

ETERNAL DOCTRINE

PART II

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Based on the universe of
STAR CONTROL
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CHAPTER 7

COUNSEL

Unknown date, hopefully September 2155

Unknown location, hopefully somewhere near Alpha Pavonis

For some reason there were beetles everywhere. Gruber observed their movements for a while and soon came to the conclusion that they were in the middle of a battle.

pow

Something solid hit Gruber in the back of his head. He turned around and saw one of the beetles holding a wooden paddle.

crash

Something hit him in the head again and, judging from the sound it made as it broke on impact, it was made of glass. He turned around again and saw a beetle holding a broken bottle with an annoying grin on its face.

He stepped on something wet – or rather – he found himself standing in a puddle. Then it all became clear to him. He was standing in a puddle in the middle of a bottle-paddle beetle battle. It made sense, it really did.

Something touched his feet underwater and then one of the beetles spoke:

“Is he supposed to look so dry?”

Another voice then echoed in the sky:

“It was a close call, but he’ll live.”

Now there were no more beetles, only bright light.

“His eyes are open,” the first voice said.

The light dimmed slightly and suddenly Gruber could sense gravity. He was lying on his back.

“Adam, can you hear me?” the second voice asked.

The correct answer was yes, but Gruber couldn’t find the strength to say it.

“Blink once if you can hear me,” the voice continued.

He tried to blink and succeeded. He noticed that he was now able to take note of his surroundings. He was in a brightly lit room and there were two people standing next to him. One was wearing something red and the other one something white.

“Nothing to worry about,” the one in white clothing said. “He’ll recover fully in a few days.”

It surprised Gruber how much effort it took him to keep his eyes open.

“I doubt he’ll be able to talk today,” the same person continued. “I’ll let you know when you can have a chat.”

The person in red clothing left the room. Gruber saw no reason to resist the urge to close his eyes any longer. As he did so, he decided to take a little nap.

It felt like he had been lying there for ages, but still there had been no feeling of boredom. He could remember several lights, sounds and liquids. He had noticed different people coming and going, but only one of them had examined him. At some point he had realized that he was in the infirmary of the Vindicator and that Senior Medical Officer Karan Mehul had been taking care of him.

A sudden sense of consciousness flowed through Gruber. Mehul was standing next to him, facing the other way. Before Gruber could stop himself, he groaned and grunted to get the doctor’s attention.

“Ah, you’re finally **fully** awake,” Mehul observed.

He then leaned over Gruber, pointed something bright at Gruber’s left eye and asked him to look up. Gruber complied and the request was followed by orders to look down, left,

right and straight forward. The sequence was repeated for the other eye as well.

“Now open your mouth,” Mehul said, holding something flat right in front of Gruber’s mouth.

Gruber wanted to comply, but he managed to open his mouth only slightly.

“As wide as you can,” Mehul instructed.

Gruber struggled and little by little he made progress.

“That’s enough,” Mehul then stopped him.

Gruber was disappointed. He was sure he could have done better. Mehul then put the thing he had been holding into Gruber’s mouth.

“Try to say *aaaaaa*,” the doctor requested.

How stereotypical, Gruber thought.

“aaa— *cough* *cough* *cough*”

“Close enough,” Mehul decided. “Drink this.”

He offered the other end of a long straw to Gruber, who couldn’t see what was at the other end. Gruber reluctantly took a sip and an unfamiliar liquid filled his mouth. It had zero taste, but somehow it completely moistened his mouth which, he now understood, had been really dry.

“Tell me your name,” Mehul said.

Gruber was curious to see how well he could talk now.

“Adam Gruber,” he replied with little effort and felt pleased with himself.

“Where are you?” was the next question.

“Aboard the Vindicator.”

“What year is it?”

“2155.”

“What is the current date?”

Gruber felt irritated since the question was unfair.

“That depends on how long I’ve been here,” he answered.

“Very good,” Mehul replied. “It’s been three days since you were brought here. Do you remember what happened?”

Gruber thought about it very carefully. He could remember everything up to the point when he was in the hole and something had pushed him to the surface. After that he could remember heat, thirst and the need to pee, but nothing concrete before some random flashes from the room he was now in.

“Yes,” he truthfully responded. “Where are we? I mean the ship, where are we going?”

“I’m sure the captain is eager to answer your questions,” Mehul said and took out his communicator.

“He can talk now,” Mehul said to the device and tucked it back into his pocket.

Gruber suddenly remembered Mehul’s attitude problem towards Captain Zelnick.

“Do you still question his leadership?” he asked the doctor.

Mehul seemed a bit embarrassed.

“No,” he said. “You were right and I was wrong. I hope we can put that behind us.”

Gruber was relieved to hear that.

“Yes we can.”

Mehul gave him a foreign smile, whose meaning Gruber couldn’t decipher.

“Let’s talk business then,” Mehul began. “Now that you’ve recovered from the dehydration, there’s nothing really wrong with you. You will probably feel weak for a day or two, but you can get back to work as soon as you have the strength to stand up.”

Gruber tried to rise to a sitting position, but the attempt was futile.

“Take your time,” Mehul said, “there’s nothing to gain from rushing it. I think you can get out of here in 24 hours.”

Gruber relaxed his body and prepared for a long wait.

“You don’t need my attention anymore, so I’ll take my leave now,” Mehul continued. “Call me if you need me.”

Gruber nodded in agreement and Mehul left the room. Very soon afterwards Zelnick entered.

"I heard you were awake," he said. "I can see the rumors of your death were greatly exaggerated."

"Only slightly," Gruber replied. "What's our status?"

Zelnick took a chair and sat down next to Gruber's bed.

"We are currently heading towards Alpha Apodis."

Gruber recalled that Apodis was a small constellation inside the larger Draconis constellation and that Alpha Apodis was a super-giant.

"So we're selling the coordinates of Beta Pegasi right away," Gruber commented. "I suppose the plan is to check Epsilon Draconis afterwards."

Epsilon Draconis was one of the systems that were supposed to contain a rainbow world.

"That is correct," Zelnick said. "Of course we would like to check Epsilon Draconis as well before selling the coordinates, but that would require several days of needless transit time."

"Let's not forget that according to the Spathi the area around the Draconis constellation is supposed to be hostile territory," Gruber reminded the captain.

"Yes, the territory of the 'Thraddash'," Zelnick agreed. "I'm not worried about that, since even Fwiffo said that they are a weak race. We'll just do our business and get out quickly."

"You know how it always goes when you put it casually like that," Gruber remarked.

Zelnick smirked at the thought.

"History is behind us and the future hasn't happened yet."

That comment struck a nerve.

"You're quoting your mother again, aren't you?" Gruber asked.

Just then the door opened and Rigby entered the room. For whatever reason he was holding something which looked like a flower pot.

"I asked Rigby to join us," Zelnick explained. "He's been studying the plants that saved your life."

"And I've been thrilled to do so," Rigby continued. "I have a specimen right here."

He showed the pot to Gruber. Instead of dirt, it was filled with something rockier. Gruber assumed it was the soil from Alpha Pavonis VII.

"Notice this part here," Rigby said and pointed at a small hole in the soil. It looked just barely too small to fit a finger.

Rigby then handed the pot to Gruber and turned off the lights, making the room pitch-black.

"I see, or rather, I don't see right now," Gruber commented. "So I assume that the creature comes out of the hole now."

Just then a dim red light was turned on.

"They seem to sense only a small part of the spectrum," Rigby explained. "Look closely now."

Gruber looked at the hole and indeed something was emerging from it. At first it was just a stem that protruded further and further, but after it was about 15 centimeters tall, the stem suddenly divided into several branches. The plant then looked like a mast of a sailing vessel.

"See the web?" Rigby asked.

Gruber looked closely and, yes, there was something between the branches. Indeed it looked exactly like a mast – it even had sails.

"I'll turn the lights back on now, watch closely," Rigby instructed.

It was good that Rigby gave the heads up, because otherwise Gruber might have missed the event entirely. Immediately as the lights were turned on, the plant retracted back to its hole faster than lightning.

“Interesting,” Gruber commented, “and also, impressive.”

“As I’m sure you’ve figured out already,” Rigby began, “during day these plants hide underground to escape the unbearable heat on the surface. When night falls, they reach out from their holes and set up this web to catch airborne plankton.”

“That’s pretty much what I thought, yes,” Gruber said. “So what’s at the other end of the stalk?”

Rigby seemed to be beaming with enthusiasm.

“I was hoping you’d ask that,” he joyfully said and took out a pen and a notepad from somewhere. He drew a horizontal line on the first page. “Here’s the surface.” Then he drew a snaky twin line downwards. “This is the tunnel the plant digs for itself.” He drew several more similar twin lines, each connecting to the others beneath the surface. “This is the network of tunnels the plant uses.” Then he colored one of the tunnels and continued the coloring above ground as well. “Here is one of the plants from your perspective.” Then he did the same for all the tunnels so that the stalks were all connected below the surface.

“So it’s the same plant,” Gruber noted.

“Indeed it is,” Rigby agreed.

“They’re not all the same, are they?”

“Not the same, no. But close.”

“What do you mean?”

“Think about earthworms. If you cut one in two, both ends may continue to live. Are they then the same or not? That’s philosophy.”

Gruber could see where this was going.

“So are you saying that all of those plants are pieces of just one... progenitor?”

“I’m quite sure of that,” Rigby replied. “I tested the genes of several samples and they were all identical. It appears that no matter how small a piece you cut off, it always manages to live if it can feed and escape the heat of the day.”

It was a scary thought. A life-form like that would be extremely difficult to kill.

“So what we have here is the ultimate weed,” Gruber declared.

“That’s a pretty accurate way of putting it,” Rigby agreed. “And indeed these are plants, not er... animals. Their cells have a strong resemblance to those of plants on Earth.”

“What would happen if...” Zelnick suddenly speculated, “if we threw these things at our enemies? I mean, like on the homeworlds of some Hierarchy races? Would these plants be able to take over entire ecosystems?”

Gruber gave this idea some thought, but no matter how he looked at it, he came to the same conclusion.

“That’s biological warfare,” he stated.

Zelnick looked like he had never heard the term before.

“Is that bad?” he innocently asked.

“It’s against the rules of the old alliance,” Gruber explained. “Although sending the ‘Evil Ones’ to the face of Spathiwa was an equal deed, so whoever did that was not above this kind of actions.”

“Why is that forbidden?” Zelnick asked. “I mean, why is it allowed to nuke an entire planet into oblivion, but not to send in new dominant life-forms?”

It was a fair point in Gruber’s opinion. They might need to have a discussion about this in the command council.

“I think the reasons are mainly historical,” Gruber guessed. “Now that I think about it, I don’t actually know why such a line has been drawn. Maybe it’s about using another life-form that has no say in the matter? Or maybe it is just considered unfair?”

Zelnick obviously wasn’t buying it.

“So we can eat our enemies alive if we want to, but we can’t have our dogs eat them alive?”

Gruber was pleased with Zelnick’s way of mind.

“You make a strong case, captain.”

The following silence indicated the need for a new topic.

“We got the warp pod,” Zelnick said. “According to Skeates it’s pretty advanced stuff – a piece of real high-class equipment.”

“That’s why we went down there, right?” Gruber reminded.

“And all the samples you brought from the wreckage,” Zelnick began, “they, together with the 3D scan data, have already allowed us to get a pretty good idea on how a Dreadnought functions. And by ‘us’ I of course mean Skeates again. When we get back to the starbase, Dr. Chu and his pals will have a real blast.”

Gruber hadn’t even considered the possibility that the warp pod and the samples wouldn’t be with them right now, but hearing that they were was somehow calming.

“What’s our plan with the Melnorme?” Gruber asked. “I mean, what purchases are we going to prioritize?”

Zelnick gave an ominous laugh.

“I haven’t quite figured that out yet,” he admitted. “I was hoping we could decide on that now.”

Gruber experienced ambivalent feelings. He was glad to be needed – that Zelnick wanted to have his insight on important matters before making decisions. But on the other hand, it also made the captain look vulnerable and too dependent on his first officer.

“I think the top priority is to confirm everything we have on the Sa-Matra – first and foremost that it even exists. If it does, we need to know what it is exactly and where we can find it. If that goes well, we then need to know how to deal with it. If the Chenjesu were right about everything and we really need a matter-antimatter bomb, we need to ask the Melnorme how to repair the Ultron to get the bomb from the Utwig. That is, unless they know of another bomb we could

get our hands on, or, if they can sell us the technology to build such a bomb ourselves.”

Zelnick seemed to nod on everything.

“That all sounds logical,” he said. “And then there’s the Syreen matter: Where are their ships and how can we convince them to join our cause?”

“There’s that, too,” Gruber agreed, “but I say the Sa-Matra is the top-priority here. If we get our tanks full of fuel and all the information I described, **then** we could ask about the Syreen.”

“And the radiation shielding,” Zelnick reminded. “It would be cool to explore the surface of the rainbow worlds.”

Cool indeed, Gruber thought. One couldn’t even imagine what they might find from a Precursor dump. But on the other hand, they might just as well find nothing. It was a gamble, but something that would have to be done.

“It looks like we have plenty of purchases,” Gruber summed it up. “Some of these we will probably have to save for later. There are still an additional 500 credits coming from the coordinates to Epsilon Draconis.”

Just then the door opened and Belov entered the room. He noticed the captain and immediately took half a step backwards.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt,” he apologized. “I can come back later.”

“Nah, come on in,” Zelnick welcomed him.

“I’ll just take my leave then,” Rigby said, grasping his chance to get out. Gruber had already forgotten that he was there, sitting in the shadows, holding the pot.

