

REAPERS ⊕ OF THE  
DAMNED

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Dedicated To  
Peace, Justice, And the Pursuit of  
Happiness

# CHAPTER ONE

Gemcore mining space station V-323 was an impressive sight, a white, rectangular figure sitting majestically on top an immensely massive hulk of black. The small structure produced the only light in the dark void of space. Upon first glance the glowing form appeared ugly. Its' contours had no beauty, no elegance rather its edges were sharp and jagged. You couldn't blame Gemcore architects, after all its purpose was to function as a mining space station. Mining itself was a rugged and harsh undertaking and it required facilities that could handle the beating it delivered. It's no wonder why they didn't bother with beauty and only concentrated on making a sturdy structure.

The designers also knew a vulnerable space station sitting atop massive amounts of precious ore in the desolate reaches of space would be a tempting target for space faring bandits. That's why they had also built in weaponry so in case of an attack the space station could hold off the intruders until their employer could send company issued security forces to the rescue.

The primary weapon of the space station was the quasar cannon. This was a most devastating and gigantic weapon. It occupied two floors of the station, the lower level stored the quasar cannon head, and the top level was where the quasar cannon capsule resided. When fired it emitted a distortion wave that shattered anything in its path. The cannon head was the actual weapon it was responsible for emitting the wave. However it lacked any targeting abilities. This task was left to the capsule, which could rotate in any direction conceivable.

Of course the cannon could only be used on long-range targets firing too close could damage the station. For this task the station was equipped with laser turrets, positioned strategically on its perimeter. These deadly pieces of equipment could pierce a fiery hole into any hostile entity that got too close to the space station. And if the enemy survived the outer defenses, the corridors and other critical areas of the station were equipped with projectile guns. These guns were controlled by an artificial intelligence known as SENTINEX (SENTient INtruder EXicutioner) programmed only to, differentiate between friend and foe, and then to eliminate foe.



Rie Yamada, chief security officer, turned off the communication link connecting him to the quasar cannon head operator. Yamada had just relayed the orders he was given, from his superiors, to the lower level operator. The order was to ready the cannon so that the freighter craft leaving for earth could be protected. Rie wasn't authorized to activate the cannon himself. But he could inform the operator, who had clearance, to activate the cannon.

The freighter craft needed to be protected because of the valuable cargo it was carrying, which was mined and refined precious metals. The metals ranged from copper and iron to gold, silver, and platinum. The route from the mining space station to earth was strewn with bandits waiting to pounce.

These interstellar pirates loved to take advantage of the isolation space travel offered. However they always approached Gemcore Freighter craft with caution. There had been more than one occasion when the mining space station fired their deadly cannon upon the bandit's stealth crafts.

After receiving the orders the operator went into action. He first radioed the operator above him. "Prepare for loading sequence."

"Acknowledged." came the response. He then tapped some keys on his console, which caused the spherical object resting in front of him to suddenly come to life. It began to give off a greenish glow, which was visible even through the shimmer of the protective radiation shielding. The glow came from the sonic crystals that were inside the cannon head. These crystals served as the ammunition for the cannon. However right now in their inert state they were harmless. They first had to be charged.

“Cannon head entering power shaft standby...” The sphere began to rise. From up above an electrical hum could be heard. This was from the power shaft. The shaft was responsible for charging the crystals. This was achieved by passing the head up through the tube. The crystals were then fully charged by the time they reached the upper level.

“Visual contact with cannon head, established.” Said the second operator as the head entered the top level through a circular opening in the floor. “Initializing docking sequence.” The second operator was now responsible for the weapon. He entered in the commands to lower the electromagnetic harnesses.

They emerged from the domed walls of the capsule, long strands of electro magnetically charged rods. They crackled as fiery white electricity arced across their surfaces. Slowly the rods were lowered down until they reached the now fully charged cannon head. Once they were close enough the operator gave the command to latch on to the sphere. They immediately were attracted and firmly attached to the weapon.

The rods began to rise, dragging the cannon head up to the dome with them. Now all that was left of the docking sequence were fine adjustments to allow the distortion wave to exit the capsule through the targeting portal, a circular opening used as a ‘sight’ for aiming the wave. Once that was complete he switched channels on his com panel and reported in with the chief security officer. “Docking sequence completed, quasar cannon head charged and ready to fire.”

“Acknowledge, standby for further instructions.” Yamada responded in a crisp voice. He then switched off the link and switched channels so that he could report in with the captain, Nicolai Cruchev.

Captain Cruchev was in his ready room located in the command and control (C&C) section of the station. His broad shoulders rested against a richly padded leather backrest. His desk was equipped with a wide array of equipment that allowed him to easily monitor and control the activities of the space station. Visual displays showing key areas, a communication control panel with links to each and every part of the station, his computer terminal came with data analyzing software that kept track of production. It also had the ability to interface with any other terminal on the space station. With a simple push of a button the captain could call up any piece of information or gain access to any part of the station.

With stern blue eyes he looked over the crew manifest of the departing freighter craft. He was comparing the manifest to the current employee roster when he received word from Yamada that the cannon was ready.

“That’s great work Rie inform Benson as well.” Said Cruchev as his voice coursed through the communication link.

“Already taken care of sir!” the man cheerfully responded.

“Acknowledged, Cruchev out.” He switched off the link feeling content with his security officer. Rie was a reliable officer and had a knack for anticipating the needs of the crew. Just now he only had to tell him that the freighter craft was ready to leave. He didn’t have to tell the officer to ready the cannon. Yamada already knew what to do. After all freighter craft leaving for earth was a daily occurrence. In fact when the immense spacecraft departed from the shuttle bay, mining for the day ended, the work crew would head for their quarters to rest and the refinery would be closed.

The only people awake at this time were the personnel in the command and control section. Their job was to monitor the progress of the day’s labor as it made its way back to earth into the hands of Gemcore. The observation dome, needed by C&C to carry out its task, was placed on top of the space station. The tinted viewing portal of the dome resembled jewels in a Spartan crown. Mounted on the sides of the dome, powerful space age surveillance equipment probed the furthest reaches of space, tracking the lumbering space vehicle as it made its way through a hostile environment. As an extra security precaution the manned delivery vehicle reported in at designated checkpoints. This way C&C could have a first hand account about the security and progress of the cargo.

“Freighter craft: Alpha Ten pilot: Sinclair reporting in at checkpoint: novas prime. Do you copy?”

“We hear you loud and clear Sinclair. Your approach vector to the next checkpoint is clear of any hostile crafts. We expect you there by 06:00 SST. Over.” Came the reply from C&C personnel.

“Roger That V-323, Alpha Ten out!” The pilot responded exuberantly

Cruchev was absentmindedly listening in on the com chatter between C&C and the pilot. He was more focused on reviewing the day’s production report. He was pleased to see that they had met their daily quota. Hopefully their performance would convince Gemcore management to provide funds for constructing a much needed recreational room. Switching off his computer terminal he decided to meet with C&C personnel before returning to his quarters. The darkened computer screen reflected back his image. He caught a quick glance of his collar and noticed his lapel pin was crooked. Taking pride in his appearance he straightened the pin bearing the insignia of his rank. The gold piece of metal contrasted with his darker uniform. Across his breast pocket etched with white thread was the diamond shaped logo of the Mega Corporation he worked for.

Feeling content with his attire he emerged from his ready room and entered the adjacent glass dome. He strolled amongst the various display consoles and mingled with the highly skilled crew. He prided himself on being there for his men and insisted on personally being there when transports were leaving for earth. A harmonious relationship amongst him and his crew was also important to him. He achieved this by trying to create bonds of brotherhood between him and his men and ensuring their safety during any activity on or off the space station.

He didn’t consider this to be an excessive task but a vital one. Working in space is a demanding and isolating experience. Workers have to trust each other so that morale and productivity remain high. Not to mention the dangers of mining in a low gravity environment, where every breath you take is because of oxygen delivered from a pump, where the only reason your body doesn’t cave in on its self is because of your pressurized space suit, where the person next to you can’t hear your screams unless they are transmitted via radio waves. That is why Cruchev had taken every safety precaution. The worst thing he could imagine was losing a man under his command.

His attention soon drifted from the display consoles to one of the huge glass, viewing portal. The portal reflected his image as he made his way over. At first he could only see darkness but as he drew closer the commander peered through it. He began to make out the outlines of rocky plains, gaseous fissures, and razor sharp cliffs. Here and there, the space station’s floodlights would reflect off of the crater speckled surface, revealing more of the dark hulk. Cruchev’s muscular body involuntarily shuddered; this was no man’s land.

To a layman it would seem odd that such an object should be affixed to the station. It appeared like a needless burden had been placed on the structure. But this was not the case in fact this odd object was the key to the success of this whole operation. For it was here that the precious metals were extracted and sent off to earth. This was the very source of all the riches the space station had promised its owners. This odd object was an asteroid, laden with huge deposits of precious ore valued at 323 trillion credits.

Gemcore could have easily passed up on this asteroid for more productive ones. After all the cosmos was nearly infinite and had tremendous wealth to offer. In fact electronic surveillance had revealed asteroids bearing even more loot than the current one. However they were outside of Earth’s solar system. Reaching them would take an eternity. That wasn’t practical when you wanted to send in construction crews to build a mining facility for you; or if you wanted to rotate your employee roster after a six month tour of duty.

Gemcore had taken its time before deciding where to set up camp. They had wisely chosen the current location for another important reason. Chasing down a moving object every time you wanted to reach it is a tedious and expensive proposition. Especially since that object is shooting off into deep space beyond the reach of your vehicles. Luckily for the mining company this particular asteroid was trapped by the gravimetric wake of a nearby moon. It continuously orbited the larger mass, thereby becoming a natural satellite. The advantage of this was that it could always be found at the same location.

Following the outline of the tubules coming out of the western side of the refinery Cruchev fixed his gaze on the inactive ore trolleys resting inside of the cylindrical tunnels. These trolleys were loaded with ore extracted from the mining tunnels and then sent to the refinery via the tubules. When viewed from up above the tubules looked like the tentacles of some great sea creature had grasped its prey and now was strangling it to death.

However the crew didn't see it that way. They looked upon V-323 and saw the progress of the human race as it ventured into space to provide for its self, ensuring its future. They also saw a huge payoff, Gemcore was paying them handsomely for the dangerous work they were doing. An eighth of 323 trillion credits went a long way.

## CHAPTER TWO

A new day dawned; out in the dark vacuum of space the only way the crew knew this was when their sleep cycle, controlled by a monotonous atomic clock, was completed. Just like a well-oiled machine the morning routine began. Foremost on the workers' minds was to fill the empty space they had in their stomachs.

The mess hall cooks had just decompressed the morning rations. Today's menu, pancakes drizzled with synthetic maple syrup and a side of hydrated eggs. To a person on earth who could get fresh food the crew's meal would taste bland and would be rather tough to chew. But the crew didn't complain after all their only other option was starvation.

Chuck helped himself to an extra helping of eggs and pancakes he knew he would need all the energy he had for today's work detail. His foreman, Bo Benson, had already informed the work crew that they would be drilling through core zero, the most densely packed region of the asteroid. Normally such an area of dense rock would be passed over for relatively softer areas. But subterranean geo-scans showed huge veins of gold forming a dense latticework inside core zero, making it the biggest deposit on the asteroid. They didn't come all this way just to let a little rock get in the way of their riches.

The burly miner made his way through the mess hall; his soft hazel eyes searched for his buddy Raza. Like the captain said it was always a good idea to make friends. You would never know when you would need one out there in the mines. Raza was sitting in the corner of the mess hall intently reading some data off of a slim lightweight PDA.

"You better get something in ya' if you want to be any good to us" Raza looked up from his handheld device.

"Oh. Hello Chuck." he squinted as he looked up from his device "Didn't hear you comin'. I was just looking over these drill specs. Can you believe it? They want us working at 3500 rpms."

Chuck looked perplexed "Ah! That's no big deal we'll be done sooner!"

"Yes, but don't you realize with that kind of speed and the mineral density of core zero we may wear out the drill bits. Getting new ones from company headquarters will take weeks."

Chuck furrowed his eyebrows "Well the way I see it all that stuff is the captain's headache. I am hear to follow orders and make my millions"

"I suppose" Raza turned his attention to his breakfast. "They're getting better at the decompression sequence. I can almost taste the yolk this time"

Chuck spoke with a mouth full of food "Yeah! An' duh pancakes taste like ma' made 'em" Raza smiled amusedly. He was about to say something when suddenly the automated addressing system went off.

"All mining crews report to the airlocks" signaled the soulless computer voice.

Chuck wiped his mouth on his sleeves "Well that's me, better get down there before someone takes my suit." he sighed, and then looked enviously at his friend "You drill jocks sure have it easy; up there in your cushy cockpits, without a care in the world. It's us grunts that do the real work."

"Yeah, but you guys have all the fun" Raza retorted "Getting your hands dirty and space walking all day."

"I dunno' about that" he said wryly "Anyway I gotta go suit up. Hope you have a nice trip over, Sweetie" Chuck said mockingly he then got up and left the mess hall. With his friend gone Raza concentrated on finishing his plate of food. He didn't like wasting perfectly good food that could go to use feeding the poor.

“All drill rig operators report to the ATV Depot.” He dropped his fork instantly becoming alert. That was his cue to get down to the All Terrain Vehicle (ATV) depot and ready his vehicle. The two announcements were separated by ten minutes of time so that the corridors and elevators wouldn't become overcrowded with people. Just another measure the captain had taken to make the environment on board the compact space station a bit more pleasant.

Twenty minutes after the first announcement mining crewmembers started filing in to the space station's numerous airlocks. As each worker made his way in to the decompression chamber an audible clicking sound could be heard. No one paid much attention to it they all knew a SENTINEX gun was mounted to the side of the doorway. The clicking sound came from its DNA scanner, as it scanned the surface of their skin.

The scanned DNA would be compared with DNA specifications stored in the space station's database. If the scan found a match it wouldn't open fire otherwise it would unleash a torrent of platinum tipped projectiles at twenty rounds a second reducing anything in its path to slag. Normally people wouldn't like having such a dangerous weapon pointed at them. But the Artificial Intelligence controlling it was like a faithful friend protecting their lives. It was one hundred percent foolproof it could not possibly make a mistake and it never did.

Everyone was double-checking their space suit's environmental seals and safety equipment. Soon the behemoth drill rigs would be showing up in front of the airlocks ready to take the various mining crews to their work sites. In the meantime the miners amused themselves with idle chatter and raunchy jokes. After a few moments of waiting the familiar rumble of metal threads against tough rock could be heard; the drills were coming.



Out here in space everything had to pull its weight. There was no room for luxury. That's why the drill rigs served as transport vehicle and mining equipment all in one. As the rumbling grew more intense the walls of the airlocks began to vibrate. They were getting closer. From his airlock's viewing portal Chuck could begin to make out the contours of the rig. A Huge titanium reinforced steel alloy drill bit gleamed in the space station's floodlights. He watched as the rigs dipped in out of craters on their huge tank like threads. Their drill bits bobbed up down with each plunge.

As the drill operators made their approach they steered the machines so that the crew cabin porthole would align itself with the airlock's porthole. Raza was up in his cockpit steering the huge vehicle. He was assigned to Chuck's work crew and was making his way over to their airlock. After some tricky maneuvering the giant machine was in alignment. Now began the decompression sequence. There was a pocket of vacuum between the two airlocks that had to be dealt with. A thick rubber tunnel extended from the cabin door creating an insulated chamber between the two airlocks. Powerful pumps inside of the drilling rig pumped air into the vacuum to introduce atmosphere. Once the pumps finished their job the airlocks began to open.

Great steal bolts slid out of the walls of the space station. Powerful electromagnetic seals that formed a perimeter around the airlock doors were deactivated. Now with a simple twist of a handle the doors swung open. The crew walked through the treated space vacuum and into the awaiting rig. Each drill rig came with a crew cabin; which was a compact and efficient room, nestled in the underbelly of the enormous machine. It had sturdy benches in the center and equipment lockers off to the side. As soon as the entire mining crew filed into the room the airlocks were sealed and the rubber tunnel was retracted. The rig pulled away from the space station and made its way to the mines.

Chuck headed towards the lockers. He was looking forward to using his favorite tool the sonic pick. Once the behemoth drill rigs carved out a huge cavern it was up to them to finish the job. With his sonic pick he would smash into targeted sections of the mine to release the precious ore. It was then up to the sifters to comb through the rubble, extracting precious metal ore with their I-MED (Ionic Metalloid Extraction Detector).

This ingenious device cut the time needed to refine excavated rock by half. The sifters could begin the

refining process right there in the mine. They would pass the I-MED over the mined rock, the ionic scanners would detect sections of rock emitting metallic ions then the device's electromagnetic conduit would emit a pulse of energy that would extract that section of rock. That piece of rock would gravitate towards the conduit attaching itself to the device. Now all the sifters had to do was carry it over to the awaiting anti-gravity trolleys reverse the polarity of the pulse and the ore would fall in. Once full the hovering trolleys would automatically whisk away the extracted ore.

Chuck knew the sifter's job was important but he wouldn't be able to do it himself. He would get bored too quickly. Picking up metal ore and dumping it into trolleys all day didn't sound so appealing, smashing rock with a powerful piece of equipment did. Chick gingerly raised his sonic pick out of the locker. Its rubber grip slid smoothly into his hand. He used his other hand to keep the device level. The burly miner liked the way his equipment felt and cradled it for a little while longer. He then checked to make sure the power pack was fully charged to provide the maximum amount of energy to the sonic generator located inside of the tools casing. He adjusted the intensity controls of the pick to make sure the sonic booms made by the generator were not too powerful or too weak. The sifters were already calibrating the ionic scanners affixed to their equipment. They made sure the ionic spectrum was wide enough to include gold ions. Everything looked ready to mobilize.

From the soft vibrations of the drill's engine it became apparent that they were slowing down. Then a final lurch forward indicated that the ride was over. Now came the tough part. There was no atmospheric treated tunnel outside the walls of the cabin, only the unforgiving blankness of space up above and the jagged asteroid underneath. Once everyone double-checked that their space suit's environmental seals were active. They signaled the drill operator to open the airlock.

Up top in his cockpit Raza scanned his console. He could see that the crew was ready to depart. He punched the proper sequence of keys to gradually decompress the cabin. Once this was done he opened the doors. Down below the crew could hear the crackle of dissipating electromagnetic energy through the synthesized polymer casing of their helmets. As the cabin door slid away, a gush of air and the dark expanse of the asteroid greeted them. They slowly marched towards the exit, their heavy boots making no sound in the still vacuum of space. With their powerful tools in hand they climbed out of the rig and stepped onto the alien surface.



"Sonic picks! Up front! Sifters bring up the rear!" Bellowed Bo Benson over the dedicated crew com frequency, each and every miner heard the commands through speakers embedded in their helmets. They then began to take their positions.

"I want straight formations!" with military precision Benson continued to Sheppard the crew into place, forming a massive ring around the numerous tunnel openings. Once he was satisfied he gave the final commands.

"Mining crews, Fallback!" the miners began moving away from their assigned drilling rigs.

"Drills, Power Up!" high above in their cockpits, drill operators began manipulating their consoles; soon the powerful drill bits began to rotate. At first they spun slowly but as the motors provided more torque they picked up speed. Soon the razor sharp drill bits were nothing more than glimmering metallic blurs.

"Forward!" the drilling rigs lurched forward each one made its way to its particular section of asteroid with its mining crew following behind. Raza was given the eastern side of core zero. He made his way to the tunnel that led to his destination.

The diameter of the tunnel was wide enough for one drilling rig to enter. There was very little room between the sides of the drill and the tunnel walls. Raza carefully centered the rig with the tunnel opening. He then entered. Chuck and his team of miners waited for his return at the tunnel's opening. It was up to him now.

Raza followed the tunnel he and other drill operators had carved out in previous mining expeditions. Each

time they gained more ground; the mineral density would increase making it tougher to drill. Geo-scans had shown this final push into core zero would require drilling through the toughest material yet.

As he made his way in he could tell that the surrounding matter was getting denser. The metal threads were not getting as much traction as the dense minerals refused to allow the threads to get a grip. A while later Raza reached the end of the tunnel, ahead of him laid a solid wall of rock.

It was now up to his powerful machine to obliterate the obstacle. He carefully approached the wall, making one last check to make sure the drill bit was set to the correct rpm. After offering a silent prayer he brought the two forces into contact. As soon as the spinning metal fell upon the impervious rock powerful jolts rocked the drilling rig. Raza could feel the intense shocks through the walls of his cockpit. They rattled everything inside of the cramped enclosure. Metal joints groaned under the stress the forward viewing portal's plexi-glass rattled. But Raza was not worried; he knew his machine was designed for this kind of punishment. The joints would hold and the rattling would subside.

He concentrated on measuring the progress of the bit. It was gradually making its way into the wall of rock. He would softly nudge the rig forward to press the drill bit deeper into the wall. The rock would resist then suddenly give up as soon as the bit pulverized the tough material.

Progress was being made slowly and Raza was concerned about the readings he was getting from thermal scans of the drill bit. They were far above normal. He decided to release some coolant into the inner body of the overworked component. After doing so he carried out another thermal scan. Raza relaxed a little, the new reading returned favorable numbers. But he knew not to get cocky; there still was a long way to go.

Raza felt the rock growing more and more resistant; he even thought he heard it moan. It was as if it was in pain. Raza felt embarrassed; if Chuck heard about his irrational thoughts what would he say? Instead of indulging his over active imagination he contacted Bo Benson.

"Hey boss! I've got a problem with the mineral density in my section. It's too high."

"It's not just you." Bo's voice came in with a touch of anxiety "Drill operators from all over core zero are reporting in about how tough the rock is." Bo said over the com link "I've put in a request with C&C about increasing rpm I'll let you know what they say. In the meantime continue at current speeds."

"Understood." Raza cut the transmission. He continued plowing through the wall of rock. Once in a while he would hear that mournful moan again. "Must be something in those eggs I had for breakfast" Raza thought "Playing tricks on my mind" but as the moans became more and more definite he didn't think so. "Those moans are definitely out there" Raza continued thinking as he nervously scanned the dark mining tunnel "But what could it be?" he raked his mind, trying to find a plausible explanation.

"It must have something to do with the overheated drill bit. I think it is expanding to quickly" Raza gauged the plausibility of this theory "Yes! That must be it! Expanding metal has been known to emit sounds. Like when you leave your land craft in the sun!" he felt better once he had discovered a possible cause for the disturbing sounds. But he still was itching to get out of the tunnel. For some reason it was giving him the creeps. Raza was startled as the cockpit erupted with commotion. The proximity sensors were alerting him to the fact that he had reached his goal. Core zero had been breached.

With maddened urgency Raza began to deactivate the drill bit. Now that his objective was accomplished he wanted all of the engine's power in the threads. Getting out of this place was now his main concern. He keyed in a sequence of keystrokes on his console that would reverse the direction of the threads. Soon the changes made took effect. The drill rig began pulling out of the tunnel.

Gemcore safety regulations dictated that a slow and steady pace be kept when pulling out of a mining tunnel. But Raza was really anxious after hearing those eerie sounds. He was confident enough in his maneuvering skills to pull out of the tunnel at high speeds. He watched the gray walls of the tunnel whirl pass the aft viewing port. Shortly after he was at the opening, in a dusty cloud of asteroid ash and pulverized minerals, Raza re-entered the asteroid's surface.

Some miners who were mingling in front of the opening scurried away when they saw the speeding rig barreling towards them. The behemoth burst out of the tunnel, thick streams of dust slithered off of its sides as the thick metal treads tore up the ground underneath. It came to a screeching halt many meters away from where it should have stopped.

The crew hesitantly approached the rig. What was wrong with that guy? They all thought. Chuck decided to find out. "You okay there big buddy?" Chuck's transmitted voice came in over the cockpit's speakers.

"Yeah...I just wanted to see what this baby could do!" Raza Responded with forced bravado

Chuck wasn't convinced "Not like you to break protocol like that." He glanced over at the frightened miners who narrowly escaped being crushed by the rampaging mining equipment. "Ya' could've killed those miners back there."

