot a course for the nearest dataline so we can get an update on our mission status."

"A-aye, sir," Mungalsingh replied nervously. The adrenaline from the battle would wear off soon, but in the meantime she was understandably shaken. She stared at her control console for a moment, trying to see through the adrenaline-clouded haze and make sense of what she should do next. A few seconds later, she nodded almost imperceptibly to herself and tapped in a few commands.

The main screen flickered, and a disembodied head of a man with a cropped beard, a copper nose and an impressively enormous mustache appeared. It was the *Brahe's* AI, Tycho, modeled after the ancient namesake of both himself and the vessel. "Captain," he announced, "I am required to remind you of our

current primary mission parameters. Despite our run-in with Gravik pirates, we still are responsible for surveying the unmapped portions of the Aquila Rift.” His voice was flat and toneless, devoid of all emotion.

“Thank you, Tycho, I’m well aware of our current mission parameters but I also am required to file an immediate report on any hostile engagements, particularly with Graviks, and this slight detour shouldn’t take very long, besides our only lead on existing knowledge of the region has turned out to be a dead end so I would like to follow up with UFESF databases and see if there is any other place we can start than a random sensor sweep of a random sector of the Rift.” It always amazed me that a Blunda’s tiny lungs could even retain enough air to belt out such long sentences, despite how quickly they spoke, without taking a breath.

The image on the screen nodded passively. “Understood, Captain.” And then the screen switched back off.

Tycho was a C-class AI; not combat-grade or capable of running more than a few ship systems at a time, but highly specialized to the ship’s mission. He, we all called him a “he” rather than “it” thanks to the anthropomorphization inherent to all AIs, was a font of knowledge on archaeology and history, and seemed to take it upon himself to keep all missions on task. Otherwise, he wasn’t all that smart. He lacked any creativity or personality, and had virtually no tactical knowledge whatsoever. He was helpful and useful at times, but certainly no genius.

I leaned back in my chair, and let it swivel. We had survived unscathed, our ship and our selves no worse for wear, though many nerves had been shattered. Now that the terror and endorphins had worn off, I was more disappointed than anything else. Those Graviks didn’t have any information for us, and my entire career was built on discovery. I supposed that this little setback only meant there was more for the *Brahe* to be the first to encounter. Even so, I couldn’t help but feel let down, even a little.

The captain was just annoyed. He took the Blunda philosophy of non-forgiveness and amplified it tenfold; another of his attempts to compensate for his size, I think. His tiny little claws still raked in annoyance at his chair, and he stewed in brooding anger. He wanted to go back and finish off those pirates, under the outward rationale that they would continue to be a threat to other innocents, but deep down with only the motivation of vengeance. I pulled my mind back from his as he began contemplating different strategies, different assault tactics.

I let the chair continue spinning, forcing my mind to retreat into itself. It was a bad habit, reading the thoughts of others. I’d gotten used to almost exclusively communicating telepathically back home, and when I went to Earth for the Academy, it was a tough habit to break but one the administrators forced me to. Telepathy had its uses, and my particular talents were in high demand in UFESF, but the thoughts of fellow officers, superiors and comrades, were off-limits.

I stared up at the ceiling, and wondered how long it would be until we got to a dataline and started the next leg of our journey. It had been almost a week since we were last on one, but we’d jumped around quite a bit since then. In any case, there was nothing more for me to do until we got our next set of orders.

Once those new orders came in, I almost wished we were still fighting Graviks.

Another UFESF research vessel, the *Herschel*, a cutter like the *Brahe*, had gone missing, and we were the nearest vessel capable of investigating. Like I said, space is vast. There were other ships more qualified, but all were weeks away, at best.

The *Herschel* had been on an archaeological expedition on the outskirts of the Aquila Rift, only three sectors from our current location. Their last communiqué, sent by carrier probe, vaguely indicated they had made a discovery of great importance. They were scheduled to report in again a week later, and never did. Protocol demanded an immediate investigation, even by a ship ill-equipped for rescue operations, lest some tragedy befall the ship in question. Most of the time, though, investigations were a waste of time. Communication breaks could be caused by faulty equipment, planetary weather conditions, spatial anomalies, U-net traffic bottlenecks, or even legitimate dangers like alien attack. In the latter case, the assailants were almost always long gone, having left no one behind to rescue and no trail to follow.

The captain hated such missions as much as anyone. Even after a day and a half in quad-space, he was still brooding over the encounter with the Gravik pirates, and had secretly hoped for reinforcements and orders to track them down and eliminate the threat they posed to UFESF. Of course, such an order was not meant to be. We were even more poorly equipped for a combat mission than one of rescue, and UFESF Command considered this investigation higher propriety than a lengthy and likely fruitless tracking voyage.

Emkee begrudgingly accepted the new mission, and briefed all senior staff on everything that was known about the *Herschel*. Which, it turned out, was surprisingly little. The ship operated on a skeleton crew, assisted by a B-grade AI named William. Most of the ship’s crew were scientists; archaeologists, to be precise. The ship carried a crew of four command staff, three engineers, a doctor/cook, and seven experts in various fields of archaeology, anthropology and paleontology.

The Chief Science Officer, a kindred spirit by virtue of title alone, was a Commander Lenore Sterling. Human, age: 41, hair: brown, eyes: gray. She had sent the last communiqué, and was the last link UFESF had to the *Herschel*.

I stared at her personnel file image on my HUDset for a long time. She had a serious, intense look in her pale, almost white eyes. Her skin, deeply tanned from years of field work, was nearly the same color as her hair. Crows' feet were forming by her eyes, but she still looked great for her age. For a human. There was something about her I found almost immediately fascinating. Reports indicated she was extremely dedicated to her work, and passed up many offers of university appointments in order to continue her field work, and her contributions to galactic society, without true personal gain. She valued knowledge and discovery, just like I did. She was the science officer I longed to be.

We arrived at the *Herschel's* last known position: an unremarkable binary system on the anti-spinward side of the massive dark dust cloud called the Aquila Rift. The two stars were both blue dwarves; energetic and bright, but small, meaning the habitable zone was considerably less than 1 AU out. The system contained a plethora of worlds, but only one was habitable. As luck would have it, our sensors picked up the *Herschel's* presence on the surface of that world, the second from the stars. The star system had no name, merely an arbitrary catalog value, so the world had no name either. It was home to no intelligent life, and orbital scans indicated only the presence of plant life pollinated by unusual species of airborne microbial colonies.

Locating the *Herschel* wasn't hard at all. I located its ident-transponder signal, and traced it back to a location on the surface. Optical scans showed it there, plain as day, nestled amongst amazingly thick vegetation, less than a kilometer from what appeared to be a structure of some sort on the surface. My first thought was that the structure was built by the research team as a base on the planet's surface, but under closer scrutiny I realized the team could never have built such an architecturally distinctive structure.

It screamed H'mthett, in every single detail of its surface, even from orbit 400km away.

What was even more puzzling was the presence of the *Herschel* on the planet. While most ships are designed to function within atmosphere, landing parties, even large research teams, typically utilized shuttles for surface landings. This left the mother ship in orbit, free to engage in other duties and keep a watchful eye on the team and external factors. The *Herschel's* presence on the surface wasn't immediately a sign of danger, but it was a red flag.

The second red flag was the complete lack of power or radio signals from the site. The research outpost was completely silent and dead, and the ship seemed to be powered down, only its backup battery-powered ident-transponder still functioning. Had some calamity forced the ship to land there and power down? Had it crashed? Or did the research team simply need its presence for something? Power to operate machinery, more hands to assist, or something else benign? Again, this was nothing overly suspicious, simply unusual. It was odd, though, that the ship was near the dig site, yet its shuttle was nowhere to be found. It couldn't have gone far, since landing shuttles are incapable of Quadrajump, nor are most even equipped with Elston drives. It had to be on the planet, or at least in the system, unless something had happened to it. I started a local sensor sweep for wreckage, but didn't immediately find anything. I left the sensors running while we proceeded with the investigation.

We tried hailing the *Herschel*, and got no response. The ship was broadcasting nothing but an identification data stream. If anyone heard our hails, they either couldn't or wouldn't respond. And that made us all nervous.

"All right," the captain announced, punctuating the statement with an uncharacteristic pause. "We're going to have to send a team down to investigate and it's just too dangerous given that we don't know what happened for the entire ship to go down so Lieutenant Siebzehn I'm putting you in charge of a recon team, take Lieutenant Sigmund and Lieutenant Raskin and Commander Niediepe and Ensign Mungalsingh down in the shuttle and report on your findings as soon as you can."

I stood up. "Yes, sir." I nodded to Sigmund, and the two of us were joined by a nervous Delilah Mungalsingh, and we headed into the little lift down to the launch bay. In the lift, I heard Tycho's bland voice announce that the presence of the chief engineer, Lieutenant Commander Niediepe, and one of my science team's forensics experts, Lieutenant Jonas Raskin, was requested for a landing party.

For a snap decision on the part of the captain, the team seemed capable enough. The ensign would be our pilot, and as a junior officer who hadn't found a niche she would be expected to fill in any role asked of her, so long as it didn't require too much specific expertise. We were bringing the chief engineer in case the *Herschel* needed repairs, and Raskin for obvious reasons. Going into potential danger, of course our team included the most capable combatant on the *Brahe*, Sigmund the Canisian warrior. In a situation like this, of course I would prefer to have a squad of marines, but since the *Brahe* lacked such personnel I was happy with the next best thing.

At first I was dubious about the captain neglecting to include medical personnel, but then I realized a doctor would probably be superfluous. This ship had been out of contact for a while; anyone on the verge of death would be already dead, and any one of us knew enough first aid to tend to any non-mortal injuries. My psychic abilities, in fact, also had healing potential, as long as a wound wasn't too severe. The doctor would be better put to use preparing the medical bay to receive the injured than spending time going down to the planet where there were less adequate medical facilities.

The lift hissed to a halt on the lowest deck of the *Brahe*, and the two-ply armored doors slid quietly open. We passed through an open bulkhead, and stopped at the outfit station to pick up the necessary gear. I picked up a medikit and opened it to make sure everything was there: an osmospray injector, a full array of injection canisters, and sundry other small first aid implements. I slapped the pack onto my belt, and unconsciously felt for my blaster on my right hip and the spare half-dozen power magazines on my left. I snapped down the visor over my left eye on my HUDset, and started recording. As designated team leader, it was my responsibility to document the entire trip. Without a doctor, I was glad I had sprung for the Mediscan HUDset software out of my own pocket. You never know.

While the other bridge officers checked their gear, the lift hissed up and back down again a few moments later. It opened, to reveal Jonas Raskin and Nidiepe. They both greeted us and approached to stock up on their own gear as well.

Raskin was about six years my senior, but my junior in years of service. He was human, with a round face, broad nose and stocky build. He had sandy hair and pale hazel eyes that never missed a single detail. He was very thorough, and quite easy to get along with; a perfect coworker, really. He'd been in academia on Earth his entire life, and spent several years before earning his UFESF commission teaching and conducting research. I guess university life got too boring for him, though, and he ventured out into the stars. Not that space doesn't hold opportunities for scholars, it's just that UFESF officers are on the fast-track to new discoveries. As Raskin checked over his equipment, and quickly itemized the contents of an aluminum case containing a number of scientific apparatuses and a single compact ARbot, he shot me a smile and said, "Looks like another adventure, huh, Tus?" We were on a first-name basis. "Hopefully it won't be as harrowing as the run-in with the Graviks."

I smiled back and nodded in agreement, but there was nothing to say. I glanced over at Nidiepe, our chief engineer. He was an Anuran; something like a giant frog walking on two legs. He had moist green skin, with a pair of black-and-yellow double helixes winding from his eyelids all the way down his back, though like the rest of us he wore the UFESF uniform of purple and black leather. His limbs were long and gangly, and gave the impression of clumsiness though I'd never seen him so much as stumble. He had four-fingered hands that worked miracles with machinery, and enormous yellow eyes that almost carried a persistent blank stare. I'm no expert on Anuran physiology, but Nidiepe seemed young to me. He had an amazing mind for machines and math, though, so it wouldn't have surprised me if he'd graduated from the Academy at an unusually young age. Smart as he was, Nidiepe also impressed me as exceedingly lazy, and I sometimes wondered how he made it to Lieutenant Commander, much less Chief Engineer. But it didn't matter that he outranked me; on this mission, I had operational command. Nidiepe could, technically, pull rank on me if I let it get to my head, but that wasn't going to happen. Even if I were the sort to flaunt such temporary power, he'd probably just go along with it. The path of least resistance and all.

Once everyone was ready, we headed into the shuttle bay. It felt cramped and crowded with the single shuttle. In a pinch, the bay might have been able to just barely fit two shuttles, side by side, if their owners didn't mind ruining their paint jobs. As it was, the *Brahe's* bay had enough room for the shuttle, some crates and loading equipment, an assortment of larger scientific machines, and a single aging but spaceworthy ARC mechanized combat armor suit. The ARC was armed, but only lightly, and was mostly used for making repairs to the ship in space.

Running a diagnostic on the shuttle was the *Brahe's* android, Llewellyn. He looked human, with a late-thirties face, a tangle of curly brown hair, and large, blue eyes that looked perpetually surprised. He wore a non-officer's uniform of purple and white, in the short-coat version, and carried no weapon. Not only were androids prohibited from carrying rank, they were also not allowed weapons, as part of an antiquated set of "laws" governing their behavior and letting humans rest easy knowing there would be no "robot uprising."

I know androids make a lot of people uncomfortable, and I think that goes tenfold for me. It's not that artificial beings disturb me on principle, and every android I've ever met has been pleasant enough, but as an ESPer I pick up a lot from people I talk to: psychic emanations, emotions, surface thoughts. With androids, they have no minds, they are just computers in human-shaped shells, so they have absolutely no psychic presence whatsoever. Talking to a computer AI, a floating head on a screen, is one thing, but talking to a person who acts natural but simply doesn't exist, on a psychic level, is disorienting and uncomfortable for someone like

me. Still, though few people worry about hurting an android's feelings, I had to remain professional, and not allow my discomfort to show.

"Hi, Lieutenant," Llewellyn said jovially, with a sincere smile, all the while radiating no more psychic sensations of cheer or geniality than a toaster. "I heard you're taking the shuttle down to the surface, so I'm just finishing up some last-minute system checks."

I gave the machine a pat on his shoulder and replied, "Good, good. Thanks, Lou. Let me know when we're cleared to go." I always worry that someone will detect the falseness in my voice when I talk to an android. He nodded to me, a remarkably natural and human gesture for a construct, and turned back to his datapad while I led the way to the gangway into the shuttle's cockpit.

Inside, I settled into the copilot's seat, and Ensign Mungalsingh's tiny, lithe form slid into the pilot's chair. We checked over the control systems as the rest of the landing party clambered aboard. Within a few minutes, Llewellyn gave us the thumbs-up, and we were off.

Our touchdown just on the edge of the *Herschel's* camp was a little rough. Mungalsingh was having a little performance anxiety, I think. She'd flown shuttles before, but this was really her first potentially dangerous landing party mission.

We ran a quick air scan for contaminants and germs, which came back negative, then we disembarked. Outside, the air was warm and humid, but not unpleasant, at least not yet. It smelled pungently of leaves and pollen, and I thanked Deliverance that Phorellans don't have allergies. Raskin sneezed almost immediately, then set about preparing himself a dose of antihistamines.

We stepped onto the lush carpet of brilliant emerald grass and surveyed the camp from its southwest corner. There were no signs of movement or non-plant life. In fact, the plants had begun taking the camp over already. I glanced over at the *Herschel*, which, from our vantage point a good kilometer away, still seemed to be similarly overgrown. I made a verbal note in the mission log, recording through my HUDset, that the plant life seemed to experience extremely aggressive growth, to which I added some hypothetical conjecture about the pollination methods.

A pistol drawn, Sigmund led us cautiously into the camp, which was comprised of two buildings: a small living module, and a larger, two-story research module, both of which had been constructed from pre-fab sections brought down by shuttle. There was no sign of the shuttle itself, though, only the kilometer-distant *Herschel*. Down a slight rise to the northwest, the slate gray top of the H'mthett structure protruded from the vegetation, curiously not overgrown. My own fascination with the structure would have to wait, though; our objective was the *Herschel* team.