Belov took cautious steps towards Gruber’s bed.

“It’s nothing important, sir,” he addressed Gruber. “I just need your opinion on a bet I made with Ahmed.”

Gruber made a gesture indicating that he was all ears.

“What bet?” Zelnick asked.

Belov quickly straightened his posture and replied to the captain in a formal manner.

“Sir, when we were preparing to land on Alpha Pavonis VII, I waged 100 credits that we would need rope down on the surface. Ahmed took that bet.”

Belov started to look uncomfortable as he continued explaining the details.

“While we were on the crash site, I used the rope to do something unnecessary, just for the sake of the bet. Ahmed saw through my attempt and I admitted defeat, there’s no question about that. But then you, first officer, got stuck in that pit and we **would** have needed the rope, although I didn’t have it anymore since I left it at the crash site. Now Ahmed thinks that it doesn’t count since the rope wasn’t actually used for that need, but I think that the bet wasn’t about whether the rope will be used, only if it would be needed.”

Belov gave an apologetic look to Zelnick. Apparently he considered Gruber as *one of the guys*, but the captain was an authority to fear and respect. Gruber found himself pleased with this.

“So, er,” Belov continued, “I was hoping that you could be the judge on this matter, since you were the one who needed the rope.”

Gruber laughed, but only inside his head. On the outside he put a serious face and acted as if he was trying to make a serious judgment.

“I’ll think about it,” was his ultimate verdict.

Belov took the cue, saluted, and hastily left the room, obviously regretting setting foot there in the first place.

“I can see that the work of a first officer carries all kinds of duties,” Zelnick commented.

“Indeed,” Gruber agreed. “I don’t get paid enough.”

“But what do you think?” Zelnick asked. “That’s a tough one.”

“What? The bet?”

“Yes, what **is** your final judgment?”

Once again Gruber couldn't help feeling amused at what the captain clung to.

“I said I'll think about it,” he answered.

CHAPTER 8

TWO DOCTRINES

September 26th 2155, Alpha Apodis, 258.2 : 850.7

“That’s extortion!” Zelnick commented on the prize the Melnorme announced for the information on how to destroy the Sa-Matra.

“Our prices are non-negotiable,” Trade Master Ultramarine stated the undisputed fact.

They had had 64 credits upon arrival, and then they had sold the coordinates of Beta Pegasi for 500 credits and bought fuel to fill their tanks, bringing their credit balance to 504. Then they had bought information. Zelnick and Gruber had agreed that they should first simply ask where the Sa-Matra was. The Trade Master agreed to reveal that piece of information at a steep cost of 350 credits, but they hadn’t made the purchase yet. They wanted to first find out the prices of all Sa-Matra-related pieces of information that they wanted. However, they would have to come up with a strategy to deal with the Sa-Matra by themselves, since they didn’t have 59 000 000 credits.

“Excuse me for just a second,” Zelnick requested and turned to Gruber.

“What now?” he asked the first officer.

“350 credits is a bit too much at this point,” Gruber said. “We should first confirm that it’s even in this quadrant. That information might come cheaper.”

“So I’ll ask the price for a true-or-false question like that,” Zelnick announced his intentions to give Gruber the

chance to stop him if he disagreed, which he didn't do, so Zelnick asked.

"We can tell you whether the Sa-Matra is in this quadrant or not for 10 credits. Do you wish to make that purchase?"

"That's affordable," Zelnick commented to Gruber.

"Yes," he then replied to the Trade Master.

"The Sa-Matra is currently stationed in this quadrant," Trade Master Ultramarine said. *"Your credit balance is now 494."*

Gruber wondered whether there was point in a purchase like this after all. Of course this in a way confirmed that the Sa-Matra was real. Now if they couldn't think of a better way to waste their credits, they could use most of their remaining balance for the actual location.

"There's something I want to confirm," Zelnick said to Gruber. "Something that's been really bugging me for the past few months."

"Is it about the Ur-Quan's intentions?" Gruber guessed.

"How did you know?" Zelnick asked in amazement.

"It's been harassing me as well," Gruber replied. "Even though I hate myself for it, I can't stop thinking that the Ur-Quan might actually be defending the galaxy from the Kohr-Ah."

"Why the self-loathing?" Zelnick asked.

"Because they are the enemy and they must remain so," Gruber explained. "In any case, if that information is affordable, we can purchase it."

Zelnick turned to the trader again.

"Can you confirm if what the Ur-Quan have told us is true?" he asked.

"That depends on what they have told you," the Trade Master replied, once again very skillfully keeping the customer from feeling stupid for asking a stupid question.

“They say that they are not our enemy,” Zelnick explained. “They say that they are actually defending us from a greater evil and that it is in our best interest to remain under a slave shield.”

“I see,” the trader said. “What you’re asking is a matter of opinion and that is something we do not sell. However, what we can sell you is lots of information on what led the Ur-Quan and the Kohr-Ah to the war they are now fighting. Knowing all that, you would then be more qualified to make the judgment for yourself. I will gladly sell that historical data to you for a modest fee of 160 credits.”

In Gruber’s opinion it was too expensive for abstract knowledge. If they made that deal, they couldn’t afford the information on Sa-Matra’s exact location anymore.

“Very well, we shall make the purchase,” Zelnick said to the trader without asking Gruber.

“An excellent choice,” the Trade Master commended Zelnick. “We are initiating transfer of the data now.”

“I’m picking up a request for data transfer,” Katja reported. “Shall I accept it?”

“Go ahead,” Zelnick said.

Gruber took this chance to criticize the decision.

“Captain, I don’t think this is a wise course of action,” he said. “While I am personally very interested to see the data we just bought, I think we should prioritize solid, useful data at the moment.”

Zelnick’s face seemed surprisingly confident.

“I appreciate your advice,” he began, “but I disagree. We can’t defeat our enemy if we don’t know them. I’m sure that knowing the history of the Ur-Quan is much more valuable to us than 160 units of fuel.”

“The transfer is complete,” Katja reported.

“Your credit balance is 334,” the Trade Master said. “What else can we do for you?”

“Oh crap, I miscalculated,” Zelnick agonized and slapped himself in the forehead. “I thought we would still have credits for the location of the Sa-Matra.”

Gruber took a deep breath so he wouldn’t say anything unnecessary. During the thorough inhaling he understood that now would be a good time to remain silent.

“We’ll just get some info on the bomb instead, right?” Zelnick now checked with Gruber.

“Right,” Gruber replied.

Zelnick turned to the trader again.

“I am interested in buying new technology,” he said.

“*What a coincidence,*” the trader joyously replied. “*I am interested in selling new technology.*”

“So, uh,” Zelnick tried to begin, “we’d like to be able to build a matter-antimatter bomb. How much would that cost?”

“*21 000 000 credits,*” the trader replied. “*Do you have additional 20 000 666 credits on another account?*”

Zelnick checked his pockets very thoroughly to make a point.

“No, no I don’t,” he then said as if he had just realized it.

Gruber silently commended the captain on the performance.

“Looks like we won’t be buying technology after all,” Zelnick continued and then changed the topic entirely. “Do you know what this is?”

He showed an image of the wrecked Ultron.

“*Yes, we have lots of information on this subject as well,*” the trader boasted.

“Can you tell us how to fix it?”

“*Absolutely! The cost for that information is 150 credits. Do you wish to make the purchase?*”

A fair deal, Gruber thought, if they could get their hands on a matter-antimatter bomb with 150 credits instead of 21 000 000. Of course they had no guarantees that fixing the

Ultron would get them the bomb, but it seemed like the odds were good.

“Yes,” Zelnick replied. “Please tell us how to fix it.”

“You already know that the device is called the Ultron,” the trader began. “It is a Precursor relic which is inoperable in its current state. It is evident that neither your nor our technology can replicate the necessary spare parts. However, the Precursors built their devices to serve multiple functions and therefore you can use other Precursor artifacts to fix this one. We took the liberty of scanning the data you have on the device and we can conclude that you are able to fix it with three specific relics:

- the Rosy Sphere, which is in the possession of the Druuge at their central trade world in Zeta Persei*
- the Clear Spindle, which is in the possession of the Pkunk at their homeworld in Gamma Krueger*
- and the Aqua Helix, which is in the possession of the Thraddash at their sanctuary in Zeta Draconis.*

If you have these three relics, you will be able to easily repair the Ultron without any further instructions. Your credit balance is now 184. Is there anything else we can do for you?”

Everyone on the bridge checked the star map at the same time. Zeta Draconis was very close, only about 25 units away and Gamma Krueger was at 052.2 : 052.5, just a bit over 150 units from Sol. Zeta Persei on the other hand was on the other edge of the quadrant. When they had first heard of the Druuge, they had decided that they wouldn't make a trip that far without a very good reason, but now they probably had one.

“Should we save the rest of the credits for later?” Zelnick checked with Gruber, who agreed.

“Nothing more today, thank you,” Zelnick politely summed it up with the trader.

"It has been a pleasure dealing with you, Captain Zelnick," the trader concluded on his part the same way all Melnorme always seem to do. *"We look forward to your next visit."*

Then the transmission was cut.

"Mr. Samusenko, set course for Zeta Draconis," Zelnick ordered. "We'll get that Aqua Helix one way or the other."

"Aye-aye, sir," Samusenko replied. "ETA 30 hours."

"Katja, send all the info to the starbase," Zelnick then commanded.

"Affirmative, sir," the communications officer copied.

Zelnick then turned to Gruber.

"Let's go through the data on the Ur-Quan right away," he decided. "Get Rigby and come to the conference room."

The Melnorme had conveniently prepared the package for human file structure, so they didn't have to waste time converting it. They made the data public so everyone on the ship could read it, but Zelnick, Gruber and Rigby were having their own private reading session. In a few hours Gruber felt he had understood the big picture.

Nearly 25 000 years ago there had existed an alliance of star faring races near this region of space. This alliance, called the Sentient Milieu, was very much like the Alliance of Free Stars. Its members co-operated to enrich their cultures, to provide a safe crèche for emerging sentient species and, not least of all, to defend themselves against external hostilities. There were seven notably active members in the Milieu: the Yuli, the Drall, the Mael-Num, the Faz, the Taalo, the Yuptar and, the most famous of them all, the Ur-Quan.

The Ur-Quan evolved on a harsh world outside this region of space. They were solitary predators whose way of life resembled that of praying mantis or polar bear on Earth. They had a very limited set of social behaviors, most of

which dealt with sex. Just like humans, the Ur-Quan had to compete for survival against many physically superior species and thus evolved intelligence and tool use. But unlike humans, they also had to master their fierce territoriality to build a cooperative planetary culture. Just when they had begun exploring their solar system in crude atomic vehicles, they were discovered by the Taalo. After some convincing the Ur-Quan once again conquered the hunting beast within themselves and, instead of ripping the Taalo apart, they joined the Sentient Milieu.

However, the Ur-Quan couldn't completely shut down the predator instincts that they had evolved over the past millennia. For some reason the Taalo were the only race whose presence they could tolerate. The Ur-Quan were therefore the solitary scouts of the Milieu and the Taalo relayed all communications they had with other Milieu species.

After the Ur-Quan had joined, the Sentient Milieu flourished for several thousand years and at its peak it included the membership of a hundred worlds. Thanks to the bold Ur-Quan adventurers, the Milieu had discovered countless ruins and relics of the Precursors. They were well on their way in piecing together the ancient Precursor mystery, but then the darkness fell upon them.

On one routine planetfall, an Ur-Quan scout encountered a small creature, later known as a Dnyarri. Before the Ur-Quan could defend itself, the Dnyarri had used its strong psychic powers to take over the scout's mind. It commanded the Ur-Quan to take the Dnyarri aboard the ship, along with several hundred others of its kind. Then the Ur-Quan scout, having no say in the matter, returned to the capital planet of the Milieu. Within hours, every resident of the planet had fallen under the Dnyarri's command. Within a month, Dnyarri-compelled starships had spread the creatures across the Milieu.

One race in the Milieu was able to fight back. The Taalo were silicon-based life-forms, but other than that bore little resemblance to the Chenjesu. Their physique most resembled that of a rock and they were naturally immune to the Dnyarri's psychic compulsion. The Dnyarri wouldn't permit anyone to exist outside their control, so they ordered the Milieu to attack and destroy the Taalo home planet – the moon of the second planet in Delta Vulpeculae, one of the few milieu worlds located in this region of space.

“Do you remember what the Orz said?” Gruber suddenly interrupted their silent reading marathon. “The Orz mentioned a ‘playground for Taalo and Orz at Delta Vulpeculae’. They also claimed that the Taalo can ‘slide’ and ‘play time jokes’, whatever that means.”

Zelnick and Rigby nodded to acknowledge that they remembered the Orz saying that, but at the same time they relayed their wish to continue reading, so that's what they all did.

The Taalo were indeed wiped out by the Ur-Quan, but according to the Melnorme data, they had managed to create a device which would give other races psychic immunity like their own. Judging by the destruction of the Taalo, it was safe to assume that the device either didn't work or was never put to test. There was no mention of the fate of the device in the data.

With the Taalo gone, there was nothing to stand in the Dnyarri's way. As centuries of the Dnyarri dominion passed, what was once the Sentient Milieu deteriorated and degenerated into a great galactic gulag. Races that didn't serve the Dnyarri with the demanded speed were ruthlessly wiped out from existence, which was the fate of the Yuli and the Drall. The agents of this genocide were always the Ur-Quan, who were the most psychically sensitive race and thus most easily compelled, making them the favored slaves of the Dnyarri.