"Come on, Chuck! They were a hundred parsecs away from me." he said sheepishly "No really...I figured I should have some...fun...with the rig"

The burly miner knew his friend too well and didn't believe a word he said, "If you don't want to tell me what's going on then fine. You cool off or do whatever you gotta do to get sane again; me and the boys are going in."

Raza felt a pang of guilt. Maybe he should tell the truth what's the worse he would do, laugh. Besides he had a moral obligation to warn his crew about any potential dangers in those tunnels. "All right, if you must know...I thought I heard something down there."

"I knew it!" Chuck said with obvious satisfaction in his voice "What was it?" he asked intently.

"It sounded like a voice." Raza began to say "A voice that was in pain. Almost like a...moan."

Chuck thought this over "Must be gas" he suggested brashly.

"Perhaps. It could also have been my drill bit it was overheating. But whatever it was it freaked me out. It made me act irrationally and feel really anxious. I had to get out of there right away." he hung his head in shame "That's why I sped out of the tunnel like that. I wasn't thinking straight." He said in a forlorn voice.

"No kidding, Sweetie." Chuck snorted "Tell you what." he said cheerfully "The sifters got scanning equipment on their I-MEDs I'll tell one of them to calibrate for gases, just in case."

Raza considered this "All right, just be careful."

"I am touched. But don't worry we always are, Chuck out!" he abruptly cut the transmission and began preparing to enter the mining tunnel.

Raza reclined in his seat. He tried to get a grip on his emotions as he watched the miners gather their equipments and turn on their space suit's floodlights. In a single file they walked into the carved tunnel. The luminous lights cast ominous shadows of the miners on the tunnel walls. After the last of them marched several meters into the mine, all Raza could make out of their presence was a swaying glow of light.

Raza silently recited the Aytal-Kursi, a powerful verse from the Muslim holy book the Quran, which exemplifies the great power God has over the universe. The powerful words of the passage put Raza at ease. A soothing calm enveloped his spirit soon he closed his eyes to rest. Awhile later a familiar voice crackled over the speakers. "Good news guys!" It was Benson addressing all the drill operators on their com frequency "You have approval to increase RPM by a factor of 500." Raza's long awaited request for an increase in drill speeds was finally being acknowledged, "However at the first sign of bit fatigue you are to shut down immediately."

Raza switched on his com “Gee, thanks Bo! But I already reached my goal a long time ago.” Raza said, “I was able to reach the specified target depth at pre-mission drill speeds.”

Benson thought a while before answering “Strange all the other drill operators have only met a half or three quarters of their target depths. How’d you manage that?”

“I don’t know sir, guess it was luck.” He said with a smug smile on his face.

Bo Benson consulted the latest geo-scans of core zero. After a careful analysis he responded “Not quite...” He said, “According to my calculations you seem to have pierced a gaseous... ‘Back Door’.”

“Gaseous ‘Back Door’, Sir?” Raza asked

“Yeah... apparently the tunnel you were assigned to lead to a pocket of empty space containing an unknown substance. This substance has low molecular cohesion. That can only mean it was some sort of gas.” Benson continued with his summation “When you pierced the pocket you released the “gas”, creating an opening, a “Back Door” if you will, into core zero thereby allowing you to reach your target depth so quickly.”

Raza began to get an idea of what could have caused those awful moans. Suddenly he thought of something “Is the gas hazardous?”

“I can’t tell with these scans. We’ll have to send in a science team to make a full investigation. In the mean time keep your mining crew out of the tunnel.”

That last remarks formed an icy grip over Raza’s body “Sir...” he said dreadfully “They’re already down there.”

“What!”

“They left before you reported in!” he nervously replied

“Get them the hell out of there!!!” Bo bellowed

“Right away sir!” Raza matched his communication channel with the miner’s frequency “Chuck! Do you read me? CHUCK! It’s me Raza.” He lamented “If you can hear my voice you and your men have got to get out of there now!” Raza stared at his console frantically waiting to hear his friend’s familiar voice. But all he could hear was the droning static of empty space.

## CHAPTER THREE

Chuck was walking behind a sifter with the rest of the crew bringing up the rear. The sifter watched the monitor of his I-MED as it scanned the air 50 meters in front of him for any signs of hazardous gases. He had calibrated the ionic spectrum to include a range of known gases but so far the device wasn't picking anything up.

"Seems like your friend was worried about nothing." He sniffed heavily "The air in here is good enough to breathe, without any pulmonary filters."

"Just keep scanning" Chuck said distastefully as he looked around the tunnel. The ash gray color and the imposing height of the tunnel walls made him feel uncomfortable. The sterile white lights flowing from his suit's floodlights made the cavernous environment even more surreal.

The crew could tell they were walking through the section of tunnel that had been carved out in previous mining expeditions. The worn surfaces and sonic pick pot marks indicated this. They trudged deeper into the tunnel as they were getting closer to the end they noticed how the walls took on a more powdery feel. This section was more recently excavated and didn't have a chance to get worn smooth from mining activities yet.

The sifter was watching his monitor intently; while the rest of the crew was focused on idle conversation or listening to amusing resonance waves using communication equipment embedded in their helmets. They hardly noticed when Chuck told them to make a full stop.

"Look up ahead." He said with a glimmer in his eyes. When they did a myriad of sparkles met their eyes. Their floodlights were being reflected off of the tunnel wall's surface. When they realized what was causing the sparkles, all their pain and all their dreary worries were gleamed away. Ahead of them laid a solid wall of gold veins.

"Jackpot! Baaybee!" said a few rambunctious miners. Everyone erupted with good-natured banter.

"I am gonna buy me a space yacht with my million credit bonus." Said one gleeful miner.

"Yeah, well me and my family are moving out of the sorry excuse we have for a house and move into the new underground condos on novas prime." Said another

Chuck being ever practical exclaimed, "You have to mine it first!" he raised his sonic pick "Let me and my boys handle this. Then you sifters can clean up our mess." He turned to the assembled group of pick toting miners. "Power up boys!" he said with a mischievous smirk across his face.

As the men activated their power packs energy coursed through the sonic pick's casing causing a high-pitched whirling sound. "Take your positions!" Chuck said. They made a straight line in front of the gold encrusted wall, picks aimed and leveled with the wall. "Fire!" intense waves of energized sound screamed out of the devices, within nanoseconds they crashed upon the glittering wall. In an instant the tunnel floor was bombarded with falling pieces of rock.

The exuberant miners continued with the onslaught. As the lower areas of the wall began to hide behind mounds of fallen ore they targeted the midsection. More and more gold ore spewed out of the walls. There seemed to be no end to it or to the miner's appetite for more. With cold calculated precision strikes they continued to gut the tunnel clean of its precious ore.

At first it was just a raucous whisper barely audible over the falling rubble. It was the sifters who first noticed it; the sonic pick crew was too busy blasting away. They consulted the lead sifter who had specially calibrated his I-MED for hazardous gases.

"Not a thing in sight!" he said anxiously

"Well something is here." Said another worried crewmember "It's getting louder." The whisper became a moan "What is that!" He looked around trying to identify the source of the awful moan. The man was becoming more and more agitated. The rest of the sifters also tried to locate the origin of the sound, but couldn't. It seemed to be coming from everywhere. The moan took on an unearthly pitch. "Dear lord are the dead rising?" he said with raw fear in his eyes.

His co-workers tried to console him "It's probably just escaping gas rubbing against rock."

The explanation didn't help "For god sakes make it stop!" he became hysterical. His colleagues grabbed a hold of him to calm him down. The wide-eyed man resisted them.

Chuck raised his arm and clenched his fist; signaling the crew to cease-fire. The moan had grown in to a wretched scream and could be heard by all.

"Just calm down, Jake!" Chuck yelled at the disturbed man. He turned his attention to the lead sifter "Bison! What does your I-MED tell you?"

"Nothing." he said defensively as he hunched over his controls calibrating for the widest spectrum "It can't tell me a damn thing, it's useless!"

"All right then we gotta get out here now! We can come back for the ore later. But the most important thing is too remain calm." Just then the unworldly scream took on a bloodcurdling pitch. It enveloped the entire cavern; there was no refuge from the horrifying cry. It struck their shielded ears with great intensity. No one doubted it this wasn't escaping gas; there was an unnatural presence in the gutted tunnel, and it was mad.

"What do you want from me!" the panic-stricken sifter screeched. He violently struggled against the hold of his fellow sifters. Once he broke free he made a mad dash for the distant tunnel opening. At that exact moment the presence let out one more horrifying shriek. In that instant the man seemed to be hit with a tremendous force. As the mining crew looked on in with horror, his body was launched from one side of the tunnel to the other. The bent body slammed against the wall sending up a plume of dust. It then fell to the floor in a crumpled heap.

Suddenly the scream stopped it faded away into the recesses of the tunnel. The shocked miners stared at each other, not believing what they just saw. A few regained control over their senses and quickly made their way to the broken body. Chuck got to him first he gently turned the sifter's mangled body over. The inside of his helmet visor was splattered with blood and his neck laid at an unnatural angle. The hysteric man was silent.



"If you can hear my voice you and your men have got to get out of there now!" Chuck was staring at the slain man the transmitted voice didn't register, with his conscious mind, but as it persisted it slowly crept into his thoughts.

"Raza? Is that you?" He answered absentmindedly

"Chuck, you're okay!"

He looked down at the fallen man "Not all of us are." he said soberly.

"What do you mean? Did the gas get you?"

"Gas? What do you mean gas? You call what attacked us gas!" he said disgustingly "Gas doesn't fling you around like a rag doll!" he growled.

"I don't know what you're talking about." Raza responded coolly "All I know is that I released a pocket of some unknown substance, which could have been gas. And that you guys need to get out of there right away!"

"Thanks for the heads up, but we already got a man down because of that unknown substance." He said with anger in his voice "And don't call it that! What you released was not a substance or a gas or whatever the hell you wanna call it." He paused to collect his thoughts from his frantic mind "It was a...being."

"A being?"

"Yes a being...it broke the neck of one of my men. It was premeditated murder! Do you hear me! Murder!" He chocked back an intense urge to scream, "It wasn't even human, at least you can punish a man for a crime. How do you punish something you can't see or feel?" Chuck waited for a response "Answer me damn it!"

"I don't know what we are dealing with" Raza said "The best course of action is to get out of there before someone else gets hurt. Let a science team go in there to deal with the...being, they've trained for situations like these."

"I am not leaving my man behind. He's coming with us so that he can have a proper funeral with his friends. I 'aint leaving him here so that his soul can be tormented by that...thing for all eternity."

"You're right Chuck. That's the decent thing to do." And with that final transmission the brawny miner hefted his fallen comrade onto his shoulder. He began to march towards the tunnel opening. The rest of the crew somberly followed.

## CHAPTER FOUR

“Cause of death, acute trauma to the upper vertebrae.” The station’s Chief Medical Officer was recording the proceedings of the dead miner’s autopsy. “Compounded with punctured airways caused by broken bone.” The medical officer looked away from the torn throat of the miner. He referred to an MRI scan of the man’s brain.

“Curiously enough my scans indicate heightened activity in the motor cortex of the subject’s brain. Yet the frontal lobes remain brain dead. In my medical experience I have never come across a corpse whose brain was half dead.” The doctor thought for a while “It is my recommendation, based on the fact that the subject can not be declared clinically brain dead, that he be placed in a hibernation capsule, in the hopes of reviving him. I’ll direct my medical staff to clear all debris from his airways, so that in the unlikely case he does recover he may easily begin to breathe.” With that final remark he ended the audio recording.

His able assistants carried out the orders of the Chief Medical Officer. After a minor operation, the still body was wheeled over to the awaiting chamber. Its sturdy containment panels were made of clear glass that held a life sustaining gel-like broth of vital nutrients. The nutrients were broken down to the atomic level so that the patient’s pores could easily absorb them.

Perhaps what was more remarkable was the fact that the life sustaining gel not only nourished the comatose body it also served as a complete life support system. Oxygen molecules and roving clouds of electrically charged ions helped to sustain the body’s need for oxygen and gently coaxed it into consciousness.

The medical staff used a specially designed elevation apparatus to lift the broken body up to the top of the hibernation capsule. The machine’s topmost panel slid open exposing the rose colored gel. The body was then lowered into the chamber. The viscous liquid molded itself to the contours of the body. The life sustaining components of the fluid immediately took affect. Vital nutrients infused with the blood stream. Rich molecules of oxygen made their way to the lungs. And clouds of electric ions found their way to critical systems of the body to gently bring them back into operation.

When the body was completely inserted the top most panel was closed. The trained medical staff checked that the unit was working properly. When they were satisfied they left, leaving the man to fight for his life.



They were all assembled in the mess hall. All the miners and technical personnel were present. Normally the space station crew would eat in shifts that way the entire station population wouldn’t be crammed in to one place. But this was different they were here to listen to Captain Cruchev’s briefing. Everyone knew it would be about the strange occurrence in the mining tunnels. All they knew was learned from the frightful transmission made by Raza they desperately wanted to learn more and waited for their captain to speak.

Even though the mess hall seats filled up people were still coming in. They sat in the aisles, on tabletops, on kitchen counters, others just stood. There was a murmur throughout the room as they discussed the day’s events amongst themselves. “There’s some kind of poltergeist haunting the tunnels” speculated one person

“Or it could be an unknown alien species bent on killing every last one of us” said another

“You’re both wrong, we’ve slipped into a parallel dimension where everything is horrible and the opposite of the real world.”

“Well whatever happened, poor ‘ol Jake is hanging by a thread in doc’s hibernation capsule.” All idle conversation stopped as Cruchev walked in; his Chief Security officer Rie Yamada and the crew foreman,

Bo Benson, flanked him. They lined up at the front of the room where they could address the entire gathering.

Once he had everyone's attention Captain Cruchev began "Today, the unthinkable has happened. Despite all are safety precautions, despite all of our meticulous planning, despite having the best equipment and weapons system science can offer we are in danger of losing a man. We all know this man as Jake McGill. In the time I spent with him I came to learn that he is a dedicated and hard working individual. Dr. Shukai our Chief Medical Officer informs me that his condition is critical. He holds very little hope that he will recover. However we all must pray for a speedy recovery, for Jake's sake."

He paused to let out a sigh "Having said that I do realize you guys must be pretty shaken up. But you need not worry. Your safety is my prime concern. I could give a rat's ass to what the Board of Governors at Gemcore had to say about this incident. They're only concerned with the bottom line and want production to start up right away. I told them it 'aint gonna happen" the crowd erupted with a deafening cheer. Cruchev couldn't help but bask in the glory.

After they settled down he began again "I told them that a proper investigation was needed and based on the results of that investigation we will decide whether or not to start up production again. You all know the station's Chief Security Officer, Mr. Rie Yamada" the stern Asian man gave a terse nod "He will fill you in on the details of the security precautions that have been put in place, it is expected that all of you comply with them." Cruchev turned to Rie and gestured towards the crowd "Mr. Yamada."

Yamada stepped forward and began in a strong and efficient voice "All mining activities have been suspended effective immediately. This means all drill rigs, all mining equipment, and all space suits are to remain deactivated. The mining tunnels are off limits except to authorized personnel. No one is allowed to exit the space station without clearance. We will enforce a curfew after 20:00 hours, after which all non-essential personnel will be confined to their quarters. As far as the investigation is concerned I have already selected a team of technicians to investigate this incidence. As we speak this science team has been deployed and has begun preliminary investigations. I have every confidence in their abilities and fully believe that we will prevail." With that last announcement Cruchev made sure everyone understood the new security procedures. He then dismissed the gathered group of workers.



The unmanned aerial vehicle careened through the tunnel. Its live action cameras sent back real time images along a wireless optical channel. The receiving unit was setup near the infamous tunnel opening. It displayed vivid color images captured by the UAV's cameras. The science team intently watched the transmitted telemetry.

The autonomous aircraft sent back pictures of the ash gray tunnel walls. The technicians sent instructions to the aircraft's navigation control system to go deeper and faster into the tunnel. As the faithful mechanical servant carried out its orders the tunnel grew darker. It wasn't long before it was commanded to activate its forward illumination projectors.

After a while the gathered group of people could make out the gleaming mass of gold ore that was hastily left behind by the traumatized mining crew. The UAV was commanded to stop, less it crash into the excavated wall. It hovered over the area where Jake had fallen. It felt no emotion as it scanned the crimson spot left behind by the wounded man.

The aerial vehicle safely reached the end of the tunnel, thereby completing its mission parameters. It turned around to head back to its landing pod. Meanwhile the technicians prepared the mobile sensor array, an absurdly elongated vehicle that housed a vast array of surveillance equipment. Despite its inelegant appearance the mobile sensor array was a vital tool, which was critical for the success of the science team's mission. The exterior of the vehicle was emblazoned with the Gemcore logo. It had a bulky look due to heavy armor plating placed around its sides. The reinforcements were put there to make it more durable but it gave the sensor array an overall blocky and angular appearance. Gemcore architects seriously needed lessons in aesthetics.

Since the UAV's journey was uneventful they decided it was safe enough to proceed into the tunnel for a more elaborate investigation. The crew began entering into the vehicle from an entry hatch built into its side. The technicians made their way into the dimly lit interior of the sensor array. There were no overhead lights the only visible source was from the numerous illuminated control panels and display screens. They were all arranged in a line along the sides of the cabin. Only a meager aisle, that allowed one person to slip by, was left in the center. The aisle traveled the length of the cabin from the back emergency exit, past the side entry hatch and all the way up to the front cabin wall.

On the other side of this wall was the cockpit that was where the driver and navigator were taking their positions. They could talk to the cabin crew by intercom and could get a visual from the small viewing portal that was carved into the cabin wall.

After everyone filed in, the hatch was sealed. Once the decompression sequence completed the crew took off their space suits. Lockers in the back of the vehicle served as a good place to store the bulky suits. The technicians began to take their positions at their respective stations and began to assess the readiness of their equipment. As each scanner came online they announced it to the crew.

"Bio Scanners online and operational"

"Ionic scanners online and operational"

"Metallurgic Scanners online and operational"

"VLS filters online and operational"

"Sonar online and operational"

"Doppler online and operational"

"Radar online and operational"

As the majority of the scanners had been accounted for the driver began the descent into the tunnel. The navigator had an electronic schematic of the tunnel at his disposal; which was constantly updated by a geo scan of their approaching destination.

As they descended deeper into the tunnel the science team grew more and more somber. The technicians intently watched their screens for any unusual readings. Occasionally metallurgic scans showed deposits of mineral ore, other than that there was complete silence.

After several minutes of intense stillness the bio scanner started picking up faint traces of bioorganic material.

"Hey! I've got something on bio." Instantly a murmur of excited voices filled the interior.

"Bearing?"

"Point three Mark eleven" the technician nervously gulped "That's where Jake..." he couldn't bring himself to finish his sentence.

"Yeah, that was the place." The com operator responded knowingly "We shouldn't be getting bio readings from down there. Let me check in with C&C just to make sure there aren't any stray miners wandering around."

As he patched into the space station's communication lines the rest of the technicians gathered around the bio scanner. "You know, it could be some sort of celestial arachnid that burrowed into the asteroid to make its nest. Creatures that can do that are not uncommon in this region of space." Said one thoughtful tech.

"Yeah or it could be just a glitch" said another as he stared at the bio scanner. The wispy green cloud on the monitor throbbed each time the scanner picked up bio signs. As they moved deeper into the tunnel the signal grew stronger.

"Just got word from C&C" said the com operator "No one is allowed out, the station is under complete lockdown and all workers are accounted for." Everyone turned to the glowing monitor. Their eyes fixated on the pulsating blob.

"Run a complete diagnostic on that scanner. The readings it's giving don't make any sense"

"The equipment is working fine there must be something alive out there."

"Impossible!" cried out a technician, the tiny cabin erupted with angry voices. Everyone was engaged in a heated debate. Each man trying to convince the other that his take on the situation was right. But no one wanted to hear what the other person was saying. All of a sudden the sonar operator let out a deafening cry of pain.

Everyone turned to look at the screaming man. He tore off his headsets as he reached for his ears. His face was twisted into a painful grimace.

"The hell's wrong with you?"

"I feel like my ears are bleeding!" The distressed sonar operator shrieked

"What happened?"

The man clutched his aching ears "I was listening for any unusual sounds when I hear this moan." He winced as a searing jolt of pain shot through his nervous system "At first I didn't pay attention, figured must be something interfering with sonar. But the moan wouldn't let up it just got louder. I tried telling you guys but you were too busy yapping away." he looked at them with an accusing stare "The moan turned into a scream which grew louder and louder until it got to the point where I couldn't stand it no more. That's when I screamed"

"Isn't that the way Chuck described the attack; A moan that turned into a scream which became unbearably loud."

"Well that settles it," said the smug bio technician "Looks like I was right. There is something out there, we should reinforce armor plating now." They were all in agreement and quickly swung into action.

"You know what happens next, right?" said one nervous tech

"Just reinforce those damn plates, now!" said the sonar operator

This time the being gave no further warning before attacking, with a sudden burst of energy it slammed into the side of the sensor array. The vehicle tilted to one side and then fell back to the ground; dislodging stones from the tunnel ceiling. This was evidence of the unbelievable power wielded by the being.

People inside were violently thrown about, some suffered minor injuries. The driver wasted no time in getting the vehicle in motion. He reversed gears and sped towards the tunnel openings. The infuriated being pursued its prey. This time a massive jolt was felt from the rear. It was attempting to corner the intruders.

"Watcha got on geo?" the exasperated driver asked his navigator

"Auxiliary tunnel at 2 'o clock." came the tort reply. He gunned the engines and headed for the refuge. At this point making it to the main tunnel opening was too risky. Their best bet was to wait it out in a secluded area.

The speeding vehicle violently swerved to the right as it careened into the narrow opening. The auxiliary tunnel served as a storage depot once it was stripped of its geological treasures. Mining equipment strewn about the tunnel floor was shattered into splinters as the bulky vehicle made its way through. After a short distance the small tunnel ended. The driver hit the brakes hard. The sensor array's tires locked into position and began to skid. The vehicle refused to stop as its tremendous mass and speed created too much momentum.

The tunnel wall loomed in front of the driver's eye as it drew closer and closer. He sharply turned the steering wheel to the right. The vehicle grinded against the tunnel's sides; the added friction helped in slowing down the speeding vehicle. With a softened thud it collided with the tunnel wall.

The bodies inside the mobile sensor array lurched forward as it came to a complete stop. A sudden silence enveloped the interior of the vehicle. The technicians were startled by the abrupt change. Their ears took a while to adjust to the deafening silence. They anxiously listened for any disturbing sounds from the being. They heard nothing except for the unrelenting pounding of their hearts.

# CHAPTER FIVE

The desolate halls of the space station gave Raza an eerie feeling. He was used to having them full of hurried people making their way to important places. Now, as his footsteps echoed off the dimly lit metallic floor, he felt gloomy.

The station had been in lockdown for the past four hours. All nonessential personnel were confined to their quarters. The only reason Raza, a drill operator, was allowed out was because he had religious clearance.

As a Muslim he should perform his five daily prayers in a congregation. Islamic law decreed a congregation to consist of 3 or more worshippers. Since five other Muslim men served at this mining space station they all decided, with the captain's permission, to designate an unused crew quarter as their Masjid, a Muslim house of worship.

As Raza drew closer to his destination, he saw one of his faithful comrades showing his green clearance pass to one of Yamada's officers.

"Looks good Ahmed." Said the officer as he handed the pass back. "Just return to your quarters ASAP." He said with a smile

"Will do!" the bearded man responded as the officer left to continue his patrol. He then turned to enter the Masjid; just then he caught sight of his Muslim brother. "Assalam-O-Alaikum!" he said heartily.

The gloominess Raza felt was instantly washed away; it was replaced by a warm sense of brotherly love and kinship. "Walaikum-Assalam!" he responded. They clasped each other's hands firmly, smiling ear to ear. "Is the Fiza Al-Farghad out of alignment?!" Raza asked

"May Allah forbid it! I recalibrated it myself just a couple of days ago. I have compensated for the accelerated trajectory detected by C&C. This time, by the will of Allah, we won't be praying in the direction of Novas Prime!!!" he let out a hearty laugh.

