

¹And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. ²He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. ³He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore until the thousand years were ended. After that, he must be set free for a short time.

Revelation 20:1-3 (*New International Version*)

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The abduction

They first arrived in 1956, in the cold wastelands of northern Siberia. That year was particularly cold and the government had issued warnings for people to stay indoors as a heavy snowstorm was reported to be moving in over the area. That's when I decided to venture to the crater. I always thought best whilst at that crater. Some villagers say it was caused by a meteorite collision whilst others say a nuclear bomb had once been tested there; I don't know which is true except that, after measuring the radiation levels there, I dismissed the nuclear bomb test theory.

That night, it was extremely cold; around minus twenty-nine degrees. I was wrapped up very warmly but I still felt the bitter cold as the wind chill made the temperature seem even colder. As I sat in my truck with the engine running, I thought of her, Anya; that beautiful Russian girl who had stolen my heart, and now this. I had to decide. She wanted to leave Siberia and go to Moscow but I hated large cities and loved my work. I knew if I chose to stay, I would lose her. As I wrestled with my thoughts, I was startled by a bright light instantly illuminating everything around me. I raised my left hand to shield my eyes whilst my right hand instinctively reached for my rifle. That is the last thing I remember, the last time I saw Siberia, Earth, and my Anya.

Many things have changed since that day. I am no longer that entity that was abducted all those years ago. That powerless and pathetic creature died a long time ago. I don't know all of what happened after that, but the little I have pieced together since, is stranger than science fiction.

It seems whilst in transit, my abductors' starship developed a malfunction which led to its collision with a large asteroid. The two creatures who abducted me were instantly killed and I was ejected from the starship. By some extraordinary chance, the life support system in my cryogenic chamber kept all my vital life systems alive until I was discovered by the 'Souls.' I still do not know who they are, but

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I have always called them 'Souls' because they are entities of pure energy. They gave me a new body and made me partly like them. I kept my human brain and spinal cord but I lost all other parts of my body. Now I see without eyes, hear without ears, and feel without skin.

The call

Earth had achieved hyperspace travel over a thousand years ago, and in the millennium following this, had used the technology to brutally expand throughout the galaxy and beyond.

Earth's expansion pace had only been slowed by the 'three minute barrier.' In hyperspace, a ship could travel up to several light years per minute, after several minutes the structure of the hyper-drive core exceeded thermal capacity and melted down, leaving the ship permanently stranded in hyperspace. The hyper-drive pioneers overcame this problem by carrying several hyper-drive engines onboard their ships, one for the outward journey, and the other for the return journey or emergencies. Long trips took many hops to complete and required a new breed of spaceship pilot, the Hoppers.

Six hundred years ago, a scout Hopper ship discovered the Kolumbas system, a seemingly insignificant cluster of impenetrable giant planets thought to be uninhabited. On a large asteroid at the outskirts of the Kolumbas system, an alien substance was discovered, this substance later proved to be Earth's solution to the 'three minute barrier.' The substance was named Kolum, after Kolum Mathias, the Hopper whose ship had discovered it on K-Minor. This rare but vital alien substance allowed Earth's hyper-drive engines to bridge the "three-minute barrier," and was the key to Earths' accelerated space colonisation program. Kolum was now Earth's main space expansion resource, and a Kolum mining colony was swiftly established on K-Minor.

Today, thanks to Kolum, Earth's expansion program moves on at a thousand-fold. Hoppers, the captains of these new hyperspace ships, can stay in hyperspace for weeks on end. A rumour even spread through the psicomms network of a secret Hopper ship, commissioned by the Ministry of Human Defence, a secret department of the ETCA, which had entered hyperspace for over six years. Where they went and why they

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were sent there, is the guess for the speculators and rumourmongers.

It was the celestial winter in the Kolumbas planetary system where the ETCA still wielded a strong influence. On K-Minor, the furthest of the eighteen Kolumbas planets; and considered a large asteroid by some scientists, a mining colony had been in place for over six hundred and forty years.

The environment on K-Minor caused earth settlers' skin to harden, and Alfias; like all the other dwellers of K-Minor, had dark rough leathery skin. He had just completed sending the weekly mining log back to ETCA central on Tachii-2 and his thoughts wandered to the secret six-year hop mission. He liked that story. He had been fascinated by it since he was nine years old, ever since his uncle, Temus had told it to him.

Looking up at the sky, Alfias could not help but wonder what lay beneath the impenetrable purple clouds of Kolumbas Major. The huge planet exerted immeasurable forces on its neighbours and even at the distances that separated K-Minor from the Kolumbas solar system, Alfias could feel the enormous gravitational pull of the giant as it filled the entire night sky.

Kolumbas Major; his uncle had told him many strange stories about the giant planet. Two thousand times the size of K-Minor, it could be the largest source of Kolum in the galaxy. The ETCA had eyed it for many years as a potential giant Kolum mine. And although several thousand scientists and engineers had died attempting to land mining teams and a colony on it, the ETCA had never forgotten the 'Purple Killer'; as it had come to be known by the colonists on K-Minor.

It had been over five years since Alfias had heard any news of a Kolumbas Major landing attempt. Not even a rumour. Many of the colonists, including Temus, believed that the Purple Killer should be left alone. Superstitious old fools; Alfias thought as he turned to head back to Home Core. One

day someone would succeed with a landing, and Alfias swore he would be there to see it.

The sky had taken on a reddish hue as the purple gave way to the harsh Kolumbas sun. Alfias had literally minutes to enter the hatch and secure the door before the temperature outside, rose over one thousand degrees centigrade; the cool K-Minor dawn. He had never seen the sunrise and he didn't want to, either.

As he packed up and headed for the hatch, Alfias remembered the story of mad Jones. He remembered when Temus told him of the colonist named Jones, who apparently went insane and in his rampage, killed twelve people. The punishment in those early colony days was to face the dawn. Temus told of how the mad man had been tied outside and left to see the dawn. The next evening after the temperature outside had dropped sufficiently; a scout team was dispatched to survey the spot where Jones had been tied. Alfias remembered how Temus, leaning forward with a dark and mysterious look on his face continued his story, "There was no sign at all that he had been there. No bones, no clothes, not even the remains of the metal helmet and clasps of his space suite were found," and with dramatic mock wide-eyed fear, Temus added, "He had simply, vanished."

Some of the older colonist's still spoke of the ghost of mad Jones, roaming around in sector thirty-three behind the morgue. Alfias closed the third hatch door behind him and walked over to the hatch control panel. He could feel the heat rising in the room as he quickly punched the green button and activated the cooling shields. Instantly the room temperature returned to normal.

There were twelve escape hatches to the mining colony settlement. Each hatch had a manual override for the shield. The shield kept the intense heat outside from killing everyone inside. The computer was programmed to automatically engage the hatch shields if the manual override was not activated when the temperature reached ninety degrees centigrade.

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Alfias had gotten into trouble many times in the past for allowing the automatic override to be activated. The last time it happened, he learned why all the older miners were so insistent that he used the manual override at all times. He spent two weeks in the infirmary recovering from the effects of ninety degrees centigrade.

“Alfias, where have you been?” screeched Temus’ strained voice over the Mod Com.

“Hi Uncle, I was uploading the week’s log and ran a bit behind.” Alfias, now entering the transport shaft, piped back, hoping Temus would not question him further.

“Mother has your food waiting, and it’s getting cold. If you’re not here by ten, I will eat it, boy,” Temus threatened in his usual light-hearted manner.

“OK, I will be there in eight” Alfias replied quickly, bracing himself for the high-pressure Chute ride.

The colonists mainly lived underground on K-Minor, in caves dug deep into the planet’s cold core. The only means of transportation through the millions of miles of tunnels on K-Minor was the Chute. Capable of multidirectional movement, its only flaw was the incredibly high G forces it exerted on its passengers.

As the catacombs blurred past with Alfias pinned to the small seat in his chute, he wondered what was for dinner. Mother always made the best meals.

The colonists had devised a curious system of food preparation. The system required all colonists over the age of eighteen to take turns in preparing their camps’ meals. With one thousand six hundred and twenty three camps on K-Minor, there was always something different to eat, if you were popular enough to be invited into the other camps. Alfias was never short of such invites, and always accepted invitations, especially when it was Temus’ turn to prepare the camp’s meals.

Home core was the main cave that housed twelve hundred of the one thousand six hundred and twenty three camps. The other camps were spread through thirteen annexes

to Home Core. Each camp in Home Core had its own character and all camp homes displayed a beautiful array of lights, making each one individual. As the chute blasted out of the catacombs into Home Core, Alfias squinted at the bright-multicoloured lights.

The camps were linked by thick cables supplying data, electricity and life support liquids and gasses. Each home tapped into this supply. With a free incinerator outside on the surface of K-Minor, the waste from each home simply drained into Home Cores' central drain and was pumped outside during the night to be incinerated at sunrise.

The more elaborate homes, found in the single digit numbered camps, housed executives, colony administrators, support staff, police, ETCA and Earth Links, the corporation responsible for the miles of Magnolane on K-Minor.

The chute slowed down as the powerful electromagnetic drives kicked in. The invisible Magnolane had been installed over fifteen years ago. It consisted of coiled lanes of a copper-based alloy buried under the ground. Millions of volts passed through the coils creating the strong, controlled electromagnetic field that the chute rode on. By varying the fields of its own electromagnets, the chutes' computer controlled the direction and speed of the Chute. Alfias had learned all this at the early training centre when he was younger, but had since forgotten most of it.

As he came closer to the hub of Home Core, he saw the thousands of chutes, like so many ants moving back and forth between the camp homes.

Alfias' chute automatically slowed down to walking speed when he was within his camp. Ever since the tragic accident of five years ago when a visiting dignitary from Tachii-2 had been killed in a collision with a chute travelling at high speed, all chutes were now restricted to fifteen kilometres per hour within the Home Core camps. An oversight by the programmers had left the camps annexed to Home Core unrestricted free cruise zones. The young children of the camps used this to their advantage whilst their parents

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were away on mining shifts. Alfias, thought back to earlier days when he used to chase his friends through the Magnolanes of the annexed sectors.

As he neared the camp canteen, he noticed that even though all the recharge bays were full, a space was empty near the canteen door. His chute came to a stop in the only free recharge bay outside the camp canteen. Alfias briefly glanced at the rows of recharging chutes, and realised he was very late; it seemed everyone was already inside.

The Chute doors slid open with a soft whoosh. Alfias stepped out and ran to the canteen entrance. Pulling open the metallic doors, he stepped into a pitch-black room.

“Huh?” he uttered confused. The canteen lights were never off.

“SURPRISE!” came a chorus of familiar voices, accompanied by bright lights.

He squinted at the lights as the camp residents, all wearing party hats and holding their metallic cups in the air, welcomed him. A large banner stretched across the ceiling, from the left to the right wall with “HAPPY 21ST BIRTHDAY ALFIAS” printed across it.

He now remembered.

“Hahaha, I forgot all about it. You got me... Thank you. Thank you...” his surprised response was drowned by the cheering and singing. He was swept off the floor by Temus and two other friends who were, for once, not in their usual grey mining overalls. Their muscled brown skin glistened in the bright canteen light, barely contained in the casual shorts and t-shirts they wore.

Everyone in the room sang in unison, “For he’s a jolly good fellow, for he’s a jolly good fellow, for he’s a jolly good fellooooooooooww, and nobody can deny...”