As years passed, the Dnyarri genetically altered the Ur-Quan to split them into two sub-species. The green Ur-Quan were the scientists, technicians and administrators and also responsible for maintaining the limited infrastructure of the Dnyarri civilization. The black Ur-Quan were the basic laborers and soldiers.

After nearly 2500 years of Dnyarri dominion, a chance discovery by a green Ur-Quan named Kzer-Za finally led to the violent overthrow of the slave empire.

Kzer-Za was a researcher, specializing in repairing the mental damage inflicted by long-term exposure to the Dnyarri's psychic compulsion. During Kzer-Za's lifetime, the Dnyarri had already become lax in their dominance. They occasionally, by accident, permitted their slaves moments of self-direction. Kzer-Za was able to use those moments to figure out that when a slave was just about to die, the Dnyarri had to release their control or they would die themselves. Kzer-Za also realized that the Dnyarri would have to temporarily release control also when the slave was experiencing extreme pain. Kzer-Za then had to find a way to share the findings with all other Ur-Quan.

Kzer-Za waited for the right moment and then injected itself with a dose of acidic poison, sending incredible waves of pain through its body. In the few moments before the acid killed it, Kzer-Za was able to transmit its discovery across the planet and into space as well.

Before the Dnyarri knew what was happening, Ur-Quan everywhere were torturing themselves with anything they could get their talons on. During the few seconds of freedom they sought out the nearest Dnyarri and crushed it.

As the Ur-Quan gained longer and longer periods of freedom, they developed new tools and weapons against the Dnyarri. The most gruesome of these devices was the Excruciator – a device inserted directly into the brain to generate a constant stream of agony. The Dnyarri could not

make the necessary mental connections anymore and were slain by the thousands. The Ur-Quan slave revolt was won.

The Ur-Quan then faced two decisions: First, how to punish the few frightened Dnyarri still alive on their homeworld. Second, how to ensure that the Ur-Quan would never be made slaves again.

The first decision was made swiftly. They wouldn't kill the Dnyarri, as that would be too kind a fate. Instead, the Ur-Quan genetically altered the Dnyarri to strip them from their sentience, bringing them down to the level of dumb animals. The Dnyarri would then be further debased by forcing them to serve the Ur-Quan for all eternity, doing the most demeaning task the Ur-Quan could imagine – acting as translators and making physical contact with other species, who the Ur-Quan now considered revolting and grossly inferior to themselves.

The second decision was not made so easily. The green Ur-Quan, who had started calling themselves the Kzer-Za, wanted to establish the Path of Now and Forever, meaning that all other sentient species would either be made slaves of the Ur-Quan or be forever imprisoned under an impenetrable shield. Another view was introduced by a black Ur-Quan named Kohr-Ah, who proposed the Eternal Doctrine, meaning simply the systematic eradication of all sentient life from the universe, excluding the Ur-Quan.

“These positions seem a bit extreme, don't you think?” Zelnick commented.

“Of course,” Rigby said. “If I understood correctly, at that point they had all been suffering from the non-stop agony of the Excruciators for years to defeat the Dnyarri, not to mention several millennia of slavery. I doubt that even the Ur-Quan could overcome mental scars like that. Most of them were likely mad, and I do mean insane-mad.”

“It appears that that's when the civil war between the green Kzer-Za and the black Kohr-Ah began,” Gruber made

out from the data. “Do you see any mention of how long ago that was?”

Rigby and Zelnick looked through the data.

“I think that was roughly 20 000 years ago,” Rigby reasoned.

“Wow,” Zelnick remarked, “and I thought that the Great War was a long one. So how did the war start?”

“I think the last part of the data covers that,” Gruber assumed and continued reading.

Neither side would submit. Before the others could stop them, the followers of the Eternal Doctrine had started executing their dogma and burned the Yuptar’s homeworld to ashes. When they were about to do the same to the Mael-Num, the followers of the Path of Now and Forever confronted them. That’s when the first shots of the doctrinal conflict were fired.

For decades they were engulfed in a bloody conflict and it seemed likely that they would completely annihilate each other. But then the Kzer-Za made a discovery that changed everything – they found the Sa-Matra, a Precursor battleship. With the Sa-Matra they sliced through the opposing forces in days and the followers of the Eternal Doctrine, who were now calling themselves the Kohr-Ah, were defeated.

However, the Kzer-Za didn’t destroy the Kohr-Ah. They accepted the possibility that they were wrong and that the Kohr-Ah were right. The Kohr-Ah were directed to fly through the stars, travelling against the galactic spin, whereas the Kzer-Za would travel with the galactic spin. When the two forces would meet, they would engage in ritual combat with the Sa-Matra given to the winner.

“So this is the war they are fighting right now,” Zelnick concluded.

“If the Kohr-Ah win, the Kzer-Za will stand aside and let them kill everyone,” Gruber pointed out.

“We can’t let that happen,” Zelnick proclaimed. “Isn’t there any way we could help the... Kzer-Za? Should we start calling the green ones Kzer-Za, by the way?”

Gruber thought about what one of the green Ur-Quan said during their battle three months ago.

“They said pretty clearly that they don’t want our help,” he reminded the captain. “Of course that doesn’t prevent us from attacking the Kohr-Ah. And yes, I think we should call the green ones Kzer-Za from now on.”

“But what happened to the Mael-Num?” Rigby asked.

They all checked the data once more.

“Here it is,” Gruber found and explained to the others.

The Kohr-Ah had arrived to the Mael-Num homeworld slightly before the Kzer-Za. As they were about to start raining death, a plea came from the surface. The Mael-Num asked why the Kohr-Ah were going to kill them. Something about the words obviously struck the Kohr-Ah, as they went to great lengths in explaining their reasoning. As they were doing so, the Kzer-Za arrived and the fighting started. The Mael-Num were then able to escape amidst the confusion.

“Wait a minute,” Zelnick said. “The words the Mael-Num used are quoted here. See? Here. *What you are doing to us is wrong! Why do you do this thing?*”

“How can there be a quote?” Rigby wondered. “What kind of sources do the Melnorme have? This data looks like they were there themselves.”

The following silence indicated that there were no guesses, but also that there was no point in questioning the reliability of the Melnorme’s information.

“This was a sad tale,” Zelnick summed it up. “What did we gain from it?”

“Plenty,” Gruber rushed to point out. “Now we know that the Ur-Quan are weak to psychic manipulation. And we just happen to know some folks that are pretty adept at psychic manipulation, right?”

“The Dnyarri?” Zelnick guessed.

“The Syreen,” Rigby continued the thought correctly.

“Right,” Gruber agreed, “although the Syreen didn’t actually dominate the Ur-Quan in the Great War. I wonder what the difference between them and the Dnyarri is. We should definitely ask them.”

“Yes, let’s fly there right away!” Zelnick eagerly suggested.

“I second that!” Rigby exclaimed.

Gruber rubbed his forehead for a while. He had known that his captain was more interested in intercourse with females than saving all sentient life in the galaxy, but now he had a xenotech like that as well. Not that Gruber himself would mind checking with the Syreen, keeping it strictly business rather than pleasure. Of course after they had taken care of the official matters, they would have a few hours of spare time during which—

Gruber was suddenly able to snap out of it.

“I think there are a few things we need to do in this region first,” he reminded the other two.

“The Aqua Helix, sure,” Zelnick agreed, “but is there something else?”

A memory of something important struck Gruber just then.

“The talking pet!” he remembered.

Zelnick and Rigby weren’t obviously prepared for such an enthusiastic outburst from Gruber and couldn’t tell right away what Gruber was after.

“They are the Dnyarri, right?” Rigby checked.

“Right,” Gruber said, “and do you remember what the Arilou asked us to do?”

“Ah,” Zelnick and Rigby realized in unison.

“The Arilou said that,” Zelnick began to recap, “they witnessed the crash landing of the Dreadnought we examined at Alpha Pavonis and found that the talking pet

had survived, although barely. They then took it to the Umgah, since they themselves lacked the bio-science skills to save the wounded creature. And we were supposed to find out how the creature was doing.”

Just then something struck Gruber, not like a frying pan this time, but instead a bolt of lightning. It was a thought that sent cold shivers down his spine.

“And the Spathi said that—“ Gruber began shouting what he had just realized, but he was so excited that he dropped his portable console to the floor. He reached down for it.

“—They said that—“

thump

He hit his head on the table as he was getting up.

“—The Umgah are acting like zombies!” he finally managed to say as he stood up, rubbing the top of his head.

Gruber noticed that both Zelnick and Rigby had their mouths open.

“The Dnyarri,” Rigby mumbled. “But I understood that the Ur-Quan had dumbed down the Dnyarri to a harmless level.”

“And then the Umgah got their hands on it,” Gruber said plainly.

The Umgah specialized in bio-engineering. If the Ur-Quan could do something to alter the genes of a species, the Umgah could undo it ten-fold.

“We need to recruit the Dnyarri!” Zelnick declared.

Rigby was more cautious.

“But sir, didn’t you pay attention to the story?” he said. “If we meet with the Dnyarri, we would be completely at their mercy. They could take over our minds whenever it would please them.”

“Oh, right,” Zelnick remembered.

“We could try to make Excruciators of our own, though,” Rigby suggested.

Gruber had to cut in there.

“I advise against tinkering with our brains at this point,” he commented. “We could first check the Taalo homeworld at Delta Vulpeculae for the mind shield that may or may not be there. Even if it isn’t, we might learn something in the process. We should also send a scout to the Umgah homeworld to see what’s happening over there before going there with the Vindicator.”

“Right, of course,” Zelnick agreed. “We got a little carried away there.”

“I got the impression,” Rigby began, “that the Dnyarri are incredibly evil and powerful – not something to be toyed with. We need to be **very** careful. And if the Ur-Quan find out that the Dnyarri have returned, if that really is the case...”

Rigby didn’t have to continue the sentence. The Ur-Quan probably still had Excruciators or something similar at hand.

“I believe that using the Dnyarri against the Ur-Quan would work only once,” Gruber speculated.

All three of them tapped their fingers on the table.

“So what now?” Zelnick asked.

“Now,” Gruber began, “we figure out how to steal a Precursor relic from an unknown, hostile alien race called the Thraddash.”

CHAPTER 9

VIOLENT RHINOS

September 27th 2155, Zeta Draconis, 277.6 : 867.3

*Maybe the Thraddash will give us the Aqua Helix if we just ask nicely. Or maybe not. Maybe they will open fire on the first sight of us, which is what a Hierarchy battle thrall **should** do. That course of action would actually make our job a lot easier since we wouldn't have to worry about morality issues. However, if the Thraddash are as weak as the Spathi claim them to be, Captain Zelnick might hesitate to use deadly force.*

There should be no room for mercy or hesitation. We should simply be glad if the enemy is weak and seize the opportunity to strike a blow against the Hierarchy. We were also weak when we joined the Alliance, but we still managed to play a major role in the early days as suppliers of war material. If the Hierarchy would have wiped us out then, when we were unable to properly defend ourselves, the blow would have been devastating to the Alliance even though we didn't have any decent ships.

We should also consider the possibility of recruiting the Thraddash. It is hard to imagine why any race would voluntarily become slaves (like the Mycon did), so they might be willing to join us in our revolt. And even if they wouldn't dare to go that far, there is a chance they would be sympathetic to our cause and at least negotiate for the Aqua Helix.

One final note of not-getting-carried-away: We have no idea what kind of an artifact the Aqua Helix is. What does it

look like? What does it do? Is it even something we can take with us? Would the Thraddash rather destroy it than let it fall into enemy hands? I dare say all these questions will be answered soon.

Zeta Draconis had eight planets. Upon first glance they couldn't detect any ships in the system, but there had been several spoors in hyperspace. If they took care of their business in a reasonable amount of time, they should have no trouble evading unwanted encounters afterwards. However, zero Thraddash presence wasn't exactly what they had wanted, since they didn't know on which planet the Aqua Helix was, if it even was on a planet. They were just told that the device was on a Thraddash shrine in this system and there was no rule against building shrines in space.

"So now what?" Zelnick asked. "Should we start searching all these planets for... what?"

"We can scan a planet's surface for unusual energy readings," Dujardin reminded the captain. "That way we can find any signs of an active civilization."

"Any suggestions on where we start?" Zelnick looked for opinions.

Gruber thought that their best bet was to start from the habitable zone, where life was most often found. Although, now that he checked, there didn't seem to be any planets inside the habitable zone in this system. Maybe they should start from the innermost planet then. He suggested this to the captain and got no objections.

Several hours later, as they were getting near the first planet, they received an ansible message from the starbase. Hayes and his pals had agreed that meeting with the Pkunk was a priority that couldn't wait for the Vindicator's return, so they were preparing to send the Arilou on a diplomatic mission to Gamma Krueger. They had also agreed that since

the Arilou could travel so fast to distant stars, they could make the trip to the Druuge trade world in Zeta Persei as well to negotiate on acquiring the Rosy Sphere. Hayes also wanted to boast that they were now producing Cruisers at a steady rate. Everything seemed to be in order...

...including the large fleet of ships orbiting the first planet. The ship type was unknown to the computer, but Fwiffo was able to verify that they belonged to the Thraddash. Soon after they were seen from the Vindicator, they broke off from orbit and went into formation. Then the Vindicator was hailed on an open frequency and they answered the call.

The alien that was soon projected on the communications screen looked... tough, for a lack of better word. Gruber thought of some old animation videos he had seen a long time ago where the characters were animals acting as humans, dressed in human clothes. If in one of those animation shows there had been a bad guy who was a rhino, it could have looked exactly like what they were seeing on the screen. It was even smoking a cigar.