They both removed their footgear and entered the Masjid. Removing bedding and closets, so that a greater number of worshippers could pray in the interstellar Masjid had enlarged the crew quarter's floor space.

Islam also decreed that while praying a Muslim should be facing the Kabah, the holiest Masjid in the Islamic faith. Back on earth people would use a compass to point them in the direction of the Kabah. In the far reaches of space this was not so easy. There was no convenient magnetic pole to tell you which way north was. And even if you knew which way Earth was you still had to triangulate the position of the Kabah.

When Muslim scientists saw their fellow man venture into space they didn't want to be left behind, because of a religious technicality. After consulting with their scholars to better understand the subtleties of their problem, they began the task of constructing a device, which would help them locate the holiest house of Allah even in the deepest depths of space. The device they invented was named the Fiza Al-Farghad, meaning space compass.

While Raza and his faithful brothers prayed the other crewmembers whiled away their time in their quarters. Some betted their hard earned salaries, playing gambling games on the station's public computer network. Others decided to satisfy them selves by watching dancing holo-images of scantily dressed women; while others washed away their boredom by decompressing their favorite alcoholic beverages.

Of course Cruchev had no time for such distractions. He was in his ready room trying to diffuse a diplomatic time bomb. His vid screen was tuned to the offices of Gemcore's Premier Chairman. "I understand that production needs to start up right away. But-

"No buts Cruchev. Now! Means, Now!" replied a red faced image of a chubby cheeked man.

Nicolai put on his most diplomatic smile as he faced the vid screen "The safety of our Men has been compromised. We need more time."

"I decide what you need!!! And you need to send a fully loaded Freighter Craft to my Space-Port, this instance!!!"

Cruchev carefully chose his words "With all due respect Sir, the Men are frightened they don't want to enter the Mines."

The Chairman's face showed disgust "I don't care! Send them in by gunpoint, God Damn it! Why do you think I gave you a security detail?"

Nicolai remained silent obviously General Walker wasn't thinking straight, he thought. But the disgruntled man's next words seemed well calculated.

"I am giving you an Ultimatum." The portly man said with grim determination "If you don't have the guts to send your men into harms way, I'll find someone who does."

Nicolai tensed up "Sir there's no need for that. Just give me 4 hours top and I'll have production up right away."

Walker threw his hands up in the air in utter frustration "Wrong Answer Cruchev!!! I want you to get your sissy ass off of my space station, right this instance!!!"

The captain was stunned; he sat motionless not believing what was just said. Walker pressed on "Are you getting me Cruchev?"

"Yes sir, I am getting you." he reluctantly answered

The large man was more relaxed now, he sat back in his chair and continued, "I am glad we have an understanding...you know I was expecting something like this would happen. You came across as a bleeding heart when I first saw you; what with your ideas of brotherhood and peace. They seemed out of place in our corporate culture and I thought a yuppie like you wouldn't be strong enough to make tough decisions. But I assigned you to this post anyway. I figured you, being a hero in the space force, was just the thing we needed."

Nicolai listened intently as his Premier continued speaking "But I don't like putting all my credits on one horse, know what I mean?" He said as a cruel sneer crawled across his face. "That's why as soon as you left for V-323 I started grooming your replacement." The ruby man was satisfied with the grim expression he saw on his subordinate's face.

"Colonel Ramsey will be arriving at your coordinates in 12 hours. He can be quite -er...persuasive when it comes to motivating men." He chuckled cynically "He'll be arriving with a contingent of well armed security personnel. I expect you to give them your full cooperation." With that final altercation the vid screen went blank. An instant later the black screen displayed Gemcore's jewel shaped logo.

Cruchev sat at his desk staring at the screen not believing what had just happened. Was Walker serious? Was he really going to replace him? Nicolai knew a little about Ramsey's reputation. Since they got the job done the top brass of Gemcore encouraged his ruthless ways.

Cruchev thought back to Jake's broken body and the fear he saw in his men's eyes. He was torn with emotion, on the one hand he was trained to follow orders and on the other hand he had a conscience that begged him to do the right thing. The captain leaned back in his chair resting his head on the soft leather. He thought about his next move as he stared at the ready room's ceiling.

After a long while he leaned forward, the flexible chair straightened itself. He had come to a decision. Now he had only to put things into motion. After reciting a silent prayer he slid his right arm under his desk. His hand followed along side the inner edge of the table. His fingers groped for the small device. "Ah here it is!" he thought as his fingertips registered a cool metallic touch. He felt for the indentation and placed an index finger in it. The device began scanning his fingerprints. Once the device determined that this was indeed Captain Cruchev's index finger a soft hissing sound could be heard.

"I didn't think I would have to open this," he thought somberly. When the hissing stopped he knew the compartment had fully opened. He let his hand slip into the hollowed space. He felt around for the weapon, instantly his hand wrapped around a metallic object. He clenched it tightly and brought it to the surface of his desk.

His eyes swept across the chrome surface of the gleaming object. There existed only a few dozen of these energy weapons, the one he had was crafted using an experimental prototype. The weapon operated on recently developed technology that allowed you to fire a beam of high intensity light particles. Because of this the weapon was referred to as a Photonic Emitter.

## CHAPTER SIX

The powerful creature pierced through the liquefied rock with its thick pointy legs. Acidic spit, propelled from its mouth, caused more rock to dissolve. After burrowing through the tough material the creature's stout body emerged into the auxiliary tunnel. If the celestial arachnid could sense acoustic waves it would know that the crew of the mobile sensor array was desperately trying to get out of the tunnel. Grappling hooks had been deployed and their whining gears attempted to pull the sensor array towards the tunnel opening.

The beastly body of the arachnid glistened in the dim light of the tunnel. The first layer of its body was made up of a thick and powerful exoskeleton. It formed a powerful seal over the soft flesh of the arachnid's inner body. This natural protection allowed the celestial arachnid to survive the harsh vacuum of space.

Space bandits, who chose to cut themselves off of the resources of mainstream society occasionally had to make use of the arachnid's flesh. They would organize hunting parties to track down the creatures. Once caught the tough exoskeleton presented a challenge. However a barrage of concentrated heavy weapons fire did the trick. Once the arachnid was split open the tender flesh was theirs for the taking.

"Got something on bio." The bio tech hesitantly reported

"Here we go again." Mumbled a disgruntled tech

"Anything on Sonar?" asked another.

"Nothing" said the Sonar operator who had removed his headsets and had routed all auditory outputs to internal audio emitters. His ears were still recovering from the last encounter.

"So it can't be the entity. Can it?"

The bio tech thought this over "Well these reading are far more condensed then the previous ones."

"What does that mean?"

"We're dealing with something else."

"Something else? What do you mean something else?" the tech looked forcefully at his colleague "What else can survive in this God forsaken place?"

"I think I know what it could be." Said an engrossed tech, who was looking out of the side-viewing portal. They all looked over to the awe struck man. Their curiosity overwhelmed them as they gathered around to find out what was holding the man's attention so completely. The mobile sensor array's headlights cast a dim glow in the tunnel. It was enough to make out the steel gray fangs dripping with acidic saliva.

"Whoa! Ain't she a beauty?"

"I've never seen one so close up." Replied another astounded tech.

"Yeah, I thought they were a myth, till now" they all watched as the celestial arachnid crawled near the vehicle.

"The hull plating is still reinforced, right?" the worried tech got a few snickers.

"Don't worry sweetie I won't let it get you." They all let out a hearty laugh.

After such a hazardous ordeal the crew began to relax. A sense of calm was taking over. Things were

returning to normal again. "Well I am glad that it was nothing. I never thought something so ugly could bring such comfort." A few techs smiled contently.

A soft humming sound could be heard inside of the cabin. "Looks like someone is getting into the spirit of things?" they all looked around trying to find who was the jolly fellow. When they couldn't find the source of the humming they became concerned.

The sonar operator was the first to notice something odd about the sound. He quickly made his way to his station and intently watched his control console. His fingers danced over the console flicking switches and adjusting knobs. The humming turned into a moan. The joy the crew was feeling was instantly sucked out of their spirits. "But that can't be I am not picking up a second Bio reading" the bio tech had already manned his post. A grim expression formed on his face.

Just then an unworldly scream was heard from the tunneling opening. The bio tech checked his monitor. Sure enough a wispy green cloud had appeared. "Retract Grappling Hooks! Cut the engines!" screamed the com officer to the driver. "We can't let it know we're here!" Seconds later the cabin was plunged into darkness. Their anxious faces glowed from the active console monitors.

The terrifying screams continued. Some people began to pray, asking for forgiveness for their sins. Through shallow breaths of air the bio tech watched as the readings drew closer to the sensor array's position. He wished he had a weapon to use against the entity, something to defend himself against that vicious thing. Alas nothing of the sort existed; helplessness and despair took over the emotions of the science team. They waited for their imminent deaths.

The entity drew closer to the vulnerable vehicle. It retracted its body into a condensed ball of energy. It built up its power so that it could be released with a sudden burst upon its unsuspecting victim. With all its might the entity surged forward. Instantaneously the arachnid was hurled through the air. Apparently the science team was not the target.

The fierce creature skidded across the floor. It immediately spun around and began spraying acid aimlessly around. The entity easily bypassed the toxic sprays and moved in for the kill. The arachnid was thrown up against the wall. This time the enraged being did not release its grip.

Powerful electric pulses hammered the creature's body. At first the helpless arachnid withstood the ferocious pummeling. But alas the glimmering exoskeleton could not take any more. Small fractures formed on the hardened material. They slowly crawled across the surface. The electric pulses repeatedly rammed into the creature, the fractures grew into cracks.

Grayish flesh peered out of the wounds and the creature let out piercing cries of anguish as the invading vacuum of space contoured its innards. The entity would not relent. The continued onslaught dislodged the arachnid's acid sac from its socket. The sac dangled by a few tough tendons. A couple of well placed pulses severed the tough material and the sac fell to the tunnel floor in a gush of acid, as the sac membrane was ripped apart. Any rock that came in contact with the caustic substance dissolved into a bubbling mess.

By this time the hardy creature could not take anymore, its body grew limp its screams faded away. As the being concentrated its energy on the cracks chunks of flesh began dropping from the openings. Soon the entire exoskeleton laid in pieces the arachnid's innards strewn across the rough tunnel floor. Upon realizing that there was nothing left of the celestial arachnid the entity released its grip, a fragmented spinal cord clattered to the ground.

The science team looked on in horror. They could not believe the ferocity of the attack. Some of the technicians were visibly shaken from witnessing the ghastly act. They slowly moved away from the viewing portal, their eyes spoke of the horror they had seen. A few techs lingered on gawking at the manhandled carcass; whispering amongst each other while pointing through the portal.

The atmosphere was tense with emotion. They feared that the entity would turn on them at any moment. The suspense was unnerving they needed answers. "What's the status of the entity?"

"It's still out there, hovering over its kill." Replied the bio tech, his eyes fixated on his glowing console. A few more techs clamored around the console. The familiar green cloud was visible. According to the readings the entity was still taking no interest in the sensor array, which brought some relief to the stranded science team.

"What are these clusters?" an inquisitive tech asked as he pointed to the console. It displayed the familiar pattern of the entity, which resembled a wispy cloud, but this time there were concentrated areas of organic matter. The bio scanner showed them as condensed green lights in the cloud.

"I don't know I haven't seen these kind of readings before." The bio tech consulted some additional information "But from what I can tell it isn't moving."

"Good! Hope it stays that way." The wishful tech spoke to soon; the entity began the next phase of the kill. It allowed itself to gently descend upon its prey, like a silent fog enveloping its domain.

The eerily graceful motion startled the watchful technician "Dear God! It's moving!" the bio tech exclaimed. The room became silent. Everyone feared the worst.

"Is it heading our way?"

"Not that I can tell." Suddenly an excited voice came from one of the techs by the viewing portal.

"Looks what's happening to the flesh!" he called out. They all gathered around the viewing portal to see what was happening. The sight they saw was probably more horrendous than the initial attack. The gray clumps of flesh began to seethe as they violently convulsed.

An alarmed tech exclaimed, "Wasn't killing the poor bastard enough? Now it's destroying every last trace of its remains. What manner of being is this? Does it kill without reason?" these questions wandered through the minds of all people onboard the sensor array.

"That is what we were sent here to find out." Another coolly responded. The bio tech began to manipulate the controls of his workstation. People could feel the soft vibrations of the bio scanner's motors, mounted on the roof of the vehicle, as it adjusted its scanner to pick up more intricate details.

"What are you up to?"

"I have an idea." The bio tech responded curtly as he continued feeding instructions to the delicate instrument. The view on the console continually changed, however the other techs could not make any sense of it.

"Care to enlighten us?" The bio tech kept them waiting for just a few more seconds as he finished up a few fine adjustments.

"There!" he exclaimed with satisfaction. The console's screen showed a split screen view. One had a close up view of the green lights inside of the cloud. The other showed a strange and undecipherable view. Strange floating structures bounced around in a suspended medium, some showed clear signs of damage.

"What' are we looking at?" One technician asked as he studied the images on the display.

The bio tech turned to the gathered group of technicians "This boys and girls is Celestial Arachnid DNA." The science team looked on as the bio tech explained his actions, "You'll notice the familiar double helix structure found in all organic organisms." The technicians easily recognized the familiar structure once it was pointed out

"Now take a look at these strands" the bio tech adjusted the view so that they could get a better view "You see the chemical composition of these double helixes have been altered!" the science team considered the

new facts.

One of them raised their hands the bio tech acknowledged him "Why do they look damaged?"

"Because it was done in a random fashion, no consideration of the negative effects of the alterations was made." The bio tech replied

They absorbed the information and tried to deduce what was going on "What did this?" another tech asked

"The being has released a pathogen that is mutating the arachnid at a subatomic level."

They all thought intently but still could not reach a conclusion. They needed more information "Why would it do that?" the bio tech did not answer immediately he wanted them to think about it for a while.

"It's feeding!" he cried out, "It draws upon genetic material to nourish itself!" the other technicians were still confused. He pointed to the other half of the display "Look at these green points of lights inside of the entity. See how they are becoming brighter. That means they are being fortified. They must be some kind of energy store for the entity."

As the technicians gained a better understanding they started asking more focused questions "So this pathogen is released by the entity, which starts mutating its victim. This helps the entity extract genetic material, which it feeds upon. Kind of like saliva helps us digest our food."

"Exactly!" the bio tech confirmed their conclusion

"So that means the pathogen stays with the victim."

"Right." The bio tech said with an awkward look on his face. Now it was his turn to be confused, the technician was not sure where this train of thought was going. It was the sonar operator who first came to the awful conclusion.

"Jake!" an icy grip fell upon the crew as they all came to the same horrible conclusion.

"We've gotta warn them." The sonar operator turned to communications tech "Com! Contact C&C!"

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Dr. Shukai was in his office working on a paper for an upcoming symposium on Interstellar Diseases. The subject of his paper was Jake, his most astonishing patient to date. Dr. Shukai was so engrossed with his work he remained at his workstation even after the space station went under lockdown. Since he couldn't return to his quarters he decided to stay up and write some more.

After a few productive hours of work he decided he needed a break to refresh his mind. He sat up straight and felt a satisfying crack as his back aligned itself. The motion sent a surge of blood to his head that gave him a pleasant tingling feeling. He turned his head towards his office window.

From the large glass encased opening he could see the foreboding hibernation capsule. The overhead lights had been switched off and a veil of darkness obscured the details of the comatose body. Dr. Shukai wondered about the poor man, was he ever going to make it?

The only people running the station's Medical Center during this part of the time cycle was a skeleton crew of three or four medi techs. One was leisurely monitoring the readings coming from the capsule as he read a colorful comic strip off of a PDA.

The doctor decided to distract himself by checking his messages. Using his workstation console, he established a connection with C&C's communication satellite and began downloading text messages that were addressed to him. He was reading a letter from his wife when he heard a commotion.

"Doctor check out these readings!" it was the medi tech who was monitoring the hibernation capsule. Dr. Shukai secured his workstation and quickly made his way towards the capsule.

By the time he got there the overhead lights had been turned on. The room was bathed in the sterile white lights emitting from the Medical Center's ceilings.

"What is it?" the doctor asked

"I am getting peculiar readings from the DNA tag." The medi tech said as he glanced at the capsule's console. DNA tags were routinely injected into comatose or deceased bodies so that they could be easily identified. As the doctor examined the console he could see why the medi tech was so concerned. The DNA tag was no longer identifying the body as Jake McGill. What was most peculiar was the body wasn't being classified as Homo sapiens.

"This is most peculiar." Dr. Shukai thought out loud. At first he suspected a technical glitch "but how can that be, the system is brand new." There had to be another reason, so he thought some more. Finally he decided to query the tag. Using the capsule's console he interfaced with the device. Using a set of instructions that could be understood by the DNA tag, he asked which species the body belonged to. The tag began scanning a genetic sample of the man's body. The scan was compared with all DNA specifications it had in its memory; when no match was found it responded by displaying the text "unknown" on the doctor's console.

Shukai was thoroughly confused he sat down besides the medi tech. He took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes, the soothing motions helped to clear his mind. "Maybe I've made a mistake with the instruction set." He thought. He checked the instructions once more but couldn't find any errors. So he sent the same query again. Once more the tag responded with the same bizarre answer.

"How can that be? Surely we encased a human being named Jake McGill inside of this capsule." He said out loud, of course the doctor didn't expect an intelligent response from a mere technician. That's when he realized he needed more help. "When is the science team due back? Maybe they could shed some light on this enigma."

The technician consulted his PDA “They were due back hours ago however they haven’t reported in yet.”  
The technician replied

Dr. Shukai’s curiosity grew more and more. He had to find out the reason for the bizarre readings. He needed an answer now, after all the entire premise of his paper was ruined. It dealt with a human being not an unknown species. “Medi Tech!” he addressed the man sitting next to him “Prepare a bio scanner and configure it for deep penetration.”

“Understood!” the technician left to get the device. Dr. Shukai was following a hunch. If he could see the man’s DNA maybe then he could find out why he was receiving such strange readings. The technician returned with the device and began to configure it. Its sensors were faced towards the hibernation capsule. They soon began to probe the preserved body.

Dr. Shukai intently watched the scanner’s monitor as hazy images began to form. He could make out the familiar double helix and other sub atomic molecular structures. What he saw next startled both men. “It’s damaged DNA sir!” the medi tech blurted; apparently his rudimentary knowledge of molecular biology was sufficient to make a proper diagnosis.

“Indeed.” Shukai replied as he made fine adjustments to the scanner. The monitor began displaying something else. It wasn’t healthy or damaged DNA strands rather it was a third structure the doctor could not recognize.

“Hello, what’s this?” the doctor zoomed in on the mysterious structure. He watched as it latched itself onto a healthy DNA strand and ripped it apart. “My gosh!” the aggressiveness of the microorganism was something he had never seen before.

Not knowing what to make of it, he decided to consult his medical references to see if anything like this had been documented. A copy the references were stored in the memory banks of the doctor’s computer terminal he quickly made his way to his desk and typed in a search query. The computer returned several articles however he only read the most relevant ones

“Did you know that the gas moths of vixen heights secrete viruses to paralyze their prey?” he absentmindedly asked the medi tech “The virus enters the victims body and feeds on its central nervous system.” The doctor found this to be most impressive “They said that the presence that attacked Jake had low molecular cohesion, thereby implying a gas creature” he stroke his chin as he thought deeply “Is it possible that we are seeing a repeat of the gas moth’s attack?” Shukai weighed the evidence that was before him and drew a conclusion “I propose that there is a pathogen inside of Jake McGill that is attacking his DNA, thereby altering it completely.” the shocking discovery wasn’t acknowledged by the medi tech, whose eyes were fixed on the hibernation capsule.

“Sir, he’s moving.” Dr. Shukai faced the capsule. Sure enough Jake’s body was stirring. He decided to leave his desk to get a closer look.

“No need to worry. It’s just misfiring motor neurons, purely an automatic reaction.” The doctor sounded like he was convincing himself rather than the medi tech. The doctor’s disbelief in his explanation was soon confirmed. With a sudden jolt the limp body instantly became erect.

The sudden and unsuspected movement caused a wave of fright to crash through the two men. They instinctively held their breaths and stared at the rigid form with wide gazing eyes. They held their positions for a little while longer as they tried to anticipate its next move.

They didn’t have to wait long in an equally sudden jolt the body violently arched its back propelling itself through the thick nutrient broth. It seemed as if something was drawing the body towards itself. The corpse was up against the clear glass containment panel. The viscous broth no longer obscured its physical features.

"Mr. McGill, can you hear me?" Dr. Shukai cautiously asked the reanimated corpse. The doctor stared into the dull vacant eyes that once belonged to Jake McGill. They stared back with gelatinous white eyeballs. The body's skin had gone pale and the limbs devoid of life giving blood were beginning to decay. Seeing this, the doctor knew that Jake was no longer amongst the living.

Shukai had only his theory of misfiring neurons to explain the ghastly scene. But as the body began wrenching it self in horribly unnatural positions the doctor found his entire body of medical knowledge useless.

The medi tech, who was thoroughly disturbed, vomited across the antiseptic white tiles of the medical center. The doctor looked away from the excrements; a pang of nausea overcame his senses. He just wanted to leave this place. But the next actions of the ungodly being compelled him to stay. It began beating its balled up fists against the containment panel. At first the blows were clumsy and slow. But spasmodic jerks in his arms and torso began building up momentum. Soon the entire body was putting its weight into each blow, which came one after another.

"Sir, I don't think misfiring neurons can do that!" the disturbed man said as he wiped his soiled mouth across his sleeve. "We need to get out of here! Seal this place up... that thing can't get out of here."

The doctor did not immediately acknowledge the man's practical request "We could spend years studying this one phenomenon." Shukai said reverently with his gaze transfixed on the hibernation capsule, which was already showing signs of fatigue.

"We have to leave!" the medi tech screamed into the Asian man's face. "We don't know what that thing is capable of." he said while forcefully gesturing at the crazed body.

The doctor snapped out of his trance "You're right we must seal the Medical Center before he can get out." At that exact moment the containment panel shattered. A surging wave of nutrient broth cascaded across the floor. The glaring white light from above caught the crest of the waves and reflected back. The body leaped out of the opening created by its bloodied fists. It landed with a tremendous thud as more broth flooded across its backside.

The body heaved its chest heavily all the while staring across the room with sheer malice in its deadened eyes. With lumbering movements the corpse began making its way towards the main entrance. Each time it jerked itself forward foamy broth flew off its limbs.

The men looked on in horror as the horrid creature went passed them. They watched as it left the Medical Center and made its way down the hallway. Once out of sight the men breathed a sigh of relief.

"We must warn the others!" The medi tech was instantly on his feet making his way towards the Medical Center's intercom. He found the emergency distress button and activated it. In an instant the room was filled with the blaring sound of security alarms. The automated addressing system began repeating an archaic distress call, "Intruder Alert!"



Yamada's men were out patrolling the hallways and other access points of the station, in order to make sure the station was under lockdown. Security detail MK-32 was in the vicinity of the Medical Center when the alarms sounded.

"Tactical formation!" ordered the squad captain. The heavily armored security personnel formed a tight circle and moved forward. Their heavy boots clanged against the solid floors of the station as they made their way towards the Medical Center; A few seconds later the sound of thumping flesh could be heard through their helmets.

"Lock and Load!" the squad captain commanded. His men activated their automatic weapons; once activate they brought them to chest level with their muzzles facing forward. They continued marching towards the

point of distress, when they made visual contact with the intruder.

“Dear God! It’s Jake!” a wave of panic swept through the group of men. Seeing their colleague, in such a frightful state, caught them off guard. However in an instant their training kicked in, and they became emotionally detached.

“Freeze! Hands on the ground now!” The possessed corpse did not heed their command and continued rampaging down the hallway.