As the chanting filled the room, Alfias received pats on his back from the men and kisses on his cheeks from some of the women, including Mother beamed at him with pride.. “I should have known something funny was going on when you asked me to go and upload the mining report by myself.”

Alfias shouted at Temus as he was carried around the room. Temus laughed and continued singing.

After the lap of honour on the shoulders of Temus and his best friend Saiydi, Alfias was lowered into a chair in the middle of the canteen. Temus motioned for everyone to back off and make room for the birthday man.

“Today, we are proud to welcome Alfias into adulthood.” Temus announced.

A roar filled the room as everyone clapped and cheered. A few people whistled loudly whilst others stamped their feet or banged on tables with their empty metal cups.

“As is our custom here on K-Minor, all who enter into adulthood have to spend one night in sector thirty three.” Temus continued.

“Ooooooooh,” the crowd uttered in unison.

Temus turned his back on the crowd to face Alfias. “Are you ready boy?” he asked with a glint in his eye. “Are you ready to face your demons and shed your childhood like an old jumpsuit?”

“YES I AM,” Alfias replied without hesitation, screaming above the cheering. This was the moment he had dreaded the most. He tried to be brave and not show his fear.

“Yeahhhh,” a deafening reaction followed Alfias’ answer only to be followed by more cheering, jovial singing and chanting. “Sector thirty three, in sector thirty three, the ghosts and ghouls are all you’ll see in sector thirty three. Ohhh, sector thirty three, in sector...”

In all the singing and chanting, no one saw Mother slip away into the kitchen behind the canteen. She returned, wheeling a large floating trolley with a small cake inscribed with ‘21’, and surrounded by food and drinks for everyone. Plates and cutlery were quickly distributed from underneath the trolley and the nightlong party begun.

Alfias woke up later than usual, still nursing his head from the celebrations. He remembered what he had to do that day, and fear gripped him. Sector thirty-three. Today was the day he

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had to go and spend one night there. The realisation filled him with fear and anxiety. He had heard so much about sector thirty-three from the other adults of the camp, all of it bad news.

He looked around his small room. His gaze rested on his junior mining overalls lying on the grey metal floor.

“Open windows.” He commanded the room computer and immediately regretted doing so. The wall above his bed morphed into a wide-open window. The bright lights of the camp streamed in, causing him to shield his eyes.

“Program twelve.” The computer reacted instantly to his hurried command and the room fell into darkness as the view through the window morphed into the soft lights of the view of Kolumbas Major before sunrise. The soft purple haze flooded the room, casting an eerie purple shadow over everything.

“*Alfias*,” he turned to the door thinking someone had entered the room and called him.

“Hello? Who is it? Temus?” Alfias got up out of the bed, and dragged on his overalls. In the light from the window, he could not distinguish the door handle from the rest of the door. He felt his way around the middle of the door for the small circular handle, he eventually located and pulled the handle and was again blinded by the bright camp lights outside his door.

“Hello?” Temus, Saiydi and Mother were already up and outside Mother’s home. The red, yellow and green coloured camp home was loved by all the residents of the camp, and on any given day or night, people would congregate there for a chat or a discussion with mother and anyone else present. Today was no different. Mother sat on the porch with her familiar rocking chair, swaying back and forth, as she fumbled with her knitting.

As long as Alfias could remember, she had been knitting the same item. Temus had one foot on the top step of mother’s home, the other on the street and Saiydi was leaning

with his back to the yellow section of the house facing Alfias' small camp home. Saiydi was the first to see Alfias.

"Hey, the birthday boy is finally awake." Saiydi pushed himself from the wall and walked slowly towards Alfias, smiling.

Temus also turned around and Mother looked up from her knitting, both welcoming Alfias with a smile.

"Did any one call my name?" asked Alfias, his eyes slowly adjusting to the bright lights.

"No, but we were talking about you a minute ago. We wondered when you would wake up." Temus replied.

"Did you sleep well?" inquired Mother, in her usual caring manner. Mother set her knitting down and got up from her rocking chair.

"Huhhh, yes" Alfias answered, yawning at the same time. "I was awakened by someone calling my name. Let me have a shower and get dressed properly. I will be out in fifteen."

"OK, we will inform the others," said Saiydi, as he turned back towards Mother and Temus. "Happy birthday Alfias, you will be a man tomorrow."

As Alfias went back and shut the door to his purple room, he heard Mother's voice trailing off, "Almost a man, and it was only a short while ago I was rocking him to sleep in this very chair," Alfias smiled.

Sector thirty three

Every member of camp sixty-four was present at the border of sector thirty-two to bid Alfias farewell. The group of mining colonists stood and looked out towards the dark and barren streets of sector thirty-three. The Magnolane disappeared into the dark shadows less than a couple of hundred meters into sector thirty-three. Each adult knew very well how scared he or she had been, when it had been their turn to spend a night there. Most had never ventured further than the first abandoned building where they spent the night, always keeping an eye on the bright horizon created by the lights from the occupied sectors.

Sector thirty-three had long been abandoned by the early colonists due to several accidents that resulted in twenty-three fatalities. The sector sat on an electromagnetic anomaly that intermittently caused the levels of electromagnetism to rise dramatically every thirteen weeks. The phenomena wrecked havoc on all electronic devices and metallic machinery. This cycle was not consistent and often the phenomena would occur earlier than expected. When this happened, Chutes and other machinery malfunctioned, causing accidents and sometimes death. The site was abandoned twenty years ago and was now only used as a graveyard and for initiation ceremonies marking a colonist's passage into adulthood.

Alfias was given his night pack, comprised only of non-metallic devices; a torch, a knife, a flare gun, several thermal blankets, an inflatable mattress, and food and water.

“Be brave Alfias, I am very proud of you.” Mother gave him a big hug, her warm, damp face streaming with tears of pride.

“Watch out for Mad Jones boy, word is, he is roaming about tonight” Temus said ending the advice with raucous laughter. “You’ll be alright son. See you tomorrow.”

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“If you live” a voice from the back of the group, now all around Alfias, piped in. The whole group except Mother and Alfias burst out into nervous laughter.

“I’ll see you all in the morning. If I see Mad Jones I will be sure to give him all your addresses.” Alfias replied trying to sound brave. He turned and walked over the dusty yellow boundary line on the ground, his knees now shaking. He was not sure if it was from the cold or the fear. A few steps into sector thirty-three and the darkness immediately enveloped him. The road sloped downwards as he walked deeper into the valley that sector thirty-three sat in. He turned back to see his friends waving to him. He gave a faint wave back. As they passed from sight, he could still hear their voices singing faintly in the distance.

“Sector thirty three, in sector thirty three, the ghosts and ghouls are all you’ll see in sector thirty three...” The voices grew faint more quickly than Alfias had expected. In a few hundred steps, he could neither see nor hear anything. He reached for his torch. As he flicked the switch, he wished he had not. The powerful beam of light from the torch fell on a gravestone.

“Ahhhhh,” he screamed in fear, dropping the torch on the floor as he stepped back. The light flickered twice and disappeared. He bent over to pick up the torch but could not find it in the dark. He got down on his knees in the dark feeling all around him for it. His right hand felt something cold, “Ahhhh,” he screamed again, dropped whatever it was he had picked up and turned and run back in the direction he had come from, leaving his overnight bag behind him.

Running blindly in the pitch black, he stumbled over something on the ground and fell, hitting his head against another gravestone. As he lay on the ground dazed, he felt the warm blood trickling from his forehead. He lost consciousness and slipped into dark.

Several hours passed before Alfias woke up. He was shivering and still lying on the ground against a stone slab. It was still

pitch black, but his eyes had adjusted to the darkness. The landscape was dotted with gravestones and large black shadows. He reasoned that the large black shadows must be buildings. In the distance, he saw the silhouette of his night pack. His head was throbbing. He reached up with his hand to feel his head. The bleeding had stopped, but the blood had hardened and dried on his forehead, matting his hair to his face. He got to his feet and brushed himself off.

He walked back to his night pack and found the torch under a fallen gravestone. He flicked the switch, but the torch did not respond.

After several minutes of fumbling around with the torch with no luck, he threw it back on the ground. He could not believe how stupid he had been.

“Superstitious nonsense” he mumbled to himself as he picked up his night pack and strapped it securely on his back. He surveyed the horizon. Behind him must be where he came in as the horizon was glowing dimly. That must be the lights from the occupied camps. He could not go back. He would be the laughing stock of the camp. He decided to walk towards one of the buildings for shelter.

The further into sector thirty-three he walked, the darker it got. He stopped. He simply could not see his own hands in front of him after walking several hundred steps towards the nearest large building shaped shadow.

“*Alfias*,” he heard a whisper from the dark.

“Huh?” Alfias stopped dead in his tracks and held his breath. That voice again, it was somehow familiar, eerie, but at the same time familiar.

“*Alfias*”

“Who is there? Who are you?”

“*I am here to help you fulfil your destiny.*” The faint whisper seemed to come from all round him.

“What’s my destiny?” Alfias slowly slid his night pack off his shoulders and reached inside for his knife.

“*You are destined to open the Abyss, Alfias. Open the Abyss and save mankind,*” the voice whispered.

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“The Abyss? Do you mean Kolumbas Major? Alfias felt a little less scared now as he wielded his knife in front of him.

“It has many names to many people, Alfias. You hold the key to unlock its doors once again. I will always be there to help and guide you, just call upon me in your mind and I will come.”

“How am I going to open the door to Kolumbas Major, ermm, I mean the Abyss?” Alfias was intrigued and no longer scared.

“Go to Earth, find the ship. It has been prepared for you.” The whispering voice now grew fainter. *“Find the Triton. You will hear from me again ...”* the voice faded into the dark.

“Hello, are you still there? How am I going to get to Earth? How do I find the ship? What is the Triton? Hello? Are you there?” A thousand questions flew through Alfias’ mind. Whose voice was it? Was it a ghost? Was it Mad Jones? How did it know that his dream was to be the first to land on Kolumbas Major? Alfias was so excited he had forgotten where he was. He was no longer afraid. He called out to the voice in the dark for a few more minutes, and then eventually gave up. The voice was gone

He opened the valves on the inflatable mattress and laid it on the floor. The mattress automatically inflated and covered the road. The heat from the special material made the mattress glow softly in the dark. Alfias lay down on the mattress and covered himself with one of the thermal blankets.

His mind was spinning with what he had just experienced. He fell asleep with a smile on his face dreaming of landing on Kolumbas Major and discovering the largest Kolum mine in the galaxy.

The warm mattress and blanket made him fall into a deep, restful sleep. The darkness completely enveloped him as he slept on the street in sector thirty-three.

Sector thirty three

Most of the adults in Alfias' camp had only lasted three hours in sector thirty three, and the longest stay since the cemetery was established was five hours. Alfias eventually awoke from his deep sleep. He was in total darkness but he was no longer scared. He rolled up his blanket and deflated the mattress still yawning. After packing his night pack, he started back towards sector thirty-two. He wondered how long he had slept for.

As he walked further away from the graveyard and closer to the border, the horizon became brighter. In the distance, he could hear muffled noises. As he got closer to the border, he could make out many voices calling out his name.

“ALFIAS, ALFIAS,” the voices repeated.

“HELLO,” he shouted back.

“ALFIAS,” they must not have heard him because the shouting continued.