"So, what's this?" the alien said in a surprised tone. "An unknown alien species? How wonderful, someone new to fight! We are the Thraddash of Culture 19. What have you to say before we begin combat?"

Gruber and Zelnick had agreed that they shouldn't reveal their true intentions right away.

"Slow down a bit, we mean you no harm," Zelnick lied. "Why do you wish to fight us?"

"HARG! HARG! HARG!" the Thraddash laughed. "Stupid, weak alien! We are Famous Ur-Quan Combat Thralls! It is our obligation to destroy all non-Hierarchy forces. Although, even if we weren't Ur-Quan Combat Thralls, we would still attack you. You see, we know well the value of a good fight. Either you win and prove your superiority or you lose and are vanquished. If the

vanquished is lucky, it may survive to learn an important lesson from its defeat. This is the way of the Thraddash! We fight and learn and improve! All other cultural schemes are inferior. This is a proven fact."

Zelnick whispered to Gruber:

"I don't think we can recruit them."

He then continued the conversation with the Thraddash.

"Is this your homeworld here?"

"SNORT! What a laugh!" the Thraddash continued laughing, obviously being offensive on purpose. *"It amazes me that a moron like you is able to fly a starship. Take a good look at that planet. Does it look habitable? NO! Our homeworld orbits the glorious star D— Wait a minute! You puny weaklings! You don't have the muscle so you try to trick us to tell you secrets! Well it won't work! Ha! I caught you in the act. HARG, this is NOT our homeworld, dolt! Here, on the dark continent of Funt, high on a mountain, in an ancient shrine, resting in a special ceremonial cradle, glowing with its magical blue light, is the Aqua Helix – the most revered of all Thraddash relics, the sign of any Culture's authority!"*

If there ever was the time to be a smooth talker, now was it, Gruber thought. Idiots like these could blurt out highly valuable information without even realizing it. Captain Zelnick would just have to find the right words.

"Aqua Helix, eh?" Zelnick humored the alien. "Sounds impressive. What does it do?"

"Ho-ho, so you have some brain at least," the Thraddash commended, sounding awfully surprised. *"The Aqua Helix has been at the heart of all our Cultures, except for Culture 9 and they don't really count. It guides us, motivates us and rewards us. We know the Aqua Helix is great because all our previous cultures have known this to be true! If it wasn't anything special, WHY would we spend so much blood and passion over the little thing? It would be a*

colossal waste! An absurd travesty! HARG! Actually, this is what Culture 9 said during their two-week period of dominance before Culture 10 wiped them out, thus proving Culture 9 wrong and once again proving that our cultural scheme is superior."

To Gruber it sounded like the Thraddash were just like that voodoo shop keeper in New Orleans who tried to sell a priceless Precursor artifact for 5 dollars, only this was the other way around.

"You talk about different cultures," Zelnick began. "What do you mean by that?"

"I am 100 % certain that was the least stupid thing that has ever come out of your mouth, puny alien," the Thraddash declared. "I will gladly tell you how our superior culture works, even though talk is usually for sissies, weaklings like those of Culture 14."

The alien took a thorough puff from its cigar.

"For ten thousand years, we Thraddash have fought and died, learned and improved. Then, along came Culture 14 which claimed that all this – this perfect method – was wrong! They claimed that each time we violently transformed to a new Culture, we inevitably blasted ourselves back at least five hundred years in development. Hmph! Some people just cannot accept the cost of progress. Indeed, the FOOLISHNESS of Culture 14's peaceful whining was revealed when they were conquered by Culture 15 after only a ten year reign. And did the change to Culture 15 set us back five hundred years? NO!"

The Thraddash hit its fist on the table.

"Two, maybe three hundred years, tops."

"Those idiots," Zelnick pretended to agree with the Thraddash. "Say, could we go take a look at this magnificent Aqua Helix?"

The Thraddash seemed to contemplate the request.

“Okay, go ahead,” it then replied. “We can fight after you have enlightened yourself at the sheer magnitude and wonderfulness of the— WAIT A MINUTE! You were planning on stealing it, weren’t you!”

“Er...” Zelnick searched for words. “No we weren’t?”

This lie didn’t seem to work.

“You are just like the vile Culture 16!” the Thraddash furiously accused.

Then the screen went blank as they cut the transmission. The Thraddash fleet then took a tight formation, which in Gruber’s opinion looked offensive.*

“Prepare for battle,” Zelnick announced, although their fleet was already in battle formation and everyone was ready for everything.

“We’ll test their defenses,” Trent said and ordered two nukes to be launched at random targets in the enemy fleet. Wu did the same and soon four nukes were seen speeding away from the Cruisers.

“There are 15 enemy ships in total,” Dujardin reported. “They are all of the same type. Their size is close to that of the Stinger. So far their speed seems moderate.”

As if on cue, right after she had said that, all the enemy ships broke formation by storming into different directions with amazing speed and acceleration. The nukes couldn’t turn fast enough to keep track of their targets and therefore they missed entirely. As a safety precaution, when that happens, the nukes are automatically deactivated to avoid unwanted collateral damage. They drifted harmlessly towards the planet and would probably burn in the atmosphere, if the planet had one.

“McNeil, fire away if you get the chance,” Zelnick ordered the weapons officer.

* Meaning that they were preparing for an attack, not that the formation offended Gruber in some indescribable way.

“Yes sir,” McNeil responded. “I’m ready for action!”

The enemy was still pretty far away and outside the weapon range of everything except the Cruiser’s nukes.

“Sir, take a look at this,” Dujardin then requested and showed a view from the telescope on the main screen. “This is the area from where the enemy fleet just stormed away.”

The area was filled with flames of some sort. They were arranged in several straight lines, probably 15 of them.

“So when the enemy uses that booster or whatever,” Gruber speculated, “they leave a trail of this flame behind.”

“Judging from the temperature of the flames,” Iwasaki, the hull officer began, “I’d say we should steer clear of them. I fear they could burn through our shielding.”

“Okay, that shouldn’t be too difficult,” Zelnick acknowledged the information.

Just then four of the enemy ships used their boosters again and this time they were all storming right towards the Vindicator.

“They’re fast!” Dujardin reported. “Ten seconds until flyby.”

Trent had already reacted and fired another nuke at the enemy’s path.

“McNeil?” Zelnick checked.

“I got it,” McNeil replied, took aim and fired.

The shot from the Hellbore Cannon hit the first enemy ship directly, wiping it out from existence. Trent’s nuke was also targeted at that ship so the nuke exploded where the ship had been. The shockwave pushed two of the incoming ships off course, but the last one now had a clear shot at the Vindicator.

“Brace for impact,” Zelnick called out as the enemy ship fired at them.

thump *clang* *bong*

The sound of hits echoed throughout the hull, but that was all. There was no notable shock or anything.

“Iwasaki?” Zelnick demanded a damage report.

“Nothing, sir,” Iwasaki replied. “Those shots cannot penetrate our shields.”

Just then the enemy ship that had fired at them used its booster again and curved away, leaving the trail of fire right in front of the Vindicator. They had about one second to dodge it, which obviously wasn’t enough and they flew right through the fire and flames.

For a split-second the bridge bathed in the yellowish light of the flames and then they had gotten through.

“Iwasaki?” Zelnick demanded a new report.

“We’re good,” Iwasaki reported, “but our hull took damage. I advise against doing that again.”

The rest of the enemy fleet was attacking the escorts of the Vindicator. It seemed that the Orz couldn’t use their boarding troops against small maneuverable ships like these, but their turrets were fast enough to keep up with their targets. The Zoq-Fot-Pik Stingers were engaging four of the enemies one on one and seemed to be doing a fine job at it. Trent and Wu had no trouble fending off the enemy as their point-defense lasers were enough to take out the weak projectiles shot by the enemy. They could also occasionally hit the enemies directly with the lasers when they got too close. For some reason the enemy mostly ignored the Star Runner, which probably suited Fwiffo just fine.

There were bright flashes every now and then – whenever a Thraddash ship was destroyed. Dujardin counted down from 15 to keep track with how many enemies were remaining. The battle was going smoothly without losses or surprises until she reached 4.

“A new ship just appeared from behind the planet,” Dujardin reported. “It’s one of those red probes again!”

The probe went straight to the nearest ship, which conveniently belonged to the Thraddash, and attacked it with its lightning weapon.

“Sir, the Thraddash are hailing us again,” Katja reported.

“They’re fighting a losing battle,” Zelnick said. “They will be wiped out in a few minutes if this goes on. Let’s hear what they have to say, maybe they want to surrender.”

The presumably same Thraddash individual was soon displayed on the screen again.

“So it’s you!” it shouted in an angry and accusing tone. *“You’re the one behind this red probe menace! I should’ve known that it takes cowards like you to send robot emissaries of death to do the dirty work. Ha! Now that we’ve caught you red-handed, you can answer what it is about Epsilon Draconis that interests you so much. We’ve seen your probes study the first planet. You’ve obviously put some jammers down there since our scanners malfunction when we go near the planet. SPEAK, ALIEN! REVEAL THE TRUTH! CONFESS YOUR CRIMES!”*

“Okay,” Zelnick agreed, “but will you put down your arms if I confess?”

“HARG! HARG! HARG!” the Thraddash laughed again. *“You act all high and mighty after your successful surprise attack, but you wimps will soon run out of luck. Even if you managed to get out of this system alive, you would still be a poor second to the Ur-Quan in terms of power. No! We will not surrender to the likes of you!”*

Meanwhile a nuke shot from the Seraph destroyed the probe. The Thraddash ship it was attacking was already inoperative, but in one piece.

“Bwahaha, you incompetent fools shot down one of your own!” the Thraddash snickered.

“Captain, there’s a new fleet of ships emerging from the other side of the planet,” Dujardin reported.

“What kind? How many?” Zelnick demanded.

“So far they’re all the same as the previous Thraddash ships. There’s more and more of them coming into view. There’s already 13 of them – now 14.”

Zelnick reported this to the other captains, although most of them had already noticed. There were now only three ships of the original Thraddash fleet left and one of them was disabled. Two of the Zoq-Fot-Pik Stingers intercepted the last functional enemies and the rest of the Vindicator's fleet turned to face the new enemy squadron.

"So you finally noticed our main fleet," the Thraddash who was still linked commented. *"Let's see how quickly you are destroyed when the tables are turned."*

Zelnick then cut the transmission.

"Is the whole fleet visible yet?" he asked Dujardin.

"I think so," she replied. "There are 22 of them. All are of the same ship type as the ones we just destroyed."

"Let's do it like last time then," Zelnick declared.

After about 15 minutes the Alliance of Free Stars was still without casualties, but the Thraddash fleet was down to four, including the previously disabled ship. The Vindicator's Point-Defense laser system was tested against the weak enemy projectiles – just to avoid the unpleasant noise that came from getting hit.

One blast from the Hellbore cannon reduced the number of enemies by one more. Three Zoq-Fot-Pik Stingers chased one enemy ship in a planned manner right to the hands of the fourth Stinger, or more accurately, right into its tongue-lance, which is an inadvisable place to be for an enemy. The other Orz Nemesis then landed three hits in succession to the last functional enemy and the battlefield fell silent.

"What shall we do with that disabled ship?" Zelnick asked Gruber.

This was a new situation to Gruber. If the enemy wasn't able to fight back, they were usually simply executed, since there rarely was a chance to take prisoners. But now, with the Vindicator's advanced lifeform analysis tools, they might have a chance to interrogate the enemy.

"I think we should try to take one of them alive," he suggested.

"Alive?" Zelnick said in surprise. "How would we pull off something like that?"

Gruber figured that the enemy ships were so small that they could fit one inside the Vindicator's storage bay. Then they could just cut open the hull and use electrical tazers on everyone inside or, if tazers wouldn't work, threaten the captives at gun point to enter the cages in the containment area. And if the enemy still wouldn't cooperate, they could simply be shot. He proposed this to the captain.

"How brutal," Zelnick commented. "Wouldn't it be simpler to take just one?"

Indeed it would be, Gruber thought. First they would have to find out how many crew members does the disabled ship have on board. They would have use for only one captive, so they could kill the rest.

"We will take only one alive," he replied to Zelnick.

In Gruber's opinion Zelnick's face showed a sign of hesitation, but he still nodded in agreement.

"Even though the enemy hasn't been much of a threat so far," Gruber began, "we should still consider ourselves being on a tight schedule here. In my opinion we have three tasks ahead and we should start working on them simultaneously. The first priority is of course securing the Aqua Helix. We should send a landing team down to the surface as soon as possible. Our secondary objective should be scavenging all the debris from the battle, which we should also start doing right away. I'd say that getting the live captive is less important, but there should be nothing stopping us from starting work on that right now."

Zelnick nodded at everything Gruber suggested.

"That sounds convincing," he said. "Let's do that."

The captain then addressed the radar operator.

"Danielle, can you locate the Aqua Helix?"

“Let’s see now,” she replied. “The Thraddash said that it’s on a mountain on a dark continent. There are three continents visible from here and one of them is indeed darker than the others. I’ll scan the mountain tops on that continent for unusual energy sources... There.”

She put a view of the scan results on the main screen. There was one highlighted area.

“I dare say that’s our target,” she concluded.

“Impressive,” Zelnick commented. “Gruber, brief the landing team and get them down there right away. This time you’re not going, since you’ll oversee the capture operation. Iwasaki, take care of the scavenging. Samusenko, get that disabled ship into our storage bay.”

“Yes sir,” all three men said in unison.