We quickly swept the entire camp, and found no trace of the science personnel. Careful investigation did, however, turn up signs of a fire: plasma burns on the walls of the living module, both inside and out. There were no bodies or blood, though. And unfortunately, further traces of whatever transpired were most likely eradicated by the fast-growing vegetation. Equipment seemed untouched, as all the research computers and machines were still intact. Sticking together, we headed for the *Herschel*.

Being the same ship class, its layout was virtually identical to the *Brahe's*, so my team and I were able to quickly make a deck-by-deck search. The situation, though, was the same as in the camp: no crew, but equipment seemed mostly intact. Notably missing was the ship's shuttle, and there was slight battle damage within the ship's corridors.

The area seemed clear of any immediate danger, so I left Nidiepe to examine the ship's systems and took Raskin back out to further investigate the apparent scene of violence. I was more interested in the H'mthett structure, though. Nidiepe also wanted to check it out; I sensed his admiration of the graceful architecture, the subtle lines, the seamless monolithic construction, the flowing lettering. He should have been an artist, not an engineer.

I left the sniffing human to his work analyzing the plasma burns and searching for any other clues, and set about accessing computer files. The camp itself was without power; someone had taken the generator, which meant the computer system couldn't be powered up without an alternative. I stared into the dark of the research lab for a moment, then turned to head back to the shuttle for a power pack, when a glint of glass caught my eye. A datapad sat on the edge of the table, which was otherwise cluttered with some dusty rocks and a few small H'mthett artifacts no doubt exhumed from the ruins.

I picked up the datapad. It was a larger one, not the little handheld affairs we generally use as computers but one meant for graphics work and lengthy text displays. I had one myself, back aboard the *Brahe*, and it was indispensable as Chief Science Officer. I quickly looked this one over, seeking but not expecting any identifying marks. Of course, there were none, but it still had power, so I switched it on.

It only took me a moment of scanning its contents to realize it belonged to none other than Commander Lenore Sterling, Chief Science Officer of the *Herschel*, and leader of the expedition. It was filled

with directory after directory of notes and images of artifacts and ruins, pages upon pages of data that could take weeks to sift through. What interested me most, though, were her video logs; amongst other things, they could give us some clue as to what happened to the ship and its crew.

I sat down in a seat beside the table, and loaded up the logs. There were several dozen of them, so I started with the first one. Commander Sterling appeared in a time-stamped freeze-frame. Her features were lean and firm, almost rugged. Her pale eyes were confident, and looked directly into her datapad's camera without hesitation. Her hair, trimmed with bangs that fell in wisps down to near her eyebrows, was probably shoulder-length, but done up with pins as a professional formality. Her black and purple uniform hugged her curves in an almost enticing fashion. She really was quite attractive. I pulled myself away from my extremely unprofessional fascination, and began playing the log.

**TIMESTAMP: UE 0119-04-12 10:02:41**

**LOCATION: +11+11-3:+0+2-3:+1+1+2:-4227-819+52213:02**

**DESIGNATION: PLANET VERDANT**

*Well, here we are. My team and I just landed near the ruins we surveyed from orbit, and I have to say we're all extremely excited. We're setting up base camp right now, and haven't gone to the ruins themselves yet, but I don't think any of us can wait much longer.*

*The team right now consists of me; our archaeologist, Selleseth; our Phorellan expert on H'mthett artifacts, Lieutenant Al'dan Vierzig; systems technician, Ensign Besim Njiric; and the Herschel's android, Henriksen. We should be set up within the hour, and then it's off to work! Ha, I doubt I'll be getting much sleep the next few weeks. This is all just so exciting. Readings from orbit indicated the structure still has power, and for some reason hasn't become overgrown on this amazingly verdant world we dubbed, of all things, "Verdant."*

*We're hoping there's some dismantled tech in there, something we can finally understand. Sigh, it's so frustrating. The H'mthett have been around probably millions of years, and are more advanced than anything in the known galaxy, and they're part of UFESF, but they're still so reclusive, so damned quiet. They never share anything except z'ellzyks and some other stuff we would've come up with on our own in a century or so. They treat us all like, I don't know, like insects. Like we're not even sentient. Everything we learn from them is from these ruins, and even then so much of it is guesswork and conjecture. Their tech is utterly incomprehensible for the most part.*

*I know, I know, I need to remain professional. I wonder what a H'mthett would say if it was with us right now? They never seem to care about anyone digging up their old tech, since no one can understand it anyway.*

*In any case, we're scheduled to start excavating at 12:00 today. Here's hoping we find something good.*

**RECORDING END**

**ELAPSED: 00:01:47**

Commander Sterling certainly had spirit, I had to give her that. And, like most intelligent beings in the galaxy, didn't have much love for the H'mthett. I had to agree, their role in galactic society was a strange one. If it weren't for them, UFESF might not even exist; Earth would have probably destroyed itself a long time ago. The revelation of their existence on Earth was a catalyst for global unity, interstellar exploration and the formation of the galactic society we all knew and, for the most part, loved. So, in a way, UFESF owed its very existence to the enigmatic "grays."

Still, even as UFESF members, the H'mthett were non-communicative at best. They partook half-heartedly in galactic politics, but refused to share or explain their incomprehensible technology. As Sterling had mentioned, the H'mthett introduced the z'ellzyk, the little chrome psionic slugs attached to the base of nearly every skull in explored space that allowed virtually unimpeded conversation, regardless of language. Well, with everyone except the Ferceans. But if not for the z'ellzyk, the H'mthett were generally distrusted and disliked, particularly by humans, with whom they had a long and controversial history of abductions and experimentation.

But for my people, the perspective was a bit different, albeit intertwined with Humans'.

My home planet of 4L was a young world that showed signs of extensive and rapid terraforming, populated with a limited range of floral and faunal species and lacking any evidence of evolution. In a way, we were seemingly, literally, "placed" there. Now, I've never really understood religion. The concept of a divine power, or some spiritual existence after this one, never made any sense to me. There was no proof, no reason to believe in it, aside from the apparent need many species felt to do so. My people believed in fact and science, what we could see with our eyes and feel with our hands, and nothing more. I've heard some species

call our existence “empty,” but I call it “unimpeded.” I think about all the wars waged in the name of religion, the Laenhopt and their mad religious crusade to cleanse the universe of mammalian life, and it makes me glad I have no such absurd beliefs.

The closest we Phorellans have to divinity is Deliverance, the entity or species that created us and placed us on our world. Casual observation and historical evidence both point to Deliverance, in fact, being the H'mthett. Of course, the little gray guys will never admit it, but extensive research, by both my fellow Phorellans seeking for explanations of our origins, and by humans seeking proof of H'mthett genetic experimentation on their kind, points to my people being a lab-constructed cross between Humans and H'mthett. We do share physical features of both, and have a number of genetic features science now believes must have been selectively bred, or engineered, into us.

Genetic analysis has been inconclusive, though. Our DNA is similar to Humans', but much more complex, carrying many times more information. Decoding this has proved a difficult proposition, and while anecdotal evidence exists, there is no hard proof that our DNA contains that of the H'mthett. But legends from our brief past, and ancient images painted on walls, of our benefactors teaching us science and giving us fire, show us images of creatures resembling the H'mthett. The grays' own admission that they have been long searching for a way to preserve their dying species, their disintegrating genetic code, their homogeneous stock, points to the Phorellans being an experiment in just that. But, still, the H'mthett deny or simply ignore any such accusations.

I looked over at Raskin, who was engrossed in a careful scan for genetic material and foreign debris in the lab. His aluminum case lay open on the table opposite me, his equipment carefully laid out, and he was directing a handheld scanner across the workbench against the far wall. I checked in with the others via HUDset: Sigmund reported no movement outside, and Nidiepe was assessing the state of the *Herschel*, assisted by Mungalsingh. There was nothing more for me to do at the moment but continue my investigation into Sterling's logs. While I was itching to get into those ruins, I was equally curious to first find out what Sterling's team had found.

**TIMESTAMP: UE 0119-04-12 19:36:08**

**LOCATION: +11+11-3:+0+2-3:+1+1+2:-4227-819+52213:02**

**DESIGNATION: PLANET VERDANT**

*Damn the biological need for sleep! I'd love to keep going, but the team is just too exhausted for much more. It took us a few hours, but we managed to get inside the ruins. They go down a ways, readings indicate about 400 meters down, and then the whole “complex” is like one great big corridor that runs in a straight line for kilometers. It's some sort of old research facility, and we only just started mapping the layout and cataloging the apparent projects.*

*Like anything H'mthett we find, this place is old. Really old. But, of course, everything still works, though it looks like the H'mthett did pack up a good deal of equipment. Their computer systems also seem to be wiped clean, no records. Lieutenant Vierzig has been trying to decipher some of the systems and experiments that are still here. This whole thing is just another one of those big H'mthett mysteries. Why did they just abandon this place? If they were finished with it, why didn't they tear it down? Do they really not care if anyone finds it?*

*Anyway, we checked out over a dozen labs already. Each one seems to be dedicated to some sort of genetic research, not really a surprise, on a single species. There are these stasis tubes containing a single specimen each, dead but perfectly preserved. We found Graviks, Ferceans, Nautilians, Veridians, Anurans, Hemiptoreans, and lots of Humans. There are even some other animals from various planets; I recognized the Earth cows, for one. Ensign Njiric's scans indicate we've touched maybe ten percent of the structure so far. So, we've got a lot to go, still!*

*Selleseth is working on some theories regarding what this place was actually hoping to achieve, and why the H'mthett abandoned it. I think it's anyone's guess, but those archaeologist-types always seem to know more about the motivations of lost civilizations. I never got into that sociology and anthropology stuff, but Selleseth always seems to have done his homework.*

*Anyway, it's been a long day. I'm turning in. More to report tomorrow.*

**RECORDING END**

**ELAPSED: 00:02:14**

I cycled through more log entries without watching them. There was nothing remarkable about any of them, probably just more reports of what the team had found. I was just setting the datapad down to check on the rest of the team when Nidiepe's gravelly voice crackled over my HUDset.

“Lieutenant,” he croaked, “I've got something on the *Herschel*.”

I stood up, almost knocking Sterling's datapad onto the floor. "What is it?" I exclaimed, shooting Raskin a glance and gesturing for the door.

"I think you'd better come and see for yourself. Everyone."

The entire team convened on the *Herschel's* bridge. Nidiepe stood at the bank of computer terminals to the rear of the room, his lanky, webbed fingers dancing across the touch screen panels. Once everyone was present, he began explaining his findings.

"I was (croak) running a diagnostic on the ship's systems. It's got minimal backup power, but the main drive core was completely removed, as was the tesseract (ribbit). This ship isn't going anywhere, that's for (croak) sure." The Anuran language was punctuated by odd vocalizations, the nuances of which I never quite grasped, which the z'ellzyk didn't seem able to translate, so listening to the engineer was often something of a challenge.

"You called us all the way over here for *that*?" Mungalsingh exclaimed impatiently. I think his croaking mannerisms got to her a little more than the rest of us.

I shot her a look, but Sigmund beat me to the punch, saying, "Mind your superiors, ensign."

Mungalsingh flushed and looked away, but her frustration didn't abate. Nidiepe continued, after a momentary glare in the young woman's direction, "Whoever set the ship down here might have been planning to re-(ribbit)-cover it later, as they didn't do any permanent damage. But they did use some sort of virus to wipe the computer's memory banks (croak), including the memory of the AI. However," he looked up at me with an expression that I could only interpret as a smug grin on his amphibian features and stabbed a moist finger at a particular readout on the panel, "they partially missed a couple of the security feeds. I've piped enough power into the (croak) system to give us replay of the last few minutes before everything shut down. I don't think anyone's going to (croak) like what they see, but it might answer some questions."

"Let's see it," I prompted with a nod.

Nidiepe loaded up security footage from a camera in the corridor just outside the shuttle bay. The time stamp was dated a little less than a week earlier. It was an obscure angle, looking down into the hallway just inside the bulkhead leading from the shuttle bay. The video showed a fair amount of static and distortion, evidence of the deletion virus.

Hissing faded in and out over the sounds of gunfire and shouts. I could make out a few flashes of light in the corridor, as blaster fire erupted somewhere out of view. There was a lot of commotion, then alarms began blaring. A couple of crew members came into view, firing their sidearms down the hallway and shouting, their words drowned out by one another's and the commotion. As I watched the two UFESF officers, a Human female and a Sardinian, fall to hostile fire, I radioed back to the *Brahe* over my HUDset. "You getting this, Captain?" I asked. The video recorder was still running, and the *Brahe* had a direct continuous feed from it.

Emkee's usual chipper manner was replaced by a somber tone. His only reply was, "Yes."

The gunfire abruptly ended, and three humanoid shadows, the silhouettes of larger assault weapons in their hands, came into view. The static returned before I could make out any features like species, and a moment later the video went black.

Nidiepe let out a long, deep croak. Silence filled the dark bridge for several long seconds before the engineer finally said, "That's all I (ribbit) could recover. But is sure looks like piracy to me."

Sigmund growled, a deep, throaty sound, baring his teeth. His hackles bristled, and anger radiated off of him, tangible to me, but the others picked up on it easily enough. Nothing angered a Canisian more than senseless slaughter, battle without honor. "At least they died defending their ship," he snarled softly.

"What I'd like to know," I mused, "is what would have drawn pirates here. This system is so unremarkable, this planet doesn't even have any mineral resources to speak of, and the *Herschel* wasn't exactly a merchant ship. And they just grounded it here when they were finished with the crew, I guess, so they didn't even care much about the ship."

"The dig, then?" Raskin suggested, completing my thought for me.

I nodded back to him, and was about to say more when Mungalsingh cut in. "But the question is, why?" she asked. "Unless they intercepted that last message beacon, the one that said they'd found something really big, what would have drawn them here? There's really nothing valuable about H'mthett ruins, they're all over the place, right?"

I shrugged. "We won't know that until we find out exactly what they found here." I held up Sterling's datapad. "I think I was on to something."

"Lieutenant Siebzehn," Captain Emkee said over my HUDset, his Blunda words translated in my head by my z'ellzyk, "I'm putting the *Brahe* on high alert I want you and the landing party to finish up there as quickly as possible and get back here I've got a bad feeling these 'pirates' didn't just abandon the *Herschel* and they're planning to come back for it once they finish whatever errand they're on now."

I could hear the anger creeping into his voice. Now that the video feed had stopped, his brooding anger had quickly turned back into thoughtful rage. He was ready to act and, in true Blunda fashion, would forgive no trespass.

I nodded, even though he couldn't see the gesture, and replied, "Aye, sir. We'll check the ruins, then head back ASAP." I turned to address the others, and announced a bit more loudly, "You heard the captain. Let's start packing up here. Nidiepe, if you could, recover what you can here. Ideally, I'd like to move this ship so whoever our friends are won't find it when they come back for it, but if that's not doable, salvage what you can and leave it as inoperable as possible. Everyone else, we're heading into the ruins."

Datapad still in hand, I led the team out of the *Herschel*, through the camp, and to the gaping entrance to the monolithic H'mthett structure over a kilometer away. It was still light out, and the blue-white light from the twin stars gave even the overly verdant greenery a ghostly cast. The ruins' entrance faced roughly to Verdant's "west," and the gradually setting suns illuminated the façade with a bright sheen.

I quickly read the angular script engraved around the entrance; as with most ancient H'mthett text, it was mostly nonsensical and highly metaphorical, long and verbose. It read something along the lines of, "Facility for research of perpetuity, lest the shining light of our intellect not be extinguished from this strand of existence." It went on and on, in flowery words that were unnecessary in conveying the facility's purpose.

This ability to decipher writing is one we Phorellans are known for. No one is sure, despite endless research, how we do it. I just look at writing and, no matter what language it's in, I can get the gist, if not the precise meaning, of it. Some scientists speculate it's some sort of "programmed" genetic memory, but why we were "built" that way is still a mystery.

We went inside the structure, heading down a flight of wide, gentle stairs, all composed of the same metallic concrete. As we descended, illumination just barely bright enough to see in flicked on silently, and seemingly without source. I had to occasionally yawn or swallow to clear my ears, as mounting air pressure began to blot out the dull echoes of our footsteps on the unyielding stairs. Our descent took us, according to my HUDset mission counter, seven minutes and fourteen seconds, though as we continued, reception back to the *Brahe* became fainter and fainter. By the time we reached the bottom of the stairs, and stared down an enormous, angular, vaulted hallway that extended as far as we could see, we had completely lost contact with our ship, and with Nidiepe aboard the *Herschel*.