Alfias started to run up the sloping road when he could see the crowd in the distance.

“THERE HE IS,” screamed a voice that sounded distinctly like Temus's.

As he got closer, he noticed that this crowd was larger than the one that saw him off the night before. How long had he been away?

Alfias came out of the air hygiene unit and reached for his new grey adult mining overalls. Today was his first day as an adult miner.

“I still don't believe you that I was away for three days. I simply remember falling asleep and waking up a short time later” Alfias activated the nanoseal on his overalls whilst Temus waited patiently at the table for him.

“Come on boy, you don't want to be late today, your first day at the mine head. You wasted enough time with all those doctors now lets get to some real work.” Temus said, as he got up.

They both headed for the door on their way to work. As Alfias opened the door, he caught a glimpse of Temus's

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face in the mirror. Temus looked at Alfias with a new look in his eyes. Alfias could not make out if it was discomfort or respect. It wasn't only Temus, he had noticed that everyone including Mother looked at him differently now since he came back from sector thirty-three.

The camp members relayed to him the events that transpired after he entered sector thirty-three.

When he had not returned after five hours, people started to worry. A search party was sent to find him after ten hours of absence. The rescue team had marshalled six Chutes, and entered the sector after Alfias. They only managed to get fifty meters before they had to turn back. The electromagnetic anomaly recurred. Luckily, no one was hurt, but the rescue was aborted and the useless Chutes were dragged back over the border. After that, no one wanted to go in after him. They had all waited at the border and called out to him. Every hour that passed, the crowd grew larger, until Temus spotted a moving shadow in the dark coming up the road.

Alfias was immediately taken and examined by the camp doctor. An ETCA scientific ship in orbit around K-Minor heard of the incident and its scientists, bored with measuring gravitational fluctuations around the planet, requested a landing on K-Minor, offering their medical help. The doctors amongst them examined Alfias. Dr Jenson Meeko, the chief medical officer on K-Minor examined Alfias with the assistance of the ETCA scientists. They found nothing abnormal with him and concluded their findings in a report that was filed on the Home Base medical computer. Even the cut on Alfias' head had disappeared. The doctors privately believed he had made up the story because they couldn't find any signs of damage to his skin and no traces of blood on his forehead or hair. Alfias did not tell anyone about his conversation with the voice.

Two weeks later, after the ETCA ship had departed for another planet in the Kolumbas system, Dr Meeko called Alfias at work.

“Alfias?” The familiar voice of Dr Meeko boomed over the Mod Com.

“Oh, hello Dr, what can I do for you? Want some more blood samples?” Alfias shouted back in a jovial manner over the loud drilling noises all around him. He set down his Robodrill and deactivating the JCBot’s robot arms. He was at the Kolum mine face, on the front line.

“It is almost the end of your shift isn’t it?”

“Yes, Doctor, I have another five minutes”

“Can you come and see me when you are done there?”

“In your office at Home Core Med?” Alfias asked, screaming even louder to be heard. He activating the JCBot’s robot arms again and raised his Robodrill towards the mine face.

“No, at my home. It’s in sector four, number thirteen.”

“OK, give me thirty minutes,” Alfias now manoeuvred his Robodrill to its resting place by the hip of his JCBot. The storage flaps opened as he slid the three-meter long diamond and Kolum tipped drill into the storage caddy. Moving his hands over the controls, he swivelled the JCBot ninety degrees to his left. Hundreds of JCBots lined the front line, each controlled by the miner in the small caddy on the belly of it. Alfias raised his hands to the frontline supervisor, who was in his observation booth to the far left of the cavern. He nodded and punched the release button. Alfias’ JCBot glided backwards over the dust strewn Magnolane and out of the cavern. The cavern was over a kilometre wide and two hundred meters tall. It was one of many to be found on K-Minor, containing the rich veins of Kolum. The JCBot came to a stop in its usual recharging port. Alfias released his safety harness and opened the toughened glass globe that kept him protected in the control centre of the mechanised mining vehicle.

Alfias had never been to sector four before. As his Chute glided through the streets, lined with holographic trees and small birds from the ancient Earth ornithology archives, Alfias

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marvelled at the homes, each one unique and built of flexi glass and CC3. The changing colours of the CC3 made each home look different at any moment. CC3 was very expensive and was the most advanced concrete compound produced by ETCA. These houses must be worth a fortune. Alfias' standard release Chute stood out amongst the other more sophisticated Magnolane users personalised Chutes. A long, sleek, black and silent four-seater BMWBenzCrysler Chute overtook Alfias' dusty grey and dented standard chute.

Alfias' Chute came to the gates of Dr Meeko's home. The house could barely be seen from the streets and was fronted by a six-meter tall projected force-field gate. The shimmering blue gate dissipated as Alfias neared and reenergised behind him as his Chute passed beyond them. Alfias manoeuvred his Chute up the incline in the lane leading from the gates. As he came over the top of the lane, he saw the magnificent mansion. It was made entirely of flexi glass in the style of the old Bavarian castles of ancient earth.

Dr Meeko was waiting for him at the entrance.

"Leave your chute over there" Dr Meeko shouted whilst pointing at a corridor to the left of the holographic fountain at the front of the mansion. The Magnolane disappeared beneath CC3 brickwork. Alfias set the Chute to park mode and the computer automatically followed the hidden Magnolane down the long corridor to a large Chute docking bay. There were four super Chutes already docked there and a rugged looking military chute, complete with mounted CT32 blasters.

Alfias unbuckled as his chute completed its docking routine. He hopped off and ran back through the corridor towards the house. As he passed the fountain, the soft sound of flowing water was joined by soft music he had never heard before. He continued towards Dr Meeko, briefly turning back when the music stopped, leaving only the sound of flowing water. The music must have been automatically activated when he came close to the fountain.

“Dr, you must be doing well to own this place, it’s beautiful.” Alfias commented as he extended his hand to greet the Dr.

“Oh, thank you, it’s not really mine it belongs to ETCA.”

“What music was that fountain playing?” Alfias asked turning to look back at the musical fountain.

“That’s Ancient Earth. It used to be called classical music. Do you like it?” The Dr asked pulling open the large double doors to the mansion.

“Yeah it’s all right but I would prefer a deep baseline in there somewhere.”

“Hahaha,” the Dr laughed. “Come Alfias, I want you to meet some people.” Dr Meeko, still chuckling, led Alfias into the large foyer of the mansion. The ornately decorated, large, circular room stretched fifteen meters high with four elegant holographic crystal chandeliers floating half-way from the ceiling. The room had two winding staircases leading to the first floor, and two exits leading off to the right and left of the foyer.

“Come, let’s go into the study,” Dr Meeko led the way towards the right exit from the foyer. Alfias followed the Dr into what looked like a large ballroom. Alfias had read about such rooms in his history classes as a child. The walls were covered by holographic tapestries and the large windows, three meters tall, stretched from the floor to the ceiling. Alfias looked out of the windows as he passed them. They overlooked beautifully manicured gardens with brightly coloured birds strolling between the trees.

“What are those animals Dr?” Alfias enquired, now increasing his walking pace to catch up with the Dr.

“Peacocks, they lived on earth a long time ago. They were a type of fowl.” The Dr answered as he continued to walk towards the end of the ballroom.

At the end of the ballroom, the Dr opened another set of double doors to a dimly lit room full of holographic bookshelves and books.

The Kolumbas Affair

“Here we are at last.” The Dr waited until Alfias was inside the room before shutting the doors behind them. “Take a seat over there.” The Dr pointed at a group of soft chairs around a short glass topped table to the immediate left of the double doors. Alfias walked towards the seats. As he got closer, he realised there were three people already seated there with their backs to him. He walked to the nearest available seat, and sat down.

“Hello Alfias.” Alfias recognised the ETCA military uniform. The man extended his hand for Alfias to shake. “Hello,” replied Alfias, wincing from the grip of the man’s handshake.

“I am General Thorn of ETCA special projects.” The General introduced himself then turned to the man to his right, a short man with dark lenses that totally obscured his eyes, “This is Mr Lawson, he is only here as an observer.” Mr Lawson did not move but continued to sit with his face pointing towards Alfias. Alfias wondered if Mr Lawson was looking at him.

He felt uncomfortable and avoided looking at the man as he muttered “Hello.” Mr Lawson did not reply.

“This is Dr Voss from ETCA special operations; he will be asking you some questions.” The general continued pointing at the man to his left. “And of course you know Dr Meeko.” Dr Meeko smiled and sat next to Alfias, leaning back in the comfortable, fabric-covered seats.

Alfias was intrigued and a little uncomfortable. There was something wrong here, and he could feel it. Was he in trouble?

“You are in no trouble Alfias. We only want to ask you about the events of two weeks ago when you were in the dead zone.” The sound seemed to come from the direction of Mr Lawson but Alfias did not see his lips moving in the dim light.

“You mean sector thirty three? I thought that was all over now. I’ve answered all the questions the ETCA doctors and Dr Meeko asked.”

The General now leaned forward, “we know you did son, these questions are different from those, and will only take a short time.”

“OK, what do you need to know?” Alfias leaned back in his chair. His shoulder touched Dr Meeko who quickly moved to the side away from Alfias.

“*What do you know about The Abyss?*” Mr Lawson asked, again without seeming to move his lips or any part of his body.

Alfias was taken by surprise. He had not spoken to anyone about the eerie voice from sector thirty-three. How did they know? “The Abyss? I don’t know what you mean.” Alfias hoped they could not tell he was lying.

“*We can tell that you are not telling the truth. Did you speak to anyone or anything in the dead zone?*” asked Mr Lawson in the same unemotional voice.

“I...I heard voices” Alfias answered, now a little afraid.

“What did the voices say?” asked Dr Voss, who had been silent until now.

“I don’t remember. I was scared. I ran and fell, hitting my head on a gravestone and knocking myself out.” Alfias instinctively avoided telling them the contents of his conversation in sector thirty-three. Something inside him told him he could not trust these people, especially Mr Lawson.

“*You can trust us Alfias; we are here to help you. Tell us the truth. What did the voice say?*” Mr Lawson asked still not moving.

“I didn’t say voice, I said I heard voices”

Dr Voss reached into the inside pocket of his overall and pulled out a shiny metal the length of his palm. He placed it on the table in front of Alfias. The object pulsed softly with a purple light. “Do you know what this is?”

Alfias reached to pick up the device. It pulsed even brighter as his hand neared it. The General’s hand darted across the table and grabbed Alfias’ hand before it reached the object.

The Kolumbas Affair

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you, son.” He said still maintaining his death grip on Alfias’ wrist.

“Just look at it Alfias, do not touch it.” Dr Voss said beckoning to the General. The general released Alfias’ hand. Alfias quickly withdrew his aching wrist and held it close to his chest; rubbing it with his other hand. The bright purple pulsing changed to a softer, dimmer pulse as Alfias leaned away from the table.

“I don’t know what it is, I don’t know what you want from me, and I can’t answer any of your questions.” Alfias eyes watered from his throbbing wrist. He was scared and wanted to leave the room. He didn’t like these people. He stood up and was quickly pulled back down to the seat by Dr Meeko.

“Please cooperate Alfias; these men have come a long way to ask you these questions answer everything they ask truthfully.” Dr Meeko said looking straight into Alfias eyes, whilst still keeping hold of his hand.