A few hours later the shuttle had taken off and a damaged Thraddash ship was inside the Vindicator’s storage module. Gruber and Skeates were inspecting the enemy craft, which wasn’t noticeably bigger than the shuttle. Several crew members were ready to shoot at anything that came out of the ship. The ship hadn’t responded to their transmissions anymore and they still had no idea how many Thraddash individuals were inside. There were no visible windows in the craft through which they could see inside.

Gruber and Skeates agreed that they would drill a small hole into one panel and pump some sleeping gas into the ship from the medical bay’s supplies. According to Dr. Mehul, the gas should have some effect on all carbon based life-forms that breathe. And since the Thraddash were seen smoking a cigar, they probably breathed.

If everything went according to their plan, they would cut open what they thought was a door to the ship after injecting the gas and would find any number of unconscious Thraddash inside. They would then drag one to a cage in the containment area and execute the rest.

Skeates tried the drill on the ship's hull and it worked as it should. The Thraddash technology seemed primitive, somewhat similar to what humans had when they had first joined the alliance.

The drilling made a terrible noise, which of course gave everyone inside a heads up that something bad was about to happen. When the hole in the hull was ready, Gruber inserted a thin hose and turned on the gas pump. They then waited for 15 minutes, during which they heard a few strange sounds from inside the ship.

"I think it's safe to open the door now," Gruber said after all sounds had stopped. He then signaled the team with the laser cutters to start their work.

Gruber stepped back as two men worked on the cutters and four men with tazers took positions near the door. Four more crewmen were a bit further away, ready to shoot at the doorway with lethal weapons in case of an emergency. They were also prepared to open the cargo hold doors if things got completely out of hand.

"Almost there," the man with the laser reported after a few minutes, "get ready!"

As soon as he was finished, the door panel fell to the floor and the cutter team dashed away from the ship. Gruber grasped his tazer tightly as he watched the sleeping gas pour out of the ship. He half-expected a swarm of armored Thraddash soldiers to storm out and start shooting, but luckily that didn't happen.

After the air had cleared, the tazer team stepped inside the ship while Gruber waited outside. Soon the leader of the team reported that there were two bodies, either dead or unconscious. Following Gruber's orders, they dragged both of the bodies outside the ship and tied their arm and leg equivalents. Gruber then checked, to the best of his knowledge, whether the aliens were alive. He quickly

concluded that, based on the moaning, both of them were alive. He reported the situation to the captain.

"I thought you were going to take only one," Zelnick commented.

"That's still the plan," Gruber replied. "With your permission we'll kill the other one now."

Zelnick had a troubled look on his face.

"This doesn't feel right," he hesitated. "Shooting unconscious captives seems like something that bad guys do."

Gruber had expected Zelnick's hesitation. It's easy to push a button on the bridge and destroy a ship full of enemy individuals, but when you have one of them right in front of you, it feels more personal. Pulling the trigger gets significantly easier after doing it for the first time, though.

"There are no good guys and bad guys in a war," Gruber educated the captain. "There's just your side and the opposing side, both doing what it takes to win. And if they don't, they lose and die."

Zelnick processed this point of view for a while.

"Well, if you think it can't be helped," he finally agreed.

"That's what I think," Gruber replied.

Zelnick sighed.

"You have my permission to kill the other one."

"Roger that."

Gruber then tucked the communicator back into his pocket and took a rifle from one of the crewmen. He walked to the unconscious Thraddash body closest to him, pointed the rifle into the back of its head and pulled the trigger.

CHAPTER 10

INTERROGATION

September 28th 2155, Zeta Draconis, 277.6 : 867.3

The bio-lab of the Vindicator was accessed from the shuttle hangar, meaning that they had to drag the unconscious body of the Thraddash for about 200 meters to reach its cage. As with all heavy things, it gets more and more heavy along the way. Somewhere between the crew module and the Hellbore Cannon module they gave up trying to haul the body with their bare hands and got one of the loaders to do it in the pneumatic exoskeleton.

The cage prepared for the Thraddash was in a room that obviously wasn't optimized for interrogation. However, if you wanted to do all sorts of tests with the captive, like poke it with long sticks, there were advanced tools for that.

After the body was finally shoved into the cage, Gruber, Rigby and Vargas stayed in the room to discuss strategy while waiting for the creature to wake up. Someone else had taken Rigby's place in the landing team for the current mission.

"There should be only one interrogator at a time," Vargas suggested. "According to human psychology, the best results are achieved when the interrogation is done on equal terms."

"But it's in a cage," Rigby pointed out.

"Well yes, there's that," Vargas agreed, "but we mustn't add any unnecessary threatening elements, such as several interrogators or someone constantly pointing a gun at the prisoner."

"In human psychology," Gruber reminded.

“Of course,” Vargas said, “but this is an excellent opportunity to study alien psychology.”

Knowing Vargas’ field of interest, it was no surprise to Gruber how excited Vargas was.

“So who will be the one asking questions?” Rigby asked.

“I am,” Gruber said. “I know best what we want to achieve and basic interrogation was a part of the Star Control officer’s training program.”

“Right,” Vargas agreed. “We’ll observe from the next room.”

Just then the Thraddash moaned and grunted.

“Looks like it’s waking up,” Vargas observed and signaled Rigby that they should exit the room.

Soon Gruber was alone, looking at the slumberous alien behind bars.

“Check one two.”

“Check three four.”

He heard Rigby’s and Vargas’ voices in his earphones. He looked at the camera in the room and gave a thumbs up to indicate that he heard the checks. He then placed a chair in front of the cage and sat down to wait for the alien to come to its senses.

The Thraddash tried to stand up but failed, assuming it was bipedal, and stayed on all fours.

“What is this place?” was its first question.

“You are a prisoner,” Gruber explained. “This is your cell.”

The alien growled and grasped one of the bars in the cage. It pulled itself into a standing position and tried to shake the bars loose. Gruber sat motionless, knowing that no amount of brute force would break the bars.

Soon the Thraddash also realized that what it was doing was pointless. It then took a few steps back and rammed the bars. It tried that for a few times, but it was no use. The cage

remained undamaged and for some reason Gruber found himself enjoying the show.

“You puny weaklings,” the Thraddash said while taking a break from trying to trash the place. “Only inferior aliens like you resort to such cowardly actions.”

“Your fleet is destroyed,” Gruber informed the alien. “Were you able to observe the battle after your ship was disabled?”

The Thraddash sat down and calmed a little.

“No,” it responded. “*SNORT* But I bet your casualties were severe!”

There was an expression on the Thraddash’s face that would in human culture be considered a sign of arrogant hostility.

“There were no casualties on our part,” Gruber politely answered.

“I suggest you humor it, just a little,” Vargas suggested. *“I’m sure it will be a lot more responsive after that.”*

Gruber considered it for a while and then agreed.

“Although,” he continued, “our forward armor needs repairs.”

“HARG! HARG! HARG!” the Thraddash laughed very loudly. “I knew our Reeunk afterburners were too much for you. You do have some backbone in combat though, I give you that, but still nowhere near as much as the Ur-Quan.”

“How did you come across the Ur-Quan?” Gruber asked.

The Thraddash took a cigar from somewhere, put it in its mouth and somehow lit it.

“They enslaved us, dolt, over fifty years ago,” it replied. “When they first came into our space, we attacked them with gusto. We zipped in to fire our Mark 6 blasters and then were supposed to zip back out to prepare for another attack run. SNORT!”

The creature took a long puff from its cigar.

“Unfortunately, before we could zip out, our ships were either blasted to smithereens by the Ur-Quan’s fusion bolts or were picked apart by the swarms of Ur-Quan fighter-vessels.”

Gruber tried to imagine that battle, but didn’t understand one thing:

“Why didn’t you escape with your afterburners?” he asked. “It looked to me like you could outrun anything with your ships.”

“Indeed we can, now,” the Thraddash proudly said. “But back then our ships weren’t yet equipped with the afterburner. It was about 10 years ago that Maintenance Engineer Reeunk invented the afterburner effect when he accidentally stuck his cigar in the aft fuel valve of the ship he was working on. WHABOOM!”

The alien used its front legs to help describe what happened.

“The ship took off like a farg out of hell, and Reeunk was fried to a crisp. Yes, we remember Reeunk with much fondness. We have of course refined the device over the years and equipped our entire fleet with it.”

“So the Ur-Quan defeated you and you chose the role of fighting slaves, am I right?” Gruber checked.

“There was no choice,” the Thraddash said. “Only a fool would choose fallow slavery.”

This was its first successful insult, Gruber thought, although it wasn’t intentional. The Thraddash probably didn’t know that humans had made that choice.

“What happened after you were enslaved?” Gruber asked.

“I will gladly tell you,” the Thraddash answered, “because that was when the glorious Culture 19 was formed. Immediately after the enslavement we realized that a change was in order – a new Culture had to be established. So, of course, we began a thermo-nuclear exchange to decide who

would lead this new Culture. We were all quite disappointed when the Ur-Quan in orbit above our homeworld launched waves of fighters that intercepted all our missiles. They explained that slaves were not permitted to engage in such destructive conflicts. So my people, being superior, introduced a super-lethal poison into our opponents' water and air, thus ending the conflict, HARG! HARG! HARG!"

The alien took another long puff from its cigar, blew a smoke ring and continued.

"The Ur-Quan were not particularly happy about this resolution, and killed all of our leaders. Under other circumstances that would have started a larger inter-Thraddash war, but the Ur-Quan appointed new leaders, apparently chosen at random, and explained that further disobedience would result in the destruction of our species."

The Thraddash then stumped its cigar into the floor and concluded the story:

"Frustrating, huh?"

Gruber had to ask the obvious:

"If you have been an Ur-Quan battle thrall for 50 years already, why didn't you participate in the Great War between the Alliance of Free Stars and the Ur-Quan Hierarchy?"

This question apparently struck a nerve.

"We wanted to," the Thraddash replied and grasped air with its fist, "Oh, how we wanted to! We were the first battle thralls the Ur-Quan enslaved in this part of the galaxy, so we thought we had priority. But instead, the Ur-Quan thought we were too weak to hold our own in the upcoming battles, so they left us here to 'guard the flank'."

The alien then stood up and walked to the side of its cage.

"If only we had been *WHIMPER* stronger and less... *SNARF* troublesome. You see, another reason the Ur-Quan wouldn't take us with them was because we kept

picking fights with the new battle slaves like the Umgah bobbies or those religious idiots, the Ilwrath.”

Gruber agreed with the Ur-Quan.

“I’d like to know how they evolved such a hostile culture,” Vargas commented.

Gruber saw no harm in asking about the Thraddash history, since at least this individual seemed rather proud of it.

“Have you always been this hostile?” he asked. “Was the Culture – 14 if I remember correctly – the only exception?”

First the Thraddash was just surprised, but then it burst into laughter.

“Hostility? HARG! HARG! HARG! We are not hostile. Hostility is unwarranted aggression! *SNORT* If you want to know about hostility, let me tell you about Culture 12. They were SO hostile that while they were on their way to their first great battle, Jugkah the battlemaster stepped on Gnusko the tactician’s foot, causing him great pain. The annoyed Gnusko turned on Jugkah and sliced his body in half! This miffed Jugkah’s troops who took it upon themselves to murder Gnusko and his elite soldiers.”

The Thraddash was obviously enjoying telling the story, judging by the wide smirk on its face.

“The REAL trouble started when now-dead Jugkah’s master sergeants Muuhd and Pudt started arguing about how to kill Gnusko – simple crucifixion, or the slower ‘Lead Tattoo’ technique. The argument was resolved when Muuhd and his five hundred troops were slaughtered by Pudt and his gang.”

There was a pause in the story as the Thraddash lit up another cigar.

“This probably all would have gone down in history as a great day of learning for Culture 12, were it not for the surprise arrival of Culture 12’s original enemy, the Yajag and his cronies. They wiped out Culture 12’s army, thus

beginning the long and glorious Culture 13. Indeed the following Culture 14 is a black sheep among our cultures in history, but they also taught us a valuable lesson and reinforced our resolve. But as you see, Culture 12 was hostile, unlike us in the glorious Culture 19 who merely want to kill you.”

Gruber appreciated the honesty of the Thraddash.

“That’s brutal,” he remarked, meaning it as a compliment.

This made the interrogation subject laugh again.

“Brutal? You don’t know the meaning of brutal until you’ve heard the story of Culture 3!”

“This is great stuff,” Vargas commented. *“Keep it talking.”*

“How brutal WAS Culture 3 you ask?” the Thraddash continued. “Culture 3 was SO brutal that they maimed, tortured, enslaved and in general brutalized THEMSELVES! You see, Culture 2 had made a virtue of stoic resistance to pain, stubborn fortitude, that sort of thing. So when Culture 3 came around, they had a problem: How were they going to impress everyone as being even tougher?”

The subject leaned to the bars between itself and Gruber.

“Their answer? They would arrive at a battle, stand on a tall hill where everyone could see them and chop off one of their own limbs! Then they’d wave it around, screaming and shaking it at their enemies.”

“Did it work?” Gruber asked, sincerely interested.

“It did!” the Thraddash proudly answered. “It scared the hell out of their opponents! They ran like crazy! You could tell who was a real war hero back then by how few arms or legs they had left.”

The subject stumped its cigar into the bars.

“War parades were quite different too,” it continued. “Instead of sturdy old warriors walking slowly past the reviewing stands, they tended to roll, and at a good clip, too.

To you, an inferior alien, this may seem bluntly stupid – the product of a sick, primitive society, eh?”

“Yes it does,” Gruber said.

“*SNORT* You couldn’t be more right!” the Thraddash agreed. “Culture 3 was, as you can well understand, only the third Thraddash Culture. It was far from the tempered perfection you see before yourselves right now.”