The stairwell and ensuing tunnel were vaguely triangular, with rectangular doors spaced evenly along the walls once the floor leveled off. Everything was Spartan and utilitarian, with no decoration at all, simply harsh lines and dull metallic stone concrete. Bland-looking control panels were integrated into the walls beside each door and occasionally between them. Running the length of the ceiling was some sort of tube mechanism, probably used for ferrying supplies and maybe even personnel along the length of the installation.

Ever vigilant, Sigmund went ahead, his pistol held at the ready, and checked the nearest doors. He visually swept the interiors with his HUDset, scanning for heat, movement, radiation, and various other signs of life or activity. I linked up with his HUDset, and watched what he saw in a PiP superimposed over my own field of view. As Sterling had described, the rooms were labs of some sort, though these first few were empty of anything useful or interesting.

After checking the nearest four rooms, he nodded back to me, and broadcast silently via his z'ellzyk, "All clear." He was being quiet and careful, and I appreciated that, though I didn't quite share his paranoia. Still, if it kept us from walking into an unlikely ambush, all the better.

We made our way as quickly and quietly as we could deeper into the installation. My scientific curiosity was burning to stop and investigate every little thing along the way, but we had a priority mission. My curiosity would have to wait. Sigmund and Mungalsingh split the duty of checking each room, on opposite sides of the seemingly endless corridor, and I split my own HUDset view between both of them. Sigmund moved with efficient confidence, and swept his side of the hallway swiftly. Mungalsingh, on the other hand, was less efficient, and almost imperceptibly shaky. When I was close enough, I let my senses extend out a little, to take in the apprehension she felt. It wasn't fear, as so far nothing fearsome had manifested itself, but it was simple uncertainty, nervousness. She really wasn't sure of what she was doing.

Raskin and I held back, he clutching his aluminum case, I with Sterling's datapad under my left arm, my pistol clutched in my right hand. We followed the others slowly; too slowly for my tastes. I considered stopping to watch a few more of the lovely Sterling's logs, but thought better of it. We needed to stick together. Though, on the other hand, she might have been able to provide some insight into our search.

After an hour of sweeping empty labs, it was clear we were unlikely to encounter any resistance, but we hadn't made it even halfway down the hallway. HUDset distancing scans indicated the corridor still extended at least another kilometer. Peering down its length, the ceilings towering high overhead, I swore I could detect the curvature of the planet.

We sat down in one of the labs with a blank-eyed Sardinian staring down at us from its stasis tube, labeled "Subject 4.419.764.021-delta." I thought about that number for a long moment. Four billion. This poor Sardinian was one of literally *billions* of "test subjects" abducted over the centuries by the H'mthett. There was no other text to indicate whether he had been a success or a failure, but it was quite clear he was no longer alive. Had his unwilling sacrifice been of any use? Was there something in his piscine DNA that helped the H'mthett save their dying race? I gave it a long, pensive mulling. Maybe it was time for the H'mthett to die. They had already outlived their homeworld. Perhaps they were already extinct, and simply didn't want to admit it. How long had they been perpetuating their own existence at the cost of *billions* of other lives?

I shook my head absently, and sighed. I stared down at Sterling's datapad in my hands as I sat in one of the uncomfortably low chairs in the lab. Lenore Sterling might well have sat in this very chair, looking up at that very same Sardinian, packed in a tube like an Earth anchovy in a jar, and thought the very same thoughts. I turned the pad back on, piped its audio directly into my HUDset so as not to distract or disturb anyone else, and played the final log entry. It was dated the day before UFESF received the mission's last transmission, three weeks after the mission began.

**TIMESTAMP: UE 0119-04-28 12:06:41**

**LOCATION: +11+11-3:+0+2-3:+1+1+2:-4227-819+52213:02**

**DESIGNATION: PLANET VERDANT**

*Last night we sent the weekly message beacon out. It should reach the nearest dataline in a day or two. I can't wait to share this discovery! There's no telling what it could mean for UFESF, particularly the Phorellans. We're planning to relocate the stasis tubes for subjects 4.419.770.004 through 009-omega to the Herschel in preparation for returning them to UFESF for further study.*

*This morning, just a couple hours ago, we made contact with another ship, I think it's Gravik, passing through the area. Selleseth went to speak with them, and see if they could lend some personnel in helping us get things moved. I'm not sure who has been more excited the last few days, me or him. It's really amazing, this discovery could be the most important in H'mthett relations ever.*

*We don't want to risk opening any of the stasis tubes here, we need a controlled environment, so I'm hoping we can get them moved quickly, and then-*

**RECORDING END**

**ERROR: SYSTEM SHUTDOWN**

My eyes went wide, and I stared at the blank screen displaying only text. I had seen part of the attack, but seeing this portion was still a shock. Lenore herself had been attacked, possibly even killed.

I watched the last few seconds again, then again frame-by-frame. She was cut off, and before the datapad cut out I could make out, for a sixtieth of a second, the flash of some sort of weapon. It was too brief to be sure, but it had the characteristic blue glow of an L<sup>3</sup> weapon. Such an attack would also explain the shutdown; an L<sup>3</sup> set on level 1 produced a dispersed electric charge sufficient to render a target immobile, and also short out electronics. A higher setting would have killed Lenore, and its plasma would remain contained enough to leave the datapad unscathed. I could think of few other weapons it might have been.

I switched off the datapad and stood up abruptly. "Everyone," I announced, "We've got a new destination."

At least Commander Sterling was nice enough to identify the subjects for us. The labs were ordered sequentially, later experiments being further inside. By that numbering, we had a little less than six thousand subjects to go. Each room held up to twelve subjects, based on what we'd seen so far, but we were still looking at a considerable trek further into the installation to locate the "all-important discovery." If we could find that, we might get a better idea of what the attackers were after. But I didn't like the sound of a Gravik ship coming into the equation.

I explained on the way, and showed the others Sterling's final entry. "I thought I smelled Graviks in here," Sigmund remarked gruffly. "But they smell like metal, just like everything else here, so I couldn't be sure. Plus it's been a while." He seemed compelled to make excuses for why he hadn't sniffed out a Gravik presence before.

I dismissed it with a wave of my hand, a very human gesture I'd picked up on Earth. "Don't worry about it," I remarked casually. "Besides," I added, "I think we're here."

We stopped at the doorway of another unremarkable lab, no different from any others. The numbering over the doorway indicated this was our destination. Inside, lined up on either wall, I could make out more stasis tubes, but from out here it was impossible to make out their contents. Too anxious to wait for Sigmund's sweep of the room, I headed in. It was clear the assailants had left, what could be waiting for us?

My psychic senses, ESP if you will, honed from years of study at the Phorellan Psychic Academy, warned me something was wrong, but a moment too late. It took my conscious senses an instant to catch up, mainly because I wasn't paying attention to my unconscious ones.

Standing just inside the doorway, hidden from view until I had entered, was the *Herschel's* android, Henriksen. His wide-eyed, unyielding stare was almost penetrating, his human features compassionate but his psychic presence completely blank. I recognized him from the *Herschel's* roster; he was the same model as our own android, *Llewellyn*, but in an attempt to make androids more human, each was given randomized physical characteristics. He was the same height and physical build as our own android, with gaunter features, straighter, darker hair, and tightly pursed lips. His hawklike nose protruded prominently from his face, which was affected with wrinkles in an attempt to make him appear wizened and fatherly.

"No," he stammered, his round eyes widening even further. I heard a faint electronic ping somewhere in the lab, and quickly glanced within to notice a red light flick on behind some equipment haphazardly piled up in the far corner.

"Crap," I muttered. The others joined me just inside the doorway as I blurted, "What did I just do?"

"No time!" Henriksen exclaimed, mimicking panic quite well despite not feeling a bit of it. He reached out and physically pushed me out the door. "You have to go! Now! You triggered the motion sensor!"

Mungalsingh slapped the android's hand off of me. "Hold it, you stupid robot!" she snapped. "The motion sensor for what?"

Henriksen's eyes narrowed, and his brow furrowed. He hesitated for the briefest moment, no doubt processing the best way to break the news to us. Clearly, though, time was of the essence, and he opted for the direct route: "A tesseract bomb."

When it comes down to it, dimensional travel is extremely dangerous. The tesseract, the core of the quadraump system, is essentially a sustained four-dimensional object, tied to the third dimension via a theoretically stable pan-dimensional field. Any time a ship goes into quadrajump, it taps into that tesseract's dimensional energy, tears a hole in our reality, and drops the entire ship into the fourth spatial dimension, where space, time and physics are different enough to exponentially decrease transit times across space. The ship itself retains its three dimensionality thanks to a delicately maintained energy shield called the 3DIF, the 3-D Integrity Field. Matter from our three-dimensional reality, you see, simply can't exist as four-dimensional; the additional "level" of existence tears any 3D object apart in 4D space. I try not to think about the system too much, lest it make me thoroughly paranoid to travel.

So in the end, every ship carrying a quadrajump system is, in effect, carrying a dangerous weapon; a bomb, against which there is virtually no defense. A destabilized tesseract can release a burst of energy, or rather create a bubble, inside which everything becomes four-dimensional. Tesseract systems are equipped with multiple redundant safeguards, failsafes, and automatic shutdowns to prevent just that. But if you know what you're doing, it's possible to disable those systems, and force a tesseract into that critical meltdown stage. And create a tesseract bomb. Which, incidentally, is completely illegal under UFESF weapons treaties.

I guessed this was where the *Herschel's* tesseract ended up. Based on the size of the ship and the power needed for its tesseract, the device could take out this entire installation, at the very least, if not a good portion of the planet Verdant. Taking cover elsewhere in the structure would hardly help, unless the H'mthett architecture harbored some previously unknown anti-dimensional properties.

Ensign Delilah Mungalsingh promptly proceeded to panic. She let out a terrible scream while whirling on her heels and, despite having a poor foothold on the smooth floor, took off in a sprint. I was fighting back panic myself, but there are some situations where they are so hopeless you can't help but remain level-headed. If I thought running would do any good, I'd probably have been racing her out of there. "Grab her!" I shouted, and Sigmund obediently lashed out a clawed hand and snagged her by the back of her uniform.

Mungalsingh flailed wildly, screaming, "Are you insane?! We have to get out of here!"

I shot a glance back at the light, which was now blinking. "How long?" I asked the android.

"Ten minutes," he replied. "Please, you must go. You might be able to make it." He reached up to push me along again.

I shook my head. "We'll never make it," I replied. I knew full well that such an improvised destructive device was impossible to disarm at this stage, at least by anyone in our little group. Nidiepe *might* have been able to do it, but probably not in ten minutes. But all hope wasn't lost.

I let out a deep breath, trying to clear my mind and think of a solution. Some extremely advanced ESPers were capable of bending space with their minds; if I were one of them, I could have possibly teleported us all to safety. We couldn't bunker down in another lab; matter meant nothing to a dimensional bubble, it simply swallowed everything. I closed my eyes, trying to find a solution, and in doing so let the block on my mental senses drop. The emotions around me began flowing through me, making it almost impossible to think.

Mungalsingh was terrified, her panic not even remotely held in check. She struggled in Sigmund's grip, and was about to cry. She hated UFESF for assigning her here, she hated Sigmund for not letting her go, she hated me for dragging her into this. She hated everything and everyone, and her mind was otherwise a raging torrent of jumbled thoughts and emotions. I couldn't believe such *madness* wasn't tangible to the others; it struck me as odd, at that moment, that I found myself thinking about how different a psychic mind was from a "normal" one.

Raskin, too, was scared, but he was more experienced, and far more technically knowledgeable, so his attitude approached mine. What was the point of running and screaming from inevitable destruction? We had ten minutes left, ten minutes for introspection and coming to terms with our own mortality. Raskin's heart was racing, but he was keeping his breathing calm. Multiple times, we had run up against seemingly overwhelming odds, but by keeping our heads we had always persevered. Of course, most of the time those odds were mathematical, or the risks merely academic. This was the first time a research assignment was a threat to our lives.

Sigmund, on the other hand, was just angry. He was enraged at the cowardice of those who had left this trap for us, and infuriated by the fact that his death would not be that of a Canisian warrior. He would not fall in battle, fighting honorably. He would be killed swiftly and helplessly.

I couldn't let that happen. I wouldn't let these cowards kill anyone. My eyes flashed open as I stepped out of the lab, stress-induced tunnel vision concentrating my field of view straight down the seemingly endless hallway. The hard lines of the architecture converged somewhere in the distance, a point that seemed impossible to reach. But something I saw then, something in those lines, gave me the solution.

I whirled to my right, quickly assessed its layout and then stabbed my index finger onto the panel beside the door. Half a second later, a previously invisible seam opened up in the transport tube overhead. I punched in a couple other instructions on the panel, while the others looked on in startled confusion, then jogged over to the spot directly beneath the opening in the tube. I hurriedly beckoned to the others. "Come on!"

Everyone but Mungalsingh swiftly followed, but she hesitated a moment, as if the realization that she might not die was too much for her mind to register. Behind her, Henriksen shuffled forward and pushed her shoulder blades with both hands, propelling her toward the rest of us. As the human and android stepped into our little cluster, Raskin nodded to him and said, "Thanks." The android merely nodded back.

A moment later, the transport tube sucked us upward with an imperceptible force. The tube closed up beneath where we levitated motionless, and a second later we were moving. H'mthett technology is truly miraculous, even by modern UFESF standards. When I was studying on Earth, I read some research by an old 20<sup>th</sup>-century physicist who categorized galactic species by their level of technology, and by their sources of power. The categories ranged from using the power of fossil fuels, to that of an entire planet, to that of a star, ultimately to that of an entire galaxy. The H'mthett, literally millions of years beyond any other species, had achieved that level of technology, if not more. They could go anywhere, do practically anything, seemingly in violation of every physical law known to science.

As a result, we didn't even feel the twelve-second trip through the tube and across over a kilometer of space. We were gently deposited at the entrance to the structure, and as soon as my feet touched the ground I was radioing Nidiepe over my HUDset. "We've got a tesseract bomb about nine minutes from going off. We've got to go."

The response was delayed a moment as the Anuran struggled to grasp the sudden announcement. Hesitation and incredulousness shook his voice as he replied, "(Croak) nine minutes? There's no time to escape it in nine (ribbit) minutes!"

"Just get to the shuttle," I told him. "We'll get it warmed up and ready."

"No," was his steadfast reply. "You get to the *Herschel*."

I hated to do it, but I had to remind him, "Who has command of this mission?"

He croaked back, "Who is the ranking officer? (ribbit)" Well, he actually did it. He pulled rank on me.

We all ran as fast as we could, and between breaths I shouted back, "The *Herschel* doesn't even have power! We'll never make it off this planet in it!"

"(croak) Trust me, Lieutenant."

The others stopped and looked at me. Did we risk taking the shuttle, even though Nidiepe was probably right? We had maybe eight minutes left, and it would take another five or six to get to the shuttle through the underbrush, equally as long to reach the *Herschel*, but the shuttle's takeoff sequence would cut us dangerously close. Or did we risk going to Nidiepe? He was the senior officer. And while he was lazy, he had confidence. If he had a plan to get us out of here in one piece, maybe it was a better one than mine.

My mind made up, I set my jaw and nodded. "To the *Herschel*," I commanded.

Even with the prolific vegetation, we made decent time, and covered the kilometer to the cutter in four minutes. I shot a woeful glance at the *Brahe's* shuttle as we passed the distant clearing in which it was nestled. The tesseract bomb would destroy it as easily as the ruins, and as easily as us. We might well be stranded here. But survival was more important. I just hoped the planet itself would survive, or even our escape might not mean much, if we got crushed as it imploded or something.

Captain Emkee's voice came over our HUDsets as we neared the *Herschel*. "Lieutenant Commander Nidiepe informed me of your current situation and apprised me of the plan we're monitoring things from up here and we are most definitely detecting a buildup of dimensional energy within the ruins so just hang tight and good luck we'll be over your position in just a few minutes."