“I won’t repeat myself. Stand down or we will fire!” As expected the lumbering corpse did not stop. It continued forward heading straight for the heavily armed men.

“Drop him!” Sworn to protect the lives of the people on board the station Yamada’s men did not hesitate to open fire. A stream of projectiles burst out of their powerful weapons. They pierced the reanimated corpse, but they had no effect, it continued coming. With muzzles blazing the men held their positions. The valiant effort was all in vain the ungodly beast rammed into them and knocked them aside.

The quick thinking squad captain realized that their target was heading for the lower levels. He immediately contacted the security detail responsible for that section “It’s battering down the elevator doors as we speak. You have just enough time to setup a barricade around the western elevator shaft.”

“Roger that MK-32, we’ll be ready.” The gray skinned corpse had pulled apart the elevator’s heavy sliding doors and had jumped into the dark shaft. It landed on the roof of the car; seeing that it was trapped the corpse became frustrated. It let out an angry cry and began pulling on the emergency exit panel. Its still functioning ears could hear loud voices and the sound of heavy equipment outside of the elevator shaft. A part of him understood that if he continued in this manner he could be destroyed, however he was powerless to stop himself he had to answer the call of the entity.

It managed to get inside of the car and began to pry apart the sliding doors for the lower level. When it made enough room to slide its body through he was met with a blinding flash of light. Stunned the reanimated corpse began to stagger, its body was sprayed with bullets but it did not back down. The effects of the stun grenade wore off and the corpse charged towards the metal plates that had been bolted to the deck plating. The highly skilled personnel of security detail MK-59 continued their onslaught however the supernaturally strong cadaver overcame their defenses and plied through the hastily erected barricade.

The sound of heavy weapons fire and detonating stun grenades caused quite a commotion. Crewmembers resting in their quarters were awakened by the sounds of battle. They wanted to investigate the disturbance so they watched the attack from the doorways of their quarters. However their curiosity was immediately satisfied when they saw the abomination heading in their direction. They quickly ducked back into their rooms as the bleeding corpse ran past them.

“He’s heading for the airlocks!” the second squad captain said with a look of frustration on his face. “Only SENTINEX can stop him now.”



With superhuman strength the possessed body tore down the airlock door. It entered the decompression chamber and immediately made its way to the outer airlock door. The sturdier door proved harder to smash down. The corpse repeatedly smashed its self into it with greater and greater force. Completely focused on achieving its goal it paid no attention to the deadly piece of hardware, mounted in the corner of the chamber.

During station lockdown SENTINEX guns were set to surveillance mode. In this mode the gun’s scanner actively scanned the immediate surrounding for unauthorized DNA. When Jake’s body tore down the door and entered the decompression chamber the scanners had already detected it and began an analysis of its DNA. A search of the database returned no match. SENTINEX’s programming compelled it to take the next logical step.

"Halt Intruder!" Jake's altered body continued smashing the outer airlock door. "Cease all movements and stand by for Security Personnel" SENTINEX sent a silent distress message to C&C, notifying them of the intruder. A copy of the scanned DNA specifications was also sent.

"This unit is lethal and must be complied with." the digitized voice emitting from the automated weapon's speaker patch gave its final warning. The ungodly corpse, no longer able to comprehend speech, continued battering the door.

Upon realizing that all conditions for executing termination protocols had been met, the synthetic voice made one last statement "You will be terminated." With this blunt statement SENTINEX's weapon system came online. A full round of projectiles were loaded into its firing mechanism. Targeting scanners steered the muzzle towards its prey. Motion detectors made one final sweep to make sure the intruder was still being in compliant. All scan results were sent to C&C, so that they could be scrutinized in case of a mishap.

Then for one cold and deadly second the gun remained motionless, the multi chambered muzzle was cocked and aimed at its unsuspecting victim. With cold calculated precision a blitzkrieg of projectiles burst out of each chamber. The muzzle was ablaze and rotated rapidly as projectile after projectile exploded and screamed towards its target.

The first salvo found its mark and severed the left leg from its torso. The body's pain receptors no longer functioned; Jake's body felt no pain and continued hammering away. The targeting scanners adjusted the trajectory and the second salvo severed the other leg. The body could no longer support it self. It splashed into a pool of blood. Both legs were sprawled on either side and the stunted body continued to break down the door. Only this time it could not apply its full force. Its blows slowly weakened.

Upon detecting continued motion SENTINEX unleashed a third salvo, which decapitated the unholy fiend. The head rolled off and came to a rest in the pool of blood. The eyes were still fixed in their lifeless expression and they vacantly stared at the airlock ceiling.

An onlooker could tell that the headless torso was not in control of its actions. Something was controlling it and compelled it to continue pursuing a fruitless and self-destructive goal. The outer airlock door would not yield and the severed body no longer had the structural support to bring it down, yet it persisted. SENTINEX would not stop until all motion had ceased, a fourth salvo tore off the right arm another one tore of the left arm. All that remained was a bloody chest that vainly thumped against the door.

The final salvo raced along the spinal cord, cutting the chest in two. Both halves peeled away from each other. Strands of guts held them together but then gave way with the continued onslaught. The desecrated corpse no longer stirred. It lay in pieces on top of the cold chamber floor. One last sweep of the motion sensor revealed no movement. With that piece of data inputted, SENTINEX stopped its onslaught and sent a report informing C&C that the intruder had been terminated.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

The teardrop shaped craft careened through space. An onlooker could tell that it wasn't a military craft, for its bright red exterior did not make for good camouflage. It was the kind of craft you would expect the young rich nobles over at Vixen Heights to be cruising around in. Only they could afford the luxury of having twin aft thrusters and a top speed of 10 mach.

But in this part of space, the hunting ground for pirates, the sports craft seemed oddly out of place. No one, with half a brain stem, would bring their prized possession in to a known pirate stronghold. Nevertheless the lone craft swept forward, its pilot oblivious to what laid in store for him.

Without warning a large stealth craft de-cloaked a few kilometers in front of the sports craft. It seemed like it materialized out of thin air. The smaller craft was compelled to slow down and make a complete stop less it smash into the rusting behemoth.

This maneuver was typical of the pirates that operated in these parts. They liked to make their victims feel intimidated by suddenly appearing out of nowhere, with their huge vessel, which were bristling with weapons. They made sure their modified canon heads were installed up front where they could be easily seen.

"Get out of there, if ya' know what's good for ya'" a gruff voice could be heard over the sports craft's cockpit com. The pilot knew that his captor wanted him to eject his escape pod, with him in it, so that the sports craft could be easily taken. The pilot refused to comply.

"You blue bloods sure are thickheaded. Eject now or else we blast our way in!" the gruff voice gave an ultimatum to the helpless pilot. If he didn't abandon his possession the pirates would fire and break open the plexi-glass windshield. This would destroy the craft's environmental seals and the atmosphere would be sucked out of the cockpit, suffocating the pilot to death.

After waiting only a little while later the pirate decided to make good on his threat "All right buddy it's your funeral." The stealth craft's weapons came online. They were targeting the windshield when the pirates heard an unusual sound.

"What in damnation is that racket?" the pirate captain asked his band of thieves.

"Sounds like an incoming distortion wave."

"Impossible!" the furious man slammed his fist into his ship's control console "Why would Gemcore waste energy on that blue blood. It's not even their craft!" despite his confusion a distortion wave, fired from a quasar cannon, was headed their way. From the forward viewing port the crew could make out a green streak of light coming at them with tremendous speed.

As the massive wave of energy drew closer to the stealth craft the behemoth vessel began to shake. "Steady men! This beast has taken many a blow. She'll hold after this one too!" the incoming projectile streaked over the sports craft and slammed into the larger craft. The massive influx of energy instantly paralyzed the pirate's ship. With its weapons and propulsion systems offline it lay dead in the water.

For a moment there was complete stillness. But it was quickly snuffed away with the arrival of more incoming vessels. "Now what!" the agitated captain was looking through the forward viewing port when small fighter crafts suddenly began to appear. At first there were only a few then more and more came into view. They screamed over the stealth craft and quickly surrounded it. Cutting off all possible escape paths, then the armada descended.

Through a veil of stellar dust, battle craft emblazoned with the Gemcore insignia emerged. They took up

positions around the trapped vessel. They were followed by large lumbering freighter crafts, their holds eager to fill up with refined ore. Finally at the end of the convoy an impressive Command and Control field vessel appeared. The veil swept away revealing the field vessel's forward viewing port. It was made from a single rectangular piece of reinforced plexi-glass. It encompassed the entire bridge section of the vessel. Placed on top of it was a mobile quasar cannon head, its sonic crystals were still glowing from the recent discharge.

At this point the captain realized that he'd been had. The bright red sports craft was just bait. It lured him into revealing his position. If Gemcore had sent in a marked scout he would have never attacked for fear of a swift and deadly reprisal. This shrewd maneuver was not typical of the mining company and the captain was very suspicious.

"Whom am I dealing with?" he was at the com, its frequency matched with the command vessel. "I can tell your not the usual Gemcore pups they send my way!" the com remained silent "Well go on, you obviously have me, what is it you want?"

An icy voice responded "I seek to rid this sector of your kind once and for all."

The captain was taken aback for a second but he quickly masked his worry and pressed on. "Well then go on 'get rid' of me if you must. But you'll never know where I have transferred my credits. Their other repositories beside the central computer core, you know." he had been in more dire predicaments and knew that it was always possible to bribe his way out. "And I don't have to remind you that they use to belong to blue bloods like you."

"Scum like you need to be purged not appeased." Came the retaliating response.

The captain smiled on the inside "Ahh! I see we have scruples." The captain's voice took on a more cheery tone "Well men like you are certainly in short supply. Alright then take me prisoner, throw me in the brig, put me on trial or whatever you blue blooded yuppies do." The captain said mockingly. He was already thinking about the contacts he had in Gemcore penitentiary; and which of those contacts could be bribed into freeing him.

"You're already in your jail cell my friend. And I find you guilty of larceny against the corporate entity known as Gemcore. Guilty of the attempted murder of a Gemcore scout, guilty of preying on others wealth, guilty of being space scum!"

The captain was astounded by the litany of charges "On whose authority!?" he was becoming a bit nervous. This guy was a real hard case.

"On my authority and my authority alone! You should also know that I find these crimes to be insufferable and you will be punished for your crimes."

The captain decided to change tactics. Perhaps he could appeal to his captor's sense of remorse, if he had one. "Senór! I've received your warning loud and clear there is no need for unpleasantness." He paused then added "I promise you won't hear from me again."

"Liar! There will be no mercy! You and your men are sentenced to death!" the words struck the captain like an icy pick. His men, who could hear the conversation started to get agitated. Usually they were the ones doing the killing no else threatened them with death, especially not Gemcore.

"Wait! Be reasonable! Maybe we can make an agreement?" but the link had already been severed. He could hear his crew speaking in worried tones. The trapped men looked out of the viewing ports and saw that the Battle crafts were charging their weapons and aiming at the hull of the stealth craft.

"I didn't think blue bloods like you acted this way! I thought we had an understanding!" his voice fell on an inactive com link. Seeing that there was no room for negotiations he responded in kind "All right! Do what you must. You'll never take me alive!" with that final indignation the captain closed his end of the channel.

The laser turrets on board the battle crafts finished charging. The tips of the turrets were glowing from the pent up energy they had inside of them. Soon afterwards red hot lasers could be seen shooting out of them. They bombarded the hull of the stealth craft. The trapped craft was very old; its main defense was stealth. It could not take the brunt of an attack coming from a sophisticated weapons platform.

Moments later the hull began to rupture. White streams of atmosphere erupted from the laser induced fractures. The suction of escaping atmosphere caused anything close to the openings to be sucked out into space. Debris from the craft's interior was being propelled into the battlefield.

A few of the bandits were sucked out. They could be seen thrashing in the suffocating vacuum of space. A little while later they hanged motionless. By this time the laser bombardment had severely damaged the hull. The numerous fractures expanded until they combined and formed a gaping chasm running down the length of the stealth craft.

More and more debris and beings spewed from the chasm. This time some of the crewmembers were clad in space suits. The suits were equipped with jet packs and the pirates could be seen escaping from the battlefield. Apparently this was not acceptable by this contingent of Gemcore security personnel. The smaller fighter crafts surrounding the wounded stealth craft took aim at the fleeing men. Once they were locked on the fighter crafts released a torrent of machine gun fire from their firing banks. The stream of projectiles sliced through their targets leaving a crimson streak in their wake.

The lasers were now targeted inside of the chasm. Small explosions lit up the dark interior of the mortally wounded ship. The lasers started to slice through the support beams, causing the ship to break apart from its self. The stealth craft was being cut in half.



Inside of the pirate ship there was mass hysteria. Those bandits fortunate enough to find a space suit were able to survive the loss of atmosphere. Now they had to doge the incoming volleys of laser fire. Once the support beams gave way the walkways and decks crumbled. The space pirates struggled to find shelter in the fallen rubble. The best they could do was crawl into small air pockets. They rammed the butt of their machine guns into the cavities to make more room for themselves. They prayed the boarding parties wouldn't find them.

The space bandits, hidden in their air pockets, watched as small assault crafts entered their ship from the gaping chasm. The nimble crafts managed to land on the crushed decks. Once they touched down their doors flung open and out poured Gemcore security personnel, armed with Rocket Propelled Grenades (RPG) launchers. They made a perimeter of several square yards using the assault crafts as shields.

The pirates realized that they were securing ground for the next wave of invaders. A few of them were loyal to their captain they believed in what he fought for and could not allow his ship to be overtaken. They mustered up enough courage to attack the perimeter. They figured if they could punch a hole into the enemy's defenses their comrades, who had gone into hiding, would join the fight. After all none of them wanted to return to a life of servitude.

The group of valiant pirates charged forward guns ablaze. Gemcore retaliated with a heavy barrage of grenade salvos. The airborne bombs hit their targets dead on and the charging pirates were blown to bits. The ill planned insurgency was quickly snuffed out. With the area secured, several more assault crafts descended.

This larger group of security personnel was armed with assault rifles. They broke up into two teams and began searching the destroyed ship. By this time the laser bombardment had ended so the only danger the boarding party faced was the crumbling ship itself and hidden pirates.

Their objective was to secure the ship. They were given authorization to eliminate any obstacles that got in the way of the mission. Along the way the two assault teams came across pirates cowering in the rubble.

The initial charge made by the pirates was the only resistance offered. Isolated and with no command structure the individual pirates quickly surrendered.

Gemcore security personnel took the pirates as prisoners. Electromagnetic restraints were attached to their upper limbs, effectively immobilizing them. One of the freighter crafts was called in to act as a prison ship. The large vessel landed in a clearing made by the assault team. The rounded up pirates were made to enter the vessel. Outnumbered and utterly defeated they did as they were told.

As the prisoners filed into the vessel one of them began whispering something to another prisoners. This highly suspicious action caught the eye of one of the assault team member. "You there! Why are you talking to that other prisoner?" the shackled man quickly stopped talking, the guard made his way over to investigate "Organizing a prison break are ya?" With that accusation the guard rammed the butt of his RPG launcher into the prisoner's leg. He immediately fell on his knees.

The attack caused a stir amongst the captured men. They actually looked upon the fallen pirate with concern. The guard found this to be peculiar. "What were you saying?"

The prisoner continued kneeling; a bitter sneer grew across his face. "Answer me!" the guard's heavy boot crashed into the captured pirate's gut. The padding of the space suit softened the force of the blow. The pirate looked through his visor and said. "I was telling my men that Gemcore rats 'oughta bathe before taking over ships." The other pirates began to laugh "You're stinking up the whole place!!!" all of the prisoners let out hearty laughs.

The guard was not amused. A suspicious look formed on his face "Your men?" the pirate realized he said too much "You're the captain of the ship?"

Realizing he had nothing more to lose the man replied with great defiance "Yes I am."

The guard studied the man's face "You go by the name of Diablo, don't you?"

The dark skinned man smiled "I see that my reputation has traveled far and wide." He stood erect and continued; "Yes I am Diablo, captain of stealth craft Chaotica."

The guard's stern face instantly transformed into a menacing grin "I was hoping you would say that." He slung the launcher across his side and pulled out a dagger from his utility belt. The rest of the assault team kept a watchful eye on the rounded up prisoners.

"I am going to make an example out of you space scum." The words had an oddly familiar tone to them. He brought the blade of the dagger dangerously close to the space suit's air regulators.

"You wouldn't." the pirate captain said defiantly "One thing I learned about you blue bloods is that your laws make you weak. Your superiors won't allow you to commit murder, even the murder of an anarchist space bandit like me."

The guard was amused "Fair enough but who's going to find out? These men are loyal to me they will say what I tell them to say. And as far as I am concerned you resisted arrest." In one clean motion the blade sliced through the air regulators. A cloud of oxygen gas sprayed out of the space suit.

"I am your prisoner. I surrendered to you. How could you do this?" the captain started to have trouble breathing. His visor was becoming cloudy as he labored to fill his lungs with air.

"Gemcore has been too lenient with space scum like you. It's my job to rid this sector of your kind. When they see your suffocated body, your band of thieves will think twice before plundering Gemcore property again."

The captain let out a raspy voice "Spare me, I beg of you." The dying man pleaded. The other security personnel were beginning to feel uncomfortable. This was a bit too much perhaps now they should restore

his air supply. But no one dared mention this to the man holding the dagger.

The pirate captain strained to let out his last words. "At least...let me know...the name of the man who...defeated me." The guard holstered his weapon and knelt on the ground. The launcher kept him from moving close to the dying man. He carefully removed the straps of the weapon and laid it beside himself.

The captain was already suffering from a severe lack of oxygen. He could no longer kneel properly and was bent over. His gloved fingers clawed at the deck of the captured ship. "You want to know my name?" the man asked. The captain grimaced as he nodded. The man moved in closer making his visor touch the other man's visor.

Both men made eye contact. Cold beads of sweat fell from the gasping captain's contoured face. "If you must know, tell them the man who defeated you was none other than the colonel of Gemcore Security Contingent AK-99." The captain collapsed on the floor the life draining out of his body. "I go by the name of...*Ramsey!*"

## CHAPTER NINE

“What the hell happened in my Space Station?” Cruchev asked as he paced the floor of his ready room. Anger and frustration dripped from his face. Each step he took caused his holstered weapon to dip up and down with rhythmic movements of his neatly attached utility belt. Off to the side Rie Yamada and Dr. Shukai sat on a leather couch. They kept quite as they patiently watched their captain think things through.

With eyebrows furrowed in disbelief he asked, “You’re telling me that people can come back from the dead?”

The two men looked at each other, not sure who should answer, “This was not a person” Yamada replied in a detached manner “My Squad Captains reported that it was able to withstand anything they threw at it. That’s just not humanly possible.”

The captain mulled this over “And what do you have to say?” he asked the timid doctor, who immediately looked up and adjusted his glasses.

“I made a preliminary analysis of the subject’s DNA and was able to find evidence of a mutagenic pathogen. Which was so potent that the subject became another species altogether.”

Cruchev was dumbstruck but listened intently “Can you tell me more?” he had crossed his arms across his chest and gave the doctor a serious look.

Dr. Shukai showed obvious discomfort from the close scrutiny “This mode of attack occurs in other creatures with gaseous form. That implies we are dealing with a natural phenomenon. Other than that I am afraid I do not know any more. My assistant and I barely made it out alive when that thing went on a rampage.” The doctor cradled himself as he recalled the recent nightmare.

Seeing how scared the doctor was he decided to end the interrogation “Fair enough.” He then turned his attention to his chief security officer “I hear that the Science team learned of the pathogen and that they sent us a warning. Why didn’t you do anything?”

“There wasn’t enough time to put together a proper defense.” Rie Yamada tried explaining his inaction “The body was already on a rampage by the time we received the message.”

Cruchev’s face showed blatant displeasure Rie was an able security officer and showed a lot of potential that is why he had taken him under his wing, tried to make him a more capable officer and a better person. But at times he came up short; this was one of those times. Cruchev would have liked to scold Rie for not acting quickly enough. But he knew it wasn’t his fault and thought better of it “I understand.” He let out a long sigh “When can you debrief the science team?”

“They returned from the mining tunnels just a while ago. I am told they’re still in the ATV depot, unloading the Sensor Array. As soon as they settle in I plan on getting a full account of their findings.”

“Be sure to include Dr. Shukai in the briefing. I want him to start researching this matter in depth at the earliest possibility.” He said sternly “That is all.” Cruchev was signaling the dismissal of the two senior staff members from his ready room. He was already making his way to his desk when he saw that they still remained. Cruchev gave Rie an inquisitive look.

“Sir if I may?” the officer obviously had something on his mind

“Go on.” The captain said as he beckoned his loyal subordinate

“I couldn’t help notice that you are carrying a class one Photonic Emitter.” The security specialist licked his

lips before continuing, "Respectfully sir is it wise to be carrying such a rare weapon? After all it's primarily for ceremonial purposes."

Cruchev's haughty mood instantly dissolved "Rie, you know me too well." He said in a laid back manner "I am not one for showing off. I agree; such a weapon should be kept for safekeeping." He paused to collect his thoughts "But right now I need it for my safekeeping."

Yamada looked perplexed "Surely with the entire space station under lockdown any risk to your life or to the crew's is greatly reduced."

Cruchev nodded his head in agreement a grave look shadowed his face "I am not doubting your abilities. But I see a threat on the horizon; a threat so great that all our defenses will prove utterly inadequate." Dr. Shukai nervously looked at the two men, not sure if he should be hearing this "Rie, they're sending in Ramsey."

A look of shock crossed the man's face upon hearing the dreaded colonel's name. Cruchev continued "I am too hand over V-323 upon his arrival."

"We can't let him do that." Rie pleaded, "He doesn't know what he's getting into."

"I know. That is why I am devising a plan of action. Rest assured that I will not let him succeed."

Yamada looked upon his commander with pride "That's good to hear. We must take action soon, you know just as well as I do that men like Ramsey only care about the bottom line and don't care how they get there. He'll send your crew to their deaths if it means filling up another freighter craft with ore."

A look of satisfaction came across the captain's face. He was glad his security officer was with him. Although they wouldn't be working for Gemcore anymore they had to make a stand. With grim determination Cruchev turned towards Yamada and said "Ramsey is not to set foot on this station"

The officer softly nodded his head "I'll make the proper arrangements."



Deep in the recesses of core zero the entity brewed. Its gaseous form unfurled itself across the floor. Here in its sanctuary the primitive mind of the being plotted its next move.

*These thieves they are so bad they try to hurt me hurt my home crush home to pieces take away my essence leave me be I don't like the thieves they should leave why don't they leave? I don't like the thieves and they don't like me I will make the thieves leave they won't like me even more my strength is low must feed again my prey must be ready by now I called it as far as it could come I will go the rest of the way to feed on thief prey but I will have to go to the thief home to feed on thief prey maybe I should crush thief home maybe then they will leave and leave my essence alone and leave my home alone I don't like the thieves and they don't like me so I will feed on thief prey and crush thief home so that thief leave me alone...yes that is what I will do*



"I come before you with great urgency." Rie Yamada was at the head of one of the mess hall dining tables. Dr. Shukai, who had regained his composure, was also at the table along with key members of the science team. Yamada also decided to invite Raza and Chuck to the debriefing as their eyewitness accounts could prove useful.

"As I speak my sergeants are making preparations to defend the station against a possible attack, from incoming hostiles." The news caused a stir in the gathered group of people.

"I do not wish to disclose the identity of our adversary, but I do ask you to trust the decision of our captain as he has our best interest at heart. I understand that this situation is unnerving for some. But we must conduct this debriefing in an organized and systematic manner." Yamada paused to catch his breath; the weary faces of the crewmembers reminded him of how tired he was, but he pressed on.

"The conclusion we draw from this meeting will help us combat a clear and present danger; known to us as the entity. We already know that this being is capable of attacking humans, releasing a pathogen that causes the victim to mutate into another species. What we do not know is how do we counter this threat." He looked hopefully at the group of people.