Gruber nodded in agreement as there was some sense in the first part of what the alien was saying.

“I have a question for you cowards,” the Thraddash suddenly declared.

Gruber made no actions towards shooting the alien before it could ask the question, so it asked:

“Why do your probes always fly in the direction of Vega after they are done with their misdeeds, hmm? Do you have a secret base there?... Ha! That’s it, I got you! You have a probe factory somewhere near Vega and use it to send endless waves of destruction upon your foes!”

The expression on the alien’s face changed to a lot less hostile one.

“How admirable!” it concluded.

Gruber recalled all pieces of information they had on the source of the probes. The Zoq-Fot-Pik had calculated a line on which the source must be, the Arilou said that they come from a world with no surface and now they knew that they come from the direction of Vega. Gruber checked the star map. In addition to Vega, the only star in that direction on the line was Beta Corvi, which was right next to Vega. Now they knew where to look if they wanted to get rid of the probe menace. He was so thankful to the Traddash that he decided to let it think that the probes were indeed human design.

“You seem to have it all figured out,” Gruber commended the captive.

"I have also figured out what you did to my co-pilot, Fkank," the Thraddash continued. "Seeing how vile creatures you are after all, you must have executed him. That's what I would've done."

Gruber kept a pause during which he hoped that Vargas would give him advice. He was just about to tell the truth when he heard Vargas' voice:

"Tell the truth."

So he told the truth.

"Serves him right for getting captured," the Thraddash remarked.

"So your buddy was Fkank," Gruber began. "Do you have a name?"

The captive leaned towards the bars again.

"I do," it replied. "And I dare say you do too."

"I do," Gruber answered.

It seemed like neither of them were about to reveal their names any time soon. Gruber suddenly had a dangerous feeling of bonding with the captive. That was the one big mistake you could make with a prisoner of war. He felt he had to get out of the room so he made his way for the door. As he had just opened the door, the Thraddash spoke:

"If you're going to kill me, just kill me," it said.

Gruber looked back at him from the open doorway.

"Not yet," he said.

Suddenly the Thraddash threw itself towards the bars again.

"THIEF!" it shouted and tried to force itself through the bars.

Gruber was puzzled for a moment, but then looked behind him and noticed Belov, Witherspoon, Ahmed and Cuvelier carrying a large blue object which had the shape of a helix. The Aqua Helix, no doubt, he thought and closed the door.

“I see your mission was a success too,” he commented to the landing crew.

They set the helix down on the floor.

“Yes it was,” Witherspoon said.

“A walk in the park,” Belov summed it up.

“There were no guards, no defense systems, and there was a landing site right next to the shrine where we found this thing,” Witherspoon explained.

Gruber inspected the artifact. Just like most Precursor relics, it looked like a piece of modern art with no specific purpose. Rigby then came out from the room where he had observed the interrogation and joined the crew around the Aqua Helix.

“So this is supposed to fix the Ultron,” he skeptically stated. “I don’t see how.”

“You’re neither a Precursor prodigy nor a technician,” Witherspoon laid out the facts.

“That is true,” Gruber said. “We should get Skeates and Captain Zelnick to take a look at this.”

While Rigby and Vargas continued interrogating the Thraddash, Gruber got briefed on what the landing team exactly found down on the surface.

The Aqua Helix had indeed been inside a shrine. It was in a large cylinder room where the walls were filled with scripts that bore resemblance to old Egyptian hieroglyphs. The landing team had recorded a complete 3D model of the room, so they would all have plenty of time to try to make sense of the scribblings. Of course it would be a lot quicker to have their Thraddash captive to work as a translator.

Gruber relayed the information to Vargas via the communicator.

“I don’t think we can get much out of the captive right now,” Vargas replied. *“It still hasn’t gotten over the shock*

of realizing that we took their treasured relic. Whatever the device is capable of, the Thraddash seem to value it highly."

Gruber was with Zelnick and Skeates as they inspected both the Aqua Helix and the Ultron wreckage.

"I don't see how these are supposed to be related," Zelnick said after a while. "I was hoping there would have been a slot or something in the Ultron where we could have just inserted the Aqua Helix."

Skeates felt the smooth surface of the Aqua Helix.

"What did the Melnorme say about these, exactly?" Skeates asked.

Gruber displayed a recording of the conversation from his communicator.

"To be exact," Gruber pointed out, "they said that we need to have all three artifacts and **then** fixing the Ultron will be easy."

"I really don't see how any other artifact could make this one work with that one," Skeates said, pointing at the helix and the Ultron.

All three of them soon concluded that there was nothing more to gain from looking at the artifacts, so Skeates returned to his duties and Zelnick stayed behind to converse with Gruber.

"The scavenging is finished," he said. "We did everything we came here to do. Now what?"

Gruber hadn't had the chance to tell the captain about the probes' origins so now he did.

"Vega?" Zelnick repeated and checked the star map. "That's pretty far out."

"267 units," Gruber said. "The trip would take us approximately 11 days one way."

"It's good to know where to go if dealing with the probe menace becomes a priority," Zelnick began, "but I say we shouldn't take that long a detour at this point. I think we

should prioritize checking out the Umgah and the possible Dnyarri.”

Gruber agreed with the captain. Even though the probes needed to be dealt with eventually, right now was not the time. They had more pressing matters at hand.

“We just need to figure out how to do that safely,” Gruber reminded the captain. “If we go to Umgah space carelessly, we might fall under the Dnyarri’s mind control ourselves.”

Zelnick seemed to do some serious thinking.

“Do you have any ideas?” he asked.

“Not right now,” Gruber admitted. “But we have a long way ahead of us and plenty of time to think. The Umgah’s home star, Beta Orionis, is actually about as far as Vega – 282 units to be exact.”

“And we even have the Thraddash captive to entertain us on the way,” Zelnick said and took out his communicator.

“Mr. Samusenko?” he said to the device and got a reply. “Take us to Beta Orionis.”

“No, we need to stop at Epsilon Draconis first,” Gruber reminded the captain.

“Oh, right, the rainbow world,” Zelnick remembered. “Mr. Samusenko, make that Epsilon Draconis.”

CHAPTER 11

ANCIENT EVIL

October 10th 2155, Beta Orionis, 197.8 : 596.8

October 2nd 2155: Captain Zelnick came up with a cunning plan on how to safely check what the deal is with the Umgah: We will use the captured Thraddash ship. Skeates assured me that the intact ship we captured can be adequately fixed for flight, thanks to the vast supply of spare parts we salvaged from all the wreckage. The only problem is the pilot. We will have to convince our captive – probably at gun point – to do our bidding.

And now we have confirmed that there is a rainbow world at Epsilon Draconis. Not that there had been any doubts about it. I'm looking forward to our next meeting with the Melnorme.

October 3rd 2155: Vargas has been successful with his interrogation techniques. According to the Thraddash prisoner, the Ur-Quan base of operations is in the Crateris constellation. Now we need to send scouts into that area to find out if that's where the Sa-Matra is.

The captive was also surprisingly willing to help us execute Zelnick's plan. Of course the only option given to it was death.

October 8th 2155: The Thraddash ship looks horrible, but according to Skeates it is airtight and will fly. He was also kind enough to install a circuit breaker, which will disable the entire ship with a push of a button from the Vindicator. I

still think this is not enough. We must prepare for the chance that the ship will return with a Dnyarri on board. And we also need to make sure that the captive will want to return.

October 9th 2155: Thanks to the simple yet brilliant idea of Captain Trent, we have installed one of the nuclear warheads of Tobermoon into the Thraddash ship. The triggers have been given to all three human captains: Zelnick, Trent and Wu. If there is any reason to believe that there is a Dnyarri on board the Thraddash ship as it returns, anyone of the captains can detonate the bomb. I find it difficult to believe that the Dnyarri could control all three of them from such a distance without even knowing they are there. Also, if the ship is not back in 12 hours, the bomb will be detonated. Just to make sure, we strapped the prisoner into the ship so it can't bail out.

Now we are all set. There is equipment for recording everything on board the Thraddash ship, which Skeates has named Torch. (probably because of the flaming afterburner) The captive knows what it's supposed to do and we can get the recordings even without its consent.

The ship is away. Thanks to the afterburner, it should reach the first planet, the Umgah homeworld, in five hours.

One final note: Ever since we arrived in this system, every crew member with esper potential has reported feeling... bad. According to Dr. Mehul there's nothing physically wrong with them, but they all themselves describe it as a "terrible, sickening feeling".*

* After spending some time with the Syreen, screening for psychic abilities was made part of the health checks of all Star Control recruits. So far humanity has found no use for this information, but maybe someday...

Eleven hours had passed since the Thraddash ship left and there was still no sign of it returning. The few Umgah ships they saw had completely ignored the Vindicator's fleet in the outskirts of the system.

The condition of the crew members with esper potential had gotten worse. None of them could stand anymore, and they had all been taken to the infirmary for hydration since they had vomited all over the place. Even though Gruber didn't feel ill, he did have an urge to get out of the system. If nothing would happen in the next hour, they would remote-detonate the nuke in the Thraddash ship and fly straight to Sol. Gruber found himself hoping that the ship wouldn't return.

Suddenly Katja reported that they were receiving an ansible transmission from the starbase. They always sent a report to the starbase whenever they entered a new system. It was rare for the starbase to call them, especially since it was only 11 hours since their last chat. And what's more, the starbase requested a video feed, which was an ominous sign in Gruber's opinion.

The link was soon established and it didn't surprise anyone anymore that the speaker for the starbase was Lydia. There was something different about her appearance, but Gruber couldn't put his finger on what it was exactly.

"Hello," Lydia greeted Zelnick with a friendly smile. *"I'm sorry to trouble you, but can I speak to First Officer Gruber, please?"*

So she had changed her way of speech again, Gruber thought. Maybe it was for the best.

Zelnick agreed to the request and Gruber stepped into the limelight.

"What's the matter?" he asked Lydia.

"We need your communicator data," Lydia got straight to the point. *"Specifically, we need your personal log entries. This relates to the Groombridge incident."*

This was something Gruber had not expected.

“Huh? I already gave Matthewson my communicator.”

“Yes, but we need the data from your new one.”

This didn’t make any sense to Gruber, although it probably did to Lydia.

“But I got the new one after Groombridge,” Gruber tried to reason. “What do you need that for?”

Lydia seemed impatient.

“Oh trust me, that’s a loooooooooong story. Let’s just say that we need to confirm something. Can you send the data over now?”

Gruber reluctantly took his communicator from his pocket and attached its contents into the ansible feed.

“There, did you get it?” he checked.

Lydia looked away from the camera and asked something from someone else in the room. Then she turned back to face Gruber.

“Yes, thanks!”

She didn’t say anything for a while after that, but continued to look intensely at the screen with a smile on her face, clearly expecting for Gruber to say something.

“Well, what do you think?” she finally asked since Gruber couldn’t think of anything to say.

“Er...” Gruber hesitated for a while. “Good job?”

These were obviously not the words Lydia was waiting for.

“No, not that! Oh, you are so clueless!” she said in frustration. She then pointed both her forefingers towards her head. *“This!”*

Gruber wasn’t sure what she was pointing at. Her ears? Her eyes? Her forehead? This was probably the part where he had to notice what was different about her appearance.

As Gruber took his time replying, Zelnick suddenly whispered to him:

“Her hair, man... She used to have a long pony tail.”

Did she, Gruber thought. He hadn't paid any attention to Lydia's hair, so he decided to trust the captain on this.

"It looks nice," he hastily answered to Lydia without having time to think whether her hair really looked nice.

He then observed that Lydia now wore her hair down and it was cut to shoulder length.

"Don't get killed," Lydia said and closed the link, obviously not satisfied with Gruber's reply.

"Smooth," Zelnick commented.

Gruber thought for a while. The hair really did suit her.

"Captain, I can see the Thraddash ship now," Dujardin suddenly reported.

"Hell, it's about time," Zelnick remarked. "Katja, can you contact it?"

"I'm sending an invitation, but so far the ship hasn't responded," the communications officer reported.

"Actually, it's not even flying this way," Dujardin noticed and put the radar on the main screen.

Indeed if the Thraddash ship would keep its current heading, it would miss the Vindicator's fleet entirely. Its course was currently about 30 degrees off. Zelnick then hit the switch that should disable the Thraddash ship.

"Samusenko, intercept it here," Zelnick ordered and showed a location on the map. "Trent, Wu, are you seeing this?" he then checked with the Cruiser captains.

"Yes and I've got my finger on the trigger," Wu replied.

"Same here," Trent said.

"Katja, the recordings?" Zelnick asked for the data package from which they could see what had happened to the ship.

"We need to get closer for the transfer to work," she explained. "The range of the transmitter is about 10 000 kilometers."

Trent pointed out that the Tobermoon and the Seraph should stay further back, just to be safe.

Hundreds of thousands of kilometers later they were ready to receive the data package. Just like all the Umgah ships they had seen, the Thraddash ship was completely ignoring them – or maybe that was because it was disabled.

“Samusenko, keep our distance until we have analyzed the recordings,” Zelnick commanded.

“Aye aye, sir,” the navigation officer responded and set the velocity of the Vindicator to match that of the Thraddash ship.

“We’ve got the data,” Katja reported.

“Great, let’s go through it quickly,” Zelnick said.

Some fifteen minutes later they were certain that there wasn’t a Dnyarri, or anything else unwanted, on board the Thraddash ship, unless one considered the Thraddash captive itself unwanted. But on the other hand they were now also certain that there was a Dnyarri on the Umgah homeworld.