"Thanks, Captain," I replied. The meltdown was happening faster than I expected, and was more powerful, if the orbiting vessel could detect it through the insulating H'mthett structure. Of course, I'd never actually seen a tesseract bomb go off before, only heard stories, so I didn't know exactly what to expect. The tesseract device itself was small: a meter-wide box, roughly two meters tall. Though, a nuke or antimatter warhead was no bigger and was capable of annihilating an area far larger than we'd be able to escape in the two minutes we had left.

We reached the ramp into the *Herschel's* shuttle bay and ran inside, none of us looking back. I did still have Sterling's datapad, but otherwise any evidence of what had happened here was about to be utterly erased. Unconsciously, I gripped the pad tighter.

We were barely into the bay when the ramp-door groaned shut. Nidiepe had some power running in the ship, though from what I'm not sure. Ignoring the elevator, I raced to the narrow stairway that led amid-deck, and scrambled for the bridge. The others seemed to have similar ideas, and either followed me or found alternate routes.

I was out of breath when I reached the bridge, to find Nidiepe reclining in the captain's chair, his fingers working the control panel on its arm. He croaked a greeting to me as I huffed for breath, and he added, "Just in time."

He punctuated his statement with an exaggerated jab at a button on the panel, and I felt a faint humming resonate through the ship. A few other systems on the bridge seemed powered up, including the main viewscreen which displayed the most direct view of the ruins possible from this vantage point.

The others arrived, and all six of us, including the android Henriksen, stared at the ruins for a long, tense thirty seconds. Then, without warning, the entire vista before us began to simply collapse in on itself. It stretched and distorted, shrinking and twisting and crumbling and melting all at the same time, revealing a growing ball of nothing I could describe. There's a number of reasons they don't put windows on quadrajump-equipped starships, one being that the fourth dimension hurts the brain. Even H'mthett minds are unable to make sense of actually seeing the fourth dimension; it's disorienting, inherently confusing, and utterly incomprehensible. I've even heard urban legends of space travelers being rendered completely insane by a prolonged view of quad-space.

So, believe me when I say that I can't even describe what I saw growing out of where the ruins, and where the very planet itself, existed just moments before. It was a distortion of reality itself, and was growing, destroying the fabric of our universe as it went.

Everyone's fear and apprehension washed over me like a chill, and I forced myself to close my eyes. If I was about to be wiped from existence, I'd at least do it without being driven mad first. Then, I waited to become nothing. There was no sound, just that faint humming in the deck.

Nidiepe was brimming with apprehensive confidence; was his plan actually going to work? He was trying to remain sure of his plan, but deep down was being overcome with fear that he'd made a mistake. Raskin was resigned at this point, determined to meet his end head-on; his eyes remained open, and I felt confusion and disorientation, but it was almost drowned out by the anger radiating from Sigmund and the panic Mungalsingh was trying to keep in check.

And we waited longer. A few more seconds, and... nothing.

I wasn't sure if I should open my eyes, but felt a sudden elated relief fill the bridge. The danger had somehow passed. I opened my eyes and looked around; everything, and everyone, was still intact, though most of the lights on the bridge had gone out. I glanced back at the android, who murmured, "Goodbye, my friends. I'm sorry."

I didn't have the presence of mind to give his words much thought, and instead turned my attention toward the main screen. My gaze washed over the smug Nidiepe, whose dewlap was swelling proudly, and then came to rest on what remained of Verdant.

The *Herschel* was suspended a hundred kilometers above an enormous, perfectly spherical crater in the surface of the world, almost as its apex. Far below, the crust had been sheared away, revealing the molten mantle beneath, which began to pour out into the empty space. Atmosphere rushed passed our ship, filling in

the 200-kilometer-wide hole ripped from land and air. The planet was scarred, but not destroyed; the crater would fill with water, or maybe even plants, and atmospheric pressure might be a little lower, but probably not enough for any travelers to notice. But those priceless ruins were gone. I let out a sigh, not realizing I'd been holding my breath.

So, that was the power of one of our *engines*. It gave me a whole new appreciation for the work Nidiepe and other engineers did on a daily basis, keeping us all safe from disasters like that. Deep down, I wondered why we even still used such dangerous devices to propel us through space, but I realized that the benefits outweighed the risks; without quadrajump, our society wouldn't exist as we knew it.

A HUDset broadcast from the captain broke the silence. "Is everyone all right what happened down there did you make it?"

Nidiepe replied smugly, "We're fine, captain (croak). Nothing to worry about."

Mungalsingh quickly regained her composure. Folding her slender arms defiantly across her chest, she huffed, "I wouldn't say 'nothing.' We lost the whole research camp, not to mention our only shuttle."

Raskin patted her shoulder roughly. "But we're alive, and that's what's important."

She huffed again irritably. "I guess."

"How long do you have?" Emkee asked, and I wasn't sure what he was talking about.

Nidiepe checked the captain's chair panel, then replied, "Power to the gravity (ribbit) systems should last another ten minutes at the most."

"All right, then, we'll come get you right away."

I stared at the viewscreen still, at the scarred world marred by a growing sea of magma in the giant crater. "Commander," I said, directing my gaze back to the Anuran, "how did we...?" I trailed off.

Nidiepe tapped a few buttons on his chair panel, then replied, "I'd been working on (croak) restoring power to some of the ship's systems. My plan was to burn out as many systems as I could with controlled overloads. I had just gotten the 3DIF functioning when you contacted me."

"The 3DIF?" I repeated. Then, I laughed. "Why didn't you say so?"

Nidiepe shrugged casually with a faint croak. "There wasn't time."

I wanted to hug him, but knew better; Anuran skin secreted a toxin that would have rendered me unconscious, ill or both. Instead, I just smiled. "Well, thanks for saving all our skins."

His bulbous eyes stared blankly at me. "I don't see how saving *skin* would have kept you alive. But, you're welcome, I suppose (croak)." He then turned back to the screen, and I felt wistful emotions drift out of him. "It's just a shame those beautiful ruins are gone. I had so wanted to (ribbit) see them up close."

The dying *Herschel* was met by the now shuttle-less *Brahe* within just a few minutes. Probably looking like a bizarre sandwich, the *Brahe* connected its ventral airlock to the *Herschel's* dorsal one, and we transferred back to our own vessel. As we broke orbit, the *Herschel's* gravity system ran out of power and the ship plummeted into the crater on Verdant. I gave the planet a final look on the monitor at my bridge station; I certainly would have liked to stay longer and further explore those ruins. But even had the ruins not been wiped from this universe, we had a more important job to do: track down whoever attacked the science team, and recover survivors and whatever else the pirates stole. Fortunately, we had clues to start from.

The captain began by debriefing Henriksen in the conference room just outside the bridge, with the entire command crew present. The android recounted what had happened much as a human would, not as a video playback device as you might expect from a machine.

"I'm afraid I'm not privy to precisely what the research team found," he explained. "Archaeology is beyond the scope of my programming, I just help out as I'm told. Commander Sterling did seem to think it established a definitive link between Humans, Phorellans and the H'mthett." That would explain why the team's message indicated a discovery "of great importance." If a definitive link was established, despite what everyone already suspected, it could be a highly unsettling revelation, politically speaking.

"I can, however, recount what transpired after we launched the message probe," Henriksen went on. "A Gravik ship contacted us, and Selleseth met with them. I don't know what happened aboard their ship, all I know is that they attacked the *Herschel* shortly thereafter. They killed or subdued the entire crew, and forced the ship to land on the surface. Then, they herded those of us that survived into the ruins, and forced us to help load stasis tubes onto their ship. The most troubling thing is, Selleseth was working *with* them."

"Selleseth was the Balaari, right?" Mungalsingh asked. She absently popped her knuckles. "Damn greedy, backstabbing snakes."

Commander Theena shot her a silencing glance, then nodded to the android. "Please continue," she urged.

The android looked down, an affectation of shame coming over him. "There was nothing I could do," he explained. "They forced most of the crew, both the dead and the ones who were still alive, into stasis pods,

and then set up the tesseract bomb and a motion detector. I'm not sure if they planned to return, but they did say they planned it as a trap for anyone who came looking for the *Herschel*. I don't know why they left me functioning. I was no threat to them, as I am not programmed for combat of any sort, so perhaps they simply didn't want to bother with me. Then they left. And I just stood there, for six days, until you arrived. I was afraid to move, for fear of setting off the bomb and killing the crew. But..." he trailed off, his eyes still lowered. I bet everyone else actually sympathized with the machine, but to me it was nothing more than words from a recording device.

Still, a pit formed in my stomach. The crew was still alive in those stasis tubes when we arrived. When we triggered the bomb. When we inadvertently caused their deaths. A brief wave of nausea washed over me, and I could feel it from some of the others, too. Had we been more careful, we might have been able to save them. No, who was I fooling? It was *my* fault. I blindly entered the room first, without so much as a scan or hesitation. And my carelessness had cost the surviving *Herschel* crew their lives, and also wiped out any evidence.

"Who did they take with them?" Theena asked, while the captain remained silently contemplative. "I assume Selleseth left with them. Who did they leave in the tubes?"

Something suddenly occurred to me: I had a record already of exactly who was in those tubes. I hurriedly accessed the visual log on my HUDset and scrubbed through the playback to the moment I entered the lab. I froze the clearest image I could bring up, and piped it into the conference room's main display screen as the android began reciting the crew roster. Together, we confirmed from the image each name the android gave us.

Ten of the crew were now accounted for: Selleseth and nine others. But Commander Sterling was not among them. That meant she was probably still alive; they must have taken her, as leader of the expedition, for whatever purposes they had planned. And if a Balaari was involved, there was a better than good chance that purpose involved money.

It was a stereotype that the serpentine Balaari were greedy, scheming money-grubbers, but unfortunately it was a stereotype too many of them played right into. Their culture and history revolved around commerce, making the most cutthroat Human capitalists look generous and selfless. Every bit of status in their culture was based on material wealth, diplomacy centered on monetary gain, and their versions of "wars" were fought strictly economically. There was a saying in UFESF, despite claiming the Balaari as members, that when talking to a Balaari you keep both eyes on your wallet. Whatever a "wallet" was; it was a bit of advice I'd picked up on Earth. Regardless, even the most trustworthy Balaari's foremost motivation was money, simply due to cultural expectations. On the bright side, their assistance had helped developed UFESF's thriving economy.

This Balaari, this Selleseth, was no doubt working with his Gravik co-conspirators, at the cost of the lives of his crew and, possibly, friends, because the potential monetary gain from the endeavor was perceived as enormous. And, honestly, a confirmed link between my people and the H'mthett could be worth a good amount. I just couldn't see how something we already suspected to be true would be worth ten lives, a UFESF ship, and a fair chunk of a planet.

Theena must have picked up on the emotions reeling through my mind: guilt, anger, frustration, sadness, and more anger. Though seated two seats away, with Raskin between us, she reached over and put a hand on mine. Her azure eyes, the pupils shaped like exotic, bulbous crosses, looked into mine, and I felt, not so much as heard, her words: "It's not your fault."

Our contact lasted only a moment, during which Raskin leaned back in his chair awkwardly. I nodded back to the Commander, and she retracted her hand and turned her attention back to the discussion.

"Dammit," Mungalsingh muttered. Through gritted teeth, she prepared to say more, but Sigmund cut her off.

"We need to find these cowards," he growled. "Where can we start?"

Henriksen raised a hand, almost awkwardly, and the captain looked to him. "Permission to speak, sir?" the android meekly inquired.

"Of course of course," Emkee replied, his own anger quite evident. The herbivorous teeth lining his vertical mouth were clenched tightly, and I could see the muscles working in his jaws.

"It's my understanding that there's a commerce station not far from here. Selleseth had suggested contacting people there to aid in excavation and study."

Emkee nodded, his head vibrating up and down quickly. As a culture, the hyperactive Blunda still hadn't gotten the hang of some of the more universal Human gestures. "It would stand to reason he might go there first then to try to peddle what he stole though since he has a six day lead on us it's anyone's guess as to whether he's still there and even if he is it could be hard to track him down on an entire commerce station but I suppose it's as good a place to start as any so let's get underway without wasting any more time."

Emkee stood up from his seated position on the black glass conference table, increasing his prior height by mere centimeters. “Plot us a course, Ensign! Best possible speed!” he commanded, thrusting a paw skyward. “Dismissed!”

We returned to our stations, and I to my next task: finding out exactly what the Balaari thought was so valuable. To that end, I accessed Lenore Sterling’s datapad again, and started browsing through her entries by date. She was meticulous about making an entry every day, at least it seemed that way up until the third to final entry, which was dated four days after the previous one. What, I wonder, could make her break her routine like that? The team wasn’t attacked until the time of her final entry, and it didn’t seem as though there had been any other sort of disaster.

I stared at the pad for a long while, contemplating just what type of person she was. She was enthusiastic, energetic, passionate... once she got interested in something, she didn’t want to stop working on it. Would she have shirked her logs if an important enough discovery were made?

My hunch was yes.

**TIMESTAMP: UE 0119-05-12 08:44:13**

**LOCATION: +11+11-3:+0+2-3:+1+1+2:-4227-819+52213:02**

**DESIGNATION: PLANET VERDANT**

*This is completely unbelievable! I think we may well have stumbled on the greatest discovery in the evolution of the Phorellans, and relations between Humans and H’mthett, ever! Stasis tubes marked 4.419.770.004 through 009-omega, and their additional identifying markings, clearly trace a genetic path from Human and H’mthett subjects to Phorellan. It’s really odd, I’ve never seen them study their own kind before, certainly not dead and floating in a stasis tube. Here, look at this.*

*You can see subject 004 is a human female, and 005 is a H’mthett. Subject 006 seems mostly human, also female, early teens, but with a few malformed H’mthett traits. With 007, a male teenager, it looks like they’d fixed a few problems, but still weren’t quite there yet. 008 is almost on the mark, female and younger than the others, but they’ve got her split open; there must have been some organ problems. And 009, as you can see, is a perfect specimen of a Phorellan male, also early teens.*

*Let’s see if we can get another set of good images of each one... there we go. So, here’s 004: human female, probably in her early thirties. 005 is a H’mthett, looks just like all the rest, really. It’s interesting, you can see how they were both dissected. The H’mthett must have been matching up compatible organs or something. You can see the deformities in 006; asymmetrical eyes, patchy hair, a misshapen skull, limbs don’t match.*

*This is going to take a lot more study. We’re going to see if we can open the tubes without any detrimental effect on the specimens, and then I’d love to get some autopsies done. I’ll send for the doctor on the next supply run, if we can actually get into the tubes without causing any damage.*

*In the meantime, I’m thinking I might be too engrossed in this latest development for more log entries. If there are any major changes, I’ll record an entry, otherwise it may be a few days.*

**RECORDING END**

**ELAPSED: 00:02:23**

I backed the video up and paused it on each of the “specimens.” While the images of sentient beings, floating dead and suspended in time, were unsettling, they were also morbidly fascinating. And near-definitive proof that Deliverance was, in fact, the H’mthett.

As I’ve said, my people don’t believe in religion. It just was never part of our culture, as taught to us by the legendary Deliverance itself, or themselves. But, that history, those legends, the very idea of Deliverance, our creators through science, was as close as planet 4L ever had to a religion. So, as a Human, imagine if archaeologists had uncovered the preserved body of Jesus, or opened a physical door to Heaven and stood face to face with God. That is what it was like for me, staring into the vacant eyes of that Phorellan prototype: subject 4.419.770.009-omega. This was proof of my “faith,” an end to all my questions about who created us, closure to the mystery of my species’ short handful of generations in this universe.

And, of course, it was also proof of just how extensive the H’mthett abduction “program” had been, up until Humans mastered space travel and set themselves on barely even footing with their grey little watchers.

Of course, no one would accept this video log as incontrovertible proof, least of all the H’mthett themselves. Video could be easily tampered with, almost effortlessly and imperceptibly altered. The only way to actually prove this link, once and for all, was with the stasis tubes themselves. And that was what the *Brahe* was setting out to do.

I showed the others the recording, displaying it on the main screen at the captain’s request. It didn’t have the same awe-inducing effect it had on me, but it was stirring nonetheless. However, everyone agreed,

the recording was not proof enough. And whoever had those canisters could possibly name their price. Any number of greedy collectors would pay a fortune for them, and the usually anti-capitalist H'mthett might even be willing to shell out a decent sum of money, or other valuable resources, to keep the information covered up. Or maybe not. In any case, a murderous handful of Graviks and a conniving UFESF traitor certainly weren't worthy of possessing such artifacts.