“*When did you first notice you were telepathic?*” Mr Lawson asked.

“Ahhh, is that what you are? Is that how you are able to read my mind? Well if you can read my mind why do you need to ask me all these silly questions?”

“*I am a telepath Alfias, but it seems you are a more powerful telepath than me. I can only read what you allow me. I cannot seem to read anything about the events in the dead zone from your mind. You are blocking me, extraordinary!*” Mr Lawson now turned to his left. “Gentlemen, in light of the current circumstances I advise we take him in for further questioning until we are sure he has not been contacted.” Mr Lawson turned his face back towards Alfias.

“OK Meeko you know what to do.” The general nodded towards Dr Meeko who shifted in his seat slightly. Alfias turned to see what the Dr was doing when he felt a cold metal press against his neck. Before his head completed the turn, the dimly lit room faded into darkness.

The Galleon

The Elders, an ancient and secretive group, whose members were spread through the entire galaxy and beyond, first appeared in Earth history shortly after the collapse of the polar ice shelves. This catastrophic event wiped out a third of Earth's population, forcing the leaders of the surviving nations to set up the United Nations Sol Alliance (UNSA). UNSA was given unlimited powers to guarantee earth's survival. It quickly established and rigorously enforced anti abortion, and anti suicide laws. Wars that had raged before the catastrophe were abruptly ended. Multiple births were encouraged and rewarded. New human cloning laws were made legal and scientific research into human population development was given unlimited funding. This resulted in a rapid rise in the human population.

UNSA leader, Boris Stanovich was contacted by an Elder representative during those heady years and given advanced scientific information to prepare Earth for interstellar travel and space colonisation. With Earth quickly dying from over pollution and extreme weather conditions, Boris Stanovich saw the Elders as Earth's saviour. He committed his absolute loyalty to them and with their help greatly advanced Earth's scientific capabilities and initiated the first colonies on the moon. Boris Stanovich committed vast resources towards developing the space-folding technology and before he died, saw the launch of Hope, earth's first starship with space-folding capabilities. Successive heads of UNSA maintained the links with the Elders through their representatives and eventually allowed the Elders to fully control the organisation. One hundred years before the Kolumbas system was discovered, UNSA separated its scientific business from its military and commercial interests, creating the ETCA a policing and governing body with absolute power throughout the Earth colonies.

The Kolumbas Affair

No one knew who the Elders were. How old they were or how far their influence stretched. None of the ETCA leaders had even seen an elder, only their representatives. Their sanctuaries, impenetrable structures strategically deployed across the Universe, had a purpose unknown even to the ETCA. Apart from power, the Elders seemed only interested in Kolumbas Major, and had given specific instructions to the leaders of ETCA to sabotage or destroy any ship that attempted to land there. When the Kolumbas system was discovered, the Elders controlled all commerce and business activities in the galaxy through their representatives. These representatives were now in high positions and at the head of every important organisation throughout the Earth colonies.

The Galleon, an ETCA ship was home to over two thousand top-secret scientists, paranormals, and high-ranking military personnel. The spy ship was five thousand meters long and five hundred meters wide. Set out over fifty-five storeys, its main purpose was to monitor all ETCA controlled planetary systems as well as to spy on new territories the ETCA had its sights on. Section eight on the twentieth floor was off limits to all but the Spectre Team. This team was responsible for all black ops commissioned by the mysterious Elders.

Phenson Carpson was on the Galleon when the boy was brought in. He had been briefed by the Psi, Mr Lawson. Phenson Carpson did not like to use people like Mr Lawson but this mission-required people with extraordinary skills, and although the mental stability of Mr Lawson was more than questionable, he tolerated him, for now.

“He may have been contacted by the ‘voice’, but we are having difficulty finding that out. His mind is unnaturally strong, Master. I have never come across anyone like him. Even with the Psisor at full amplification, his mind manages to block us out.”

“Hmmm,” only the Elders and their representatives can do that Phenson Carpson thought to himself. “Take me to him. Is he still sedated?”

“Yes Master, but our readings still show a lot of brain activity. He may be acquiring us even through our shields.” Mr Lawson scurried down the corridor next to Phenson Carpson, looking up briefly to read the Elder representatives’ face. He wished he could read more but no Psi was able to read anyone sent by the mysterious Elders. This fact had never deterred the Thermite from trying.

As a young child on the planet Thermy, he had learned never to give up. Even when he was a fugitive hunted by the ETCA, he eluded capture and continued his work. It had taken the full force of the ETCA Psi corps with an earlier version of the Psisor to capture him. The ETCA invading army had not reckoned on someone like him. They lost ninety percent of their army before Thermy was captured.

After his capture, the Elders commissioned his rehabilitation and recruitment as a valued ETCA resource. With his highly developed psi abilities, he was able to paralyse or kill entire planetary populations from light years away. Now he headed the Spectre Team, a Psi team of paranormals who worked for the ETCA. To ensure he never turned rogue, the ETCA had implanted an explosive device inside his head. The capture operation had damaged his motor functions so that now, when he walked he seemed to be scurrying. This also had limited his neck movement and any movement of his head was now extremely painful. He knew that Phenson Carpson controlled the detonator to the explosive device in his head and wished he could get into the Elder representatives’ head.

“He is behind this door Master.”

“Leave me alone with him”

“Yes Master,” Mr Lawson opened the specially designed psi door with a memory only known to him and the Spectre Team. The three-meter thick blast door swung open, revealing a short corridor leading to another door.

The Kolumbas Affair

“I have to come inside with you to the inner door Master.”

“Is this room secure enough?” Phenson Carpson asked sarcastically.

“It is the most secure location on this ship Master. An atomic explosion on board the ship could not penetrate this room” Mr Lawson, who was used to reading peoples thoughts, totally missed the sarcasm.

Mr Lawson opened three more three-meter thick psi locked doors as they walked along the short corridors linking the doors. Through the third door, they entered a brightly lit room with a suspended medic bed in the middle of the room. The room was circular with no edges.

“Leave me alone with him Mr Lawson” Phenson Carpson said with his back to the Psi, who was waiting hesitantly in the doorway.

“Yes Master.” Mr Lawson was glad to leave the room. He disliked not feeling nearby minds. The room was shielded against all communication devices including telepathy. He felt alone in the mental silence and was glad to leave.

As the heavy door shut behind him and the bolts drove into the lock, Phenson Carpson walked slowly towards the bed.

As he drew closer to the bed, Alfias lifted his head and looked at Phenson Carpson. “Where am I?”

Phenson Carpson took one-step backward, surprised that Alfias was awake. He continued walking towards the bed until he could clearly see the boy’s face. He was blindfolded and could not see who was in the room. He is only a child, Phenson Carpson thought, as he stood looking down at Alfias whose feet, legs, hands, chest, and arms were bound to the bed. The self-tightening straps were programmed to tighten more whenever the patient struggled. The straps were crushing Alfias’ small frame yet he continued to struggle against them.

Phenson Carpson reached inside his pockets and pulled out a device resembling a comms unit. He activated it with his thumb and leaned over Alfias’ head to probe the boy’s mind.

The Psisor employed by the Spectre team was derived from a component within the device Phenson Carpson held over Alfias' head. It contained advanced alien technology capable of deciphering any message. The Elders used the device for a wide variety of purposes; Phenson Carpson now used it to pry into Alfias' mind.

The Triton

“Alfias, you must escape from this place. Your destiny awaits you.”

Alfias was surprised to hear from the voice again but listened closely to the instruction’s that followed. The voice instructed him to move the top part of his body violently whilst keeping his legs still.

As he moved his chest and arms violently, the clasps around his hands arms and shoulders, tightened unbearably. His leg clasps however, relaxed even more and became slack. As the adrenalin rushed through his body, Alfias kicked out with all his might against the leg and feet clasps. They gave way instantly as his legs sprung upwards and hit Phenson Carpson who was still standing over him with the mind scanner. A part of the bed caught Phenson Carpson’s chin, knocking him unconscious. He collapsed to the floor; a loud metallic sound followed his fall as a metallic object flew from his inside pocket. It pulsed with a soft purple light as it lay on the floor by the unconscious Elder.

Alfias’ legs were free, but his upper body was tightly pinned to the bed.

“Relax your upper body Alfias, and move your left foot below the bed.”

Alfias did as the voice instructed. As his left foot moved below the end of the bed, he felt something metallic.

“Kick it from behind.”

Alfias tried but could not quite reach with his left foot.

“I can’t reach it, I am trying, but I can’t reach it.”

“Relax and try again Alfias.”

Alfias twisted his left foot backwards under the bed and kicked forwards at the metal device.

Instantly, the clasps relaxed around his shoulders, arms, and waist. He was free of the bed, but his eyes were will blindfolded and his arms and hands were still in clasps.

The Kolumbas Affair

“I can’t see.” Alfias said as he rolled onto the floor exhausted from his ordeal.

“Grab the key Alfias, take the key.”

Suddenly Alfias saw a picture of the room in his mind. He looked behind him to see the figure that had been standing over him. The crumpled figure lay on the floor with blood oozing from his head. His twisted body hid his face from Alfias. Lying next to him was the metallic object he had seen before in Dr Meeko’s house. He walked over to the object and turned around to kneel down next to it. The object glowed bright white as Alfias reached for it with his bound hands.

The room was illuminated brightly. Even under his blindfolds, Alfias found himself squinting. He instinctively reached to shield his eyes from the bright light. His hands were free. As he covered his eyes with his arms, he realised his blind fold had also been removed.

“You are now the Key Alfias, the circle is closed!” for the first time Alfias detected excitement in the voice.

“Run towards the door and when it opens, quickly run out of it.” Alfias ran barefoot across the surgically clean floor towards the closed door, still blinded from the bright light that had suddenly disappeared. As Alfias run for the door he realised he no longer held the metallic object. Strange, he didn’t remember dropping it. He glanced behind him towards the unconscious figure and the bed he had been tied to. There was no metal object around either of them.

The red light pulsed repeatedly as the indicator on the wall flashed the warning signal from inside the holding room. Mr Lawson rushed to the blast door as he projected the memory code to open it. As he shuffled to the three-meter thick door, it swung open suddenly, revealing an empty corridor leading to the closed second blast door. The corridor pulsated with the red light from the ceiling and walls.

The alarm could only be triggered from inside, Mr Lawson hoped for the worse, taking time to shield his thoughts from the rest of his psi team on the Galleon. He reached the

second door just as it swung open revealing an empty corridor, also pulsating with the red alert lights off of the CC3 walls, floor and ceiling. The door at the far end of the second corridor was also shut.

Mr Lawson reached out with all his powers trying to sense what lay beyond the door before he opened it. The psi shielding was too strong even for him. His thoughts could not penetrate the thick walls and door. He had to risk it and open the door. As he sent the mental code to open the final door, he pressed himself against the left wall, bracing for an attack.

The door, opening into the room, swung slowly open. The bright white lights from within shone brighter than the corridors' pulsating red light. Mr Lawson reached into the wide open door with his powerful mind. Nothing! The room contained no minds he could penetrate. No minds he could sense. He straightened himself from the wall and slowly shuffled towards the open blast door.

Alfias approached the huge door, as it started to swing open slowly. A dull red pulsating light flashed rhythmically from beyond it.

“Run, Alfias, run!” the voice screamed in his head.