All the Umgah ships in orbit of their homeworld had ignored the Thraddash ship as well. As was instructed, the Thraddash had hailed the Umgah homeworld on approach. After an unusually long wait, the call was answered – not by the Umgah though. It was the talking pet, the Dnyarri. It simply instructed the Thraddash to leave, but since the Thraddash didn’t comply fast enough, it somehow convincingly commanded the Thraddash to go home. The Thraddash had then immediately turned the ship around and taken off towards the edge of the system with full speed.

“That’s pretty scary,” Zelnick commented.

“I think your plan worked really well, captain,” Gruber summed it up.

“Let’s get out prisoner back,” Zelnick said. “Grab the ship into our storage bay again.”

About an hour later Gruber was in the storage module, waiting for their prisoner to be unchained from the cockpit of its ship. Zelnick had expressed his concerns about having a primed nuclear warhead inside the ship, so the first thing they had done was obviously to disarm the nuke.

“Sir, the creature is mumbling to itself,” Belov then reported from the temporary doorway into the ship.

Gruber stepped into the ship to check it out and soon heard the Thraddash captive’s voice. It was constantly repeating one sentence:

“We are the polite and courteous Thraddash.”

Gruber signaled Belov to continue uncoupling the captive from the ship, but at the same time tying it up again for the walk to its cage.

“Can you hear me?” Gruber asked the Thraddash.

To everyone’s surprise, it didn’t ignore this question.

“Hello and good day,” it greeted Gruber. “How are you today? We are just fine, thank you. Are your mates and offspring well? How simply marvelous!”

The captive wasn’t really looking at Gruber, even though it was looking in the direction of Gruber’s eyes. This made Gruber feel uneasy.

“What is the number of the current Thraddash Culture?” Gruber asked to check if the captive had any sense left.

“We are the polite and courteous Thraddash,” it replied.

Gruber stepped back.

“Take it to its cage,” he said to Belov and the others.

When Belov reported that the Thraddash was successfully put behind bars, Gruber was already in the conference room with Zelnick and Rigby. All the captains in the fleet were virtually present in the meeting.

“We know there is a Dnyarri at the Umgah homeworld,” Gruber began, “and we need its cooperation in our fight against both Ur-Quan sub-species. However, since

approaching the Dnyarri is too dangerous, we cannot negotiate with it. We have learned that the Taalo created a device against the Dnyarri's psychic manipulation, but we don't know if the device is still intact, or if it ever even worked. In any case, we can most likely find it at the moon of the second planet in Delta Vulpeculae – which used to be the Taalo homeworld. We also know that the Orz like to, uh, hang out on that planet, so they might be able to tell us more about the Taalo and their... mind shield. Maybe captains *Heavy* and *Wet* could shed some light on the subject?"

Gruber motioned that the two Orz captains were expected to speak now.

"Orz will tell again," one of the two Orz holograms said. *"*Silly* campers like *word game*. It is ok for the Orz. For too much fun Orz play at Taalo *playground*. Taalo *slide* well and play *time jokes*."*

*"Campers want *heavy* things,"* the other Orz hologram interrupted or continued. *"Taalo things are so *heavy* it is *colorful*. For better *enjoyment* Orz bring things to alliance *house*. Do you want?"*

Gruber wished that Lydia was there to translate. Now it was he who had to guess what the Orz meant. He explained to Zelnick that he thought that the Orz were offering to bring some device, hopefully the Taalo mind shield, to the starbase.

"Yes," Zelnick answered to the Orz.

"Another topic we have on the agenda is the location of the Sa-Matra," Gruber declared. "We now know that the Ur-Quan war is centered in the Crateris constellation. We also know that the Ur-Quan battle platform, the Sa-Matra, is stationed somewhere in this quadrant. Everything we do will be in vain if we cannot destroy the Sa-Matra and therefore locating it will be our top priority. Obviously we can't search the entire constellation with the Vindicator. We need some more subtle scouting methods. All ideas are welcome."

Gruber sat down to indicate that anyone could speak. *"We can do that,"* one of the Zoq-Fot-Pik holograms, or, more precisely, Dip from the Voyager said.

"Yeah, we're really good at that!" the Pik from the Seeker boasted. *"Our deep space scouts have gotten quite adept at avoiding Ur-Quan patrols."*

"The furthest coordinates our scouts have ever been coreward are Grefnuf-zork, Ah-ho, Bada-bing," the Pik from the Tracker said.

"That's 525.0 : 622.9 in your coordinate system," the Zoq from the Tracker translated. *"Although the Crateris constellation is even further, we can notify our leaders that we should send scouts there."*

To Gruber it sounded like a good idea. The Zoq-Fot-Pik sphere of influence was well inside Ur-Quan territory, so they had the best probability to pull off a mission like that.

"Should we send someone there right away?" Dip asked.

"Pick me! Pick me!" the Pik from the Traveler eagerly exclaimed.

"Sure," Zelnick agreed, "I can see you won't have trouble finding volunteers."

CHAPTER 12

TIME JOKES

October 28th 2155, Sol, 175.2 : 145.0

452 hyperspace units and 18 days later the Vindicator was back at the starbase. The Traveler had separated from the Vindicator's fleet and was supposed to reach the Zoq-Fot-Pik homeworld at Alpha Tucanae at about the same time the Vindicator reached Sol. Both of the Orz ships had stayed with the fleet instead of flying to their supposed homeworld, but there was every reason to believe that the word had already reached every Orz in the galaxy. There had been no changes in the condition of their Thraddash captive, who was still only repeating the same polite phrases.

Once again a lot had happened at the starbase while they were gone. The Arilou had returned from their diplomatic mission to Gamma Krueger and they had brought with them a delegation of Pkunk emissaries. Another one of the Arilou ships had left for Zeta Persei earlier to negotiate on the Rosy Sphere. They were expected to return in a week or so.

The Pkunk, who had made themselves at home at the starbase, were avian creatures with a slim resemblance to the Yehat. They seemed extremely cheerful, but also as if they were living in a world of their own. Gruber wanted to have a long chat with them as soon as possible.

The Ur-Quan warp pod was handed to the Arilou. They seemed so surprised to receive it that it was almost insulting. They said that they couldn't construct the portal spawner at the starbase and would have to take the warp pod to their

home to do that. They estimated that the process would take about a week.

All the data and samples from the Dreadnought wreckage were handed to Dr. Chu, who seemed overjoyed with the present. He would probably spend the next few days entirely in his lab, sleeping only by accident.

The starbase's supply of base metals had now exceeded their production capacity. Only their lack of more exotic resources prevented them from building Cruisers one after the other. The contents of the Vindicator's storage bay were once again a huge help, even though the Thraddash ships were relatively primitive and the materials weren't too valuable for the most part. Still, everyone knew that if you were going to recycle something, it should be metal, since the process of refining minerals into metals demanded a huge amount of energy.

There were two new Cruisers ready now – Isadora and Anna 53.

“Anna 53?” Gruber asked, since it was a rather unusual name for a starship.

“I know, I know,” Hayes blushed. “There were circumstances and... I let Lydia come up with the name for that ship. Apparently Anna was a friend of hers. I don't know what the number is though. A few Unzervaltians on the other hand insisted that we name **something** Isadora to honor Captain Burton.”

“That makes sense,” Gruber agreed.

“By the way, Lydia has been eager to see you,” Hayes said. “She said she and Matthewson had made some kind of a breakthrough, although she refused to tell me what it was. Apparently she wanted to hear your opinion on it first.”

“I'll go see her after we're done,” Gruber decided. “So who are the unlucky sons of bitches that will have to captain Anna 53 and Isadora?”

Hayes handed Gruber two files.

“Luka Sharov for Isadora and Famke van Rijn for Anna 53,” he answered.

Gruber knew Sharov pretty well, but van Rijn was familiar to him only by name.

“I know Sharov will make a fine captain,” he commented. “I’ll have to look into van Rijn, since I don’t know—“

He had to stop there, because he wasn’t sure whether Famke was a man’s or a woman’s name. He checked the file.

“—her background,” he continued. “Don’t get me wrong though, I do trust your judgement.”

“I’m sure you do,” Hayes replied. “There’s only one more thing I need to tell you before you go.”

“Only one?” Gruber said to say something.

“I wasn’t sure whether to bring this up or not, but just yesterday an Orz ship came here, saying they had some, er... ‘colorful toys’ for us. They hauled a big rock into the middle of the hangar and then their ship took off. Now, I’m not sure if that was some arrangement you made, but in any case I had the rock moved to the storage room. Does that mean anything to you?”

Gruber was amused at the mental image of the scene.

“It might,” he replied. “We are trying to find a shield against psychic attacks. I’ll tell you all the details later, but I think we should put the rock through every test we got.”

Gruber called Lydia and agreed to meet her at Matthewson’s lab. As he stepped into the elevator, he found himself thinking of all the wild theories and revelations Lydia would no doubt present him.

What the hell would she need the data from my new communicator for? How could that be related to what happened in Groombridge? I haven’t even written anything new about that. A long story, eh? Is she going to analyze my

writing to find out if I did indeed write the mysterious Precursor part?

He looked at the mirror in the back wall of the elevator. There was a restless old man there.

What are you so afraid of? This is Precursor research and she's done a splendid job at it so far. This might result in uncovering the secrets of the most advanced race that ever existed. Why aren't you thrilled?

He gave an apologetic look to his reflection.

*It's **that**, isn't it? You're worried that her exceptional intellect makes others question her origins.*

The elevator reached level 9 and Gruber had to stop thinking in the second person.

If she was suspected of being an Androsynth, she would no doubt have fewer friends afterwards.

He saw the familiar faint glow from Matthewson's computer screen amidst the darkness of his lab.

No, that's certainly true, but that's not what worries me.

Then he suddenly realized it.

I see... I'm afraid that she actually has figured it all out. I'm worried that revealing all Precursor secrets opens a Pandora's Box which will ultimately consume us all.

He hoped to see another mirror so he could tell himself to get real. Unfortunately he didn't see one, so he had no choice but to enter the room where Lydia and Matthewson were.

Matthewson looked like he hadn't moved at all from his spot since Gruber's last visit. Soon he might become one with his chair. Lydia, on the other hand, was looking very pretty. The new hairstyle really suited her. As she saw Gruber, she stood up and, to Gruber's surprise, ran to embrace him.

<<I missed you,>> she said while hugging him.
<<Strange, huh?>>

Gruber was at a loss for words. He hadn't realized that Lydia thought this highly of him. He had of course missed Lydia too, but he didn't dare to say it aloud. He took a few seconds to think of something else to say instead.

<<Nice hair,>> he finally managed.

Lydia didn't seem to mind his reply. She looked rather pleased with her hair.

<<My roommate agreed to cut my hair after I told her how pretty her hair was,>> she explained.

"Ahem?" Matthewson coughed to get their attention. "We had some important matters to discuss as well, didn't we?"

"Right, sorry," Lydia cheerfully replied in English and laid out a big piece of paper on the table. There were lots of notes on it and also some sort of images that were drawn by hand.

"The data you sent us from your new communicator confirmed it," Matthewson began. "We now know what the mysterious log entries in your communicator's files are."

"And it's really funny how we figured that out," Lydia laughed. "You see, we had analyzed the entries for days without getting any further. We just knew that they were in Precursor language, but couldn't decipher anything from them. Then I gave up and *giggle* started reading your other, unrelated log entries."

Gruber felt a strange sense of pressure. Although he had planned on publishing some of his log, he would have left the most personal stuff out.

"But then I saw it!" Lydia enthusiastically continued. "I compared your entire readable log to the cryptic part and saw it."

Lydia was pointing at one drawing where several arrows intersected on the paper.

"It's the same thing!" she declared while tapping at the paper wildly. "The Precursor language entries in the log are

translations from all your other entries! Even that weird one you had written in German.”

Gruber knew all too well what specific entry Lydia was referring to, but to his surprise it didn’t bother him. The whole theory was much too bothersome on its own.

“But if it’s just everything I wrote,” he began, “where did you come up with the rainbow world coordinates?”

“You wrote them!” she claimed. “Right here.”

She showed from her own console a log entry dating June 21st 2155. Gruber recognized it as something he wrote.

“That was after Groombridge,” he pointed out. “I just laid out all the coordinates you had found from the Groombridge log.”

“It’s the same!” Lydia insisted. “That’s where I found the coordinates in the Groombridge Log.”

“You’re not making any sense,” Gruber replied. “You couldn’t have found the coordinates from this entry, since I hadn’t yet written it when you found them.”

Lydia gave a murderous look to Gruber.

“Trust me, I didn’t believe it at first,” she angrily said. “That’s why I wanted to confirm it before telling you. That’s why I requested the data from your new communicator as well.”

Gruber couldn’t keep up with her anymore and made no effort to conceal it.

“Oh for Five-Three-Five’s sake,” she cried and tapped on the keyboard a few times.

She then showed an image from the computer to Gruber. There were two trend lines which clearly correlated with each other. The other line ended before the other.

“See here? This is what you’ve written in human language,” she said while pointing at the other line. She then switched lines. “This is the Precursor stuff.”

Gruber then noticed that there were time units on the horizontal axis. The first date was June 2nd 2155 and the last

date was August 13th 2156. The shorter line ended at October 10th 2155.

“But June 2nd was the day we entered Groombridge,” Gruber tried.

Lydia was about to hit something or someone with something or someone, but Matthewson stopped her.

“The bottom line is this,” Matthewson explained. “Everything you have written after the Groombridge incident matches with the Precursor-text that somehow appeared into your communicator at that time. We have verified everything you have written up to October 10th, which was when you sent us the data.”

Gruber had to sit down, since the shit was getting deep.