The journey to the commerce station took just under 48 hours at Jump 8. The station, orbiting a nondescript main-sequence star three sectors Earthward of Verdant, was close enough to the unexplored reaches of the Aquila Rift to be convenient, but did not operate in a capacity official enough to constitute a major launching point for further nebular exploration. It was conveniently located to serve as a rest stop, of sorts, for ships travelling the space between Hemiptor, Naut, and the Fercean and Gravik homeworlds. It was one of the mass-produced Balaari stations, designed to bring commerce to vacant regions of space. It had been built in the Balaari station yards roughly a hundred parsecs away, and then quadrajumped into position. And it was on the U-net, which was a convenient plus.

As we approached for a docking vector, I got a good look at the station itself. It had seen better days; it was one of the older Balaari models, and was probably decommissioned from a more lucrative location and replaced with a newer, larger station. As it was, this one was probably a century old, but likely still served its purpose well enough.

When we signaled the station for a docking position, a Balaari answered our hail, and appeared amidst a cluttered and busy communication hub-room on our main screen. He had an impatient demeanor and spastic body language, unusual for a cold-blooded Balaari. From the looks of it, his department was understaffed and overworked, even in this remote sector: over a dozen ships were either coming or going as we arrived.

Balaari can be unsettling to look upon by the uninitiated at first, as so much of their biology goes against what most species accept as the common standard. On a high level, a Balaari resembles a cross between an insect and a snake. Standing on its tail, a Balaari would probably come to my shoulder. They have no legs, just a long, slithering trunk, and only a pair of bizarre, spindly arms with two elbows and a mass of writhing tendrils instead of fingers. Their bodies, while serpentine in shape and color, are covered in scales on their undersides and chitinous plates on their backs. Their most disorienting feature, though, would have to be their heads: in essence, they are upside-down. Their snakelike jaws sit atop their skulls, and their two pairs of bulbous compound eyes rest where you or I have a chin. Somehow, though, they are able to overcome the physical differences, and maintain commercial relationships with virtually every species, UFESF-affiliated or not.

This Balaari had bright gold eyes, a common Balaari trait, while his belly scales were a pale green and his plates were dark green, almost black. His tongue flicked out of the mouth atop his head, and he hissed, "Yes, what?"

"Begging your pardon," Captain Emkee said in greeting, "this is the UFESF cutter *Brahe*, requesting a docking vector and bay."

"UFESF, huh?" the Balaari hissed back. "Don't think that means you have to pay any less. The docking fee is 200μ per hour."

Delilah Mungalsingh almost leapt from her chair at the pilot's station. "Two hundred an *hour*!?" she shrieked. "That's outrageous!"

Emkee chirped angrily at her, "Ensign stow that outburst I will not tolerate insubordination I apologize for my officer we will be glad to pay the docking fee and only plan to be aboard your fine station a few hours at most." Theena tapped a quick note into Mungalsingh's personnel file on her small datapad.

Balaari body language is notoriously difficult to read, thanks to their lack of motile facial features, but this one would have rolled his eyes if he could. "Fine, fine," he replied with a wave of his "hand." "You can have... docking bay fourteen. Approach on vector four-four by two-two-three by two-one-seven. The docking fee is required prior to departure."

Emkee gave the Blunda equivalent of an acknowledging nod, foregoing the attempt at a Human one, and replied, "Understood and thank you."

Without another word, the Balaari cut off communications, and our screen went blank.

"Pleasant fellow," Sigmund muttered.

I suppressed a snicker. Sarcasm was another Humanism that apparently the tactical officer and I had both picked up on Earth, and it was refreshing to hear it come from the warrior.

Still, there was something about this station that gave me an uneasy feeling. It was too old to be a mainstream Balaari station, which usually meant either pirates or a private owner. The latter would explain the docking fee, which, by Balaari standards, was steep but not completely outrageous.

Still fuming, despite the monetary units not coming out of her paycheck, the ensign guided the *Brahe* along the designated vector to docking bay fourteen. A few minutes later, the ship shuddered faintly as

docking clamps engaged and the station linked up to the *Brahe's* port airlock. Captain Emkee made assignments for the visit, addressing Theena: "Commander I want you to take Lieutenants Siebzehn and Sigmund and see what you can learn." I rose at the mention of my name, as did Theena, though Sigmund was already standing. The three of us acknowledged the captain's order, and headed off the bridge. As we reached the lift, I could hear the captain begin a very public berating of Ensign Mungalsingh.

We boarded the station armed, as per our standard uniform. As the airlock cycled open into the station, a recording in multiple languages announced, "Thank you for bringing your business to *Hissteth's Charity*. We honor all official forms of currency. Your docking fee must be paid in full before docking clamps will be released to permit your vessel to depart. Anti-theft regulations state that weapons of any kind are not allowed onboard." It wasn't exactly the most welcoming greeting.

Standing just beyond the airlock, in a dinghy and dimly lit corridor was a dull brown Balaari, dressed in a shimmering red tunic and adorned with a modest amount of jewelry; certainly no business owner, but trying to make himself look well-off. After all, material wealth and status were one and the same. He regarded us impassively, and noted the pistols on our hips and the sundry other weapons adorning our Canisian's ensemble. "Welcome aboard *Hissteth's Charity*. You heard the message, weapons are not allowed."

Flanking the lackey were a pair of larger mercenary types. Not Canisians; only a dishonored member of their species would hire himself out in such a capacity. One was a Gravik, who looked humanoid but with coppery metallic skin and silver hair, who, contrary to the rule, hefted a heavy distortion rifle. Opposite him hunched a male Torao, a rare sight this far from his primitive homeworld, looking much like a huge, bipedal blue sabertooth tiger, with a mane of sharp scales on his neck. His oversized front limbs flexed menacingly, and his golden eyes narrowed down on us. The ceiling was just a little higher than I could reach if I stretched, and the Torao, normally standing at least three meters, had to slouch considerably just to fit. He didn't carry any weapons. Not that he needed them.

The Balaari went on. "You may leave your weapons back aboard your vessel, or turn them over to us." Sigmund growled audibly. "No one may touch my blade unless it is with their own blood."

The Balaari stared back at him, and replied blandly, "If you would like to test our security, you're more than welcome to do so. But I suggest that if you want to conduct business here, you adhere to our rules. Our proprietor values his safety, and that of his customers, you see."

Sigmund spat back, "This place smells of greed and treachery. Only a fool would enter unarmed."

The Balaari made was passed for a shrug. "I don't doubt your olfactory expertise, but those are the rules. Leave your weapons, or leave yourself."

Commander Theena put a hand on Sigmund's arm. "Lieutenant, don't worry about it. Just leave everything back on the ship. Besides, a real warrior is never unarmed, am I right?"

Sigmund narrowed his eyes at the Balaari. "It's the principle of the thing," he muttered. Then, removing his weapons, he stormed back into the airlock. Theena and I followed, and left our pistols inside. I wasn't particularly worried. If we ran into trouble, even unarmed, we had other resources at our disposal.

As we returned to the corridor, the Balaari reminded us, "Be sure you have left everything. Our weapon scanners will notify us if you are attempting to smuggle in any contraband. Violators will be dealt with harshly." His speech sounded rehearsed, and he recited it with an air of boredom.

He and the two guards stepped aside to allow us entry, and we followed the corridor about twenty meters until it opened up into a vast promenade, a multi-tiered open area surrounding the central shaft of the station, glittering with colorful shop signs in various states of disrepair or dowdiness. The street bustled with activity, but most of both the patrons and shopkeepers looked down on their luck, wearing clothes that were dirty, old, or both. Even the various Balaari, usually the pinnacle of materialism and style, seemed downtrodden and somehow less glittery.

I turned back to the Balaari greeter and his two bodyguards, and considered asking him where we might find some information, but I knew better. He'd expect a hefty fee for any sort of information. I considered probing his mind, but that wasn't exactly a precise science; I could pick up his surface thoughts, and could only guide them with verbal interrogation. I couldn't just dive into his mind and pull out what I wanted, at least not without close contact and considerable effort. So, I let Commander Theena lead us into the promenade to do some old-fashioned legwork.

Sticking together, we made our way through a handful of seedy dives populated by individuals I could only assume were a mix of traders, explorers and pirates. There were a fair number of Graviks, Nautilians and Hemiptoreans, but even after tossing around some  $\mu$ , no one we spoke to seemed to know anything helpful in tracking down Selleseth and his Gravik co-conspirators.

After two hours of combing seedy establishments and schmoozing with every trader and dock-hand we could find, we had to call back in to Captain Emkee and tell him we were no closer to leaving than we'd been

when we arrived. He replied with a heavy sigh, and said he'd have to keep running up the tab. Then, it was back to pounding the pavement for us, and the only direction to go was up.

We learned two things during our questioning: First, lots of the people we talked to, particularly on the docks, knew *something* about a Balaari traveling with Graviks, but none would give us any details. Most of the crew was either Gravik or Balaari as it was, and the Graviks held too much patriotism to betray one of their kind, and the Balaari seemed too frightened of the station's owner, to speak without his express permission. Theena and I were able to glean this much through our psychic abilities, but couldn't get more than that; as I said, mind reading is a subtle and imprecise art. And we had no intentions of resorting to torture, or more invasive means of interrogation, especially when everyone we'd met was, essentially, innocent.

The other thing we learned, very quickly, was that the base's proprietor, Hissteth, kept his tendrils in absolutely everything that happened on board. He knew every ship that came and went, every business proposition (and every underhanded deal, if some of those we spoke with were to be believed), and everything that might be of use to us. The problems that arose were first his availability, and second his price.

By the time Theena authorized an attempt to meet with Hissteth through Emkee, all three of us were getting impatient. Sigmund looked ready to literally chew off someone's head, and I was getting frustrated by all the incessant stonewalling from every little peon we ran across. We were all determined to get *something* out of Hissteth, even if it meant giving him the uniforms off our backs.

Getting in touch with the Balaari overseer was another issue entirely. Finding his residence/base of operations/corporate headquarters was simple enough, but his secretary/guard/crony brigade wouldn't give us an appointment to speak with him for at least a week. "Surely you understand how busy a man such as Master Hissteth is," a snide Balaari told us condescendingly.

None of us were ready to give up, since we had no other leads, but we were also out of ideas. We found seats in one of the less questionable eateries, and ordered some overpriced and undercooked fare. I brainstormed my typical way, by idly watching others nearby and picking up on their emotions and stray thoughts. Maybe some flash of insight would hit me from doing so, I thought. However, the primary sentiment among other patrons was that we UFESF officers were annoying and in the way, out of place and unwanted aboard a station devoted primarily to less-than-honest business.

Sigmund glared around at what essentially amounted to a tavern, nursing a disposable cup of the least-noxious drink in the house, fuming over the dishonesty saturating the atmosphere and the frustration of our situation. I knew we had to think of a solution soon, not just so that we wouldn't completely lose our trail but to keep all our heads level.

Theena broke our brooding silence mere minutes later, her psych background once again asserting its usefulness. "Perhaps we're going at this the wrong way," she mused softly, just loud enough for us to hear but still avoid eavesdroppers. "Surely, Hissteth knows everything that goes on here. He must know there's a UFESF vessel docked, and if our Graviks stopped here he'd surely know that too. And we're asking around, so word must have reach him of our inquiries by now."

"So?" Sigmund huffed back, then took another lap from his drink. "He doesn't seem to care."

Theena nodded, a faint smile on her smooth lips. "Exactly. Because we're not making it *valuable* for him to care." She leaned back, tossing her fork onto her plate with a loud clatter. "What we need to do is get the word out that this mission is a high enough priority for UFESF that we might have some  $\mu$  to throw around."

Sigmund stared at the Commander for a moment, glanced at me, then turned back to her. I had an inkling of what she was planning, but Sigmund needed it a little more spelled out. "What are you suggesting we do, then?" he asked. "Whatever it is, it needs to work fast."

She nodded again, then leaned back forward. She was confident in the plan that was brewing in her mind; not only could I feel it, but I could see it in her eyes. "I don't think it's as complicated as you're expecting, Lieutenant."

It took another two hours (and a running tab of another 400 $\mu$ ) for the plan to begin to fall into place. We requisitioned enough  $\mu$  from Captain Emkee to grease a few palms and at least build the appearance of an operating budget, and transferred it to the accounts of some key personnel on the station for whatever further information they would spare, and for the simple "errand" of passing our interest up the chain of command. It didn't take long for the proprietor to take notice, and call for us.

We were approached outside the station's banking district by a pair of Balaari, neither of them particularly distinguished from any other Balaari, but one clearly the superior to the other. They quickly made it clear that Hissteth had found an opening in his busy schedule to see us, "to talk business," they said. They then led us to his office, where they promptly expressed an expectation of hefty tips. I swear the junior of them was just there to cash in, tagging along in the other's shadow. We transferred some more funds and went inside.

Hissteth had set up his office in the most opulent and important section of the station, that which had formerly been the operations center. That meant the general operations of the station were handled in the less-equipped secondary ops centers, sacrificing efficiency, but Hissteth clearly didn't care. His office, and apparently his personal living quarters, sprawled through the entire ops center which, at one time, would have housed more than twenty personnel, overseeing station operations and keeping everything running. The room, essentially a starship bridge on a space station, was circular, and at least twenty meters across. A few sections had been walled off, clearly the Balaari owner's sleeping and entertaining quarters. The rest was as it was built: windows surrounded it on all sides, providing a clear view of everything happening on the main level of the station. It was a highly visible location, with high visibility. All of the workstations had been stripped from the room, and either carpeted over or replaced with expensive yet mismatched second-hand office décor. The whole "office" smacked of a Balaari trying too hard to look prosperous, despite the fact that he probably was.

Hissteth himself was coiled up in a large, throne-like chair behind an elaborate desk of Viridian make, which would have been a precious antique if it were in better condition. The green wood, carved in intertwining shapes of animals and twisting vines, blended into Hissteth's own green scales, making him appear as if he were growing out of the piece of furniture. He was literally drenched in gold, mostly cheaply made baubles, and his golden compound eyes gleamed down at us from his perch.

The four armed Balaari that had led us to the office turned and left, the door locking solidly behind them. They were replaced by a solitary pair of guards in the sprawling room: a female Torao, the warrior of her species, with more than her fair share of cybernetic enhancements; and a lumbering Zirconian, a towering humanoid of quartz-like crystal. He was old and obviously a seasoned fighter, as conchoidal fractures and weblike cracks marred his entire form. Both of the guards were imposing, and heavily armed. They stared us down menacingly.

Hissteth beckoned for us with a spindly appendage, trinkets and baubles clinking faintly on his wrist. Sigmund and I let Theena lead, but our plan was already worked out. We followed her forward, across a plush red carpet that I knew had to be just for show, as Balaari slithering would be difficult on such a surface. It took an uncomfortably long time to reach the stairs to the dais atop which the Balaari overseer sat, he and his guards staring us down the entire way. I knew Sigmund felt naked without his weapons.

Fortunately, I had more than enough for all three of us.

We reached the top of the stairs, and Hissteth looked us over with his blank compound eyes, seemingly orbs of glittering metal rather than visual sensory organs. He drummed his writhing tendrils together, his tongue flicking in and out atop his head, savoring the uncomfortable silence and the feeling of power it gave him.

Finally, he spoke.

"So," he hissed, an almost comical rasping saturating his words, "I understand UFESF is looking to do business aboard my station?"

Theena nodded deeply. "That's right, Mr. Hissteth. We're seeking information on a ship we believe passed through here some time ago."

Not wasting any time, the Balaari asked, "How much is this information worth to you?"

Not the least bit intimidated or remotely hesitant, Theena immediately responded, as if practiced, "That depends on what information you have. Telling us the ship was never here is certainly not worth much to us."

Hissteth leaned back in his chair, his plated coils grinding against each other as he shifted his weight. "Then tell me about this vessel."

"We were hoping *you* could tell *us* about it," Theena responded smoothly. "All we know is that it was most likely Gravik, and would have passed this way from the Aquila Rift within the past eight days." Days are typically counted as UFESF-standard 24-hour cycles, so we all assumed the Balaari would understand the metric.