As Mr Lawson reached the entrance of the blast door, Alfias pushed violently past him knocking him to the ground. Mr Lawson screamed a loud psi help signal before he hit his head on the heavy blast door and was knocked unconscious.

Alfias didn't stop to look who he had knocked down; he carried on running through two solid looking open doors and out into a large well lit corridor. Alfias ran blindly, following the voice in his head. A mental picture of his path was somehow visible to him even though he was still blind from the bright flash when he had grabbed the metallic object.

“Turn left; and go into the first room on your right,” the voice said, as Alfias ran down an empty corridor towards another corridor to his left.

The Kolumbas Affair

As he turned down the corridor, he heard footsteps from around the corner. Alfias quickly turned to a blue door to his left and stepped into the room beyond. He closed the door quietly behind him as he heard footsteps outside.

“Stern you know we want to mine that giant but the Elders don’t want us anywhere near that planet. Since our founders made this alliance with them, we have been under their control and have lost our ability to pursue our prime objectives. The organisation needs to be able to mine Kolumbas Major in order to fund our campaigns and pay our employees. And as you know they have never explained why we mustn’t go there.”

“Do we know how they always manage to stop our secret expeditions?” Alfias heard General Stern’s voice asking.

“No Stern, they are more secretive than your team. As the head of ETCA, I have tried in so many ways to find out who they are and where they are based but I fear they are extremely well connected and protected, and I now suspect they don’t even know who their members are.” The head of the ETCA’s voice grew fainter as the footsteps grew fainter.

“One day we will find out who...” General Stern’s voice grew too faint to discern as the two men moved round the corner of the corridor beyond earshot.

Alfias waited a few more seconds to be sure no one else was walking outside before opening the door and leaving the dark room.

Alfias carried on down the corridor and at the end turned left. As he turned, he saw a door immediately to his right. He ran at the door. It swung open, causing him to fall onto the soft floor. He was lying on clothing, ETCA military uniforms. He looked towards the door; a sign read ‘LAUNDRY ROOM – Sector Eight’. He looked around him; the room was full of laundry. Along the walls were machines that carried out the laundering for section eight. They whirred slowly as they quietly carried out their work

“Go to the back of the room and get into the chute,”
The voice said.

Alfias got up to his feet and made for the back of the room. A handle in the wall, one meter above the floor, had a sign above that read, ‘WARNING: ITEMS FOR RECYCLING ONLY.’

“Open the handle and climb in Alfias”

Alfias reached for the cold handle and pulled it open. A meter –sized square shaft, disappeared into the blackness behind the Galleon’s walls. From the faint light of the laundry room, Alfias could see that the shaft fell sharply downwards towards the bottom on the Galleon.

He climbed into the gaping shaft one leg at a time and sat at the entrance, his legs dangling in the air inside the black shaft. As he sat with his back to the laundry room, Alfias grabbed the handle on the inside of the shaft door. He slowly eased his body deeper into the shaft as he shut the shaft door behind him. His whole body hung on the strength of his hands, his body over the curved drop behind the shaft door. His feet swung in mid air, unable to touch ground.

“Let go of the handle.”

Alfias looked down to either side of him but could see nothing in the pitch black. His fingers started to slip from his body weight, his tired arms unable to pull him back up towards the handle. He closed his eyes and let go of the handle.

Minutes after Mr Lawson’s mental scream for help from the holding room, the Spectre Team, arrived at his side. Even unconscious Mr Lawson’s subconscious mind defended his mind from intrusion, and the Spectre team physically had to revive the Thermite psi from his concussion.

Mr Lawson awoke with his head throbbing unbearably painfully. His Spectre team surrounded him. The faces of the gifted team probed his unyielding mind for clues as to what had happened.

The Kolumbas Affair

“*WHERE IS THE BOY?*” His unchecked mental scream blasted through the whole ship. Even the Spectre Team were thrown back from the force of the mental blast.

“*We haven’t found him yet, Master. We just arrived after receiving your mental summons.*” The dwarf psi member closest to the Thermite replied, he was still holding his head in both hands.

“*FIND HIM, ALL OF YOU, FIND HIM, DEAD OR ALIVE!*” Mr Lawson bellowed in his mental rage as he struggled back onto his feet.

The Spectre Team, swaying unevenly from the power of Mr Lawson’s mental outburst, quickly made its way out of the corridor. The pulsing red lights had stopped and Mr Lawson, whose head still throbbed with the pain from banging his fragile head against the heavy blast door, stumbled into the secure room. Phenson Carpson still lay on the floor, his head in a pool of blood.

Mr Lawson shuffled unevenly towards the fallen man, probing for any weaknesses in Phenson Carpson’s mind. As he stood over Phenson Carpson, Mr Lawson noticed the Elders’ comm unit by the other side of the bed. Finally, he had the device that could deactivate the explosive device in his head. It must have been knocked out of Phenson Carpson’s hand when he fell. Mr Lawson shuffled over to the Elders’ comms unit and bent over to pick it up.

“Where is the boy, Lawson?”

Mr Lawson stopped and turned to see who had spoken. Phenson Carpson stood behind him. The dried blood on the side of his face made him look menacing as he pointed a CT32 blaster at the Thermite.

“*He escaped, Master.*” Mr Lawson slowly stood up shuffling backwards away from Phenson Carpson.

“Who opened the doors?” Phenson Carpson slowly walked towards the shuffling Thermite still pointing the blaster with a cold anger in his eyes that Mr Lawson had never witnessed before.

“My psi alarm alerted me to the danger you were in Master. I came to investigate. As I opened the last door, the boy physically attacked me, knocking me unconscious and escaped. I have sent the Spectre team to capture or destroy him, Master. Did I not do the right thing?” Mr Lawson frantically shuffled backwards until his back was against the wall of the room.

Phenson Carpson lowered his blaster and turned his back on the Thermite. “You did the right thing, Mr Lawson.” Go help your men find that boy and bring him to me. Alive.”

“*Yes Master,*” Mr Lawson headed for the door shuffling briskly, glad to be alive. As he reached the door, he saw a red light briefly shine against the blast door. As he collapsed to the floor from the CT32 laser blast, he realised that the red light was his stomach and chest splattering against the blast door.

Phenson Carpson walked over to Mr. Lawson and fired another blast into the Thermite’s face, burning a hole through his head.

“Don’t fail me again.” Phenson Carpson said as he stepped over the psi’s body to collect his comms unit and leave the secure room.

The vertical drop from the sector eight-laundry room shaft crisscrossed the Galleon, passing by every shaft after the seventeenth deck. As Alfias was tossed from deck to deck, the Spectre Team combed the ship for him.

The recycling sector was part of the maintenance deck, located at the bottom of the Galleon. Everything that had passed its useful service on the Galleon soon ended up there. When clothes were too old, worn, or damaged to return to service, they were discarded into the laundry chute and sent to recycling.

The big recycling machines hummed loudly as Alfias flew through the ‘LAUNDRY IN’ chute, onto a pile of old dirty and damaged clothes. The clothes stopped Alfias’ fall short.

The Kolumbas Affair

“Look to your right,” the voice said.

The blind fold had become dislodged during Alfias vertical tumble through the laundry shafts. He looked to his right and saw an old yellow space suit.

“Release your hands and get into the suit,” the voice said.

“How am I to get out of these clasps?” Alfias said, looking at his tied hands.

“Look on the suit,” the voice answered.

Alfias crawled over the uneven clothes towards the yellow space suit. As he got close top the space suit, he noticed a laser cutter hanging on the belt of the suit. He turned himself around and grabbed the laser cutter with his hands. He carefully aimed at the clasps on his writes and squeezed the trigger. The thin red laser light cut through the clasps and set the clothes behind Alfias on fire.

Alfias grabbed one of the burning garments and beat it against the blazing fire; however, the fire only grew bigger. Alfias grabbed the space suit and jumped out of the ‘LAUNDRY IN’ container.

He stepped into the old suit and secured the wrist, ankle, and neck clasps. Next, he pulled on the boots and secured them to the ankle clasps.

“What do I do now?” He asked, as he pulled on the old helmet and secured the neck clasps.

“Step into the space jettison chamber and exit this ship.” The voice said.

“Leave this ship, in this old suit? I could float in space forever.”

“You will have two hours of oxygen. That is all you will need. Step into the space jettison chamber now, Alfias.”

Alfias looked around the vast deck. The machines hummed loudly as several maintenance robots rushed towards the ‘LAUNDRY IN’ container to put the fire out. As the robots sprayed oxygen starving gas at the fire, Alfias backed

away towards the Space Jettison Chamber. The large chamber was controlled by the maintenance computer.

As the robots finished putting the fire out they collected all the burnt items and headed for the Space Jettison Chamber. As the robots neared the Space Jettison Chamber door, the computer opened the doors. The robots threw in the burnt material. As they turned away from the door, Alfias stepped inside. The door slowly shut and locked automatically. The outer door opened and the vacuum of space sucked out the burnt clothes and Alfias.

He floated in the cold darkness, the burnt clothes floating all around him in the weightlessness. He was spinning around helplessly in space.

Alfias caught a glimpse of the Galleon as his spin slowed down. The black ship was enormous, bigger than anything he had ever seen before. It was covered by laser cannons, torpedo shafts and other weaponry he had never seen or heard of before. As he looked, he saw the big machine moving further away from him.

Half an hour later, he could see the galleon no more. The giant ship had disappeared into the black curtain of space.

“Hello voice, I am getting cold now. What’s the next plan?” Alfias said at the blackness all around him.

Alfias floated around in space for an hour and half after he left the Galleon. He called to the voice but no answer came back. As his oxygen supply got lower, he started to panic. The suit had become very cold. He shivered in his space suit, trying to keep warm and conserve his oxygen supplies. He closed his eyes.

A loud thud woke him up. There was nothing around him. Suddenly in front of him a small sliver of light appeared, widening more with every second until he saw a door open into a ship’s cargo deck right in front of him.

“I am hallucinating” Alfias closed his eyes and shook his head. When he opened his eyes, the cargo deck was still there, in the middle of space, in the middle of nowhere.

The Kolumbas Affair

A grey three-legged creature, stepped into the doorway of the cargo deck. Its telescopic arms reached out towards Alfias, who tried to move backwards, his arms and legs struggling against the weightlessness of space.

Once the creature got a good grip on Alfias' suit, it dragged him into the ship. The cargo doors shut automatically behind him. As the cargo doors shut and locked, Alfias felt his weight underneath him. The gravity was similar to that of K-Minor. Alfias stood up, reached for the laser cutter on his suit belt, and looking carefully around him, he walked around the cargo deck looking for the missing creature. The cargo deck was spotlessly clean and empty. Alfias noticed a door at the end of the cargo deck and started walking towards it.

Alfias noticed that there was no light source in the large room yet it was very well lit. The walls seemed to give out light without reflecting it. This make them seem like they were not solid. Alfias reached over to touch one of the walls. It was soft and warm. He pulled back his hands surprised. The walls felt like a living flesh.

He continued, laser cutter in hand, towards the white door. As he neared it, it slowly opened. Alfias stopped five meters from the door and peered inside. The corridor beyond it was also white lit by the walls. He hesitantly continued, at a slower pace, towards the open door.

"Welcome Master, please come though to the command deck." A male human voice said. The sound came from everywhere around him. The walls vibrated the sound, again without seeming to reflect it.

