

Black Sunrise By Christina Engela

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Fourth Edition PREVIEW

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Dedication

To Ma, who taught me everything worth knowing – and the importance of being able to laugh at myself.



Black Sunrise

Imagine, if you will:

The Ruminarii Hammerhead was so named because of its peculiar hull shape – and, being the main warship of the warlike Ruminarii, they were as much feared as they were hated. Roughly a kilometer long, the shiny dark ships were as black as space and – as some whispered, as dark as the souls of the entire Ruminarii race themselves. In fact, the general advice in circulation – er, advised those who encountered any Ruminarii ships on their travels through deep space, to find a hole, crawl inside – and then to pull the edges in after them.

As might be deduced from this gem of completely useless advice – and the sheer amount of fear they generated apparently by default, Ruminarii were an extremely hostile race. Following

the Earth-Ruminarii war some eighty years earlier – which the Ruminarii had somehow inexplicably lost, Terran linguists had determined that there was no word for ‘welcome’ in the Ruminarii language – with the closest approximation to that meaning being something like ‘*what do you want?*’ During the four centuries lifespan of their current civilization, the Ruminarii race had managed to lay waste to almost a thousand star systems in their part of the galaxy, enslaved their populations, and stripped countless worlds of all they wanted.

It had been said, by certain older civilizations who for the moment will remain nameless, that if the *Harrt’shisk Hab’arr’oun* (Empire of the Golden Sun) ever had any allies, these would’ve been very short-lived alliances indeed! Seemingly, Ruminarii displayed only the negative emotions, and their ferocity was matched only by their boldness and ruthlessness. How a race founded purely on hate, spite, ambition and evil managed to flourish as they did is a question on which very, very few civilizations had survived to speculate. It was undoubtedly fortunate that Earth should be one of these elite few, but for now, let us simply say that while the people of that remote blue planet perhaps weren’t as informed of the significance of that achievement as they might’ve been, within the confines of the black ship in the blackness of deep space, the present company did not approve.

Half-Lieutenant Marsh’k Kluss’ta was not a happy man. Naturally, that didn’t bother him as things were rarely otherwise. Also, technically he wasn’t a *man* either, since he wasn’t Human... but he was most certainly a prime example of a typical male of his species. He was bad to the bone, and as the commanding officer of the *Black Sunrise*, happiness was not a state of mind expected of him, though in reality – *our reality* – he was probably not such a terrible person. The crew, though terrified of him even under normal circumstances, believed that he had the heart of a little child... somewhere.

Being the commander of a Ruminarii war vessel meant that he had been more than just lucky – he’d been ambitious enough to have risen to the rank by means of dirty tricks, not excluding assassination and ruthlessness, and was therefore implicitly distrusted by the *Tidhii Mah’k’hai* (Naval Command, and by implication the Queen Of Suth Herself). He was expected to mete out, in generous portions, brutality to conquered subjects, and to act swiftly and mercilessly in dealing with all alien encounters. In short, he was expected to be a bad example.

The Ruminarii were bipeds – and a reptilian species (which probably goes a long way to explain their cold-bloodedness). “Suitably shaped” is the most likely non-profane description most people could find for Ruminarii – otherwise, they were just plain ugly... at least by Terran standards. Ruminarii didn’t have a name for their language, other than the name of their race – but it could only be described as “*hissy*”.

A device in the arm of Marsh’k’s chair made an obscene noise. The murals on the chair matched those on the walls of his personal cabin, and suggested disturbing things being done to some briefly unlucky beings, some with tentacles, some with their eyes on stalks – all reminded him vaguely of dinner and made him feel hungry.

“Yes?” Said Marsh’k.

“We’re about to enter the targeted system, Lord.” Said a tinny reptilian voice in Ruminarii.

“Ah. Bad. I’ll be there in a moment.” Marsh’k paused. “You forgot the salute.” He hissed silkily.

“*Lord?*” Said the voice, suddenly overcome by panic. “*Ses ’ach L ’ru!*”

“Too late. You know what you have to do?”

“Y-yes, Lord.” There followed a sound reminiscent of a head banging repeatedly against a steel bulkhead. An electronic squeal erupted between bangs, suitably muffled by the pick-up, and then died – silence fell.

“Are you done?”

“Y-yes, Lord.”

“Does it hurt?”

“Ouch. Yes. It hurts a lot, Lord.”

“Bad. Don’t forget again, or you can bring me your fingernails yourself.”

“Yes, Lord! I won’t forget, Lord –”

Marsh’k cut the circuit on the rest of the helmsman’s whining and rose to his feet, stretching to his full height of just under six standard Terran feet. Discipline was important to all Ruminarii commanders, and the key element in instilling discipline was to instill an overwhelming fear in the crew of what would happen to them if proper decorum and procedures were allowed to slip.