Hissteth leaned back and took in Theena's expression for a long moment. His face was unreadable, his species devoid of any capacity for facial expression, but he appeared to have experience reading the faces of more expressive species. He was savoring the power he held over us, the fact that he was in control and we were at his mercy. He was trying to decide how much to tell us, and how much to charge. And he definitely knew of a ship matching the description and timeframe. I thought I felt an inkling of a name, but it was gone before it fully materialized. He mulled over potential responses a moment longer, then finally settled on one.

"I'll tell you what I'll do," he began. "You tell me why you're after this ship, and if I know anything about it, we can work out a deal."

Theena stared at him blankly for a moment, just biding her time, while Sigmund ground his teeth in frustration. He shot repeated glances to the duo of armed guards looming over us on either side of the desk. I

kept a careful eye on Hissteth and his thoughts. He knew exactly what we were after, I could tell that much. Theena knew it too.

She let out a sigh, though whether it was audible or simply mental I didn't notice. Then, she explained briefly: "A UFESF research station in the Rift was attacked, and its research was stolen. Almost all the personnel were murdered, and we have evidence that Gravik privateers were responsible. Your... fine establishment is the closest place, and we were wondering if they had passed through here."

A wave of smugness came over the Balaari. He thought he had us right where he wanted us, now. "Then, this research must be valuable, no? If UFESF sent you all this way, they must have significant resources devoted to this endeavor."

"Yes, UFESF considers this a priority," she replied. I loved how she didn't categorize its *level* of priority. "However, our concern is the significant loss of life and the issue of criminal prosecution, Mister Hissteth," Theena went on. "Recovering the research is secondary. Certainly, one such as yourself, responsible for so many lives on this station, knows what it's like to have that sort of responsibility. And, surely, you would want to cooperate with the authorities who have jurisdiction over this region of space."

Hissteth wasn't anticipating this turn of the conversation, but his surprise was momentary. He quickly steered it back on course. "Of course, of course. But any assistance my station and I were to offer would certainly be costly, in man hours, equipment, and lost revenue from having to divert resources from business to other concerns."

Theena was keeping her voice calm, but she was beginning to get frustrated. None of us signed onto a UFESF vessel to be trade negotiators, though she was by far the best qualified. "Just tell us, please, do you know anything about a Gravik vessel that might be the one we're looking for?"

Hissteth knew. He knew quite well the very Graviks who had attacked Verdant. He knew where they were and where they were going. And he even knew how much  $\mu$  he would be gaining for his part in their venture. It all flashed through his head, in an instant, and it took me a few seconds to organize and make sense of the jumble of emotions and memories. As I did, he replied, "Again, I ask, how much is it worth to you? Make me an offer, and I'll see how I can help."

I had to focus on what he was saying, what he was thinking now. I could contemplate what he'd already said later, this was important. He was deliberating which would be more profitable: sticking with his Gravik co-conspirators, or siding with UFESF. Who would pay him more?

I shot Theena a glance. Using the zell'zyk, because it was easier than sending thoughts with my own abilities, I sent a quick mental message to both of my companions. "He's in on it. No question. He knows everything we need to know, and I think he's working with the Graviks."

Theena nodded her acknowledgement, almost imperceptibly, then folded her hands and leaned forward on the desk that was probably a dozen centimeters too high for her to do so comfortably. "Mister Hissteth, your station is within the boundaries of UFESF jurisdiction, and this is a matter of significant criminal import. I suggest you cut the capitalist scheming and simply tell us what you can. We will do our best to see that you are compensated for your trouble."

The Balaari leaned forward as well, his chitinous plates grinding faintly. "That doesn't sound like a very solid negotiating strategy, Commander. I know my rights well. This sector actually lies just outside UFESF-governed space, so you have no jurisdiction here. Don't try to intimidate me." He waved at his guards. "After all, I'm the one with the guns." He leaned back again, letting that sink in, gloating in his power trip. "I'm in the business of profitability, and right now you are simply wasting my time. I don't think there is anything I can tell you."

He was taking a hard line in his negotiation, trying to force us to make him an offer. He was mulling over the expected profits from his deal with the Graviks, remembering bits and pieces of his conversation with them and Selleseth. If only my ability to read minds could pick up images as well as words I might be able to identify some suspects, but as it was all I could discern were a few words here and there, and a percentage of a potential gain in the millions of  $\mu$ .

I shot Theena another glance, and sent her a quick, "May I?"

Without averting her glare from the Balaari, she sent back, "Go ahead."

I sat up straighter and cleared my throat, getting Hissteth's attention. "And," I said with calm confidence in my voice. The hulking brutes and their guns didn't scare me. Well, not much. "What if we had it on good authority that you were involved in this act of piracy? What would you say if we knew you worked out a deal with them, and a Balaari named Selleseth?"

I felt a flood of conflicting emotions from the Balaari: shock, fear, anger, curiosity. He recovered quickly, as always his face doing nothing to betray his emotions. "That is preposterous. What proof could you possibly have?"

“That doesn’t matter,” I responded quickly. “Let’s just say that with the evidence we have, we could get this sector under UFESF jurisdiction. And then your precious profits would dry up awfully fast.”

“And now you’re threatening me?” he snapped back, emotion in his voice if not on his face. His jaw, sitting atop his head, was working nervously. He was getting worried. I had dropped a name he knew, and we could certainly make life very difficult for him here, if not downright impossible, and he knew it.

I let him stew in fear for a moment, but as I read his thoughts it seemed to be a moment too long. He quickly gave in to panic, and before I could say a thing, he slithered back from his chair and shouted, “Kill them!”

It’s a good thing the mind works faster than the body, otherwise I wouldn’t have been able to defend us against the guards and their weapons. They both lifted their rifles in the smooth, practiced motions of trained mercenaries. Safeties clicked off, and capacitors charged with faint crescendo whines. But their trigger fingers were no match for my mind.

It was a simple matter to disarm the two; despite their enormous size, neither of them anticipated such an act, and their grips weren’t as strong as they could have been. All it took was a thought, a bit of effort, and their weapons were tossed through the air, landing some distance behind us, clattering down the stairs and putting us between them and their previous owners. All three of our adversaries were momentarily stunned by my sudden telekinetic display, and I took the opportunity to demonstrate it once again.

An invisible shove sent the Torao toppling backward and tumbling down the concentric stairs surrounding the central platform of the office. She growled and snarled as she tumbled, her claws raking to find purchase and her cybernetic portions clanging loudly against the deck plates. She wouldn’t be down for long, maybe no more than a few seconds, but I just needed her out of the way while I dealt with the Zirconian.

The thing about three-meter tall creatures of living quartz is that they are heavy. *Massive*. And telekinesis works on matter, on *mass*. The bigger they are, the harder they move. And this one was *big*. I sent a telekinetic thrust his way, hoping for a lucky break and that he would go the same way as his Torao compatriot, but he stood his ground. He hardly even noticed it. Telekinesis is one of my flashier talents, but I’m not that great at it, and even the simple stuff, like disarming those goons, takes a lot out of me. And moving this guy was most definitely not simple.

Before I could do anything, he had bellowed loudly, his entire body resonating with a crystalline hum, and he flipped the heavy desk, sending it tumbling onto the three of us like a charging Canisian rasenbiest. I did my best to deflect it, but it probably weighed as much as the Zirconian. The force of it connecting with my telekinetic response threw me back, causing me to topple backward into my chair. The desk itself crashed loudly to the deck plates on my right; Theena narrowly ducked under it.

Sigmund was already up, and had tumbled to the left of the attack. Eschewing the obvious choice of weapon, one of the heavy rifles just a few short meters down the stairs behind us, he instead leapt with a ferocious roar onto the Zirconian. I wasn’t sure if I should classify that as courage or stupidity, but it at least drew the brute’s attention away from the two of us with less hand-to-hand combat expertise.

Histeth shrieked incoherently as he frantically slithered straight away from us, and I heard a feline growl from the direction of the Torao. She was climbing her way back up the stairs, and I could vaguely hear the charging of at least another weapon capacitor, maybe something integrated into her cybernetics since she wasn’t brandishing any other firearms.

Theena scrambled back, rolling carefully down the stairs and reaching for the Torao’s dropped rifle, while I just tried to scramble to my feet. The massive desk was blocking my view of the approaching Torao, but its relocation gave me a clear line of sight to Histeth. I didn’t have time to reach into his thoughts; my concern had to be his guards, or we’d end up dead. I needed to deal with the Torao.

She came barreling up the circular stairs, aiming a plasma launcher protruding from her right forearm in my direction. I reflexively ducked back beneath the desk, and an instant later a chunk the size of my torso exploded in sparks and splinters just over my head. The Torao roared again, and lumbered closer. I shot a glance over at Sigmund, but he would be no help. He had managed to grapple the Zirconian, and was now clinging to its back, scraping feebly on its head with his claws. The cracked and aged crystal seemed to be doing more damage to Sigmund’s claws than the other way round.

My psychic senses gave me a brief flash of warning, and I tumbled to the side as the rest of the desk exploded from another shot of white-hot plasma. Splinters and scalding cinders rained down on me as I came to an awkward rest two steps down. The Torao, now visible and glaring down at me, looked away, turning her attention to Theena. The Commander, still fumbling with the Torao-sized rifle, was several meters away, and the Torao had the high-ground advantage. Her plasma weapon whined again, flashing brightly.

I lashed out with telekinesis, directing it at her arm. I pushed as hard as I could, causing a wave of pain and nausea to wash over me. Her cyber-arms were reinforced, and not easy to manipulate, but I at least

managed to throw off her aim. The plasma pelted into the wall on the far side of the room, exploding in a shower of sparks and molten metal. Some of the lights in that section sputtered and went out.

Before the Torao could fire again, Theena returned the favor. The feline creature's rifle was oversized for a Dactyli, but apparently manageable enough. A bolt of spatial distortion, the product of Gravik manufacturing, lashed from the rifle and slammed into the Torao, sending her back with more force than I had been able to produce the first time around. Her plasma weapon exploded in the impact, shredding her metal, plastic and ceramic right arm. The Torao howled, in anger more than pain, as the blast tossed her back. She fell on her back just on the edge of the platform. To her relief, and our dismay, she didn't topple down the stairs again. She was getting up again when another blast from her own rifle slammed into her, square in the face, sending her sprawling back down the stairs. I didn't bother trying to see the extent of the damage; even a sturdy Torao warrior wouldn't get back up from that.

Sigmund deftly slid down the Zirconian's back, his claws raking fine scratches in its quartzlike surface, and sent a double-legged kick into the back of the hulk's right knee. Acting as quickly as I could, I assisted with a telekinetic push, and the Zirconian toppled backward. Sigmund narrowly avoiding being crushed with an acrobatic slide between the crystalline giant's legs, and rolled to his feet. But we both knew the guard would just get right back up again. I didn't want to kill the Zirconian, but incapacitating it didn't seem to be an option. I reminded myself to put in some more practice levitating massive objects when this was over.

From behind me, Theena shouted, "Stop Hissteth!" Her footsteps were tromping up the stairs.

Ever the loyal officer, I obliged. I hopped over the smoldering remains of the desk and sprinted across the platform in the proprietor's direction. At the bottom of the stairs, I could see him slithering toward one of the bulkheads leading out of the office, his hand outstretched desperately for a wall panel. If I hesitated for even a moment, he'd be out of the range of my telekinesis. As it was, it would be cutting it close.

I grabbed for him, and managed to take hold of the end of his tail. He hissed in surprise, and wriggled as I dragged him back. I was just lifting him into the air, when a vaguely disgusting "pop" echoed through the room, and he crumpled to the ground in a writhing heap. His tail, still held aloft by my telekinesis, wriggled on its own accord in midair. A shudder went down my spine; autotomy is something I don't think I'll ever get used to.

I stumbled forward, trying to get close enough to Hissteth as he continued to scramble away. His hand had just reached the panel on the wall when I managed to grab proper hold of him and yank him back. "No!" he shouted. "Destroy the UFESF ship! Board it, kill everyone, blow it up! No!!" He struggled and wriggled, trying to break free from the grasp of invisible force that now held him aloft. It was a struggle to keep him airborne, and I wasn't able to move much or speak. I did manage to get a good look at the panel, though, and was able to ascertain that he hadn't in fact been able to activate it and broadcast his orders to whoever was listening. Of course, that didn't mean he didn't have security observing everything right now. Not a comforting thought.

I heard Theena's distortion rifle echo through the room several more times, I wasn't counting how many, followed by the faint clattering as bits of shattered crystal trickled to the floor plating. Then, everything fell silent.

No alarms, no additional armed guards, just the rasping hisses of Hissteth struggling against my telekinetic grip. Commander Theena broke the silence by saying, "Lieutenant, bring him over here. Let's have a proper talk with him this time."

Not bothering to be gentle, I quickly levitated the Balaari back to the platform, and kept him suspended in midair. "I won't be able to read his thoughts if I'm keeping him like this," I mentioned. I could tell my voice was strained, and sweat was trickling down my forehead and neck. I really needed practice.

"That's fine," Theena replied, leveling her heavy weapon. "I think Mr. Hissteth will be perfectly honest with us now, won't you?"

Without trying, I could feel fear and desperation from the Balaari. "Y-y-y-yes, of c-c-course," he stammered. "Anything you want. I've got some spare  $\mu$  I can send your way for your troubles, if you-"

Theena cut him off. "Save it. We're not interested in your money, and we don't have time for games. Tell us what we want to know, and we'll leave you alone."

He seemed shocked. "Really? Just like that?"

Theena nodded, but tapped the heavy Gravik rifle with her trigger finger. "Every minute we waste here with you puts our quarry that much farther away. And I think you've wasted enough of our time."

Sigmund hefted the Zirconian's rifle, having noticeably less difficulty than Theena, but still not comfortable with its bulk. "Scan doesn't show any active surveillance in here," he muttered, his HUDset beeping softly into his ear.

"Of course not," Theena agreed. "Hissteth uses this office as his home and a place to conduct his shady dealings. He wouldn't want anyone else eavesdropping. Would you?" She nudged Hissteth with the barrel of her

gun. She sure understood people. It was uncanny. “You know,” she went on, leaning in closer, “it wasn’t very smart of you, ordering us killed. Made you look even guiltier. And now we have it all on vid.” She tapped her own HUDset, still over her left eye, still recording and broadcasting back to the *Brahe*.

Hissteth swallowed hard.

“So,” Theena continued, turning her back confidently. “You’re going to be honest with us and save us some time, or we’re going to use the overwhelming evidence we’ve collected to see that your business venture here is shut down completely. Of course, it would also be easier to just give you the same treatment as your goons here.” She awkwardly waved her firearm in the direction of the Torao’s body.

Hissteth swallowed again, this time making only a dry, scratching sound in his gullet.

“All right, all right,” he croaked. “I’ll tell you what I know. Then... please, just leave.”

“Now we’re in business,” Theena agreed, a twinkle in her eye.

“Sellesseth contacted me a couple of weeks ago,” Hissteth explained. “He said his team had found some valuable relics, and wanted to set up a deal to sell the research and stuff on the black market. It was a very profitable venture for both of us, and I had the connections to make it happen. I knew some Graviks who would be more than happy to help, for a price, so I set them up with a meeting with Sellesseth. What they did was none of my business, I was just getting a cut. 20%. How was I supposed to know people were going to die?”

“Don’t pretend we’re stupid,” Theena fumed. “You know damn well what to expect from a deal like that. Who are these Graviks? Where can we find them?”

Hissteth shuddered, fanning out his exoskeletal plates, his species’ replacement for a nervous sweat. “They charted a flight plan with me. They’re supposed to be heading to a station in Gravik space to start fishing around for buyers.”

“And the ship name?”

The Balaari looked around at the three of us and knew he had no choice. He was going to sell out his accomplices, and maybe we’d let him live.

“The...” he stuttered, “the *Hunter’s Stalker*.”

The *Brahe* pulled away from *Hissteth’s Charity* and Ensign Mungalsingh plotted a course to intercept the Gravik vessel, using the flight plan so generously contributed to our cause by Hissteth. He was even selfless enough to waive our docking fee, though Theena steadfastly refused any further “bribes.” We left him a free Balaari, at least until he screwed up again. We didn’t have time to deal with him. We had to find that Gravik ship, and finish the job Captain Emkee had been itching to do since we last encountered it.