Dr. Shukai spoke first "I could devise an antidote to counter the ravaging effects of the mutagenic pathogen." He said thoughtfully "However we lack the proper equipment, there is only so much that I can learn from a bio scanner."

At this comment the bio tech spoke up "Not necessarily, I believe the wide range bio scanner can help us to put together a defense, which could protect us from the entity." everybody started listening with keen interest

"Continue." Yamada urged

"Well, if we calibrate C&C's wide range bio scanner for low range scans we should be able to know the exact instance the entity enters into the vicinity of the space station."

"That's a start, but it won't be enough. We'll need some kind of barrier between us and it."

"Perhaps some kind of energy field will prove useful." The sonar operator commented.

"Possibly," Yamada thought deeply as he rubbed his chin "But we don't know enough about the physical properties of the entity to accurately choose the correct type of energy field. And besides energy based barriers are still an unstable technology we don't have personnel on board with the proper training to operate such a device."

"We could just blast the damn thing!" Chuck couldn't remain silent any longer "Let's give it some from Jake!"

"We're all for an offensive maneuver Mr. Charles" Yamada chided "But once again our lack of knowledge of the entity inhibits our ability to suitably arm ourselves."

"We do know one thing." The navigator of the science team decided to speak up "It can't pass through solid rock." He slyly eyed the participants of the debriefing "Geo scans show that this thing was released from an enclosed cavity. It was only when one of our drill jocks pierced an opening into the cavity that all this mayhem broke loose." Raza shifted in his seat uncomfortably "Regardless I suggest sealing the mines by collapsing all the tunnels. That way we will be able to trap it."

"Gemcore has far too much to gain from the mines; they would never authorize a complete and permanent shutdown. And besides we do not know the exact location of the entity who's to say it's still in the tunnels?" Yamada frankly said.

Raza listened to the various plans. None of them seemed right to him. They all revolved around taking advantage of the entity's physical properties so that they could destroy it. Normally that would have worked but their lack of knowledge was a major hurdle to overcome. They needed more resources, which they didn't have. He had another idea.

"Do you have something to say?" Yamada asked when he saw that Raza had raised his hand "Yes I do." Everyone at the table turned their attention to him. The close scrutiny made him nervous; he knew some of them blamed him for what had happened even though he was following orders when he made that opening in the entity's lair.

"We aren't asking the right questions. Although a plan of attack is a good approach we should be thinking about why the being attacked in the first place." The comment caused a soft murmur in the room "I can't help but think that some how we provoked an attack."

"That's absurd, what have we done to warrant the death of one of our crew members?" Yamada shot back.

The harsh words from the usually calm senior officer startled Raza but he pressed on "I don't condone the actions of the entity, but perhaps it was in self defense." A loud clamor of voices broke out in the room.

"It is a fiend!" the timid doctor spoke with a sudden burst of energy the recent rampage was still fresh in his mind "It is incapable of any sophisticated cognitive acts, let alone something as complex as self awareness! Therefore the justification of self defense does not apply." The doctor continued lambasting the previously unknown alien life form "It is a brutal and savage thing which should be met with due force." Other voices of agreement could be heard.

Raza looked on in dismay, how could they be so irrational? In their present state of mind he wasn't sure if he could convince the others that his point of view may be correct. "Settle down!" Yamada waved his hands as he brought the room to order, "Everyone is allowed to voice their opinions but we must maintain order." The voices quickly subsided; he then looked towards Raza and asked, "What makes you think the entity is defending its self?"

Raza was relieved that the security officer was at least considering his theory "Well maybe it perceives us as a threat because we have invaded its sanctuary; and now it is forcing us to leave. I mean hasn't anyone else noticed that the entity shows itself to us only when we were drilling? I was in my drilling rig when I heard those awful moans, Chuck and his crew were mining gold ore with their sonic picks when Jake was attacked. I can't help but notice a pattern."

This time no one had a fiery retort to make. They sat at the table with puzzled looks on their faces. The sonar operator also looked perplexed as he tried to find a flaw in Raza's theory. "Why was the sensor array attacked, it can't drill rock?"

Raza thought about the sonar operator's argument "I can't explain that one." the other man made a smug expression after hearing that.

"Now wait a minute." The other science team member spoke up "I think Raza is on to something." He collected his thoughts before proceeding "When we were stuck in the auxiliary tunnel our bio scanner picked up a Celestial Arachnid burrowing into the tunnel. That creature is able to move through solid rock by dissolving it with its acidic saliva. The entity attacked and killed that creature."

"What are you implying?" Yamada asked

The Bio Tech tried to explain Raza's theory "It seems to me that any sort of destructive act against the entity's lair causes it to violently retaliate. In essence, it's defending itself." These last words struck a chord. The members of the briefing seriously considered this revelation. The patterns of attack did have a certain degree of purpose behind them. As they contemplated further on the matter they gained more understanding.

"I wouldn't want anyone messing up my house." The surprisingly sympathetic words came from the entity's most vociferous opponent, Chuck. "I've known Raza ever since drilling started on this god damned rock. And I learned a lot from him, 'cuz he knows a lot about spiritual stuff and things. So if he says our drilling and stealing minerals from this here asteroid is making this thing angry, I reckon it to be true." The vote of confidence from the burly miner gave Raza a boost of confidence. He was glad someone like Chuck managed to see the truth; perhaps there was hope for the rest of them.

Raza gave his hefty friend a wink and then expectantly looked towards Yamada. All members of the briefing had their say and were now waiting for the Chief Security Officer to pass judgment. What will be the official conclusion drawn from this debriefing? Even more important based on that conclusion what actions

will the crew have to commit to?

Rie Yamada stood at the head of the table. Both hands laid flat on the greasy surface, the sanitation crew didn't get a chance to clean up from the last meal. The stern Asian man fixed his gaze on the gleaming table top, his eyes showed deep concentration. After a few moments he looked up and faced the audience.

"We are judged by our intentions." He let his words flow from his mind and pour through the room "What were our intentions? Did we intend to learn from the wonders of the Universe? Or did we intend to exploit the Universe? Did we stop and think about the consequences of our actions? Or did we force ourselves on to uncharted ground, thinking we as humans are masters of all and none dare scathe us!" the words caused a ripple of unrest.

"Gentleman, we are suffering the consequences of our intentions. Our mandate was to strip this asteroid of all its riches. No thought was given to what this rape could do. This arrogance has made our first encounter with this alien life form a disaster." He seemed to be pleading to someone. "Instead of gaining a deeper understanding of the miracles of life we have alienated it becoming its enemy." He pointed an accusing finger at the gathered group of people "Look inside yourselves gentlemen, for I have seen evil and it is us." Yamada looked visibly shaken he hung his head low as he gathered his thoughts.

"Now as chief security officer I am left with very little options. If we stay here we die. We have no means of defending ourselves. In these circumstances I must advise Captain Cruchev to immediately evacuate all personnel from these premises. As of this moment Gemcore mining space station V-323 has been condemned."

# CHAPTER TEN

This may be the last journal entry I make as captain of Gemcore Mining Space Station V-323. After General Walker, the Premier Chairman of Gemcore, gave his ultimatum he dispatched his henchman Colonel Ramsey to forcefully remove any obstacles that are hindering mining operations. Currently the Colonel is en-route to the space station. Long-range scans have detected a large number of corporate vessels approaching our coordinates; he's been given an armada.

I am grateful to my crew who has backed my decision to make a stand against this oppression. Under the watchful eye of Chief Security Officer Rie Yamada, my security personnel have completed their preparations and are ready to defend the station against an all out assault. Yamada has also debriefed key members of the science team, and eyewitnesses to the entity's attacks. He has concluded that we will not be able to eradicate the entity as we lack the resources to put together a proper offensive maneuver. The situation is further complicated with our inability to defend ourselves from its attacks.

He recommended a complete shutdown of all mining operations and an immediate evacuation of all Gemcore personnel from the premises. After weighing the facts I concurred with his assessment, however with Ramsey's armada approaching, I have decided to postpone the exodus.

The entity has not made its presence known to us for quite some time. We fear it will try to make a move for its latest kill. The desecrated corpse of Jake McGill still lies inside of the airlock. The inner door has been pressurized in the hope that we will be able to keep the entity from entering the space station. Having done all that is humanly possible, we now wait for the coming storm with baited breath.



From the bridge of the command vessel colonel Ramsey could make out the rough outlines of the mineral laced asteroid. It was in the daybreak portion of its orbit and currently rode on top of the moon. A sudden rush of malice overcame him. He replayed the recent killing spree in his mind. "It was a good kill. I especially enjoyed sending that anarchist devil back to hell." He thought to himself as he absentmindedly toyed with his diamond encrusted lapel pin. He looked towards the approaching asteroid. "Hopefully these yellow bellied pups will put up a fight."

Blood thirsty as he was he was too clever to jump into anything blindly. He decided to send in a scout to ascertain the enemy's defenses. "Bring the prison ship to the front of our formation." He barked his commands to the pilot of the converted freighter craft.

The pilot's reply came through the com "Yes Sir!" Ramsey watched as the large craft made its way through the group of vessels. Upon reaching the forward flank Ramsey gave his second command.

"Approach the space station at full impulse." The pilot hesitated to respond.

"Sir?" the colonel didn't like it when his subordinates questioned his decisions.

"Do as I say, you insolent fool!"

"Right away Sir." The freighter craft started picking up speed and left the safety of the armada. It gradually made its way to the asteroid. "Now I'll see what that bleeding heart Cruchev has in store for me."

The prison ship moved towards its target. The pirate's rough voices could be heard through the thick bulkhead of the cockpit. The pilot grew tense "I hope those brutes don't try anything, the last thing I need is for them to hijack this vessel." He thought to himself. He eyed the ominous quasar cannon head perched on top the besieged space station. He kept reminding himself that this was a Gemcore space station and that he was a Gemcore employee. "We're both on the same side." He nervously thought to himself. He hoped

the crew of the space station shared his point of view.

They soon made their beliefs clear. The pilot's com came to life "Stand down freighter craft! You've breached our security perimeter."

"V-323 this is Freighter craft: gamma nine requesting permission to dock."

"Permission denied" came the terse reply. The pilot was stunned by the reply, now what was he suppose to do? He was clearly ordered to make contact with the space station. He decided to press forward rather than face the colonel's wrath.

The pilot continued narrowing the gap between him and the space station. This elicited a more provocative response. "Stand down! Or you will be fired upon." This time they got the attention of the pilot he quickly contacted the command vessel. "Sir they are threatening to fire if I don't stop. What are your orders?"

"Continue forward those yellow bellies wouldn't dare." The pilot found the colonel's words for the space station crew to be a bit callous. He began to wonder why they wanted to fire upon him if he got too close. "Do they consider us to be a threat?" the recent massacre of the pirates made that seem plausible "Dear lord? What's Ramsey gotten us into now?" the lone pilot grew more worried as he looked across the top portion of the station. He could make out the lethal silhouettes of the space station's laser turrets. They were charging up.

Not sure what to do next he suddenly had a horrible realization, his life and the lives of the captured pirates were expendable. The ensuing torrent of laser fire fell upon the prison ship with great precision. The streaks of glowing red energy quickly tore through the exterior hull. They found their way to the fusion reactor that powered the spacecraft. The heat from the projectiles melted the core's protective layers. When the radioactive fuel was ignited the ensuing detonation incinerated everything within its reach.

Ramsey shielded his eyes against the searing fireball. He let out a manic chuckle "Those pansies don't want the big bad colonel inside their space station, do they?" The thought brought a cruel sneer on his face "Well then I guess I'll just have to huff and puff and blow my way in!" he laughed some more. He then turned his thick neck towards the com and addressed the armada.

"Battle crafts! Take the forward flanks. Fighter crafts spread out; you are to maintain cover over the larger ships at all times." The various pilots acknowledged the order and quickly executed them. The new offensive formation of the armada pleased the colonel. Surely Cruchev will be able to guess his intentions.



Rie Yamada had given the orders to terminate the unarmed freighter craft. His guilt rose when he recalled that they had detected several life signs on board. He knew that in order to defend the space station they would have to take more actions like this. "But that pilot was innocent he was only following orders." His thoughts conflicted as he looked through the large viewing portal. He was in the command and control section of the space station and was overseeing the defensive operations of the space station. Cruchev was also there he was discussing some thing with one of the crewmembers, who was seated in front of a display console.

The crewmember gestured at the display and talked excitedly. The captain also was talking and nodded his head every once and a while. Soon afterwards, the two remained silent as the captain furrowed his eyebrows and thought deeply. With a look of resolve Cruchev stood up straight and made his way towards Rie Yamada.

"We have a situation"

"Other than Ramsey's fleet closing in on us?"

"Much worse then that." He said with a tired smile "He's looking for a fight. Tactical scans show that the

armada has successfully executed an offensive formation.”

“He’s looking us in the eye.” The security officer concluded.

The captain nodded in agreement “I intend to stare him down.” He said with fierce determination “After analyzing the scan we found a flaw.”

“A flaw?” Yamada asked with interest.

“Yes a weakness in the formation that we can exploit.” The captain said with pride. He always did well with tactical simulations during his training at the space force academy. His instructors considered him to be a natural tactician.

“How?”

“We can use the quasar cannon. Our calculations show that if we target a distortion wave to discharge over the armada the wake will have enough energy to damage a majority of their ships.”

Yamada was speechless, the ferociousness of the plan astounded him “Sir surely you can’t be serious?”

“Rie trust me on this, it’s the right thing to do. We can’t possibly fight off every ship in Ramsey’s fleet, which is closing in on our position as we speak. If they get any closer we won’t be able to fire the distortion wave.” Cruchev could sense that his Chief Security Officer was doubtful, but that couldn’t be helped “I can’t stress the point anymore we have a very small window of opportunity, in which we can save the space station. We must act now!”

Yamada couldn’t refute the captain’s logic. He had made a strong case. It was just that he couldn’t believe he would have to give the command to fire upon his own people. Until now the quasar cannon had only been fired on non-Gemcore personnel. However, he knew in these circumstances drastic measures had to be taken.

“By doing this you understand that you have declared war. Gemcore will have nothing to do with us after this. We’ll be marked men no one would want us not even the sovereigns.”

Yamada was referring to the contacts the captain had made with the United Federation of Sovereign nations (UFSN) while he served with their space force. The UFSN was the only viable counterweight that could rival the power and influence of mega corporations such as Gemcore. The two parties often exchanged hot words “I understand what is at stake here. We will do what is honorable.” Yamada remained silent, proving that he was also in agreement.

“Very well captain I’ll ready the weapon, God help us all.” Cruchev watched as the chief security officer made his way over to the com station. A flurry of emotions built up inside of him. Rie Yamada’s word had struck a chord. This was truly the point of no return from here on he had committed his men to a path of war. The notion of Gemcore personnel firing upon each other was so surreal. After all he had worked so hard at creating bonds of brotherhood between men. And to compound the problem they would be cut off from the wealthiest corporate entity in the galaxy. If they survived they would be shunned by all and would be forced to live on the fringes of society. For an instance Nicolai entered into a trance like state, the hallowed word, Amen softly left his lips; thus concurring with Yamada’s prayer.

The familiar vibrations of the quasar cannon’s power shaft, broke the trance like state he was in. They grew stronger as he made his way to the eastern section of the glass dome. Soon afterwards the sonic crystals would be charged and the activated cannon head would be raised into the upper section so that its distortion wave could be targeted through the targeting capsule. “I am ready for you Ramsey.” Cruchev thought as the vibrations slowly subsided.



Ramsey was on the com with his lieutenant, they were going over the progress of the armada. So far their approach vector was clear of any hostile spacecrafts. They were on the lookout for a possible retaliation by the pirates. They might decide to ambush them for killing one of their captains. But they were not too concerned; the bonds of brotherhood amongst the space pirates were feeble.

“What’s this?” Ramsey asked the lieutenant

“Sir?” came the awkward reply

The man’s lack of understanding caused Ramsey to get infuriated “You fool! Here you are telling me that we can safely approach the space station when in fact they are charging their weapons!” Ramsey could see the greenish glow of a quasar cannon head charging up, from the bridge of the Command and Control field vessel. It was a tiny light in the distance but nonetheless it was visible to the naked eye.

The com remained silent for a while “Yes...yes they are” he stammered

The colonel leaned over in his chair and screamed into the com “Then disable that damn weapon before they open fire!” his voice strained each syllable as he spoke.

“Yes sir! Right a way sir!” the lieutenant hastily severed the com connection so that he wouldn’t have to face the colonel’s wrath any more.

Ramsey sat in his chair with a beleaguered expression. “Must I think of everything.” He thought to himself as he cradled his head. His fingers sunk into his skin as he rubbed his forehead and tried focusing his attention on the impending battle. The battle ships had already begun to charge their lasers turrets. However the colonel feared they were already too late. He could tell that the space station’s quasar cannon was already in the last stage of the pre-ignition sequence.

The main viewing portal of the field vessel’s bridge was laced with transparent electronic devices. One of these devices was a high-resolution viewfinder, which Ramsey could interface with using controls implanted in the sides of his seat. He selected a coordinate on the battlefield and instructed the viewfinder to magnify tenfold.

Once he got a closer look his worst fear was realized. The quasar cannon’s targeting capsule had already picked out a target and was locked into position. “Lieutenant! Fire all lasers at the targeting capsule.”

The lieutenant immediately replied “Firing lasers now!” A crimson hue engulfed the battlefield as every single laser turret in the armada fired its lethal projectile at the quasar cannon.

Needle thin beams of energy raced to pierce their target. However they never got the chance; all could feel the unmistakable sensation of an erupting distortion wave. Ramsey and his men watched as a green streak of light burst out of the cannon. It raced towards them with ferocious agility.

The numerous laser projectiles were useless against the massive bulk of the distortion wave. It thundered over the armada, wreaking havoc in its wake. The ships endured massive jolts of energy, as they coursed through their metal frameworks. Faulty viewing portals smashed apart betraying the encapsulated crew to the harsh vacuum of space. Fighter crafts guarding the upper section of the formation exploded into fiery wreckage.

Ramsey looked through his ship’s hi-res viewfinder. He surveyed the destruction with stern eyes. He quickly assessed the situation and found that most of the ships were still intact. “Damn the quasar cannon! Move in hard and fast!” he cajoled his lieutenant into action.

“Acknowledged!” the fleet began picking up speed some of the battle crafts had sustained hull fractures in the attack but managed to continue the fight. “Get as close to V-323 as you can, let’s see them try that again.” The ships entered the vicinity of the space station and quickly took up firing positions.

“Concentrate lasers on the targeting capsule! Fire on my mark!” after waiting a few moments he curled his lips and exclaimed “Fire!” once again a torrent of lasers raced toward the space station. This time they found their mark, projectile after projectile sliced into the quasar cannon. In response V-323’s laser turrets came online and began firing at the battleships. The fighter crafts immediately swooped in and blasted the lasers. The overwhelming firepower of the armada quickly subdued the space station’s defenses. Once the targeting capsule was disabled V-323 was theirs for the taking.

Ramsey was pleased with the situation he took his seat and established a com link with the captured station “Nicolai Cruchev, this is Colonel Ramsey I am in command of Gemcore Security Contingent AK-99. My men have disabled your outer defenses you are hopelessly outnumbered and outgunned.” He enjoyed humiliating men like Cruchev, bleeding hearts every last one of them “Nicolai Cruchev, our employer has relieved you of your duties. Your authority over this space station has been terminated, effective immediately.” He waited for a response “I order you to open the airlocks and allow my boarding party to enter.”

Inside of the now battle scared observation dome of Command and Control, Cruchev gave a knowing nod to Yamada. The chief security officer acknowledged the silent instructions and quickly left to carry them out. Cruchev then turned to the com and responded “This is Nicolai Cruchev, Captain of Gemcore Mining Space Station V-323. I cannot comply with your orders this space station has been condemned no one is allowed in.”

“Mr. Cruchev you do not have the authority to make such a decision.”

“I am afraid it’s not my decision to make. We have suffered attacks from an unknown alien life form. We’ve investigated a possible defense but were unable to find one. Our only remaining course of action is to evacuate the premises.”

“Mr. Cruchev! I have not come here to hear stories about monsters that go bump in the night.”

“I don’t tell stories, Ramsey.”

The colonel became annoyed “You are trying the patience of my employer and I. You will comply with my orders and the crew of V-323 will continue to mine this asteroid!”

“I could give a rat’s ass to you or your employer.” With that piercing remark Cruchev ordered the few remaining laser turrets to be activated and aimed at the field vessel.

“Come now, you can’t be serious. You don’t really mean that, after all Gemcore has done for you?” he inquired, seeing that his words were not taking effect he tried another approach “You think your weapons are a match for my fleet? You think I can’t destroy you whenever I choose to?” He said in a cool manner.

“Ramsey you do not know what you are getting yourself into. You have no idea what we’ve been through.” He knew there was no reasoning with a maniac like Ramsey but he had to buy some time “Are you familiar with the gas moths that reside in the catacombs of vixen heights?”

“I’ve heard of them.” The colonel replied in a bemused manner

“Well imagine their bigger meaner cousin attacking you, altering your DNA and taking control over your body.”

Ramsey let out a crackle “My dear man!” he gasped between laughs “You’ve been in space for too long. I do believe the nitrous-oxides are affecting your mental abilities!” he burst out laughing again. “I didn’t think a hero such as yourself was prone to hallucinations, what with your training and all.”

“All right colonel, if you do not wish to acknowledge clear signs of our ordeal then perhaps you should come see them for yourself.” The laser turrets were deactivated and an airlock’s outer door was opened. The mobile field vessel eagerly moved in to dock with the opening. Ramsey and a small boarding party departed

the field vessel and entered into the condemned space station.



Ramsey barged into the dimly lit airlock, his eyes flared giving them a manic look. He was followed by a group of heavily armed men. The sole thought in his mind was to get to Nicolai and relieve him of his command. He was so determined to reach his goal that at first he didn't hear the familiar clicking sound. It was the whirling sound of the servomotors that got his attention. Off in the corner lurking in the shadows the airlock's SENTINEX gun had scanned their DNA. The boarding party began to feel uneasy. They looked up anxiously awaiting the gun's next move. Ramsey's mind raced with paranoid thoughts "Nicolai wouldn't be mad enough to delete my DNA specifications from the database, would he? If he did we should have enough time to fire RPGs at that thing and disable it before it kills too many of us." Then he realized to prevent such a possibility Gemcore sent updated employee bio-data to the space station's database on a regular basis. This eased his anxiety a bit, the gun remained motionless and they continued on.

They penetrated the space station further. The hallway they entered contained a long row of airlocks stretched in either direction. Since the station was under lockdown no mining crews were present. Although they would never admit it, the darkened corridors and imposing structure of the space station intimidated the boarding party. After all they were entering an area populated with desperate hostiles, who were willing to sacrifice their lives and the lives of others in pursuit of a hopeless cause. Who knew what to expect from them.

With grim determination the boarding party began marching towards the Command and Control section, the colonel was up front, his automatic weapon's beacon was activated and it cast a blanket of light in the darkness. As they pressed forward the light revealed a startling discovery, blood streaks on the floor. The group of intruders instantly became alert and assumed a tactical formation. They followed the glistening trail of blood to one of the numerous airlocks.

The airlock's inner door was sealed; Ramsey ordered his men to secure the area, they had to make an investigation. When one of his men signaled, all clear, he approached the door's security panel and punched in the code for security override. The door slowly slid open, a strong stench suddenly bombarded the colonel's nostrils. It was a smell he had grown familiar with during his time on the battlefield; it was the smell of a rotting corpse.

Despite an involuntary wave of nausea he cautiously entered the airlock, gripping his weapon tightly. The beacon's light slowly flowed across the floor; the blood streak had grown thicker and was now forming a pool. When the light revealed a decapitated head Ramsey began to wonder if the nonsense Nicolai was rambling on about had some truth to it. "Could the crew of V-323 be under an alien attack?" The light penetrated the airlock further; he found desecrated body parts strewn across the floor. What was more peculiar was the flesh, it was seething and violently convulsing. "This is ludicrous." The grisly scene was making some of the boarding party members nauseous. Not sure what to make of the gruesome corpse and its strange behavior they left the airlock and continued on towards their ultimate goal.