"Alfias held his laser cutter tightly in his right hand and walked through the door. As he stepped a few meters into the corridor, the door shut behind him. He ran back to open it but it did not budge. It was locked shut. As Alfias struggled with the door, he noticed that the seal in the door had disappeared. Where the door had been there was now another wall. He turned around and walked deeper into the corridor.

The corridor curved around the corner out of Alfias' view. Taking each step carefully and silently, he stretched his neck to see around it.

The soft light from the walls made it difficult to see when the wall ended and the ceiling or floor began. Alfias reached out to feel the wall to his right hand; his hands passed straight the wall and disappeared. He quickly pulled his hands back out and examined it. It seemed unaffected by the wall. Alfias, feeling a little braver walked into the wall and beyond.

The white wall enveloped him with white light as he passed through it. He could only see white light everywhere. He walked backwards pulling himself back into the corridor. He continued walking along the corridor, following the curved path of the corridor.

As he turned around the next corner, a room appeared in front of him. It was brightly lit. Alfias walked to the entrance of the room and peered in. There were four of the creatures he had seen in the cargo deck standing with their backs to him in front of what looked like consoles.

Beyond the creatures was a large image of him at the doorway. Seeing himself on the screen, Alfias stepped back into the corridor.

"Please come in Master. Your oxygen must be running short, please remove your suit. You can breathe the atmosphere in here. Alfias looked down at the archaic oxygen gage on the bottom of his bulky helmet. It was almost empty.

Holding his breath, he unbuckled the helmet clasps and removed it. He waited a few seconds. Nothing happened. He let out a deep sigh and breathed in the air. It smelt familiar. He knew that taste from somewhere. He tried to remember where he knew the smell from but the information eluded him.

Alfias walked into the room leaving his helmet on the floor behind him. As he walked towards the big image of himself, one of the creatures turned around and looked past him at his helmet. The creature swivelled its grey body towards Alfias and moving its three tentacle feet at a blurring speed sped past Alfias before Alfias could raise his hand. The

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creature had picked up the helmet and returned to its position with its back to Alfias whilst Alfias realised what had happened. His laser cutter still hung by his side.

Alfias stepped sideways away from the four creatures. He kept his eyes on them as he cautiously moved to his left, away from them.

A human hand reached around him and grabbed the laser cutter from his gloved hand. Alfias turned around jumping backwards with fright.

“Sorry master, you could harm yourself with this.” The tall blond man who stood a foot taller than Alfias said as he removed the power source from the bulky laser cutter. He handed it back to Alfias who was rooted to in the same spot.

Alfias heart was racing fast. He could not move. The blond man had totally taken him by surprise. As he stood staring at the blond man, he did not notice two of the four creatures moving quickly to his side and tentacles whirring, remove his space suit. As one of them lifted Alfias off the ground to pull off his space suit and space boots, Alfias regained his senses and screamed.

The creatures ignored him and carried on undressing him. The whole procedure took about two seconds, at the end of which Alfias stood without his space suit facing the blond man. The two creatures returned to their previous post.

“Those are my crewbots; I am Jonathon, welcome to the Triton, Master.”

The Hunt

“He escaped into space, Master” Tulan, Mr Lawson’s replacement said, still kneeling before Phenson Carpson with his head bowed.

“How?” Phenson Carpson had waited patiently for this news for two hours as the Spectre team and all the other black ops teams on board the Galleon searched the ship for Alfias.

“General Stern’s team found surveillance data from the recycling computer that suggests the boy used the laundry chutes and an old space suite in the laundry drop to escape. He set the laundry drop on fire causing the recycling computer to issue an immediate jettison of the burnt material as standard protocol. He slipped out with the jettison Master,” Tulan said as he summarised his findings from reading the minds of the relevant personnel aboard the Galleon.

“HmMMM it seems this boy is more resourceful than we all thought,” Phenson Carpson mumbled aloud to himself. OK Tulan, take your team and Sterns’ team and scout the space around where he was jettisoned. Those old suits only carried a few hours oxygen without a backpack. I will return to Pentovegia to report to the Elders. Report to me immediately you find him. Use any force necessary, remember he killed Mr Lawson and almost killed me. Get him dead or alive.

“Yes Master,” Tulan had been waiting to hear those words since he found his teacher dead earlier that day. That boy will pay for killing Mr Lawson and disgracing the Elder representative. Tulan had already sent the message through telepathy to the rest of the Spectre Team and General Stern before he stood up and bowed to the Elder representative to walk out of the chamber.

His tall, thin frame moved with agility as he ran to the escalator. When he came out of the loading bay escalator, the two teams had already finished packing all their special equipment. The red ship that his Spectre Team travelled in was now outfitted with blast cannons and a nitronic charge.

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Sterns' team stood outside their black ship. Every centimetre of it was covered with something that could kill. They were ready to go.

He waved to Stern who turned stiffly and boarded his ship, followed by his nineteen black ops team. Tulan's team stood at the entrance of their ship's hatch, an odd band of psi killers. Unlike Sterns' team, Tulan's team looked like a band of misfits. Something was odd about each one of them.

Jo'la the Kytian, was tall, about three and half meters and sported a bright red mane which touched the floor when he walked. His arms extended to his knobbly bare knees. Jo'la was a biped humanoid from the Kyti system. In his home world the air was always dry and it was mating season. The chemicals he excreted through his red mane would attract females for mating. Although he was not home his body still naturally excreted the chemical causing his hair to remain a bright red.

Jo'la turned to look at Matiaas, the Sarrkan dwarf. Measuring up as the shortest member of the Spectre team, Matiaas was also the oldest member of the team. At four hundred and twenty seven, he had lived longer than the rest of the group's lifespan combined.

"For such tough guy's, their minds are not very strong." Jo'la spoke in his soft lilting voice.

"I still wouldn't like to go against any of them though Jo'la, would you? Matiaas was used to the young Jo'la's naive comments.

"We could kill all of them from here Matiaas, remember we are Spectre Team. Our minds are mightier than their years of training in silent sneaking around in the shadows." Jo'la said as he turned to enter the ship.

"Is that your philosophical quote of the day, Jo'la?" Henkiton Grrtah turned his single eye to look at Jo'la. "Don't you know that they have trained their minds to detach from their bodies? They have developed a mind shield processor that activates in combat, shielding off their mind signals from us, so that their bodies operate at a deep subconscious level.

Don't ever underestimate our black ops friends. They could still kill you if they wanted. The only one amongst us who can defeat them all is Mr Lawson and he isn't here to wipe your snotty Kytian nose anymore."

Jo'la knew better than to speak back to Henkiton. He had felt the Cyclops' mental whiplash once too often to know that it was not worth arguing with him. Jo'la paused, still with his back to Henkiton for a moment, then he and the rest of the team all turned towards the ship.

"Thoray, lock up and secure all hatches." Tulan gave the command to the black figure who was last to enter the ship.

"*HMMMMMM*," the deep mental vibration resonated through the entire ship. Thoray, hardly spoke. Of all the Spectre team, he seemed to have the least control over his mental powers. He had been devoted to Mr Lawson who had saved him from the burning ashes of his home world, during the trade wars with the Pentovegian's. He was one of a handful of survivors of his entire race and the mental scars from losing his whole species had greatly destabilised his psi powers. He was powerful but unstable and could not be amongst non-psi, especially during the nights when his nightmares caused him to project his great pain to all around him.

His whole body was black. He moved like a shadow absorbing all light that came his way. The only way the others knew he was around in the dark was to sense his great mental grief radiating ever louder the closer you got near him.

Thoray used his telekinetic ability to pull the ships hatches shut and locked. Only psi ships still used manual doors. Most psi's didn't trust electronics and preferred to stay in control by using as much manual devices as possible. The Spectre team was no exception.

Thoray, seeming to float, moved across the cargo hold towards the elevator door and into the shadows where he disappeared.

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A moment later a dark figure stepped out from the shadows behind the hatch doors, and moving close to the dark walls of the cargo hold, the figure moved silently towards the elevator without making a sound.

As the dark figure neared the elevator, Thoray stepped out of the shadows behind it and touched his black hands against the dark figures head.

The dark figure screamed in agony and crumpled to the floor. Thoray's black hulk bent over the figure that now appeared to be in the same uniform as General Stern's men. Thoray effortlessly picked up the black figure in his arms and headed for the elevator door. As he neared the door it slid open and Tulan, Jo'la, Matiaas and Henkiton Grrrtah stood facing him.

"So they couldn't resist sending a spy to keep an eye on us, eh?" Tulan said.

"Is he dead?" Jo'la asked reaching towards the spy's head with his long slender fingers.

"No he is alive, but he is out for the count from the direct blast that Thoray delivered. It must have blown his thought inhibitor." Matiaas said looking at the human's head.

"Take him to the strong hold and secure him. Remove all his clothing in case he is hiding some miniature weapon in there. These black ops agents are sneaky, and Stern would not have sent an idiot, this is probably his best spy." Tulan said to Thoray, who nodded silently as they all entered the escalator together.

On the black ops ship, the Black Cloak, General Stern sat at the command deck controls.

"We have clearance, General." The figure behind him in the shadows said.

"Take her out commander, and be quick about it." General Stern was in a hurry to be the first to capture that boy. He suspected that the psi team was to replace his team on future black ops projects and wanted to ensure success for his team and failure for the Spectre Team. Part of his plan had

already being executed by cleverly placing Colonel Snmeet on the Spectre Teams ship. Next to General Stern, Snmeet was the most skilled infiltrator on his team. General Stern was confident that the colonel would scuttle the Spectre team's chances at finding the boy first.

The black warship lifted off the crowded loading bay and headed for the launch tunnel, a gaping black tunnel leading out of the Galleon's side. The black war ship rose to align with the entrance and proceed to head towards the exit, accelerating rapidly as it approached the launch tunnel.

The red psi ship, the Third Eye, started to rise and headed for the exit, accelerating faster than the Black Cloak. It reached the launch tunnel first and shot out into space at full speed, with the Black Cloak struggling to keep up with her.

The two ships flew towards the Alfias' jettison spot. The Third Eye arrived there first and the psi team were already scouring the space with their combined mental force when the Black Cloak arrived on the scene.

Stern was quick to deploy the silver spy orbs into the space. The shiny silver orbs weaved around the two ships sampling all radiation signals and measuring gravitational changes in and around the 1000 kilometre space. Knowing that the Spectre team would be trying to read their minds, General Stern had programmed the orbs to relay their findings directly through to the Black Cloaks master computer. If the orbs picked up anything, the ship would follow the trail automatically without Tulan's team picking up the coordinates from any of the minds on board the Black Cloak.

"We can't detect anything here. There is no psi residue, no lingering auras at all apart from those left by the Galleon." Jo'la reported.

"I see that General Stern has automated the spy orbs findings to go straight into the Black Cloak's controls.

"Yes sir I can't pick up anything useful from them either. This is a dead end Tulan." Jo'la said.

"He is only a stupid boy he can't just disappear, scan harder Jo'la. I will use the ship's sensors to search for small

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masses or dead reflectors.” Tulan said as he turned towards his console to look for small bodies in the vicinity of the Third Eye.”

Tulan immediately lifted his head up from his console controls.

“They’re moving out. They must have found something.” Tulan mouthed as Jo’la looked up at the main monitor just in time to see the Black Cloak slip into hyperspace.