That same ship. If only we had known.

Captain Emkee didn’t stop jabbering angrily from the moment Hissteth revealed the name of our quarry. I had to turn down the volume on my HUDset just to think over his incessant furious babbling, and now I was stuck on the bridge and unable to escape from it.

Our biggest concern now was how we were going to approach the Graviks a second time. We contacted UFESF for backup, but there were no other ships within a few days, and time was running short. We were on our own, outsized, outgunned, and generally outclassed. Sure, we were a trained military vessel and *Hunter’s Stalker* was crewed by privateers, mercenaries, pirates, and various others with less strategic training. We had outsmarted them once before, and it enabled us to survive. Could we do it again, and manage to cripple their ship, board it, recover the artifacts and rescue Sterling? Assuming, of course, that she was alive. Though honestly at that point the thought of her death hadn’t even crossed my mind.

Theena and Sigmund reviewed potential attack strategies, and all the sensor data I provided them from the previous short-lived battle with the Gravik ship. They even brought Mungalsingh into their little talk, but left the Captain out, since his babbling was more a distraction than anything else. All that left me with was to continue reviewing Lenore Sterling’s logs. I felt like I got to know her quite well: her attitudes, her quirks, the nuances of her incredibly complex personality, and the depths of her incredibly complex intellect. Not wanting to think of the coming battle, I practically became obsessed with her over the next few days, burying myself in her datapad logs.

Fortunately, although he could have easily mislead us and disappeared from his station, Hissteth’s intel was accurate. Eight days passed before we reached the tiny outpost where the *Hunter’s Stalker* was moored. The outpost was little more than a supply depot, a tiny bubble attached to the top of a small asteroid on the outskirts of the Aquila Rift, just outside Gravik space. This region was fairly lawless, beyond UFESF jurisdiction and ignored by the Gravik government. It was rumored there were even still occasional rogue Fercean hunting raids on unsuspecting ships and prospectors. This station seemed to have been lucky so far.

We emerged from quadrajump on the edge of the system, and then assumed a course that would take the *Brahe* just within sensor range of the outpost and hidden from other sensors by the gravity well of a mid-sized gas giant. In orbit around the blue-green planet of swirling storms, we watched. I kept a careful eye on

the sensors, both grateful for finally catching up to Commander Sterling and disappointed that my time with her logs was cut short.

The only other ships in the system were a handful of merchant freighters, undoubtedly peddling their wares between UFESF and Gravik space. Most of them were probably ill-gotten, but that wasn't why we were here. The *Hunter's Stalker* didn't seem to have any backup in the system, not that they'd expect trouble. My sensors didn't pick up any significant armaments on any of the other vessels in the vicinity, and the station's meager defensive arrays would hardly repel a direct attack. The trouble now was coming up with a plan of approach that didn't result in the Graviks shooting first, but still adhered to UFESF policy. We were obligated to engage them diplomatically at first.

And that approach would lead to a losing battle.

Sigmund's culturally-ingrained sense of honor eschewed sneak attacks, but he admitted that duplicity, in this case, might well be the only path to victory. We had no chance of calling them out and even holding our own without something to even the field. We also knew that, despite UFESF regulations, a diplomatic approach would never work. These very same pirates had attacked us before on their own accord, without provocation. Now they had even more of a reason to blast us out of the stars.

Commander Theena, always the font of wisdom and tactics, had an idea. We could both strike first, and adhere to Sigmund's rules; we simply needed to level the playing field, then openly challenge them. The best of both worlds. Besides, as I had to remind everyone, we wanted to save Lenore and the stasis pods, not simply blow up the entire Gravik ship and its cargo along with it.

The only problem with our potential plan was the same reason we couldn't confront the *Hunter's Stalker* directly; we were no warship. Typical UFESF battle-ready vessels have combat-grade AIs and a staff of what they call "tactical hackers," whose responsibility is to infiltrate and wreak havoc with enemy computer systems. While we had plenty of computer expertise, our level of hacking prowess was limited, to say the least. But, we on the *Brahe* had made a habit of doing our best with what we had, so this time would be no different. We were all just nervous that we were willingly launching ourselves into the sort of situation all scientists have nightmares about.

So, Captain Emkee set me, the Chief Science Officer, to work on getting my techies up to speed on Tactical Hacking. Ensign Mungalsingh helped out as well, having taken a recent course at the academy on the subject but, like the rest of us, having no practical experience with it. Meanwhile, we had Tycho keep the *Brahe's* sensors directed at the Gravik ship and the base, to make sure they didn't depart and no other ships arrived to potentially make off with our hopeful cargo. The worst part was not knowing what they were doing there. We had considered contacting the station, but that had the potential to backfire; we were pretty far outside UFESF space, and in my experience backwater elements tend to stick together, particularly in the face of authority.

While Gravik ships are big and their weaponry formidable, in a lot of ways their technology is still somewhat behind the times. That's something they miss out on by refusing to join UFESF. As I mentioned before, their ships are slower than ours, and apparently that technological obsolescence extends to their computer security as well. Or maybe that was just the result of this being a band of sloppy pirates.

Mungalsingh was able to get access to their systems fairly quickly, after she and the three other technicians had been working in concert for about an hour. Luckily, the ship hadn't moved, and no one else in the system seemed to notice us. Sigmund grumbled the entire time the ensign was explaining the progress she and the others were making. It surprised me, honestly, to see her so enthusiastic about sitting in front of her computer terminal. She had a touchlink, like many other pilot-rated officers (I never got one because of the level of interference it posed with my psychic abilities), so she was able to delve deeper into the system than I ever could. But she impressed me as a young woman of action, of physical interactions, emotions and, frankly, violence, not as a "computer geek." But, hey, if it worked, I wasn't going to question it.

Sigmund was still unhappy with the fact that we were using such duplicity, but Emkee shot him continually silencing glances as Mungalsingh elaborated. "Getting in was pretty easy, they don't have anything as far as an AI guarding their systems. And their firewalls, simple as they are, were down because they seem to be linked up to the outpost's computer network. Really, it all seems so sloppy."

"Can you tell what they're doing linked up to the outpost's system?" the captain inquired rapidly.

"A bunch of things, looks like." Mungalsingh's eyes twitched around in their sockets as she sifted through data in her mind, via her touchlink. "They're relaying some personal messages, too many to sift through. Inventory, restocking, blah blah blah..." she trailed off, still searching, then added with a surprised tone in her voice, "There we go! It looks like they've set up some sort of meeting with buyers. Actually, it seems more like an auction."

Theena mused, "We could just buy everything at the auction, and avoid this conflict entirely."

Emkee shook his head, or rather his entire little body, vigorously. “No, absolutely not, we will not endorse pirates and murderers and thieves, they will not get away with this, no way.” Sigmund adamantly agreed, though he remained silent. “No, we proceed with the plan Ensign see what you and the others can do about disabling key systems and let us know as soon as you’ve done it so we can make our move we need to act quickly before they can fix whatever damage we cause.”

Mungalsingh nodded, still staring into space, her eyes jerking to and fro. “Yes, sir.” She could have at least kept her eyes closed.

The plan was then for Mungalsingh and the other would-be hackers to disable as many of the *Hunter’s Stalker’s* tactical systems as possible, starting with weapons and then shields and, ultimately, maneuverability. The trick was going to be getting them away from the station, to avoid collateral damage should the confrontation turn into an all-out battle.

Naturally, our plan never quite made it that far.

“They’re on to us,” one of the technicians sitting next to me at the bridge’s science station, a young crewman from Earth’s African continent by the name of Jelani, announced mere minutes later. “Firewalls are coming up.”

“We can hack ‘em,” Mungalsingh responded curtly. She wasn’t sure, though; she *hoped* they could get through.

My panel beeped, indicating that the Graviks, and now their allied station as well, were scanning for us. “They sure know we’re out here,” I added. “Hopefully, this planet will still keep us shielded. We’re going to run out of time, though. If we’re going to do this, we should do it fast, while we still have them on the ropes.”

“Agreed,” Sigmund said with a nod.

The captain mulled over strategy and tactics for a moment, his keen mind working through various scenarios. I kept my eyes trained on the sensors; the station, its personnel intimately familiar with their home star system, seemed to know exactly where our best hiding place would be. Both they and the *Hunter’s Stalker* were directing the bulk of their active sensors right at us. It was only a matter of time before we were found.

“Helm,” Emkee commanded, “break orbit and bring us straight toward them maximum thrusters full shields ready all weapons battle stations everyone. Mungalsingh I want you to stay in their system as long as possible and don’t let up keep working to bring down anything you can and give us any sort of tactical advantage.”

“Aye, sir,” Mungalsingh acknowledged. That same combat panic from our last encounter with the Graviks was beginning to creep back into the front of her mind, and I knew it would be a distraction. But we all just had to do the best we could, and breathing down her neck or telling her to relax wouldn’t solve anything.

The ensign manning Mungalsingh’s seat at the helm laid in a course and brought the *Brahe* out of orbit of the gas giant. Sigmund raised shields and did all the other stuff the tactical officer is supposed to do in preparation for battle. I could feel nervousness, if not outright fear, from everyone on the ship. This was the first time we were purposely heading into a combat situation, and it was one we weren’t sure we could win.

“The *Hunter’s Stalker* is hailing us,” I announced, my sensors detecting their communications signal.

“Let’s see what they have to say,” Captain Emkee said.

The main viewscreen flicked away from its magnified view of the distant but approaching station and ship, and displayed the familiar face of the captain of the *Hunter’s Stalker*. He was a stern-looking Gravik with silver skin, metallic black hair, and golden eyes. His jaw was rather square, and his face was lined with many deep creases. The lighting around him was dim, but I could make out various terminals and battlestations behind him. A faint hum of activity, including a distinct discussion of key systems having been disabled, filled the ambient space. The captain, whose lengthy Gravik name I couldn’t remember, cleared his throat and growled, “Well, if it isn’t Captain Emkee of the *Bravely Ran Away*. Back for another round?”

Sigmund growled, but Emkee replied over him. “Greetings again, Captain Forniarlasillonikarlissic.” How he remembered that name baffled me. “Actually we have come for something of a rematch if that is what you desire though I should make it clear our purpose is to recover the artifacts and personnel you conspired to obtain several days ago. You are in clear violation of laws put forth by both UFESF and the Gravik Hegemony in regards to assault theft murder kidnapping and the deployment of weapons of mass destruction. I suggest you power down your ship’s systems and surrender unconditionally if you do so we may be lenient otherwise we will be forced to escalate this confrontation and I’m sure neither of us wants that am I right?”

The Gravik smiled. I couldn’t feel his emotions at this distance, but he seemed genuinely amused. “Let me get this straight,” he said deliberately. “UFESF sent you, a puny little Blunda in charge of a puny little ship that we almost destroyed the last time we met, to act as police to bring us in? Or maybe you volunteered, to get revenge for last time?” He laughed out loud. “You really are a fool. First, you’re way out of your jurisdiction here. Second, your ship isn’t meant for combat. You can’t possibly think you’re a threat to us.”

Emkee was quick to reply, not intimidated in the least. “First of all Mr. Forniarlasilloniokarlissic I believe you will find that you are well outside the bounds of protection established by your government as well and in this region of free space we have as much right to confront you in this regard as anyone else and second we would not be having this conversation if you were not concerned about your ship’s systems mysteriously shutting down and leaving you vulnerable to an attack by even our ‘puny’ vessel. I will ask you again to surrender.”

The Gravik stared Emkee in the eye. He knew our captain was right, but at the same time he was right himself; they still outgunned us, unless Mungalsingh and my techs could bring down more of the *Hunter’s Stalker’s* systems. We were still beyond effective weapons range for either of us to attack, so we still had a little time. “If you think you have any chance of beating us in battle, then by all means, continue your approach. If you want to be realistic, give this one up, Captain. Turn around and go home, and tell your leaders that you failed in your mission.”

Emkee tapped a few buttons on his own chair, then looked back to the Gravik on the screen. “We should be within combat range within six minutes I suggest you take that time to reconsider your threats.” He then closed the communications channel, letting the screen switch back to its previous view.

The bridge remained eerily silent for long minutes as the *Brahe* continued to draw closer. Mungalsingh sat in her chair, her eyes closed now, her body rigid but slumped at a strange angle, as her brain worked frantically to further infiltrate the Graviks’ computer systems. But the Graviks were on to her now, that much was clear, and she was working almost as hard just to keep them from counteracting everything she’d done. Her mind was reeling, and her assistants were struggling to keep up with even the Graviks’ rudimentary countermeasures. But she had a new plan.

Tension continued to build, the *Brahe* seeming to creep toward the Gravik ship, still docked to the base, at a crawl. Seconds became minutes, and minutes seemed to drag into eons. After an eternity, which also came too soon, Sigmund’s targeting sensors announced we were within firing range. Emkee ordered the ship to battle stations, shields and weapons primed, and another communications channel open. This time, though, we were met by a Balaari. His coloration, markings and overall appearance were consistent with what we knew of the *Herschel’s* archaeologist, Selleseth.

His tongue flicked nervously as he answered. “Ah, Captain Emkee,” he hissed. “It’s a pleasure to, ah, make your acquaintance. My name is Selleseth, formerly of the *Herschel*. I have been asked by Captain Forniarla... um, the captain of this ship, to discuss this situation before it escalates unnecessarily.”

Mungalsingh had done it. Or at least done *something*. The Graviks were scared, and now trying to get us to back down by putting forth the only person really capable of negotiating on their behalf. Pirates like these weren’t known for their diplomatic skills.

Emkee spoke over his shoulder to Sigmund, loudly and clearly enough for the Balaari to hear, “Lieutenant are all weapons primed to fire upon our target upon immediate notice?”

Sigmund nodded, a tingling of superiority rippling through him. “Yes, sir. All weapons locked on target.”

“N-now hold it a second,” Selleseth stammered. “You can’t just fire on us, we’re docked to a neutral station here! Such an attack would endanger too many lives!”

“Using civilians uninvolved in your crimes as a shield is further evidence of your treachery Mr. Selleseth,” Emkee shot back angrily. He glanced down at his seat panel, checking his relay of my sensor readings. “You seem to be having trouble with your shield and weapon systems perhaps you’d like to advise your associates to stand down and surrender your ill-gotten spoils before things get violent I’m sure my tactical officer is accurate enough to disable your ship without harming the station.” Sigmund folded his arms and glared at the Balaari on the screen.

“I won’t insult your intelligence by claiming to not know what you’re talking about,” Selleseth replied, nervous but struggling to keep an air of coolness about him. “You are certainly both insightful and resourceful to have found us, and must have recovered some sort of incriminating evidence on Verdant. However, please allow me to explain.”

“I’m listening,” Emkee replied, surprisingly short-winded for a Blunda. I think we all knew the Balaari was stalling, buying his allies time to enact some sort of plan, but keeping him talking was of benefit to us as well, as it kept us out of the fight.

Selleseth took a deep breath and held it for a moment before he launched into his obsequious explanation. “You see, I never meant for things to come to this. I contacted these Graviks in an effort merely to find buyers for what we had discovered. The expedition would never turn a profit, and I knew that anything we brought back to UFESF would simply be buried. There are far too many politics involved between the H’mthett, Phorellans and Humans for such a discovery to ever see the light of day. Do you know what it would do to Human-H’mthett relations if it were made public knowledge that so many Humans were abducted and

experimented on? For *any* species, for that matter, to find thousands of their own suspended in giant test tubes in a H'mthett research facility? It would be a disaster. The only possible recourse for this discovery was to find a private buyer who would not only protect the discovery, but also make it worthwhile to those of us involved."

"That is a bit of a stretch," Commander Theena snapped back. "Everyone already suspects the H'mthett were doing this sort of thing all along. We practically have proof as it is. And the H'mthett themselves don't seem to care one way or the other. That's a pretty shallow argument, Mr. Sellesseth."

The Balaari's tongue flicked in annoyance, his compound eyes ever unreadable. His voice, though, betrayed his annoyance. "That is precisely what the others said. I was the only reasonable one. I made some calls. I wasn't going to waste all the effort we'd put in. I just... didn't expect events to take such a turn."