Yamada was tracking the movements of the boarding party using a hand held bio scanner. "They're leaving the airlocks, hurry up!" he said to one of his security officers. Who was crouched down on the floor, tinkering with a small electronic device.

The officer stood up "I am finished over here Sir."

"Great tell the others to move out." the officer entered a small alcove to round up the rest of the security detail. They made sure they didn't leave anything behind and then quickly left the area so that they wouldn't be detected.

A few moments later Ramsey and his men rounded the corner; their battle ready boots echoed in the

cavernous corridor. They were heading in the direction of the alcove when they heard the unmistakable sound of grinding metal. The sound had a scratchy quality to it and came from either ends of the hallway. The men instantly formed a circle and aimed their RPG launchers in both directions. The scraping sound grew closer. The men watched as two rotating drill bits came into view. "Drilling rigs, inside of the station?" Ramsey found the situation most bizarre. Never the less, two behemoth drilling rigs turned into the spacious hallway and headed straight for them. Ramsey considered firing the RPGs but decided against it. The close proximity of the detonation would affect them as well. Seeing no other option the men made a hasty retreat for the alcove.

Ramsey did not like being cornered this way, it went against every principle of strategic combat. However if he had stood his ground the rigs would have made mince meat out of him and his men. At least the alcove was too narrow for the huge vehicles, which continued lumbering forward. Their rotating drill bits made a tremendous racket, one of the men suggested firing an RPG using the round enclosure as cover. Ramsey denied the request, the drill bits were impervious to the small explosives, it would be a waste of ammunition, they would just have to wait it out. The intruders watched as the two machines moved closer together. They would have to stop eventually less they smash into each other but they showed no sign of stopping. Had those drill jocks gone suicidal?

Everything about the situation was most bizarre, how did these rigs get inside the station, the ATV Depot's inner doors were too small for them. Their questions were soon answered when the two drill bits came into contact, instead of a massive explosion the two objects seemed to disappear into each other. The men watched with perplexed expressions as the two vehicles consumed each other. Every now and then they could see them flickering, there surface details would go blank and then reappear. The colonel was the first to realize the ruse "Holograms!" he alerted his men "We've been had!" at that same instant the alcove was drenched in thick white gas. The men grabbed their throats, as they had troubling breathing, their eyes swelled up with tears nearly blinding them. "Very clever Cruchev, very clever!" he cursed his antagonist between labored breaths.

Being resourceful as usual he pulled out a gas mask and instantly donned it. He left the gassed men behind gasping for air. He walked through the lifelike images, easily flowing through the projected beams of lights. Hoping there wouldn't be any more tricks he headed for the upper section of the station.



Cruchev and Yamada's men barricaded themselves inside of the glass dome. The massive battle crafts hovered in view "He's on the upper level and closing in on our position." Yamada said while consulting his bio scanner. He raised his arms and flicked his wrist forward, security personnel moved forward reinforcing their barricade. The large interlocking doors of Command and Control had been sealed. Gemcore knew that this section of the space station was extremely sensitive and would be a high priority target for hostile intruders. That is why in addition to having horizontally moving sliding doors they supplemented the entrance with vertical sheets of metal. The twelve-inch thick metal curtains were only drawn in emergency situations. Since, this was where they would be making their last stand Cruchev deemed them necessary.

Ramsey got off of the elevator and entered the shadowy corridor. From either side he heard SENTINEX guns scanning him. Knowing that the machines would take no further actions he approached the large metal doors of C&C. Finding them locked he smirked and pulled out a universal access key from his utility belt. Gemcore had adequately equipped him for this hostile takeover. He slipped the rectangular key into the door's security panel. It instantly accepted the key and began to unlock itself. The four sections of the door slid apart simultaneously creating a wide rectangle. As the door slid further apart the rectangular opening grew wider revealing the amassed group of security personnel. He peered through his gas mask and saw Cruchev standing behind the barricade with his senior officers and the entire security contingent previously allocated to V-323. "Traitors every last one of them." Ramsey thought as he entered the large room.

"Freeze!" one of the security officers cried out. Ramsey cocked his head in the direction of the voice and aimed his weapon at the man. A burst of lead from the colonel's weapon smashed into the man's face, he instantly crumpled onto the floor. Ramsey turned his attention to Cruchev daring him to make his next

move.

"Stand down!" ordered Cruchev. His men instantly lowered their weapons.

"Wise decision Mr. Cruchev" Ramsey said in a cynical tone. He pulled off his mask revealing his manic gaze "For I only had to give one command and my fleet would have instantly incinerated you, right where you stand." he said with a hideous grin "Mr. Cruchev, I hereby relieve you of your command."

Under the circumstances there was only one way Nicolai Cruchev could respond "Acknowledged, I hereby stand down as Captain of V-323."

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

The frozen stillness of space was disrupted by the entity, as it raced across the rocky surface of the asteroid. Its swirling mass dipped in and out of razor sharp fissures and bounded across oversized lumps of rock. Its primal mind ached for one thing and for one thing only, nourishment. It became dimly aware of the station's floodlights as it drew closer. Light was useless for a creature brewed in darkness; it used its biological link with the pathogen to guide itself to its fallen prey. The gaseous body of the entity collided with the cool steel door of the airlock.

*Thief prey! I feed on thief prey now. But thief prey is in thief home must get into thief home.*

The airlock door was virtually a solid wall of steel and it kept the entity from moving further. Frustrated by the barrier it began ramming it self into the pressurized door. After furiously battering itself against the unyielding object, it began to peck at the airlock seal, groping for a way in. Its primitive tactile senses "felt" the faint escape of atmosphere from a nano-sized fissure.

*Ah! Thief home has hole for me.*

Molecule by molecule it made its way into the airlock. On the other side the entity's entire mass slowly trickled in. Once it had completely transferred itself, the robust creature collected it self until it was whole again. Then without hesitation the silent predator descended on the transformed human flesh, wrapping it in an invisible cloud of bioelectric energy.

It instantly began extracting nutrients from the severed corpse. This was the first time the entity had fed on a higher life form. The complex proteins present in the congealed blood gave it a renewed surge of energy. Its strength peaked and then intensified further. The being gorged on the body until there was nothing left.

*Thief prey good! Thief prey give me strength, stronger then before. Must feast on more thief.*

The entity made its way out of the airlock and moved deeper into the space station. Its floating mass aimlessly traveled through the abandoned corridors. Its primitive mind surveyed the space station.

*Thief home big. Take lots strength to crush thief home. All thief home must be crushed then theifs leave me alone.*

It continued on its journey making its way through out the station. On occasion it would pass by an oblivious crewmember. The being was tempted to taste human flesh at such times. However it did not require feeding and continued wandering. After some time it stumbled upon the refinery. Since all mining activities had ceased the ore trolleys were empty and lay inactive inside of the tubules. When the refinery is manned work crew protect their lungs through the use of pulmonary filters, for the air is always filled with pulverized particles of mineral ore. These particles were now stimulating the entity's senses. It could detect the unmistakable sensation of its sanctuary.

*My home in thief home?*

The feeble mind of the primitive creature wrestled with the conflicting notions. Following its natural instincts, the creature attempted to locate a crevice or fissure in which it could curl up in and rest. It moved towards the tubules, when they entered the refinery they merged into a single nozzle. The hard polymer exterior of the nozzle didn't feel comfortable so it decided to move on. However it only came across smooth walls and more alien instruments. The entity was confused clearly it was in its element yet it did not *feel* that way. It decided to make one last attempt.

The higher concentration of particles on the rock grinders attracted the being. After another failed attempt to hide itself inside of the refinery's machinery the creature became restless.

*This is not my home! This is thief home but my home in thief home, why?*

With its curiosity peaked the entity made its way to the conveyor belt that fed a steady stream of raw ore to the grinders. A few chunks were left behind; it immediately pushed them towards the diamond studded drum wheels of the grinder. The stones collided with the wheel instantly shattering into smaller bits.

When he saw the stone falling apart his spotted memory conjured up images of his encounters with the miners; a titanium drill bit bursting into his ancient sanctuary, sonic picks gutting the walls of his home, the sensor array scanning the mining tunnel, watching its every move. The entity had learned enough to figure out what was going on.

*Not thief prey is killer. Prey is mean to me. Killer prey must leave, must leave now!*

The entity let out a wail full moan. The overwhelming anguish of the discovery welled up inside of him. His psyche was consumed by the thought of the senseless destruction of his dwelling. He couldn't comprehend why the humans were so brutal. All he knew was that it had to stop.

The distraught creature let out its distinctive battle cry, the bloodcurdling scream that once raced across ancient cavern walls now echoed in the machine encrusted refinery. Onlookers would observe strands of electrostatic energy appearing out of thin air as the scream intensified. It then grew into a piercing shriek; the pulsating sound waves hammered the walls; which began to vibrate.

Its defense mechanisms kicked in to overdrive. The pain inside of its consciousness fueled the continued onslaught. The sound waves began to reach stratospheric frequencies. Human auditory senses would have been unable to pick up the super sonic roar. But they would be able to see that the glowing strands of energy were taking on a more condensed form. They grew into a floating sphere of highly charged particles. The sphere barely contained itself as it drew in more energy. Its boundaries were eager to rupture.

*Killer prey mean to me. I told Killer prey to leave but its stays. It hurt home again and again. I will show no mercy!*

A cataclysmic detonation of charged particles burst from the entity's soul. The room was engulfed in a blinding white light. The weakened walls gave way to the deluge, causing the refinery to burst at the seams. The four corners of the blocky structure tore apart as pulsating currents of energy plunged through them.

The harsh vacuum of space instantly invaded the artificial cavity. Clenching the vile machinery in its grip. It tore them away from their grounding and hauled them into the black void of space. Jettisoned on an eternal trajectory into deep space, they could no longer rape the asteroid.



The dead security officer's body was wrapped in a company issued body bag. It would soon be unceremoniously ejected from an airlock. Management would most likely not uphold the insurance claim that would be eventually made by the deceased's family members, on the grounds of "willful endangerment of life". No one threatened the colonel and expected to live.

Some of Yamada's men defected once they had realized that the station was lost. Those loyal to him and Cruchev were rounded up and disarmed. Gun toting security personnel kept a watchful eye over them as they sat huddled against the wall. Crewmembers that once reported to Cruchev now reluctantly sat at the numerous consoles of Command & Control. Ramsey arrogantly strode amongst them overseeing the handover of the space station.

He had already ended the lockdown of V-323. Even at this moment miners, sifters, and drill rig operators were emerging from their quarters. They had been ordered to begin mining operations immediately. However the brutal death of Jake still hung heavily in their hearts. They were not ready to brave the mining tunnels, especially since the conclusion drawn from the Science Team's investigation suggested

evacuating the asteroid. When the station walls began to violently vibrate, evacuation seemed like a pretty good idea.

“Captain can you feel that?” Yamada sat cross-legged on the cold floor of C&C. He turned towards Cruchev and repeated the question. The captain sat beside him but did not answer. His knees were pulled up against his chest as he hugged himself. He looked towards the glass dome with a vacant expression. The armada still hovered overhead. Their weapons were menacingly trained on the dome. It wasn’t clear if his mind registered what was happening around him.

“Captain!” Yamada tugged at him trying to break him out of his trance. His eyes became alert and were fixed on the Asian man.

“Captain can you feel that?” Nicolai did feel the vibrations and had already figured out what was causing them.

“I have given my word.” He softly replied, “I no longer have the authority to make a move.”

“Since when did you need authority to take action?” Rie questioned

Nicolai smiled “Your right, but under the circumstances we can’t pull a stunt too many lives will be put in jeopardy. Hopefully Ramsey will come to his senses.” Yamada thought that was highly unlikely.

Nevertheless the Colonel was in charge and he had to do something “Are those damn crystals out of alignment?” he barked into the com.

“Negative sir, their harmonic frequencies are within regulation.” Replied the lower level Quasar Cannon operator. He had already retrieved the cannon head from the tattered capsule and was running a series of diagnostic tests.

“There must be something wrong with the infernal thing. After all we gave it a pretty good beating.” He said with a cynical chuckle.

“I’ll look into it sir.” Ramsey knew the cannon operators once reported to Cruchev. However he wasn’t worried that they would try something. After all, the weapon was out of commission and a security team had been dispatched to keep an eye on them. The colonel was fairly confident that V-323 would be operational within the hour.

“We might even meet the day’s quota,” he thought gleefully. That was when Ramsey came face to face with Nicolai Cruchev’s “Hallucination”. The scream was loud enough to be heard in the glass dome. Despite being a bit muffled it was unmistakably unnatural. No Man or beast had such an eerie voice. It was enough to raise the hairs on the back of the colonel’s neck. He had to clasp his ears as the scream took on a higher pitch. The station walls began to shake even more. Just when he couldn’t take it any more the bloodcurdling sound ceased.

He cautiously lowered his hands and eyed the vibrating walls with a wary look. “Sir I have isolated the disturbance to the refinery.” One of the crewmembers reported.

The colonel instantly snapped to attention “What the hell is going on down there?”

“I am picking up a massive electrostatic buildup. It can cause a decompression at any moment.”

“Well then get a wrench monkey down there! Must be a god damn grinder on the fritz.”

The crewmember stationed at the wide range bio scanner spoke up “I should warn you that we are picking up bio electric signals.”

“What the hell does that have to do with anything?”

"It's the entity sir." He said gravely.

The garish man appeared annoyed "Don't give me that bullshit!" he shot back, then with great disdain he added "My God! Sometimes I think every last one of you has gone insane."

"Then explain this." He gestured for the colonel to look at his screen. Ramsey decided there was no harm in that, so he made his way over to the console. It was configured to provide a bio scan of the refinery. As he drew closer he could make out a pulsating green cloud. The colonel was reminded of a microorganism under a microscope lens. Even he had to admit that he was looking at a living creature and remained silent.

"Sir the structural integrity of the refinery has been compromised. It is going to decompress in less than 10 seconds."

Ramsey turned towards the other crewmember "Lower the hatches, seal off that section." He replied solemnly.

Personnel on the battle crafts had a clear view of the explosion. They watched as the chokehold the strangulating tubules had on the asteroid was obliterated. Debris from the refinery shot up from the surface of the asteroid. Huge chunks of twisted metal collided with the ships causing minimal damage. The space station was rocked and sustained heavy damage. Emergency crews were dispatched and seen scurrying around the station trying to put out fires and frantically repairing vital systems. Luckily the section adjacent to the refinery was sealed off in time and the entire station didn't blow up with it.

Cruchev sat and watched all the mayhem unfold before him. He couldn't help feeling satisfied. Clearly Ramsey's first few hours in command ended in disaster. He was certain the colonel would manage to get the mining space station operational however his thoughts soon drifted towards the entity. He did not know what to expect from it, a sudden concern for his life and the lives of others onboard the station suddenly overtook him.

"Sir? I think you should come see this." It was the operator at the wide range bio scanner beckoning his former commander. Cruchev got up without any hesitation, not realizing that he was still under guard.

"Not so fast!" the armed guard turned his weapon toward Nicolai. "Just where do you think you're going?"

"I have to speak with that crewmember." He pointed towards the bio scanner.

"I decide what you have to do. And right now you have to sit back down!" he said as he gestured with his automatic weapon.

"You don't understand, the entity is real, it can kill us all." Cruchev tried pleading his case "You weren't here when it attacked us you don't know what it is capable of."

"All I know is that I don't take orders from lunatics like you. Now get your ass back on that floor until the Colonel says otherwise."

Cruchev remained standing "Have you seen the body in the airlock? That's going to be you if you continue following Colonel Ramsey's orders. He could care less to what happens to you, he can get more muscle from headquarters." His words had an impact on the man he started shifting nervously.

Feeling unsure of himself he blurted out, "All right fine! You can go over there and talk. But I am warning you, try something and I will open fire."

"Fair enough." Cruchev carefully turned his back to the armed man and made his way over to the console. He stood besides the crewmember so that he had a good view of the monitor. What he saw next shocked him greatly. "What is it doing?" he asked in amazement.

"I believe it is a form of cellular de-cohesion." The operator replied. They both looked at the display intently. The pulsating cloud had gone down in intensity. Only faint wisps of the entity were visible.

"I think you are right." Cruchev intently studied the screen. Trying to decipher the creature's odd behavior "That could explain these fracture lines." He said as he traced an outline on the display.

"Yes that is most peculiar. I have studied the report filed by the science team not even they have ever encountered such readings." They had always seen the gas creature as a whole now its body appeared to be in pieces.

"Do you think it's a form of reproduction?" Cruchev asked the operator.

"Not likely notice how the rate of de-cohesion intensifies in the fragments. That is not consistent with asexual reproduction." Nicolai considered this as he watched the display more intently. Small pieces of the entity were breaking off of the main body then they would disappear into nothingness.

"What does this mean?"

The man turned towards the captain and said, "I think it is dying." Cruchev started to say something when he was cut short by a commotion at the entrance.

"What is that man doing?" Ramsey had just returned from a round of the space station. He was overseeing the repair of the station when he decided to return to the battle-scarred dome.

The guard assigned to Cruchev became panic-stricken "Sir he threatened to kill me!" Cruchev was appalled by how his words were being twisted "I had no choice...he just wanted to talk." He looked expectantly at the Colonel.

Ramsey glared at the blubbering man "Search him! Make sure he no longer poses a threat." The guard scurried to carry out his orders. He grabbed Nicolai by the arm and threw him up against the wall. He began searching the former commander's clothing for any concealed weapons. When he came across his waist he felt a slight bulge.

"What do we have here?" The man lifted Nicolai's shirt to reveal his utility belt, the gleaming surface of the energy weapon immediately caught his attention, "Sir I found something!" the guard exclaimed as he held up the weapon so that the Colonel could see it.

"I thought you searched these men before putting them under guard."

"We did, I don't know how this slipped through." Ramsey would have loved to "discipline" the incompetent man but right now he had other priorities.

"Give me the damn thing!" he made his way over to the security guard and snatched the weapon from his hand he then turned to him and said, "Make your self useful get out of my sight." The man quickly ran away grateful he wasn't subjugated to the Colonel's infamous temper.

He then turned toward his rival "This is a fine piece of equipment, very rare if I do say so myself. Only the top brass of the UFSN space force manage to get one of these. I wonder why they gave one to a bleeding heart like you."

Cruchev looked him dead in the eye but remained silent "What were you planning to do with this? Take over the space station." He held up the weapon and let out a manic laugh. "These things haven't been field tested there no match for our assault rifles and RPG launchers. What did you hope to accomplish, singe our eyebrows?" another burst of manic laughter came from Ramsey's throat.

"It scares the hell out of the entity." Cruchev's bluff caught Ramsey off guard. His vocal cords seized up proving that he was genuinely fearful of the being. "When that thing comes calling that emitter is your only hope." Nicolai decided to withhold the true condition of the entity.

Ramsey was shocked into silence, he slowly collected his thoughts “Yes...I see, well then I guess I’ll keep this with me.” He flipped the weapon in his hand and neatly attached it to his utility belt, next to his dagger, which was still smeared by the rubber coating of the slain pirate’s air regulator. “You wouldn’t want your captain being attacked by that thing, would you?”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” He replied in a bemused manner.

“Good now get back to your yellow bellied friends!” he shoved Nicolai towards the rounded up group of men. Cruchev had to fight off a strong urge to retaliate.

“Patience!” he thought to himself as he tried to calm his raging anger “Think! I’ve got to think.” He tried to clear the cloud of anger in his mind. So he could behave more rationally.

“Ramsey!” he said out loud “You don’t trust us to work for you so what have you decided to do with us?”

The colonel faced the former captain “Lucky for you, your Gemcore personnel and there will be an inquiry in the event of your death. Even I wouldn’t be able to explain why the captain and his men found themselves in a decompressed airlock without environmental suits.” He said with an ugly sneer on his face. Cruchev was disgusted by the man’s blatant disregard for human life. Killing was second nature to men like Ramsey they had no remorse. “I’ll arrange a freighter craft to take all you bleeding hearts straight to Gemcore Penitentiary.”



The entity laid unfurled on top the foundations of the refinery. They no longer had to bear the burden of the immense structure and laid exposed to the elements. The being tried to collect itself but lacked the energy. It longed to replenish itself with some nourishment. However in its present condition hunting for prey was impossible. Instead the creature continued to lay still. Its mind was only able to conjure up a few thoughts, for even the simple act of thinking caused him pain.

*Weak very weak...but killer prey weak too...pain strong*

The creature silenced its thoughts to conserve its energy. It tried keeping its body intact but it was no use all of his energy had been used up in destroying the refinery. Now his body was slowly scattering itself.

*I die soon*

The entity knew it did not have the energy to sustain itself any longer. What little energy it had was not enough to bind the molecules, of its gaseous body. Its body continued coming apart, the pieces that broke off continued to disintegrate. Soon the being was no more than a swarming mass of atoms. The atoms, following the laws of physics, dispersed themselves. They shot off into the cosmos, in every direction. Some became lost in the empty void of space others managed to land on other asteroids.

The tiny particles that fell upon the floating rocks, wove their way through craggy crevices. By pure chance a fraction of them stumbled upon the ancient sanctuaries of resident gas creatures. The influx of the particles stimulated the creatures. They began to stir and awoke from their deep sleep. They recognized the atoms as belonging to one of their brethren and so infused the wandering molecules into their flowing bodies.

The molecules were imprinted with the memories of the fallen creature. They began to project these recollections into the minds of the host. The numerous beings began to learn of the killer prey and their wanton acts. How despite being warned they continued to eradicate the creature’s home. They learned of their brother’s desperate act of self-preservation, which ended its life.

Deeply moved by the stirring memories the creatures could no longer remain dormant. Their thoughts began to race.

*Killer prey bad...Killer prey mean to us...Killer prey kill brother*

After carefully analyzing the memories, they took another take on the situation

*Killer prey come here too...destroy our home...steal our essence*

After coming to this conclusion, their thoughts became more ambitious

*We stop killer prey*

These benign creatures were not used to beings that killed without remorse. They had to searched their minds for the proper word to express their desires

*Our brother will be...avenged!*

## CHAPTER TWELVE

The Command and Control section of V-323 appeared barren. A skeleton crew of a few dozen crewmembers was present. They were mostly there to monitor any disturbances in the asteroid's trajectory. With the refinery out of commission the day's quota could not be met. There wasn't any ore laden freighter craft departing for the night therefore there was no need for C&C to be at full capacity.

The overhead lights had been dimmed causing the numerous consoles to cast dismal shadows on the cold metal floor. At that moment Nicolai Cruchev entered the cavernous room. Once again he strolled under the all-encompassing observation dome. At this point of the asteroid's orbit the moon was in full view. The illuminated sphere cast sapphire hued rays of light through the laser-ridden dome. Cruchev had not noticed the natural beauty of the moon before. He had always been distracted by the hustle and bustle of the nightly departure of ore. Nicolai was suddenly overcome with a feeling of foreboding he wanted to get out this place as soon as possible.

So He picked up his pace and made his way over to the wide range bio scanner. He began to manipulate the controls. Then targeted the scanner towards the remains of the refinery. He did not pick up any signs of bioorganic matter in that section of the space station. Just to be sure he entered a wider search pattern encompassing the entire structure, aside from the numerous life signs of the crewmembers the scan did not pick up any trace of the entity. Nicolai offered a silent prayer "Rest in peace creature."

"Sir its time to go." An armed guard appeared at the entrance. He was Nicolai's escort and was ordered to keep a close watch over the former commander. Ramsey was gracious enough to allow Cruchev's men to pack their belongings before boarding the freighter craft. Nicolai had not done so instead he chose to make one last visit to C&C.

"Coming." Nicolai replied he turned away from the bio scanner and walked towards the heavy metal doors. From the corner of his eyes he saw the starlit expanse of space peeking out from one of the service airlocks. The repair crew used the smaller airlocks; to service the surveillance equipment perched on top of the station's roof. It also allowed access to the laser turrets some of which were in dire need of repair after the recent skirmish. "I want to take a look outside." He addressed his escort.