“Can we follow them?” Matiaas asked, walking up behind Jo’la. The dwarf barely reached Jo’la’s knees.

“Track their minds, everyone and we will have to do this the old fashioned way. Let’s see where they pop out of hyperspace.”

All members of the Spectre Team focused their minds to track the Black Cloak. The Spectre Team struggled to maintain a link through hyperspace to the shielded minds of the black ops team. After a few hours, the Black Cloak came out of hyperspace; making it easier to keep a track of them.

“They are not far, looks like they are heading for a densely populated planet. I sense many minds, human minds.” Tulan said, focusing hard.

“Its Old Earth, that’s the moon colonist’s mental signature.” Matiaas said.

“Set course for Sol,” Tulan gave the command as Henkiton Grrrtah set the coordinates at the console to the far left of Tulan. Matiaas and Jo’la rushed towards their seats and secured themselves for the hop.

The Third Eye winked out of existence and slipped into hyperspace.

Old Earth

Old Earth was almost uninhabited except for a few research teams who braced the cold ice age to study the local climate and the limited ecology.

The radioactive ice that covered most of the planet supported no life and the ice caps now almost touched each other on the equator. This once-magnificent planet was now a frozen wasteland, a lifeless museum that attracted fewer visitors each year.

The moon hung in the sky shining brilliant with artificial light from the densely populated colonies based there. The ice fanned out fifty meters high into the sky as the Triton, still invisible, landed on the ice, sixty meters above the permafrost below. The snow flurry fell to earth all over the Triton, covering it with a white blanket of snow.

In the command deck, Alfias watched as the crew bots busied about the ship preparing for their mission outside the Triton.

“This used to be called Russia.” Jonathon said pointing at the main display.

“It looks inhospitable now.” Alfias said, folding his arms, cold from the sight of the snow outside.

“It hasn’t changed greatly since this land used to be called Russia. Since the last great ice age nothing has lived here except a few wild animals and the Keepers.” Jonathon said, still checking the controls in front of him.

“The Keepers?” Alfias asked, curious.

“They are about the only people who do not answer to the ETCA. They are an ancient breed of beings that moved here after they lost a battle with the ETCA. As is standard with the ETCA, you either surrender or your world is destroyed. The Keepers would not surrender, instead the few survivors escaped to Old Earth. Lucky for them, the ETCA would not destroy Old Earth and this planet is now too inhospitable to

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wage guerrilla warfare on; so the ETCA left the Keepers alone.” Jonathon said, still bent over the triton’s controls.

“So, are they dangerous?”

“Yes master, they are the fiercest fighters the ETCA ever faced. And few people have actually seen one and lived to tell of it.” Jonathon now turned to look at Alfias. “Would you like to meet one master?”

“No, not from your descriptions, they sound pretty mean to me.” Alfias said shaking his head.

“WE ARE NOT TOO BAD YOUNG HUMAN.” A deep voice from behind Alfias said.

Alfias froze. The hairs on the back of his neck rose as his hands instinctively reached for his laser cutter. Feeling the empty holster Alfias dived forward behind Jonathon.

“DO NOT BE AFRAID HUMAN, YOU ARE NOT MY ENEMY.” Alfias looked where the loud deep voice was coming from but the area behind where he was sitting was empty.

“Jonathon, can you hear that? Where is it coming from?” Alfias asked now standing behind Jonathon who seemed unconcerned.

“Master, meet Shadow Foot, he is a Keeper scout and friend of ours. He will be travelling with us. You can’t see him because his skin bends light and causes him to appear invisible. His people built ships like the Triton a long time ago. They have helped me unlock many of the Tritons secrets.”

“SHADOW FOOT WILL BE YOUR PERSONAL BODYGUARD FROM NOW ON YOUNG HUMAN.” The loud deep voice said.

“Thank you” Alfias stepped out from behind Jonathon and cautiously went back to his seat. His eyes searched the area behind his chair for any signs of Shadow Foot.

As Alfias sat down, Shadow Foot whispered into his left ear. “YOU WILL SOON FORGET I AM HERE YOUNG HUMAN.”

Alfias again sprang from his seat and headed towards Jonathon.

“They take some getting used to but trust me Master; you cannot have a better guard than a Keeper.”

“If they are so good how come they lost to ETCA?” Alfias asked whilst he slowly backed away from his seat.

“THE ETCA DESTROYED OUR PLANET WHILST WE WERE HIBERNATING” Shadow Foot’s voice boomed back.

“The ETCA did not know that the system was inhabited, Master. Not that it would have mattered. They were testing a new weapon in the Keeper solar system. The conditions suited the weapon they were testing. The Keeper star system had a weak sun making it’s planets very cold. The Keepers who were hibernating in the outlying planets woke up when the first device was detonated. By then three planets had been obliterated. Over ninety percent of Shadow Foot’s race perished that day. The survivors quickly rallied an attack on the ETCA. The ETCA was no match and retreated from the Keeper solar system. However before they pulled out, the ETCA detonated the remainder of the new weapons and totally wiped out the Keeper solar system. Very few Keepers survived that attack. The rest had no home and decided to go to the last place the ETCA would think of finding them. They settled on Old Earth. It was desolate, evacuated, and very cold. Three hundred of them came here and now there are over three thousand.”

“So they are building up their numbers again? Do they hope to face the ETCA again one day?” Alfias asked.

“YOUNG HUMAN, IT IS OUR DESTINY TO DESTROY THE ETCA. THEIR DAYS ARE NUMBERED.” Shadow Foot said.

“So if Shadow Foot’s people are planning to destroy the ETCA, why are we allying ourselves with them? The ETCA is now more powerful than ever.” Alfias said, as he leaned towards Jonathon, lowering his voice in an attempt to stop Shadow Foot from hearing him.

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“Master, our mission is the Keeper’s mission also. For a long time now, they too have attempted to breach the Abyss unsuccessfully. It seems the Elders are older than we once believed. They have been defending the Abyss for as long as the Keepers have been around, and that is a very long time Master.” Jonathon said, looking at Alfias from behind the Tritons main command console. The screen behind him showed the snow covered landscape outside the Triton.

“Jonathon, what is that?” Alfias said pointing at the holographic image.

Jonathon turned quickly to face the screen.

“ETCA spies. That’s a black ops ship.”

“GRRRRRRRR,” Shadow Foot growled loudly. Alfias could feel the hatred Shadow Foot felt towards the ETCA from the deep growl behind him.

“We are cloaked, they can’t see us. We will monitor them for now. Shadow Foot what will your people do?” Jonathon asked.

“WE WILL ATTACK IMMEDIATELY” Shadow Foot’s voice boomed aggressively from behind Alfias.

Jonathon zoomed in. As the image on the holographic screen grew larger, Alfias could make out a hand full of black clad soldiers wearing the ETCA Black ops insignia on the arm of their snowsuits. Each of them wielded a CT32 handgun.

“Yep are definitely ETCA, and they look well trained too.” Alfias said as he slid out of his seat and walked closer to the holoscreen.

The snow around the Black Cloak shimmered slightly.

“MY PEOPLE ARE IN PLACE,” Shadow Foot said, his anger turning to pride.

“How can you tell?” Alfias asked.

“The shimmering snow, Master, this is the most you can expect to see of the Keepers.” Jonathon said.

The black ops team began shooting at the air as they backed slowly towards their ship.

“They know your people are around them, Shadow Foot. They are retreating back to their ship.”

Alfias could not believe what he saw next. Each one of the eight ETCA black ops team members slumped to the ground, red blood oozing out of their chest. The blood froze as quickly as it flowed. In a few seconds, all of them were frozen rigid. The shimmering moved closer towards the Black Cloak. Before it reached the ship, the Black Cloak lifted into the cold snowy air and flew up into the grey sky. The attack had been swift and decisive.

As the heavily armed Black Cloak rose above the dark cloudy sky, it opened fire on the ground where it had been attacked. The powerful laser cannons fired their invisible energy from all cannons at the earth. The snow melted immediately and the water evaporated instantly leaving a molten hole three hundred meters deep. The hole was so wide that its edge stopped a hundred and twenty meters from the Triton.

“My God, are your people alive?” Alfias asked Shadow Foot without taking his eyes off the holographic screen.

Alfias turned around as the laughter from Shadow Foot filled the air behind him.

“Is it something I said?” Alfias directed this question to Jonathon.

“You don’t know the Keepers, Master.” Jonathon said without taking his eyes from the holographic image.

Outside the ship, the edges of the crater made by the Black Cloak’s lasers glowed softly. The heated air was melting the snow off the edges of the crater and streams of melted snow and ice trickled down the sides of the crater, and quickly evaporated as it met the molten rock of the crater’s sides. Clouds of steam poured out of the crater obscuring the view of its depths.

Up in the sky, the large hole through the clouds made by the Black Cloak’s laser canons began to close up. The small shafts of light that streamed through the open clouds reflected off the white snow, giving the whole scene a surreal effect. The Black Cloak now descended slowly through the

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closing cloud cover towards the crater it had created, it's lasers still poised for another attack.

From the steam-shrouded depths of the crater, the Keepers responded with deadly accuracy. A blue shaft of light flashed out of the crater towards the Black Cloak. The Black Cloak's force field was designed to protect it from laser and nuclear blasts during combat; however, the blue light was neither.

For a moment, the Black Cloak stood still in mid air, then it began to shake and shudder as its engines fought to escape the force field. The blue light intensified as the Black Cloak struggled. The light turned a bright light blue.

Suddenly the Black Cloak vanished.

"What happened?" Alfias asked turning to Jonathon then towards where he expected Shadow Foot to be standing.

"They must have hopped out of the field." Jonathon said. "That buys us some time. They will not be returning in any hurry."

"How can you be sure?" Alfias asked turning for a brief moment from the scenes outside and looked at Jonathon. "This is the ETCA after all, remember they have unlimited resources."

"That blue light you saw is a traction field. It controls the gravity around whatever it is directed at. It also disturbs all hyperspace drives. Wherever the ETCA ship has hopped to, we can be sure they are lost and will take a while for them to recalibrate and plot a course back here." Jonathon explained, moving from behind his console and walking towards the wall behind Alfias.

Suddenly the Triton shook, throwing Alfias and Jonathon to the floor.

"What is that?" Alfias asked, clambering back to his feet only to be thrown down again.

Jonathon was now up on his feet and running towards his console.

"I will adjust the gravity drives to compensate." Jonathon said as his hands reached the controls.

Immediately the tilt corrected. “There seems to be something on top of us pushing us down into the ice.” Jonathon said moving his hands frantically over the controls. “I will get us ready to hop, just in case.”

The main holographic screens lit up as Jonathon brought up the image as seen from above the Triton. The entire holographic image was filled with the red underbelly of a ship.

“It’s a ship, non-military. Must be a scout or” Jonathon’s voice trailed off.

“THE PSI SHIELD WILL HOLD. MY PEOPLE WILL DEAL WITH THEM FOR YOU.” Shadow Foot bellowed in his deep voice.

The Triton screens showed the shimmering snow all around the Triton. The weight of the ship above had pushed the Triton deep into the snow and ice. Alfias looked at the screen intently, wondering what was going on outside.

“What is it? Who are they?” Alfias asked, bewildered.

“They are ETCA, Master. Probably a psi team code named Spectre.” Jonathon answered, still looking at the shimmering image on the Holographic screen. “We have confronted them before.”