"You knew who you were calling," Emkee retorted. "You knew they were pirates and you must have established payment agreements with them. You knew what you were getting into. Whether you feign ignorance or not you are responsible for the deaths of your entire crew and you will answer for it once this is through. You may be able to redeem yourself in some way by cooperating as we now seem to have an open dialogue so perhaps if you agree to hand over your cargo and prisoner we will propose leniency in your trial."

The Balaari snuck a glance over his shoulder, his spindly digits fidgeting. "Ah, yes, well, Commander Sterling was... less than cooperative. My Gravik associates here thought it would be best to simply do away with her."

My heart sunk. Lenore Sterling was dead? I couldn't believe it. Sellesseth's words didn't even seem real. I didn't *want* to believe it. I had been thinking, *dreaming* about her for weeks now, my only goal for the end of this conflict being her rescue, to meet her face to face, to get to know the beautiful woman whose logs had already showed me so much.

But what reason did Sellesseth have to lie? He was riddling his defense with half-truths, but if he had any chance of leniency, of getting us to back down, it would be Lenore. He could use her as a bargaining chip, threaten us with standing down or otherwise risking her death in a full-on battle. But no, he instead chose to tell us the truth. The truth about her ruthless murder. The promise lost, the potential for the advancement of all our knowledge... and, just the fact that I might have been developing a thing for her. It made me angry, obviously. I felt my fingers gripping the computer panel tightly, so tightly I thought I might actually break through the glass surface, and it hurt, but I couldn't stop myself.

Murderers. All for what? Some money, and the complete waste of an important discovery? Or, if we somehow managed to destroy their ship, all for nothing.

Nothing.

"Damn it!" Mungalsingh blurted, her eyes popping open and her fist pounding the panel beside me.

"Stow that, Ensign," Commander Theena snapped. "Now is not the time for emotional outbursts."

"No, Commander, you don't understand," the ensign began to explain. But the looks on the faces of the other technicians told us everything we needed to know.

The instant before the Graviks severed our communication channel, the voice of Captain Forniarlasilloniokarlissic, from somewhere off-screen and behind Sellesseth, echoed, "Now, break dock and bring all weapons to bear!"

Our screen flickered and the image of Sellesseth vanished, replaced by our fore-facing camera still fixated on the *Hunter's Stalker* moored to the asteroid impregnated with the Gravik base. Adrenaline pulsing through my arteries, tension from multiple sources narrowing my vision and driving me shakily, I almost instinctively brought up the tactical sensor readouts on my panel, my training, despite being a few years old, guiding me through the process of monitoring the enemy's position and other readings.

The *Brahe's* thrusters kicked in, sending our ship into a calculated tactical reverse vector. Weapons were charged and ready, and shields were at full power, but we weren't going to fire first. Not while the Gravik ship was still docked to the base occupied by those who, while possibly collaborating with these pirates, were essentially innocent in this regard. Besides, there was a chance this was a carefully staged bluff.

I shot a glance at Ensign Mungalsingh. She opened her mouth to speak, but I pulled from her mind enough to now this was no bluff. They'd shut her out, and cut off her hacking attempts. Their offensive systems were still at full strength. I cut her off with a shake of my head.

Graviton fluctuations and quantum distortions rippled through the cosmic medium between our two ships as the *Hunter's Stalker* powered up its drives and, without bothering to release any clamps or gangways, ripped itself away from its moorings. A few small explosions stuttered among the station's airlocks, and atmosphere vented momentarily. At the back of my mind, I hoped the Graviks had promised a hefty payback for the extensive damage their stunt had just caused. On the bright side, our enemy was now clear of the station.

I quickly read off my panel readouts, then announced, “Gravik ship is charging distortion blasters, shields powering up.”

I had barely finished when Emkee ordered firmly, “Mr. Sigmund initiate tactical maneuvers at your discretion and fire at will.”

Tactical control was now completely in Sigmund’s hands, though Ensign Mungalsingh’s stand-in still had helm control. But until my readouts gave us a reason to do otherwise, all we could do was trust in Sigmund’s combat abilities. I just hoped our previous run-in with these pirates had been enough of a refresher course after so many peaceful missions.

Our forward turrets discharged completely, unloading a barrage of blaster bolts on the hulking copper ship. Most of the bolts splashed against its shields, but my sensors also had good news. “We got in a couple shots before their shields fully charged. Looks like minimal damage. Their weapons are targeting us.”

“Evading,” Sigmund growled. Though, evasion in this situation usually only served a psychological effect, to make the defenders think they were doing something to defend themselves. Even though the *Brahe* was considered small, it was still an enormous chunk of metal, over fifty meters long and shaped like a giant, knobby hubcap. Once the Gravik ship had acquired a target lock, there wasn’t much we could do to avoid getting hit.

A wave of quantum distortion fire pelted into our shields, rocking the ship and sending precarious sounding crashes echoing throughout the hull. Internal sensors read no damage, but the sound was truly disconcerting.

While we were still a large target, our relative size to the *Hunter’s Stalker* and its length of nearly five times ours meant we could outmaneuver it. Our thrusters engaged again, propelling us silently in an arc around the ship. Our inadequate pair of ventral blasters rained fire, almost harmlessly, on the big ship’s shields as we circled past.

“Ensign did you manage to exploit any weakness that can help us at this moment?” Emkee shouted across the bridge as another distortion blast slammed into our aft shield quadrant.

The Ensign was busy tapping in navigational calculations at the helm panel she had rerouted to the science station beside me, her touchlink speeding up her work a good deal. “Just keep running,” she replied, sweat on her brow, her hands shaking.

“We’re in too far to simply run away!” Sigmund barked back.

“Agreed,” Emkee said with a curt nod. “Lieutenant, give them everything we’ve got.”

“No, you don’t understand!” Mungalsingh retorted.

Theena stood up, even as another blast rocked the ship. “Ensign, I said stow it!”

“Shields are holding, but power is down to 87%,” Sigmund announced. “Blaster batteries at 60.”

“And their ship?” The captain inquired, his eyes glued to the viewscreen, locked on whatever view gave the clearest shot of the enemy ship.

I scanned the sensor readouts. “Their shield output is at 70%. Weapon output unchanged.” Gravik weapons, unlike the capacitors that powered ours, draw power directly from the ship’s main reactor; as long as the ship’s distortion drive is functioning, its distortion blasters will work just fine.

“Bring us about,” Emkee instructed, tapping coordinates and calculations into his chair panel. “Bearing 473 mark 217 keep us pointed directly at them all power to forward shields and concentrate all fire on their primary weapons batteries.”

“Aye, sir,” Sigmund grunted as he complied.

The *Brahe* matched the speed of the *Hunter’s Stalker*, which was still bearing down on us, and came about. It was a running battle, one in which we didn’t stand much further chance of survival. Doubtless, the pirates were matching our position with their shield strength, and they certainly weren’t letting up their steady stream of fire.

Sigmund waited a few long, precious seconds for our weapons to gain a bit more charge, and a flurry of distortion blasts slammed into us. Our shields still held, now bolstered by the combined strength of all four shield quadrants concentrated into a single face, but even that wouldn’t last forever. The tactical systems responded to Sigmund’s firing commands with a series of tones, and another dozen blasts lashed out from our prow, hurtling across the emptiness of space, through and past a formation of incoming glowing quantum ripples from their distortion cannons, to strike the Gravik ship head-on some thousand meters distant. The energy interaction between our weapons and their shields created a mesmerizing aurora of colored light, but there wasn’t time to admire it.

“That weakened their shields somewhat,” I announced. “Doesn’t seem to be deterring them, though.”

Their blasts, slower than the near light-speed particle beams we threw, caught up to us a moment later. The ship shook violently, and Theena lost her balance, toppling back into her chair beside the captain. The crashing this time was tremendous, like an earthquake lasting several seconds. The panel at my fingers and

the chair beneath me rattled violently, the lights flickered, and alarms sounded. I ran a quick damage diagnostic.

“Forward shields generators are out, ventral generators at 50%. Damage to starboard turrets, hull breach on deck 2. Captain, we can’t take much more of this.”

“I told you,” Mungalsingh shouted this time, “just run!”

“Like cowards?” Sigmund snarled. “Not now.” He launched another attack on the pirate vessel, simultaneously initiating a rolling evasive pattern, causing the view of the enemy ship, now broken by static, to begin spinning awry.

“What is the status of our Elston drive?” the captain inquired, pressing a button to channel his inquiry directly to Nidiepe in the engine room.

The response was immediate. “Still functioning, Captain, but (croak) stress fractures are forming in the outer (ribbit) housing. I wouldn’t recommend it for a long trip, and I wouldn’t recommend we get hit again.”

His words were cut short by another series of crashes, another torrent of distortion blasts slamming into our weakening shields and hull. This time, half the panels on the bridge simply went out, along with the main lights, and I heard several explosions somewhere in the ship. Dim red emergency lights came on. Sigmund was trying to keep the battle under control, but there wasn’t much he could do as our ship grew ever more crippled.

“Damage report!” Emkee demanded.

I shook my head. This was beginning to look truly hopeless, and I unconsciously shot a glance toward the nearest escape pod. “Internal sensors are out. Significant damage to shields and power relays. There’s not much more I can tell you, sir.”

I watched Emkee, waiting for a decision from him. What were we going to do? We’d charged into this situation, into battle with a superior foe, knowing quite well that this might be how things would end up. We all knew the risks when we signed aboard a UFESF ship. We all wanted justice. But none of us wanted to die.

Least of all Ensign Mungalsingh.

With an exasperated sigh, she slammed her touchlink to the master panel beside me, her face set in a grimace of frustration and desperation, and squeezed her eyes closed. Before I could even react, much less pry her loose, she had assumed helm control. Sigmund swore in Canisian, an expression that didn’t translate through the z’ellzyk, as his maneuvering control was stolen from him. Without warning, the *Brahe* spun away from the *Hunter’s Stalker*, took a seemingly random vector, and shot off, still at sub-light speeds but fast enough to be out of the pirates’ weapons range within an instant. Desperate to press the fight, Sigmund fired off a series of parting shots, which were mostly harmless even had they not been poorly aimed.

Emkee leapt to the back of his chair and shouted, “What is the meaning of this?! Those pirates are going to escape if we retreat like this!”

Mungalsingh’s eyes opened and she glared back at him. “No they’re not, they aren’t going anywhere! If anyone had listened to me, I could have explained!”

Another explosion sounded somewhere in the ship, and the entire thing lurched violently. Everyone was thrown to the floor except the few officers fortunate enough to have sturdier, armed chairs. I myself hit my head on Sigmund’s tactical panel behind me, causing my vision to swim and my ears to ring. The remaining panels on the bridge went dark, and even the red emergency lighting failed momentarily. A panel nearby sputtered and sparked, and the acrid smell of an electric fire faintly assaulted my nostrils.

Emkee grunted as he climbed back into his chair. “Report,” he coughed.

Sigmund pulled himself up to his controls; I could feel he was injured, but I couldn’t see exactly how. He tapped a few buttons. “Emergency power is running, we have minimal systems. Combat readiness is zero. Limited external sensors.”

I dragged myself back into my seat, not taking the time to help Mungalsingh back into hers. The other technicians seated near me did the same, but one of them wasn’t moving. There wasn’t time to worry about that, though. I fiddled with some controls for a few seconds and managed to access a few readings. They were garbled and intermittent, very hard to read. “It looks like the Graviks aren’t taking off. They’re coming to finish us off. There’s a big mass/power reading approaching, heavy levels of quantum distortion.”

“Shields?” Emkee inquired.

Sigmund shook his head.

Mungalsingh slapped her touchlink back onto the panel. “We have to get them up!”

“What is she doing?” Emkee snapped at me. “Someone get her under control!”

I couldn’t see what she was doing, obviously, as everything was happening within her mind via her touchlink. I tapped in a few commands to see if I could work out what she was doing through the computer, and managed to get a readout just as she finished it.

"All power has been rerouted to shields. She's extended the remaining generators around the ship, but we're at less than 10% power. No weapons, life support disabled... no, she's disabled *everything!* We're sitting ducks!" I didn't know what that expression meant, it just seemed like one Humans used in times like this.

The *Hunter's Stalker's* massive signature loomed closer, lumbering at an excruciatingly lazy pace compared to the quick jaunt we had made with our gravity drive. Power was building in its weapons, its distortion drive operating in tactical mode. Even with all available power going to shields, we only had a few seconds left to live. The viewscreen couldn't even show us our impending demise. We were blind and helpless, with only a handful of broken sensors to show us how we were going to die.

Power output from the Gravik ship suddenly flared. Energy and radiation levels spiked, and my first inclination was that they had activated some new weapon, but I quickly realized even these defective readings were not indicative of any sort of directed weapon. It was more like an explosion.

A shockwave of quantum distortions slammed into the *Brahe*, flinging it away like a dry leaf in a stiff breeze. Our shields were hardly a match for the onslaught, and they failed almost instantly. The shaking was unbearable, the crashing terrifying, the fear only amplified in my mind by that of everyone aboard the ship. More sparks spewed from power conduits in the walls and ceilings, and the smell of fried wiring became even more pronounced. All the panels went dead, and the emergency lights flickered again. Echoes from the impact still reverberated through the *Brahe's* hull, but it was otherwise silent. Even the engines had stopped, which was probably not a good sign.

The silence built as the reverberations faded, and all I could hear on the bridge was the sizzling of burning electronics, and someone somewhere coughed. Emergency lights came back on, as did the sound of the ventilation system. My HUDset crackled in my ear, and I heard Nidiepe's raspy voice. "I repeat, is anyone still there on the bridge?"

"Yeah, some of us," I replied.

Emkee sat up, rubbing his head with a paw, and checked on Theena, who groaned but sat up as well. "Damage report," the captain said for a final time.

"I'm not sure where to start, Captain," Nidiepe replied. "We're still in one piece, though (croak). May I ask what happened?"

Mungalsingh shakily got to her feet, and helped a technician up as well. He was coughing, and looked like he'd been burned by something. Sigmund was clutching his left arm as he tried in vain to stab at his tactical panels.

I looked back over at the captain. "Well," he said, his eyes on Mungalsingh, "care to explain, Ensign?"

In exchange for our help in making repairs to their base, the station's Gravik proprietors were kind enough to moor the *Brahe* and assist with its repairs. We had been lucky, and lost only a few personnel in the areas that suffered direct hits from the Graviks' weapons. The rest of our injuries were minor, aside from Sigmund's broken arm, but everyone was recovering nicely. Amidst all the repair work, we had a nice respite, a shore leave of sorts, on the station. The *Hunter's Stalker*, on the other hand, had not fared so well.

"The only thing I was able to do when I was in their systems was disable the cooling systems on their engines so they'd start overheating right away," Mungalsingh explained. "Honestly, I didn't expect the ship to blow up like that. I had been figuring they would see what I'd done, and it would get them to stand down. I figured running would get them to pursue, and force a breakdown."

Sigmund nodded his approval. "A sound strategy. We may make a warrior of you, yet, Ensign."

Mungalsingh gave the Canisian a nervous smile, but kept her eyes down. "Captain, I'm... well, I know I didn't act appropriately under pressure. I should have explained."

Emkee sipped his drink through a long, curvy straw and held up a paw. "Nonsense Ensign," he chirped after swallowing. "There wasn't adequate time for a proper explanation you simply did what had to be done and if it weren't for your quick thinking we would most certainly not have survived to be here having this conversation right now."

I leaned back and savored the drink I was imbibing. The little café onboard the Gravik station was a bit cramped, but it was clean, well-lit, and pleasant enough. Unlike most all-Gravik stations and vessels, this place also had artificial gravity. I imagined it hadn't been very pleasant for Selleseth to make his way around the *Hunter's Stalker* without being able to slither.

Full repairs were going to take another two weeks, at least, and after their completion we still had to await UFESF assistance in reenergizing our power core and tesseract. It was welcome downtime. Unfortunately, it gave me far too much time to think about Lenore Sterling.

Had there been anything I could have done? Could I have solved the mystery of her disappearance sooner? Of course, it was silly to think I could have, but my conscience wasn't one to listen to reason.

Commander Sterling's words, her face, her very memory would stick with me for a long time, I knew, even though I had never even met her.

Despite all its beauty, all there is to explore and discover, the universe is a dark and dangerous place.