"Please hurry." the sympathetic man allowed the honorable commander one last request. Cruchev made his way to the bulbous opening and peered outside he looked up to the stars he saw a shooting star streak by. "The galaxy is certainly putting on a show tonight." he thought to himself his mind began thinking about deeper notions "I am glad I had a chance to fight a vile human being such as Ramsey. Even though I will be ostracized at best, I can go in peace knowing that I have fought oppression. I will face the trails and tribulations to come with nothing but fortitude."

Putting his faith in God He departed from C&C never to see it again. While traveling to his quarters his mind came up with an amusing thought "Although my plan to evacuate the station has been put into motion I bargained that at the end of our trip we would wind up at Gemcore's space port and not in their custody."



The leather padding sagged under the weight of the colonel. He was in the ready room trying to get comfortable in the captain's chair. "I'll have to request a more suitable chair from headquarters." He thought as he shoved his rear end into the leather. Despite the slight discomfort, Ramsey was terribly happy. He felt giddy as he ran his fingers over the large tabletop. The mahogany grain gave a pleasant sensation. Ever since the rainforests had been cleared to make way for development projects of other Mega Corporations the richly textured wood was hard to obtain.

His eyes focused on the communication control panel that is when he had a marvelous idea. "Mess hall send me up a plate of sirloin steak, with a wild mushroom sauce."

Despite it being after hours the head cook was still in the mess hall kitchen. "Sir, we still have not restored power to the decompressors. I am working with the repair crew to get it up and running for the morning shift."

The colonel wanted to hurl an insult at the man, when all of a sudden the vid screen came alive. "General Walker its good to see you!" Ramsey strained to hide his shock as he greeted the leader of Gemcore.

"Good to see you too Ramsey." The man's fleshy cheeks curved up into an awkward grin. "I just got your report great work with V-323. I trust you made good use of the battle craft we provided."

"Oh yes they were very handy." Ramsey had crossed his fingers and was intently watching the screen

"Tell me why is the refinery out of commission?"

That last question startled Ramsey, he wasn't sure how he should respond. If he told the truth he'll be considered mentally inept just as Cruchev had been. No he'll have to think of something else "It was that yellow bellied Cruchev. I don't know why he did it...I guess he has some kind of vendetta with us."

"Perhaps but that still doesn't explain why you have requested an entire construction crew to rebuild the damn thing all over again." The General gave his subordinate a stern look, which was equally menacing over the grainy vid screen "You now our investors want to see profits soon. I can't afford these kind of expenses." The ruby faced man looked perplexed "What is the extent of the damage?"

Ramsey hesitated to offer an explanation "Its...It's aaah...completely destroyed. He must have used explosives to fracture the walls...then allowed the vacuum of space to do the rest." He waited expectantly for Walker's response

"I see" the chairman thoughtfully rubbed his double chin before speaking again "So you have testified to the fact that Nicolai Cruchev, former Captain of Gemcore mining space station V-323 is a terrorist?"

The colonel was taken aback. "Yes...yes I have."

"Great we'll be sure to add on the charge of 'Threat to Corporate Security' when he gets here."

The colonel let out a sigh of relief "That is good to hear, sir."

"Yes it is, just make sure you send a loaded freighter craft to the space port by tomorrow morning. Or else I will be the one breathing down your neck." He warned the colonel.

"Understood sir." And with that the link was severed. The instant the Gemcore logo filled the screen he exhaled deeply and began to relax. Despite the pressure put on him to meet the next day's quota, the newly appointed commander was pleased with how things were going. It seemed that his rival would be severely punished for his treason. Hopefully he'll be imprisoned for life. That thought gave him comfort as he switched channels to speak with the mining crew foreman.

"Mr. Benson, I take it that the mining crews are ready to depart?"

"Sir, I am afraid I cannot comply with that order."

The boldness of the foreman infuriated the colonel "And why not?" he said through clenched teeth.

"Company regulations prohibit workers from performing duties during this part of the time cycle." Bo replied in a-matter-fact tone.

"Screw the time cycle!" Ramsey's pent up anger suddenly erupted "You morons were suppose to be up and running a long time ago. We missed the day's quota because of your laziness. I am certainly not going to

miss another one, because you lame brains are too lazy to work.”

“Sir I understand that it is very important to meet the daily quota however how do you expect to do that without the refinery?”

“Mr. Benson! I’ll have you know that I am not here to wipe noses tell the sifters to make two or even three passes through the ore before extracting it. The rest of the refinement will have to take place at Gemcore’s refinery, back on earth.”

Benson thought about that for a second then replied “Sir I refuse to comply with your orders.”

Ramsey was startled for a second then shot back a response “Fine! Go ahead you think I care? You think you can’t be replaced?” Ramsey waited for a reply “I’ll just appoint another foreman and have you incarcerated. You can join Cruchev and all his bleeding heart cronies at Gemcore penitentiary. I’ll have you know the board of governors plans to string him up.”

“Very well sir, you can find me in the shuttle bay if you need me. Good day.” The swift response left Ramsey stunned.



The freighter craft laid dormant on the debris littered floor of the station’s shuttle bay. Its side hatch had been opened and the gaping interior eagerly awaited its human freight. The surrounding area was abuzz with the constant drone of several voices speaking at once. Yamada and his men had arrived in the large enclosure with their belongings. They quietly talked amongst each other occasionally pointing out the fractured walls of the shuttle bay. Security guards, loyal to Ramsey, were searching the convicted men before being cleared for departure. Just then Nicolai Cruchev arrived at the entrance. The drone of voices suddenly ceased. They all looked upon their commander with revering looks.

He acknowledged Yamada and his men by giving them a grin followed by slightly nodding his head “At ease men.” He then submitted himself to the probing hands of the security guards. Once they were convinced that there were no concealed weapons the guards gave the go ahead for boarding the freighter craft.

A sudden commotion stopped the orderly process from proceeding. A slew of escorts entered the shuttle bay followed by a large group of rowdy people. “Hey captain! Fire up another freighter craft, were coming with ya!” Cruchev instantly recognized the heavily built miner. Chuck was leading a large group of miners into the crowded shuttle bay. Cruchev also noticed that Chuck’s friend Raza was amongst the crewmembers.

“What’s all this?” he inquired

Bo Benson stepped forward and began to explain what was going on “Sir, it seems we have proven to be liabilities. The colonel does not trust us to perform our duties and we have been charged with insubordination. We have been instructed to join the other bleeding hearts.”

The former commander was pleased with Benson; right up to the end he conducted himself in a crisp and professional manner. Ramsey had lost a fine foreman Nicolai thought as he began to address the crewmembers “I am glad that you have decided not to support Gemcore’s destructive mission. However I must warn you what lays ahead of us will not be pleasant. Our careers in the space mining industry have ended. Those of us fortunate enough to receive light sentences may be able to find work in more conventional mines but some of us might never see the light of day.” He then spoke to the gathered group of men “Are you capable of facing these consequences?” The deafening silence of the men proved their resolve. Nicolai gazed upon their determined faces and knew they would not give up. He then gestured towards the awaiting freighter crafts and exclaimed, “Well then, our date with destiny awaits!”

They were about to board the vehicles when a grotesque figure began to make its way through the throng of miners. People stepped over fallen rubble to allow the figure to pass by. Cruchev’s eyes instantly

recognized the silhouette of Colonel Ramsey.

“Fine day for a trip to earth, isn’t?” he said mockingly. Cruchev remained silent his mind raced with thoughts of sabotage. “Does he plan to kill us en-route and make it look like an accident?” he considered that for a fraction of a second “No freighter craft pilots are expensive to replace, the governors would wonder why they were lost.”

Nicolai carefully chose his words and replied, “Indeed, care to join us?”

The colonel let out a hearty laugh “Don’t be ridiculous, I’ll ride of this damn rock after I have sucked it dry of every last bit of mineral ore.” The colonel’s demeanor suddenly turned cold and menacing as he gazed into the eyes of his adversary. “I finish what I start.”

Nicolai was not the least bit intimidated he responded in an equally menacing manner “Then I am afraid you’re going to die” he suddenly lunged forward. His arms shot out, racing to reach Ramsey. The colonel was shocked by the unexpected move but quickly regained his wits; he noticed that his security guards were startled and were raising their weapons.

Ramsey immediately held up his arm and exclaimed “Hold your fire!” the bewildered guards did as they were told. By now Cruchev was only a hair’s breadth away from the colonel. He stood in front of the large man with a satisfied look on his face “You sure look smug for a condemned man.” Colonel Ramsey boasted

Nicolai grinned, “It is not I who is condemned.” He held up his hands so that Ramsey could see what they held.

“What do you want with that?” Ramsey’s voice revealed his anxiety. His eyes nervously scanned the object resting in Cruchev’s hand.

“I am taking what’s mine.”

“No weapons are allowed on the freighter craft.” The colonel stated bluntly

Cruchev began to manipulate the weapon and removed a piece of hardware “Fine then take the energy pack you now it’s useless without it.” he held out his hand offering the small device.

“I can’t let you have that energy weapon.” Ramsey stared his adversary dead in the eye

“And why not?”

“You know as well as I do it’s the only defense we have against...” Ramsey did not want to admit the existence of the creature but under the circumstances he had no choice “against it.”

“It?” Nicolai faked ignorance

Ramsey pursed his lips “The entity” he said with great difficulty.

“Ah yes, the entity.” Cruchev said with obvious satisfaction he then drew closer and spoke softly “I’ll let you in on a secret, there is no defense against the entity, not even a Photonic Emitter can stop it.” Ramsey’s jaw dropped he stood there, flabbergasted; his wide eyes blankly stared ahead.

Seeing that his work was done Cruchev stepped away from the bewildered colonel. He addressed the gathered group of people “Chuck! I want you and your boys to get on the starboard freighter craft.”

“Right away sir!” Chuck began jostling the miners towards the vehicle.

“Yamada you and your men will join me on the portside freighter craft.” Rie Yamada acknowledged his captain’s order with a slight nod. The throng of people slowly made its way into the large cargo holds. They

had to sit on the freighter's deck, which was wide enough to accommodate them all. However, the sanitation crew did not do a thorough job any movement inside of the cargo hold raised a plume of pulverized mineral dust. Some people began sneezing; this wasn't going to be a pleasant trip.

By now Ramsey had come to his senses. He masked his anxiety by barking orders at his security guards. "I want these freighter crafts out of here this instant! We've got a schedule to keep." The guards tried complying with the orders the best they could. Soon all the passengers had boarded the vehicles.

Nicolai was the last to enter; before stepping inside he turned towards Ramsey "I think you should keep this." He tossed the emitter's energy pack Ramsey caught the device in his hands "I wouldn't want to add on another misdemeanor." He gave the Colonel a wink and then sealed the hatch.

All personnel left the shuttle bay the guards sealed the doors giving the go ahead for departure. Ramsey watched from behind the shuttle bay's furnace shield as the pilots ignited the engines. The exterior doors of the large hangar slid apart. The tremendous force of escaping atmosphere engulfed the cavernous enclosure. The freighter crafts began to sway however their expert pilots compensated by firing thrusters, keeping the vehicles steady.

Once there was a large enough opening the vehicles exited the space station. They skimmed over the asteroid aligning themselves with their designated flight paths. Once that was accomplished the pilots increased aft thrusters by several magnitudes. Ramsey watched through the tinted plating as the blazing vehicles disappeared into space.

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Loose gravel slid from the small opening. It trickled down and fell onto the sanctuary floor. The soft movements of the gas creature continued scattering the loose material. Once the opening was wide enough it slid its body through it. It began to traverse the natural passageways that led to the outside. The creature vaguely recalled making this journey when it had descended from the surface millions of years ago. It did not expect to awaken and emerge from its sanctuary for many more millennia. However once it had learned of its brother's demise it could no longer remain dormant.

A small fissure on the surface allowed its body to escape. The faint hissing of escaping gas paled against the great cacophony that was echoing throughout the cosmos. From all around the gas creature could sense the dauntless battle cry of its kind.

Once fully formed it too added its piercing cry to the commotion. The intense sound reached its climax and shot off in every direction. It raced to distant planets and far flung star systems. The super sonic roar penetrated numerous rocky enclosures. Stirring the inhabitants to rise and hear the distress call. They immediately rose from their slumber and raced for the epicenter. Their thoughts, united as one, was consumed by a single mantra

*We are coming my brother*



Raza laid awake in the dimly lit cargo hold. The smell of sweat hung heavily in the poorly ventilated enclosure. Miners, exhausted from their two-day ordeal, were making up for the lack of sleep. The relief of escaping from the entities clutches soothed their wracked nerves immensely. Although Raza was glad to be getting away from that awful place his mind began to worry him with thoughts of what laid ahead.

"By the will of Allah I will withstand any punishment they give me. I will not compromise on my values no matter how much harm they cause." Raza thought to himself "Worldly pain is fleeting; I feel pity for those who go against the will of God, theirs is eternal pain" that thought comforted him "Inshallah Allah will do what is best for me." He closed his eyes and tried to get some sleep.

As if out of a hellish nightmare the infamous scream rattled Raza back to consciousness. He couldn't believe what he was hearing "No, it can't be!" he exclaimed. But the terrible sound persisted it seemed to be coming from all around him. The harsh sound grated against the lumbering spacecraft, making it more hideous. Just when he thought he couldn't take it anymore it suddenly ceased.

Raza did not realize he was clenching his teeth so tightly and was surprised to see blood on his lips. The fear of confronting the entity again was so overbearing that his body had shut down his nervous system. As he regained his wits he slowly stood up from his cramped floor space. The other miners did not seem to be disturbed by the awful racket. Raza wondered if the pilot heard anything "I hope I am not hallucinating."

He decided to investigate the strange occurrence. After all the crew could be in danger. They had piled their belongings off in a corner in a big heap; it now served as a convenient ladder. Raza tiptoed through the herd of men, trying not to wake them. Once he reached the heap, he carefully climbed up to see through the sole viewing port in the cavernous cargo hold. Raza stifled a sneeze as he wiped away the fine layer of dust that plastered the plexi-glass port. "Doesn't anyone clean around here?" The gray dust covered his sleeve "This is just great, now I look destitute."

When he looked up and peered through the cleansed glass his petty concerns seemed meaningless. He was awe struck as his eyes feasted on the star speckled expanse that laid before him. Stellar winds stirred glittering strands of radiation. They arced to and fro carving the black matter of space according to their

whim. The omnipotent forces of the universe were at work giving birth to a seething young star. Ringed with white-hot plasma its crimson and amber hues consumed the insignificant human's sight, ignited his senses, filled his soul.

Overcome with emotion he began to weep, "All praise is to Allah, the lord of the Universe, the All-Compassionate, the All-Merciful, the Master of the Day of Judgment. You alone we worship and you alone we ask for help. Guide us on the straight path, the path of those whom you have blessed, not of those who incur your anger, nor of those who go astray." After this experience the opening chapter of the Quran held new meaning for Raza. As far as his eyes could see the awesome power of nature was at work. The only reason that power did not consume him was because Allah had shown him mercy. Raza shuddered as he realized that it was not his destiny to die amongst the stars.



A skeleton crew of a few dozen miners was left behind. They had been ordered to go out to the mines and continue mining operations. A few of them grumbled about labor regulations and how it wasn't right to send them off to work in the middle of the night. However their supervisors promised them handsome compensations and sent them on their way.

With the refinery out of commission it would be cumbersome to haul all that ore back to the space station. However that wouldn't stop Ramsey from meeting his early morning dead line. "Have the sifters load the drill rigs, they can walk back to their quarters." And that was that.

A few operators in the Command and Control section also decided to stay behind. They were eagerly monitoring the progress of the mining crew, as it entered the dreaded tunnels. They were on the lookout for any signs of the entity. They were to notify Ramsey the instant they heard anything. The colonel, too anxious to wait for news from C&C, decided to burn off some excess adrenaline by walking through the space station's corridor.

He was traveling through the upper levels when he came across the Medical Center. The lights had been turned off and it was completely abandoned. "I can't believe these pansies high tailed it out of here at the first sign of trouble." The colonel thought back to the time he spent on the battlefield. His employer frequently used his services to fight off unwanted nuisances offered by the sovereigns. There was a time when their space force had grown ambitious and wanted to levy taxes on Gemcore freighter craft entering their airspace. The ruthless mining company retaliated with a scorched earth policy his squadron of Battle craft were instructed to incinerate farming villages that fell within UFSN jurisdiction. With their food supply cut off the blockade soon ended.

"You see I don't run at the first sign of trouble I stay the course and accomplish my mission." His thoughts soon returned to his current situation "I know that two timing Cruchev was lying. Energy Weapons can protect me from the entity." He then cursed himself for being foolish enough to let that bleeding heart get away with the emitter "At least I have the energy pack, I can use my contacts to get me another emitter."

He was confronted with another thought "When I send off that freighter craft there won't be any qualified operators to man the Quasar cannon, the premier won't like that." Ever obedient to his superior he began to worry that's when he recalled slaughtering the pirates and decided they wouldn't need the weapon anyway.

When the drilling rigs returned to the surface without incident, they all breathed a sigh of relief. They decided to send in the mining crew for another round. The second round of extraction was also successful. Their spirits begin to lift, it seemed like they were going to meet their quota after all "You see they were all just a bunch of yellow bellies, there was no danger." The personnel of V-323 believed their colonel. They truly believed everything was going to be all right.



The epicenter was like a raw nerve. Gas creatures, responding to the distress call raced towards the central

nexus from all corners of the galaxy. They could no longer remain dormant once the call was sounded they immediately migrated to the pulsating hub of activity. Not since the dawn of time had the universe witnessed such a spectacle. These beings mostly lived isolated lives. They occasionally communicated with each other when they came out of their extensive hibernations. However a gathering of this magnitude was unprecedented.

When a sufficient number of creatures were present they began to exhibit a peculiar behavior. It began with individual creatures; they moved in close to each other and began to combine with each other. They transferred their molecules to and fro until they became a single entity. These newly formed entities combined with others. They continued in this manner growing larger each time.

Another strange behavior they had begun to exhibit was that their usually transparent forms started to become more condensed. Their transparency slowly faded each time they merged with each other. They started taking on a pasty appearance. Once all of them had thoroughly merged with each other all traces of segmentation had disappeared. Now only a ghostly white cloud stretching for miles hung menacingly across the cosmos.



The mining crew had to make ten rounds before they had extracted enough ore to fill a freighter craft. Since they didn't have the convenience of the tubules and the anti-gravity trolleys they missed the early morning deadline. As expected colonel Ramsey was furious "What's taking those lame brains so long?" he was up in the glass dome screaming at the operators.

"Sir they have unloaded the last load of ore from the drilling rig. Now they are using the elevator to move it from the ATV depot up to the shuttle bay. The elevator isn't big enough for that much cargo so its taking time." Ramsey clenched his teeth in anger however he didn't know what to say. The automation provided by the refinery was critical for meeting tight deadlines he hoped that the governors would understand.

"All right just hurry it up I want that freighter craft out of here within the hour. I'll be in my ready room in case you screw up."

"Understood sir" the operator immediately switched frequencies and established a connection with the freighter craft pilot. He was met with a commotion of sound "What's going on down there?"

The pilot's voice sounded strained "The miners are having a tough time loading the freighter. Without the refinery's ore chute it's going to be touch and go for awhile."

"The colonel's furious he wants you gone in an hour."

"I know but my hands are tied."

"Roger that alpha nine, C&C out." The pilot looked away from the tiny communications panel and sat back in his seat. He surveyed the frenzy of activity surrounding him from the cramped cockpit of his vehicle. He watched as the miners lobbed huge chunks of ore into the shuttle bay. Others would drag the excavated rocks across the shuttle bay to his spacecraft. The toughest part was to get the heavy objects high enough to reach the top of the bulky vehicle.

They had to use the Medical Center's elevation apparatus to scale the towering height. The device was designed for patients not well enough to move on their own. It wasn't meant for such harsh use and quickly began showing signs of damage. Normally they would be concerned however right now they were in a bitter mood. They had been forced to work all night and all morning. All they wanted was to be done with the task at hand as soon as possible.

"Come on! Get that crap up there, I haven't got all day." The pilot cajoled the weary miners. They shot him menacing looks and continued their lethargic pace. Becoming increasingly frustrated with the lack of progress the pilot hollered another scornful remark "Don't make me fire up with you in front of the furnace

shield.” That last remark struck a chord with one of the miners.

“That’s it space jock, your ass is mine!” He dropped his load of rocks and rushed for the cockpit door. The two men collided with each other and began throwing punches. The rest of the mining crew dropped what they were doing and ran to break up the fight. The brawl could be heard all the way up in C&C over the still active com channel. The operator could have easily dispatched a security detail to apprehend the miscreants but he had bigger problems to contend with.

“Sir I think you better come see this.”

“It better be the after burners of that freighter craft.” The colonel responded from his ready room

“I am afraid not sir.” The hefty commander grimaced as he lifted himself out of his chair. He walked through the ready room’s door and entered the glass dome. He spotted the operator waving to him and made his way over.

“This better be good,” he grumbled

“Sir I am picking up strange meteorological readings.”

“What sort of readings?” The colonel asked in a bemused manner

“Well it covers a large area, it has a fluidic structure to it.” The man paused a while to study his monitor “I am not certain but I believe a storm front is approaching the space station.”

“You’re not certain?”

“Well it’s just that the readings don’t neatly fit in with the meteorological phenomenon found in this part of space.” The colonel didn’t say anything and allowed the man to continue “I targeted the wide range bio scanner to the same coordinates and this is what I got back.” He gestured towards another set of displays. The image the monitors shot back horrified the commander. He had seen that pulsating green cloud before and understood what it meant.

“What’s the scale of that scan,” he asked nervously.

“It spans several miles.” Ramsey was shocked by the revelation he stared at the scanned image with utter disbelief. The familiar rippling borders conjured up memories of amoebas under a microscope lens. While being schooled as a young boy, Ramsey would take great pleasure in vaporizing the hapless microorganisms with heavy doses of UV radiation. But this creature was beyond his understanding he did not know how to control it “Sir I recommend canceling the shipment.”

The colonel broke away from the displays he glanced at the operator as if for the first time and then in a sudden outburst he shouted “Never! I won’t hear any pansy talk.”

The operator was not deterred by the colonel’s callous remark “Sir, if I may. Gemcore wouldn’t want to endanger their shipment. Surely they will appreciate your wise decision to postpone the shipment just for a few hours until the...uhhh...anomaly moved on.”

He considered what his unsuspecting subordinate had said. Ramsey had to agree that, it would be unwise to send out a shipment with that thing running loose. Perhaps if they waited the monstrosity would pass them by without incident. “I suppose that is possible.” He paused and thought some more “How long until it passes.”

The operator consulted the monitor “At its current rate I estimate that it will reach us in about two hours.”

“Hmmm...don’t tell the mining crew we’re delaying for two hours I wouldn’t want those lame brains taking any longer.”

“Yes sir.” Ramsey retreated to his ready room. Off to the side a leather sofa had been placed for the comfort of the captain. The colonel took advantage of the rare luxury and hastily plunked down on the supple fabric. Not taking notice of his disheveled uniform the agitated commander reached for a nearby decompressor. He inserted an alcoholic beverage pouch into the device and then powered up the unit. A little while later a thin stream of amber liquid fell into an awaiting glass. The colonel’s meaty hands grabbed the drink and downed it in one swig.

The deadening effect of alcohol started to kick in with his mind numbed Ramsey’s fright was slightly eased. He could begin to think about other things, like the schedule, he was so behind as it was and the added delay only increased his worries. Needing to relax his tense muscles he sprawled across the cool surface of the sofa. On the other side of the small room an atomic clock tracked each passing moment. As the colonel watched the monotonous LED display change numbers, he realized that the two hours would not pass easily.

Moments later a slight tug at his shoulder startled him. He tried looking around for the source of the disturbance. His groggy eyes focused on one of the operators. From the looks of it the man had been trying to contact him for some time but when he got no response he entered the ready room to awaken the sleeping commander.