“Are they dangerous?” Alfias asked

“They are the people who captured you...” Alfias interrupted Jonathon.

“Mr Lawson?” Alfias exclaimed, are you sure?

“You know Mr Lawson?” Jonathon asked, surprised.

“Yes I met him on K-Minor. He is one of the ETCA men who kidnapped me and took me on that big ship I escaped from.” Alfias explained.

“Well if you have met Mr Lawson and lived to tell of it then you truly must be the one.” Jonathon said, lowering his voice at the end of the sentence as if he had given away a secret.

“What was that?” Alfias asked, straining to hear the last part of Jonathon’s words.

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“THE ATTACK BEGINS,” Shadow Foots deep voice boomed.

Alfias turned to the holoscreen just in time to see the small shards of metal flying off the red psi ship. The Keepers were rapidly chipping away at the shielding on the psi ship. They had already breached the electronic shield and now were literally stripping the defenceless ship.

From the corner of the holographic image, the clouds behind the red psi ship changed colour from black to deep red.

“Time to say goodbye, the ETCA cavalry is here.” Jonathon said pointing at the screen just as the whole sky behind the psi ship turned into red flaming fire. The ETCA ships breaking through the thick dense cloud cover over Old Earth burned up the black atmosphere on entry. The first ship tore through the cloud cover, its hull still glowing white hot from the friction. Behind it, another war ship emerged quickly followed by another three. The sky burned with fire as the ETCA army ships obscured the entire sky from horizon to horizon.

“They mean business. I am getting us out of here,” Jonathon’s hands flashed over the controls. In the back of the Triton and within the drive rooms the crew bots busied themselves preparing the Triton for a quick exit.

“Strap in master, I will leave them a gift,” Jonathon’s hands programmed the nuclear device as he spoke. The nuclear device was dropped out of the side of the Triton out of view of the ETCA ships just as the Triton winked out of existence and into hyperspace.

On The Third Eye, all psi team members were on deck.

“The attack has stopped.” Maatias reported.

“Any signal yet, anyone?” Tulan inquired of his team.

No one replied as they all scoured the area outside their ship for any mind they could control.

Suddenly the whole team was thrown upwards as the ship fell suddenly. In the same instance gravity returned to the command deck and the psi team fell violently to the floor.

“What was that?” Jo’la asked with fear in his voice. “Have they broken through?”

Henkiton Grrtah blinked and swivelled his antennae like head from side to side. “We fell about twenty meters or so. The ice below us just gave way.”

A shadow moved from the far wall at great speed towards the command deck controls.

“Thoray, what are you doing?” Tulan asked as he slowly got to his feet. His left arm hung limply by his side.

“MUST LEAVE HERE,” the force of the mental blast from Thoray threw half the team to the floor again. Tulan fell against his left arm and grabbed it in pain.

The Hologram in front of the console showed the descent of the ETCA reinforcement teams burning the atmosphere on entry. The ship shook from side to side as Thoray manoeuvred it into the burning sky. The ship accelerated rapidly as Thoray struggled to take it out of danger. The crushing g-forces pinned the psi team to the command deck floor. Thoray, grabbed the edge of the command console as the immense gravitational forces dragged him to the floor.

“RETREAT, RETREAT, RETREAT,” Thoray’s mental screams reached every mind in and around Old Earth. The intensity of the telepathic signal burst veins in thousands of ETCA personnel’s brains on the arriving ships and in colonists as far away as the moon and the surrounding space stations.

Across the hundreds of war ships breaking through the atmosphere of Old Earth, men grabbed their heads and reeled in mental agony.

The psi ship broke through the cloud cover past the ETCA war ships, narrowly missing three of them. Once in space Thoray immediately took the Third Eye into hyperspace. The whole manoeuvre took less than a minute.

As the psi ship hopped into hyperspace, closely followed by a few lucky military ships, the nuclear device, left by the Triton, exploded. The entire planet shook from the blast

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as the fireball ate the black atmosphere. The ETCA ships that did not heed Thoray's warning were sucked into the fireball. The vast energy release ripped them all to pieces in an instant. The ETCA war ships fell out of the sky like raindrops.

The Keepers

The Triton didn't go far. A short hop to the other side of Old Earth gave the Triton time to return to complete the collection of supplies from the Keepers. The nuclear explosion had not affected the Keepers, whose shields protected them from the nuclear energy explosion. However, the area was totally demolished. When the Triton returned several days, afterwards the sky was still burning and the ETCA ships dotted the edges of the blast zone. The ships closer to the source of the explosion were evaporated in the blast; their hulls now part of the molten lava of Old Earth.

The Triton flew slowly over the ETCA warship graveyard. Many ships still burned below and the ground was molten. Lava swelled on the ground giving off toxic gasses that rose to form black clouds in the dark sky. The black smoke and dust mingled with the water clouds created by the evaporating ice and snow.

The radioactive rain fell softly against the Triton. The crew of the Triton watched the desolate landscape roll by in silence.

“Will your people be alright Shadow Foot?” Alfias asked.

“WE HAVE SURVIVED WORSE, ALFIAS. I AM HAPPY TO SEE SO MANY DEAD ETCA,” Shadow Foot bellowed.

“Jonathon, are we safe here? Won't a rescue mission be sent by the ETCA?”

“The Tritons hull shields it from the radiation. In fact, the radiation helps to camouflage us. As to the ETCA sending a rescue team, we can safely say that is highly unlikely, as they are not shielded from this level of radiation. There is only one team that can work in these conditions, the Kwarthian's. As far as I can tell, the nearest Kwarthian search and rescue team is two weeks away by the fastest ETCA ship.” Jonathon said.

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“The Keepers have our supplies over by that mountain,” Jonathon pointed as he continued. “We will rendezvous with them in twenty minutes.”

Alfias turned to the Hologscreen. He could barely make out the small land protrusion on the horizon. As he watched the Hologscreen, the mountain grew larger as the Triton flew towards it. Alfias had learned that the Triton used an external antigravity drive whilst cruising within a planets atmosphere. Jonathon preferred to travel at twice the speed of sound whilst using the gravity drives to further evade detection.

The minutes passed as Alfias and Jonathon silently watched the image of the mountain rushing towards them. The crew bots wondered around the command deck, carrying on their duties in silence.

When the mountain filled the Hologscreen, Jonathon slowed the Triton and brought it to a standstill at the base, outside a large opening.

“This is an old mountain, Master. It used to be called Everest in ancient times. It was once the tallest on this planet before the global upheavals.” Jonathon explained as he set the Triton down. Today it is one of the smaller mountains. Our supplies are waiting inside. I will send the crewbots to collect them as as even here, the radiation levels are still high.” Jonathon said, turning away from the console and heading towards the nearest crewbot.

Alfias walked towards Jonathon and the crewbot just as Jonathon completed instructing it. The crewbot turned around and headed towards the nearest command console exit.

“What are we collecting Jonathon?” Alfias asked as Jonathon turned back towards the command console.

“The ship needs crystals, fluids, and gasses to operate and sustain us. We can’t use standard refuelling stations as the ETCA spies are everywhere. No one knows about the Triton and if we are to succeed in our mission, we will have to keep it that way. The keepers are sworn enemies of the ETCA and they want to see the abyss breached. This makes them our friends.” Jonathon explained.

“How did you discover them?”

“It was by accident. I was raiding ETCA supplies on a monitoring station one day. It seems the Keepers were doing the same. One of them sneaked into the Triton with me and watched me for three days before making contact with me.”

“How do you know there is only Shadow Foot on board now?” Alfias whispered.

“VERY GOOD, YOUNG HUMAN,” the deep voice of Shadow Foot said.

Alfias jumped.

“You have a point Master; there is no way of saying. They do seem to know this ship better than I do.”

Alfias made a mental note to watch what he said in future. He turned to the holoscreen and watched the crewbots moving in a blur back and forth the cave and the cargo deck of the Triton.

“We are ready to go now Master.” Jonathon said, moving back to the command console.

“Where to now?” Alfias inquired excitedly.

“We will have to disappear for a while. The ETCA will be looking for you everywhere.” Jonathon said

“Where can we hide?” Alfias asked

“There is only one place to hide when your enemy seeks you. Hide within his home.” Jonathon said a smile spreading across his face. “We will go to one of the ETCA stronghold systems, the Tachii system, maybe Tachii-2.”

Alfias walked back with Jonathon to the command console.

“Tell me more about Tachii-2.” Alfias asked a little excited now to be moving again.

Back on the Galleon, Phenson Carpson paced across the black glass floor occasionally stopping to look out of the floor to ceiling viewport at the many ships joining the convoy of warships outside.

The conference room door slid open and the ETCA heads walked in one after the other. General George Thorn,

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head of ETCA special projects, Dr Sule Voss head of ETCA special operations and the head of ETCA, Shizah Slavinov all walked to their seats around the round table. Dr Voss placed a red folder on the table and folded his arms with his elbows on the edge of the pseudo mahogany table.

“The Elders are not pleased with how this situation is being handled.” Phenson Carpson started with his back still to the three men. They want you to use all ETCA resources to find and destroy the boy.” Phenson Carpson intentionally paused for a whole minute before speaking again. “What is the status on the search?”

Shizah Slavinov coughed uneasily. “He was tracked to Old Earth where the trail went cold.”

“Master Carpson, we put our best teams on it. General Stern, who has been instrumental for us in the past, and Mr Lawson’s Spectre Team, now headed by Tulan. Again that team has an unblemished past mission success history.” Dr Voss said looking up at Phenson Carpsons’ back.

“And how did they perform on Old Earth?” Phenson Carpson turned around slowly and glared at the three men.

Shizah Slavinov whose cough seemed to get worse, was first to answer. “They met with failure; we lost two thousand war ships and twenty five thousand men. Stern’s men escaped with nine casualties. Tulan’s team luckily escaped due to a localised time warp caused by a direct hop by the ship that deployed the nuclear device. The time warp gave Tulan’s team a two-minute window to escape. They did so with minor injuries and a damaged ship. Almost all of the ETCA ships sent to support Tulan’s team were destroyed in a nuclear explosion that has destroyed a large area of Old Earth. Deaths extended as far as the Moon colonies and we have lost all personnel in earth monitoring satellite stations. Altogether we have lost twenty five billion credits in ETCA property in this single mission.”

“This is unacceptable. We have warned you of how dangerous this boy is. It is now more important than ever to destroy him before he gets anywhere near the Abyss.

Gentlemen, we are at war. The Elders want you to discard all subtleties. Use excessive force as is necessary to find and destroy this boy.”

“Yes Master Carpson,” the three ETCA heads replied in unison.

“Shizah, stay behind. I want a word with you.” Phenson Carpson said turning his back towards the men again.

General Thorn and Dr Voss rose to their feet immediately, bowed and left the room through the sliding doors.

Shizah Slavinov adjusted himself uneasily in his leather seat.

“The Elders put a lot of trust and money in your hands Shizah. You know we do not take failure lightly. A trillion credits have been deposited in the special ETCA special projects account; the Elders want results very soon.”

“Yes Master Carpson. I will put all resources on it immediately.

Phenson Carpson knew that Shizah Slavinov would work twice as hard with him breathing down his neck. “I will stay onboard and monitor your progress.”

Shizah’s cough returned with extra persistence, “Very good Master Carpson. It will be a pleasure to have you onboard.”