“How can you say that they match?” he asked.

“I can’t, to be honest,” Matthewson answered. “But she can.”

Gruber looked at Lydia, who now seemed apologetic.

“I don’t know how,” she said. “I just see it. It’s like with the Orz. I just understand.”

Gruber took a few deep breaths to put all the weird pieces together.

“So what you’re telling me is...” he began, “You found the rainbow world coordinates from the Precursor-text, which was a translation of me writing to say that you had found the coordinates from the Precursor-text. Am I right?”

Matthewson and Lydia nodded.

“And the Precursor-texts contain everything I have written since, including everything in the new communicator?”

Matthewson and Lydia nodded again.

“So whatever I’m going to write there next, you’re telling me that it’s already written there in Precursor language?”

Once more the two nodded.

“So what am I going to write next?” Gruber asked, challenging the theory.

“It doesn’t work like that,” Lydia explained. “I can’t translate the Precursor language.”

Gruber was at the same time relieved and disappointed.

“So what’s up with that date, August 13th 2156?” he asked, pointing at the rightmost part of the time axis in the image.

Lydia shrugged her shoulders to show that she hadn’t got a clue.

“Beats me,” Matthewson said. “Maybe that’s when you die.”

If words could hurt, these really did.

Lydia kicked Matthewson in the leg, painfully, judging by the sound he made.

“OR,” she began, “maybe that’s when you just stop writing your log. Maybe that’s when all this is over and we get to live happily ever after.”

“But...” Gruber tried to reason. “Why? Why would something like this be in my log?”

Lydia put her hand on Gruber’s shoulder.

“Maybe it’s a key,” she suggested.

“The Rosetta Stone,” Matthewson said while rubbing the kicked part of his leg. “Maybe it’s a modern age Rosetta Stone.”

Matthewson hadn’t obviously presented this theory to Lydia earlier.

“What’s that?” she asked.

“It’s an ancient Earth artifact,” Gruber explained. “Before the first year in our current calendar, a single text was inscribed on the Rosetta Stone’s surface in three different languages. The stone was then lost and two of the languages were forgotten over the ages. The stone was found again 2000 years later and it then provided a key to understanding some other ancient texts written in the two forgotten languages.”

Lydia seemed impressed.

“Wow,” she remarked. “I thought history was just about wars and inventions.”

“So the big question remains,” Gruber began. “Assuming that your theory is correct, what do you – we – plan to do about it?”

Matthewson started typing something, obviously not interested in this topic.

“Well,” Lydia hesitated, “shouldn’t we, like, tell somebody?”

“Try explaining all this to Dr. Chu,” Gruber suggested. “I’m sure you’ll find him a lot more difficult audience than me.”

Lydia was clearly thinking about something.

“Hmm, maybe I’ll talk to him tomorrow,” she said.

“Oh, wait,” Gruber remembered. “He will probably be busy for the next few days, so don’t expect too much of him.”

Gruber and Lydia didn’t say anything in a while so Matthewson decided that it was time to end the meeting.

“If that was all, you can leave,” he suggested.

“That was all,” Lydia replied and got up.

Gruber followed her lead and they both left the room. They walked together to the elevator without saying anything and waited for it silently. When they had stepped in and the elevator doors had closed, Lydia finally broke the silence:

<<I don’t like him,>> she put it simply, which amused Gruber.

<<I don’t blame you,>> he replied.

Gruber then noticed that the elevator wasn’t moving, most likely because neither of them had set the dial.

<<I’m going to have the evening off,>> Gruber decided.
<<What do you want to do?>>

Lydia made a pose which clearly indicated that she was pretending to be thinking about it hard.

<<Hmm,>> she theatrically muttered.

Then she set the dial to level 5.

<<We will sit down at the cafeteria and you will bring me apple juice,>> she decided. <<Then we'll talk.>>

It sounded like a good idea to Gruber so he agreed. Soon the elevator reached its destination and the two of them stepped into the central hall of level 5. This was the level where all the entertainment was, in addition to the cafeteria. At first there had been only virtual reality equipment, but very soon a group of active crewmen had renovated one room into a small ball game court. There were goals whose size one could adjust and one could also draw any kind of lines on the floor. Some Europeans used the court for floorball, but most of the time the game of choice was football.

As Gruber and Lydia passed the ball game court, Gruber looked inside and noticed that a game of football was just about to begin. They were playing three on three. Gruber noted that the teams were once again South America versus Europe, which always had only one possible outcome. Then one of the players from team Europe noticed Gruber and called out to him.

“Hey chief, care to give us a hand here?”

He was Josef Hasenkamp, one of Gruber's countrymen, a skilled construction worker and an enthusiastic football player. It was common courtesy to speak English when other people were around.

Gruber had often played with Josef and the others and now he found himself eager to join. He just assumed that Lydia wouldn't be interested.

“Oh, Lydia, hi, I didn't see you there,” Josef continued. “Why don't you both join us? Lydia can play with the South Americans.”

It came as a surprise to Gruber how familiar Josef sounded with Lydia. It surprised him even more that Lydia was eager to hop in.

<<Come on, let's play,>> she said to Gruber while pulling his arm.

Soon Gruber found himself standing next to Josef and the Danielsen brothers from the Scandinavian Union, while on the opposing side were Fernandez, Rodriguez, Lydia and that one Venezuelan guy whose name Gruber never remembered.

"Basic rules," Josef checked with everyone. "Three touches and scoring only straight from a pass, okay?"

There were no objections as this rule set was found to be most effective under these conditions.

"30 minutes, here we go," Josef declared and passed the ball to Gruber, indicating the start of the game.

Half an hour later it was once again time to proclaim team South America superior. Regardless of the defeat and the aching feeling in his legs, Gruber felt better than he had felt in ages. This was living. And he was very surprised at how well Lydia had played. This obviously wasn't her first time. With her young and quick feet she could easily outmaneuver Gruber – and Josef too, for that matter.

They all shook hands at the middle of the court.

"Good game," Maar Danielsen commented. "You got much stronger reinforcements though."

"Damn those reinforcements," Gruber joked.

After that the players began to scatter, but Josef and Lydia stayed with Gruber.

"Same time tomorrow?" Josef invited both of them.

Lydia wistfully looked at Gruber.

"If I can still walk tomorrow," Gruber replied and rubbed his thighs.

As he limped towards the door, he noticed how sweaty he was. He really went all out in the game. He felt proud.

<<I need a shower,>> he told Lydia. <<Let's meet at the cafeteria in 10 minutes, ok?>>

Lydia smelled Gruber and made a funny face.

<<A-OK,>> she replied while holding her nose and giving him a thumbs up.

There's nothing like shower and good food after sports, he thought as he was dressing up afterwards. *There's no good food here, though. But wait, wasn't I supposed to be feeling down?*

He tried hard to remember why he was supposed to be in a bad mood, although he understood the stupidity in it.

Was it something about our mission? No. Was it about Lydia? No. Was it about football? No, I'm sure football was the thing that made me feel good.

Even as he entered the cafeteria, he still hadn't remembered. He absent-mindedly sat down at a random table and immediately afterwards realized that he hadn't checked if Lydia was already there. He hastily looked around and to his relief she wasn't. He got up, filled a cup with water and drank it all with one go. He filled the cup again and sat back down at the randomly chosen table.

Lydia arrived after about a minute or two. Her hair was wet, so she had obviously taken a shower as well. She waved at Gruber from the door, made her way to the table and sat down.

<<Could I have some apple juice, please?>> she politely asked.

Gruber nodded, stood up, fetched a cup, filled it with apple juice and brought it to Lydia, who took a sip with joy.

<<Mmm, there was nothing like this at my old home,>> she said, probably referring to the Androsynth homeworld.

<<The Spathi also like apple juice,>> Gruber started up a conversation.

<<I don't see why anyone wouldn't,>> Lydia remarked.

She then looked down at her mug and suddenly seemed sad.

<<There's something I've wanted to talk to you about for some time now,>> she ominously began.

Gruber put down his own mug and gave Lydia all his attention.

<<You can tell me anything,>> he promised.

Lydia fiddled her mug with her fingers.

<<The thing is,>> she said, <<sometimes I feel like I'm not welcome here. It was the same aboard the Vindicator. Most of the time everyone's really nice to me, but I get these strange looks from time to time.>>

<<What kind of looks?>> Gruber asked.

Lydia looked at him in the eyes.

<<Hatred,>> she replied. <<Looks of pure hatred. Not that I wouldn't have experience – I got that a lot back in my old home, but I always figured it was because I was different. I was one of the... normals... and some of the smart ones really hated us.>>

Gruber noticed tears starting to flow down her cheeks.

<<But now I still get that look, and I don't understand why,>> she said with a trembling voice. <<It's terrible! There's nobody around who's my age and every day I sense that some people... wish me dead!>>

Then she broke down and started crying, covering her face with her hands. It made Gruber feel helpless. For a second he desperately tried to think of what to do, but then decided to quickly move next to Lydia and put his hand on her shoulder.

<<What is it about me?>> she sobbed. <<All I've ever wanted was to be normal – to be like everyone else!>>

Gruber figured that now was the time to say something comforting.

<<Nobody is normal,>> he assured. <<Everyone is unique and exceptional in their own way. Your way of being exceptional has been extremely helpful and we're all grateful for your efforts.>>

Lydia dove face first into Gruber's chest and cried loudly. Gruber was unsure whether it was a sign of his comforting working or not. He looked around at the few people in the cafeteria who were now looking back at him and Lydia. He then realized that he was holding both his hands in the air, not knowing where put them. He figured he should probably pat Lydia gently on the back, but he didn't dare to do it just yet.

<<I'm afraid that...>> Lydia tried, but the words failed her at first.

That was the cue that gave Gruber the courage to put his hands down – the other one on Lydia's head and the other one on her back.

<<What really scares me is...>> Lydia managed to begin, <<What if I'm actually one of those 'Androsynth' that everyone so deeply despises?>>

Gruber understood very well. Even the fact that the Androsynth hadn't been seen in decades and that they had all probably suffered a horrible fate wasn't enough for some people. These people, who were mostly pleasant and good folk you'd meet any day anywhere, had some deep grudge against the Androsynth. It wasn't logical, it wasn't understandable – they just figured that the only good Androsynth was a dead one. The legacy of Jason MacBride's Godly Men hadn't entirely vanished, even though a century had passed.

<<Everyone doesn't despise the Androsynth,>> Gruber explained while stroking Lydia's hair. <<The Androsynth were all unique individuals, just like you and me. Most

people have always understood that, but there has also always been a loud minority that discriminates against those who are some way different from the others.>>

<<But you just said that everybody is different,>> Lydia remarked.

Gruber felt a drop of sweat on his forehead. If there ever was a time to make one's point understood the right way, now was it.

<<That's the thing,>> he replied. <<Say you have five people in a room. Four of them are white and one of them is black. Who is different from the others?>>

<<Well *duh* the black one, obviously,>> Lydia replied, taking Gruber's story as a riddle.

Gruber was already improvising, but now he had to improvise an actual riddle into the example.

<<And if three of those four white individuals are women and the black one is also a woman, who is the different one then?>>

<<So there's two that are different,>> Lydia followed the story.

<<And if the black one and two white ones, er... like ice cream, but the two others don't... Now who's different?>>

Lydia raised her head and looked at Gruber.

<<Now it's all mixed,>> she answered while managing to make a smile.

<<So you see,>> Gruber tried to conclude, <<it's all a matter of perspective. One can always find a reason to accuse someone of being different if one wants to. That's just how bullying works.>>

Gruber felt good while realizing that the story he had come up with on the fly made sense in the end. Lydia wiped her eyes on her sleeve.

<<So what's your thing?>> she asked, her voice still a bit shaky. <<What makes you different from the others?>>

Gruber tried to think of something snappy, but didn't succeed. He tried to think of something lame, but even that failed. As seconds passed, he started to panic. He had to come up with something, anything!

<<That's okay,>> Lydia saved him, <<you don't have to force yourself to think of something. After all, I know some things about you that are probably just your own thing.>>

This made Gruber a bit worried, but he didn't push the matter.

<<So,>> Lydia said to begin a new topic. <<What do you think of the Groombridge log now?>>

A sense of remembering a lost memory hit Gruber.

That was it. That's why I was supposed to be in a bad mood. I have every reason to believe that I die on a set date next year. And not just that – everything I write in my log from now on is actually pre-defined. The universe tends to get a lot less interesting when you believe that your actions don't make a difference.

<<Your theory results in a time paradox,>> he commented.

Lydia looked like she'd heard that one before.

<<There is no such thing,>> she insisted.

<<So what should I write next?>> Gruber asked. <<It seems so pointless now.>>

There was a hint of grin on Lydia's face.

<<It looks like there is only one thing you can write, but we don't know what that is,>> she said.

Gruber felt uncomfortable talking about the matter.

<<Have you met the Pkunk already?>> he asked to change the subject.

<<The children of the cosmic light,>> Lydia specified. <<They are a fun bunch. You'll like them.>>

Gruber nodded and felt that the topic was already exhausted. He checked the time.

<<It's about time to get some shut-eye,>> he decided.
<<How's your quarters?>>

<<It's okay, I guess,>> Lydia replied. <<My roommate snores a bit, but she's nice. Her name's Famke. Do you know her?>>

The coincidence amused Gruber.

<<You might have the room all for yourself soon,>> he speculated. <<But no, I don't really know her. I'd like to, though, so maybe you can introduce her to me.>>

<<She's going to be a captain, right?>> Lydia checked.

<<Indeed she is,>> Gruber truthfully answered. <<And she's going to be the captain of the ship you named.>>