“What is it this time?” the colonel said with a tired voice

“We’ve been tracking the anomaly for the past one and a half hour and...”

The now alert commander stared at his subordinate waiting for him to continue “And?”

“I don’t know how to explain this you have to see it to believe it.” Ramsey was getting tired of these charades. He swore if the operator recommended another delay he would confine him to his quarters. He picked himself up from the sofa and stormed out of the ready room. He intended to march straight towards the operator’s station; however when he glanced up he stopped dead in his tracks. The star speckled expanse of space, which was normally visible through the transparent ceiling, now had been transformed into a hellish scene.

The fright he had tried to drive away returned with a vengeance, he stared with awe as dramatic discharges of bioelectricity cast a bluish hue on the horizon. The crackling azure lighting emanated from a milky white streak that had stretched itself across the nightmarish panorama. It was unlike anything he had ever seen before, “What is it?” he softly asked

“As far as we can tell, its some sort of bioorganic buildup.”

Ramsey broke out in cold sweat, “Bioorganic, but how can this be? I thought that the entity lived on the asteroid. How’d it get all the way out there and how’d it get so big?” His mind frantically churned up more questions, he had answers to none of them. Never in his entire military career had he encountered an enemy of this nature. The commander found himself in the unique position of not knowing what to do next.

“Sir might I add that this buildup poses a threat to the station. The electric discharges could neutralize our electronic systems. Also scans show that the buildup has enough mass to cause decompression.” The colonel breathed a sigh of relief, at last something that his mind could grapple with.

“Very well raise the containment panels, seal off all sections and deactivate all surveillance equipment.” That last command surprised the operator

“But sir that would mean we will not be able to track the freighter craft.”

“I realize that you insolent fool! We are postponing the shipment until this damn bio gunk passes by. Now get to your station and carry out my orders!” the operator immediately scurried away to do so. Soon afterwards they could all feel soft vibrations coming from beneath the space station. Large metal plates

were being hoisted out from there subterranean enclosures. The computer controlled hydraulic system carefully slid the plates into position between the space station's walls. This way if decompression did occur the effects would be localized to that particular section.

The miners did not need sophisticated instruments to tell them that something was not right. By now the bioorganic matter had moved in very close to the station. All crewmembers had a clear view of the approaching leviathan. After loading the freighter craft, they had gathered in the mess hall to get some much needed nourishment. However their attention was not on their meals they couldn't help looking through the mess hall's viewing portal at the strange phenomenon. With eyes fully transfixed they drank in the vivid scene, not sure what to make of it. One miner decided to break the awe struck silence his friends were in, "I don't like the looks of that stuff." He was referring to the increasingly strong pulses of bioelectricity that was coming from the milky white thread. He became worried and suggested leaving the station "We should get out of here, while we can."

"Don't talk like a bleeding heart." A fearless miner ridiculed, "It's nothing that stuff will go away on its own." The miner's resolve quickly faded when the viewing portal began to rattle. They backed away from the shielded opening not sure if it would hold. The edges of the approaching cloud began to extend outwards, as if two giant arms were reaching for the station. The white fog became luminescent, flickering concentrations of light rumbled inside of the cloud. The miners became evermore fearful; they began to get the feeling that the bioorganic buildup was not as lifeless as they had imagined.

The edges had extended themselves so that they were just several miles away from the station. The vaporous formation now had a curved appearance. Bioelectricity burst forth from the center of the curve and raced towards the edges. The blue colored energy gathered at the tips and grew more vibrant with each passing second.

"Every man for himself!" a miner exclaimed as a wall of energy shot forward from the glowing cloud. It hit the station within nanoseconds. The tremendous influx of bioelectricity wreaked havoc with the station's electrical systems. Power surges were reported on all levels. The flickering lights in the command and control section distracted the operators. They tried assessing the damage from their consoles as best they could. However when numerous power regulators began to malfunction, causing control panels to burst into flames, they had to abandon their workstations.

Several operators had suffered severe burns; with the Medical Center out of commission they would not be able to get the treatment they needed. However Ramsey did not let that get to him he promptly surveyed the situation and exclaimed "Retreat to the lower levels!" after seeing another console explode he issued another command "Cut off power to this section!" only a few able bodied workers were left to carry out his orders. The wounded had to fend for themselves as they hobbled towards the elevators.

The colonel stood in the middle of the ensuing pandemonium, he was not pleased with the ways things were going. He had only been in command for a day and already he had missed his quota, half his crew mutinied, his space station was in tatters and now he had to abandon an entire level to some god-forsaken freak of nature. His displeasure turned into anger, he did not like making concessions to his opponents that was not how he engaged the enemy. His anger brewed inside of him turning into rage, which erupted in a loud outburst "No! I will not run!" his dubious cry got him some awkward glances. "I will fight back!" the manic look returned in his eyes they frantically searched the soot covered room for a weapon "I don't care what they say that thing can be defeated. It can be defeated, I say! I will kill it with my own bare hands if I have to!" his desperate words gave him an idea a manic laugh escaped his lips "Of course the sonic picks! We could set the intensity controls to their highest settings..." Ramsey had regained his composure and began conducting himself in a more orderly manner "Operator!"

A man, hunched over exposed power nodes, immediately stood up "Yes sir?"

"I want a team of our finest sonic pick marksmen on the other side of that door." He said while pointing to the entrance of the glass dome "You and your people are to switch power off to this section and evacuate immediately."

“Right away sir!” he hurried off to inform the others. The colonel stood erect hands on his waists “Now I will show that thing what I am made of.” He said with great pride. He strolled amongst the burn out workstations stumbling every now and then under the lingering effects of the consumed alcohol. The damaged equipment fired off an occasional flying spark, not the least bit deterred the battle hardened commander continued on at a leisurely pace. Oddly enough the wide range bio scanner was still functioning. Over come with curiosity the hefty man decided to have one last look. The familiar green cloud that indicated the entity’s presence had now been replaced with a frightful new image.

Ramsey looked on with horror at the crescent shaped edge funneling into a narrow silo. He knew that only a single shockwave, from that acoustically sound formation, was needed to devastate the station. Indeed the legendary apocalyptic horn, hailing from the end of times, was aimed at V-323.



After firing its initial salvo the super entity charged forward. It could have easily obliterated its target however a sudden and instant death was too good for the killer prey; they had to be taught a lesson. The crescent shaped edge drew closer to the station’s dome. The two protruding tips formed a vice like grip around the spherical object. Concentrating its energy into the vice the super entity began to break through the space worthy structure. At first the thick glass withstood the tremendous pressure being exerted on it. However the constant and increasingly intense force began to weaken it. Small fracture lines ran along its curved surface darting to and fro following the natural crevices of the thick glass.

The fractures became more pronounced compromising the insulating environmental seal. The super entity knew decompression was imminent and so condensed itself further concentrating more energy into its suffocating grip. Then with a satisfying burst the dome caved in on itself. Thick shards of glass rained down on the burnt out console. The makeshift projectiles sliced through the instruments erasing any hope of them ever becoming operational again.

A white rectangular column of light appeared on the floor of the devastated room. It quickly grew bigger and then abruptly stopped. The sliding doors to C&C stood ajar creating a small rectangular opening. Through it power pack fueled emergency floodlights emitted a harsh glare. The still compressed corridor had its atmosphere sucked out through the gaping hole made by the pulverized dome. Cautiously three dark silhouettes rose from the bottom of the opening. Each arm hefted a large cylindrical object and then aimed them skywards. A high-pitched whirling sound could be heard coming from the instruments. Without warning sound waves traveling at three times their normal speed shot upwards creating a sonic boom that was silenced by the suffocating vacuum of space.

The figures, anchored to the deck plating by magnetized boots, cocked their heads in the direction of the speeding projectiles. The visible waves of sound had vanished into the swirling white mist. The blackened silhouettes blankly stared at the cloudy formation, not knowing what effect they had on it. The white cloud continued hovering over the exposed room. Thick strands of mist swirled inside of it carelessly darting to and fro. It was almost as if a quiet truce had fell between the two opponents.

A deep reverberating moan blasted out from the super entity shaking the space station to its foundations. The ground buckled underneath the frightened sonic pick marksmen. The eerie sound was unlike anything they had ever heard before; their hearts were struck with sheer terror. Overcome with fright they collapsed on to the floor, their pitiful weapons clattering alongside them.

The super entity began to descend. It devised a smaller vice that neatly fit the downed miner’s space suits. Within seconds the suits began venting atmosphere the miner’s bodies were ravaged by the invading vacuum. Concentrated shocks of energy tore the unconscious men’s throats open. The super entity knew it wouldn’t be long before the infected bodies would come under its control. In the meantime it had more killer prey to hunt.

The air circulation vents provided easy access to all areas of the space station. The collective of gas creatures dispersed itself through the narrow passageways. Thick strands of white mist coursed into all four corners of the station. With its heightened senses the vengeful entity easily detected crewmen cowering in

their quarters. Since they were not wearing space suits the massive creature made quick work of the frail human beings. The super entity knew that it was not enough to simply kill the loathsome humans. If it wanted to rid itself of the killer prey and their vile ways it had to destroy their home.

With its body spread through out the space station its tactile senses could feel the entire structure at once. Its primitive mind detected huge power fluctuations coming from the eastern end. It quickly dispatched a large segment of itself to investigate that area. Ghostly mist swept into the vaulting silo that made up the two levels of the quasar cannon. It gathered on the lower level slowly shoring its energy. Barely visible in the dark silo, it began to rise from the cool surface of the metal floor. It headed for an opening in the ceiling that was the cause of the power fluctuations.

Bolts of electricity lit up the darkened enclosure, while giving off a pulsating flow of heat. As the segment of entity drew closer its gaseous body involuntary expanded from the high temperatures.

*At last we have found thief home heart.*

The entwined beings learned the discovery made by this segment of super entity the instant response was unanimous

*Strike down thief home*

Obeying instantly it entered the power shaft its bioelectric body reacted with the pulsating discharges of energy. The two forces grappled each other thick strands of electricity crackled within the ringed structure. The electric discharges grew stronger and raced with incredible speed around the circular shaft. The wanton influx of energy was too great for the power shaft to withstand. Its dazzling metallic bracing vainly strained to keep it intact. In a spectacular explosion the struggle between the two warring forces ended.

The erupting fireball blasted in all directions, shooting upwards to the upper level, the already battle weary cannon capsule was incapable of withstanding another pummeling. Its support columns threw off massive bolts that held it in place capsizing the mighty weapon. Packed with tremendous force the rampaging ball of fire incinerated everything in its path. It annihilated the eastern wall of the space station reducing it to rubble.

Simultaneously the explosion was buffered from the rest of the station by the containment panels placed between sections. Not to be denied, the subdued detonation still managed to decimate the doors to the Quasar Cannon silo. The guard posted at its entrance was bombarded by fiery fragments raining down on him from the blown up door. The debris littered alcove covered the mangled body of the barely conscious guard. He lay on his back hopelessly gasping for air with severely punctured lungs.

The super entity came upon the pitiful man; a fleeting sensation of remorse overcame the gaseous creature. Violence towards other beings was not in their nature; they did not enjoy watching humans suffering this way. The collective conscience felt the need to address the killer prey; they wanted to make their intentions clear. A form of communication that the humans could understand was needed.

Through its biological link with the injected pathogens the super entity learned that the mutation process of the slain marksmen had completed. Their dormant corpse rested in the upper level of the space station. Utterly abandoned and with its power cut off the darkened corridor of C&C cast a shadowy veil over the horribly contoured bodies. As grand puppet masters of yesteryears animated their marionettes so too did this collective of ancient entities. Infused with a supernatural life force their fallen prey rose once more.

Their eyelids slid open exposing the gelatinous eyeballs that they had hidden. Their still functioning eyes could see their imminent demise yet were powerless to defend themselves. From either sides of the corridor autonomously powered SENTINEX guns came to life. Still encased in their space suits the ghostly marksmen new the guns were scanning the rupture made in their suits by the vengeful entity. Speaker patches warned of impending repercussions upon detecting unauthorized DNA, but the ominous warnings fell on deaf ears.

True to their words the guns set themselves ablaze as they dispensed a slew of projectiles. The incoming

salvos peppered the space suits frantically flinging ripped shreds of fabric. With face shields shattered and air regulators hissing the obedient marionettes made a hasty retreat to the elevator.

The short carriage ride lowered them by one level. The elevator doors slid open revealing the barren expanse of the Medical Center. Its doors had been viciously pried open, without properly trained medical personnel the desperate crewmembers of V-323 were forced to plunder the medical supplies of the station so that they may live. Now the gaping entrance easily admitted the ghoulish beings. Reaching for the medical center's intercom one of the reanimated corpse configured it for a public broadcast. It then leaned in close so that he could speak into the embedded microphone. Its lips and mouth were cut open when SENTINEX blasted its visor but it still managed to broadcast the words its masters wanted to convey. It began speaking in a horrifyingly unnatural voice, which flowed throughout the forsaken space station.

*It is not our wish to attack you. It was you who forced us; you brought this destruction on yourself. We warned you to stop your harmful ways, but you wouldn't stop. Not even after one of our brethren sacrificed himself did you take heed. After such a clear sign of our displeasure you continued to exploit us. What! Do you expect us to standby and have our dwellings destroyed? No! We are a sentient species. We have the right to exist. We will defend ourselves! We will stand liberated! Now bear witness to our unbridled fury!!!*

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Glowing overhead lights normally bathed the outer entrance of the ATV depot. However with the station's infrastructure suffering from frequent power outages the lights were extinguished, a pool of darkness was cast over the usually busy entrance. The sturdy metal doors barely contained the deep engine roar coming from the other side. The engine roar revved up and down gaining momentum with each plunge, as if a trapped beast was waiting to break out of its cage. Soon another sound accompanied the commotion; it was a low whirling sound, which also steadily grew in pitch. Suddenly the doors began to shake making a terrible racket. The gyrating noise was the unmistakable sound of metal grinding metal. The center of the reinforced doors began to bulge. The bulge steadily grew larger morphing into a rising cone. Thin strands of metal began to twirl off the tip of the cone, suddenly a large drill bit burst through the doors, followed by a rampaging drilling rig.

Colonel Ramsey was in the cockpit frantically trying to get away from the station as quick as possible. "This is not a retreat." He reassured himself "I'll head for the mines and make a counter offensive from there." In truth the words spoken by the super entity via its semi-human conduit frightened him greatly. However his conscious mind was not ready to admit defeat and attempted yet another misguided venture.

The path to the mining tunnels was lit by the silver light of the asteroid's moon as it shone from up above. The steely light exposed the rough terrain it was littered with craters of all sizes, some too small to be noticed others big enough to swallow an entire stealth craft. In his haste to escape the colonel did not bother with the rig's headlights and blindly rambled on. The vehicle bobbed up and down as its tough metal threads fell upon the rocky surface scattering loose material in its wake.

From the aft viewing port he could make out what was left of V-323's imposing structure. The refinery and its network of tubules had long been destroyed; the bulbous sphere of the quasar cannon, which defined the identity of the station; now lay crumpled at its mount. By now the besieged space station was entirely cloaked in a white shroud. The wrath of the collective had gone unchecked and it had the entire station within its grip. Every inch of the battered structure had been captured. It was only a small matter to dispense the deadly pathogen to the few remaining survivors.

The cunning entity detected the frightened man's hasty retreat, not to be denied a total victory a section of the super entity broke away in hot pursuit. The living fog glowed as moonbeams showered it with cooling light. The creature had to be stealthy if it did not want to be detected beforehand. So it hovered just above the surface hugging the changing terrain as close as possible. Dipping in and out of craters and coasting along the slopes of razor sharp cliffs it narrowed the gap between it and its prey.

Oblivious to its presence the drilling rig chugged away just a few meters ahead. By now it had reached a smooth stretch of terrain that lead directly to the nearby mining tunnels. The creature morphed into a thin stream of white mist, barely distinguishable in the surrounding silvery illumination. Receiving instructions from the collective to "*strike down supreme killer prey*" the lone gas creature penetrated the moving vehicle.

Ramsey did not need a space suit because he was safely encased inside of the mammoth machine. His ungloved hands easily manipulated the cockpit's controls. However his agitated mind was not functioning properly, it did not register the looming obstacle up ahead on the well traveled path. The rig's threads collided with a large boulder nearly fracturing its segmented joints. Despite this the all terrain vehicle managed to grip the sloping surface and began to climb the steep surface. The boulder's height was great and completely lifted one side of the rig off of the ground. Luckily before the machine could be tipped over it made contact with the surface once more.

Ramsey was thrown around the cockpit from the jarring movements. He sustained a few bruises but no serious injuries. The sudden and violent jolt sent his heart racing pumping adrenaline into his blood stream. Now fully alert to his situation the stunned man paid more attention to navigating the large machine, hopefully he wouldn't make such a careless mistake again. He manipulated the controls to execute a

thirty-degree turn that's when he noticed the controls were not responding as they used to, the movements of the vehicle had become sluggish. "Must be something wrong with the hydraulics." The colonel thought.

When white smoke began to rise from the floorboards he incorrectly concluded that the drilling rig had sustained heavy damage. "Oh great the hydraulics are venting fluids, they must be wearing themselves out." However he couldn't bear to stop and make repairs. The proximity of the mining tunnels was too great "I know I can go another few meters." He released more power to the threads goading the machine forward.

The smoke became denser forming a thick carpet of fog. Ramsey found this behavior to be most peculiar "Smoke doesn't do that" he thought to himself. The fog wrapped around his boots obscuring their shiny black leather. The colonel began to feel cold. Not knowing what was happening, fear overcame his mind once more. His teeth involuntarily began to chatter as his body became colder. He increased the cockpit's temperature to alleviate his condition but his body refused to stop shivering. The carpet of fog began to rise; the swirling mass formed a protruding sphere, which steadily grew in size.

Ramsey was gripped by terror he helplessly watched as the sphere rose out of the ghostly white mist. The cloudy orb grew shapelier forming a familiar silhouette. The frightened man couldn't immediately identify the shape, it wasn't until it began to rotate forward revealing a bony jaw line and fleshless face that the colonel recalled what he was looking at. The face of death was a common constant on the battlefield. Corpse rotting for several weeks had their flesh stripped away exposing a nude skeleton. His mind conjured up those ghastly scenes once more thus confirming that the sentient fog had replicated a human skull.

"No! This can't be happening, get away from me." The frightened man undid his safety harness and reached for the cockpit's door. Part of his mind was still acting rational and warned him not to open the door unless he wanted to be sucked out into the suffocating vacuum. He moved away from the door and slid back into his seat to face the vapory skull once more.

"Please don't do this too me, I beg of you." The pitiful man pleaded with the staunch predator. However the leering skull only drew closer its hollowed eye sockets gave no sign of remorse. The trapped man pleaded one last time "You can't do this to me its uncivilized." in response the skull's teeth began to elongate forming sharp incisors. The gas creature laced the imitated formations with pulsating strands of bioelectricity. It moved forward with a clear intent to kill. Alone and defenseless the vile man threw up his arms in a vain attempt to defend himself, however the gaping maw found its mark and bit into the thick neck. The slashed throat spewed out a spray of crimson blood. The warm fluid splattered the cockpit controls and trickled down the sides of the console.

Thunderstruck by the vicious attack he lost control over the drilling rig. It sharply veered off of the beaten path and crashed into a nearby crater. The wounded man was thrown forward, without his safety harness to restrain him he smashed into the unyielding control console. He reeled back into his seat a deep gash ran across his forehead. For a few seconds he was blinded by the severe impact. He sat limp in the cockpit seat gasping for air. Still conscious, Ramsey knew he had to get medical attention before he passed out from a severe loss of blood.

When his vision returned he surveyed the cramped enclosure and found that the eerie fog had vanished. Familiar with the entity's mode of attack he knew that he was infected by the mutagenic pathogen, it was only a matter of time before he would see the effects. Light reflecting from his gaudy lapel pin drew his eyes down to his uniform. It was soaked with blood flowing from the wound in his throat; "My tunic is usually splattered with the blood of my victims," he amusedly thought to himself.

Feeling weak he quickly grabbed the first aid kit stashed in a compartment underneath the console. He broke open the plastic case and helped himself to an ample supply of cotton gauze. He wrapped the white fabric around his slashed throat, soaking the supple material with deep red blood within seconds. "This should slow down the bleeding long enough to make it back to the medical center." He remembered how desperate his crewmembers were after they were injured from the super entity's initial attack and figured they had probably ransacked the Medical Center "I wonder if those damned crooks left any painkillers behind." He gripped the rig's maneuvering controls and reversed power to the gears. "There's only one way to find out."

The drilling rig started climbing out of the crater when the injured man noticed his skin turning gray. He became tense once more his lungs constricted slowing his breathing "Oh God! Do I have to be alive to see this?" through shallow breaths he began to sob, "Why couldn't that god awful freak of nature kill me?" completely demoralized he cut power to the engines, without any means of locomotion the heavy rig slid back into the sloping depression "What's the point of living if I have to see myself waste away like this?" he sat in the cockpit utterly defeated allowing the forces inside of him to do their deed. He thought back to how he lived his life, of all the battles he fought, of all the pain and suffering he caused. He had to admit that he had squandered his life; he was a pitiful man and all of his accomplishments amounted to nothing.

As his mutation becomes more pronounced his mind slipped into another reality. He began to view his surrounding in a detached manner, as he was watching them from someone else eyes. He found he couldn't move his limbs for they were no longer his; they yearned to do the bidding of their new masters. The severe loss of blood had taken the broken body to the edge of death, it was the exploding energy pack clipped to the colonel's utility belt that made the transition complete. The small explosion had enough force to tear open his gut spilling his intestines and so ending the illustrious career of a blood crazed butcher.

His long gone rational mind did not know the exact mechanics of the explosion. But his arch rival Nicolai Cruchev would testify before a Gemcore appointed judge that he had his Photonic emitter's energy pack booby-trapped. His chief security officer hotwired the energy pack's power nodules to tiny bio scanners embedded in the pack's casing. The bio scanners were rigged to trigger an explosion once they made contact with the mutagenic pathogen.

The captain knew Ramsey would never willingly affix such a dangerous device to his body so he had to be tricked. They gleaned information of off the colonel's psychological profile, which was overtly obtained from Gemcore's computer system. His profile described him as being a coward when it came to realities beyond his comprehension and that he loved his life so much that he would cling to any hope of survival even if it was a false hope. With this knowledge he made the unsuspecting colonel believe he could defend himself against the entity using energy weapons.

The docile judge found the former captain guilty of corporate terrorism, espionage and premeditated murder. The commercially sponsored court duly found Cruchev eligible for corporal punishment. The noble captain's parting words still resounds with anarchist legions, seeking to overthrow the unruly rule of the mega corporations. "If a man is punished and branded a terrorist for terrorizing the likes of Colonel Ramsey then we live in an unjust world."



The god forsaken halls of V-323 were consumed by a shroud of misery. The ghastly site of convulsing bodies strewn every which way would drive any sane man to despair. In the final stages of mutation the collective of gas creatures decided to leave their fallen prey rotting; they couldn't stand inducing such foul flesh.

The gas creatures only wished to disengage from the collective and return to their ancient sanctuaries to continue their eternal slumber. However before separating they made one last decision.

*Call killer prey to their deaths*

And so they gave the command to reanimate the corpse. Having done this the super entity disengaged from the mining space station and headed towards the refuge of deep space. The obedient slaves tried following their masters but were unable to. Left to their own demise the half living beings aimlessly walked the corridors of the condemned space station. Their trapped souls were not eager to transcend this world and go on to the next. They knew their eternal resting place would not be pleasant.

They helplessly watched as the vigilant automatons once more rid the station's corridors of unwanted intruders. The smoldering ruins echoed with the sound of sporadic gunfire mercilessly slaughtering the abominations. Desecrated and filled with the stench of rotting body parts the structure's original luster had

been robbed by its creators. Indeed anyone looking upon Gemcore mining space station V-323 would agree that it was a wretched sight.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

*Oh reader respect your Acid as if it was mine  
Oh great being look over the astray  
Oh dear wallet may u remain*