Not many Ruminarii warships had ever been captured intact by any enemy, and so for those the Ruminarii “invited” aboard their vessels, this was usually a one-way sight-seeing trip. For those who really want to know, Ruminarii Hammerheads had an extensive corridor network, the interior walls tended to be heavily decorated, savagely militaristic and inevitably, close together. He strode down one with the certainty of and confidence of someone who had right of way. On seeing him, lesser ranks fell to the deck and groveled like their fingernails depended on it. There was a chorus of dramatic shrieks and whimpers as he passed. When Marsh’k arrived on the bridge of the hammerhead, everyone was already expectantly face-down on the deck, each endeavoring to grovel lower than the next. Ah... nothing quite like bad discipline to keep the crew in its place.

“*Ses ’ach L ’ru!*” Came the slightly muffled chorus, meaning in Ruminarii, ‘*Hail the Captain.*’ Marsh’k sat down on his seat of office. The sound of his black uniform and body armor against the glossy material of the command chair made a muted and rather obscene noise as he sank into it.

“*Mor ’dek ’hai de suul.*” He retorted dismissively. This had been translated to mean something like ‘*Oh, shut up and get back to work!*’ The crew ceased their groveling routine and got back to their stations. There was a flurry of activity as they all tried to look extremely busy with their instruments and control consoles.

“Report!” He ordered, his dark eyes falling on the picture on the view screen at the front of the bridge. Their ship was just passing one of the outer planets of the system, a frozen ball of ice.

“Lord, there are nine planets in the system.” Said the helmsman, sporting a rather large fresh-looking bump at the center of his forehead. “The fourth seems habitable. We may find life there.”

“Life means death!” Marsh’k retorted grimly. “For them, anyway! Conquest and plunder await us!”

* * *

Life as a private investigator, slash bounty hunter wasn’t all that Gary Beck had wanted it to be. There weren’t any big mansions on a palm beach owned by an affluent writer generous enough to let him live rent-free and use his spare Ferrari – but then he had to ask himself, what could he expect, living on a planet like Deanna? As a third-rate colony in the Terran Empire, Deanna had more than its fair share of dull moments – that is, aside from having built a reputation for being the center of the universe as far as weirdness was concerned. As a foremost example of *case in point*, critics would almost invariably point out that Deanna orbited a star called *Ramalama* – and if you think *that’s* funny, Deanna’s two moons are called *Ding* and *Dong* respectively – this is a local joke – *and* if that weren’t actually weird enough, one of them also fell down occasionally – AND got put back up again!

The sun called Ramalama hung blazing hot in the sky, and Gary Beck’s shirt stuck fast to his back. He’d just told himself again, under his breath, that this was a result of him hanging around places like *this* too long! It was a beautiful 46 degrees on the scorched dry desert plains of Deanna, and in case anyone was wondering, there wasn’t any applicable shade. Beck’s boots made dry gritty noises on the surface as he made his way down the deserted main street. Nervously, he adjusted his wide-brimmed hat so he could see a little better. The air hung motionless, hot, dry and stifling. He could hear every breath he took, going in and out, it was so quiet and still. The sun remained blinding. All was silent, deafeningly silent, and that just made Beck even more tense. He knew the man was there, somewhere. He tracked a movement to his left with the shotgun. A light gust of wind rolled a tumbleweed along the boardwalk outside the old abandoned jail until it dropped off the end. Beck exhaled tensely, and glanced round.

“He’s here somewhere, I know it.” He thought aloud. A large abandoned boardinghouse loomed over to his right, the broken glass shards of its dark, broken windows seemingly snarled at him. Beck walked on, studying the decaying buildings intensely, as if his life depended on it. He adjusted his grip on the shotgun again – the stock had become wet and slippery. Then, rounding a corner, he spotted something that told him his quarry was definitely in the area!

“*At last!*” He thought, examining the single horse that stood tethered to a decaying wooden post in the street outside the old saloon, from a distance. The creature made no attempt to nibble the grass close to the dry water trough by the post. Far from not being hungry, or perhaps being used to better, it seemed like the horse was eyeing the greenery with suspicion, as though waiting for it to move first.

“He is here! Probably close by!”

Cautiously, Beck moved on, checking the roofs, doors, windows – the various objects lying strewn across the cluttered, dead streets like dried clots in the arteries of a corpse. Oh, what he would’ve given for a bio-scanner! Seeing nothing of interest, he walked out further, keeping against the wooden wall of a building, just in case. His heart pounded in his ears. “Strange, isn’t

it?” The thought popped up in his busy mind, “you could be in hundreds of fights, but everyone always seemed like the first time.” The truth of this was apparent to Beck – after all, a million different things could happen, go completely *wrong* – and to make it his *last*. Surprise was the name of this game – and Gary Beck knew all too well that his quarry wasn’t going to just jump out and shout “Wha!” at an unexpected moment.

“Where is he? Which building?” Beck wondered silently. He decided to look inside the old saloon. A little distance away, the horse snorted nervously, scratched in the dust with a hoof near some scrubby-looking grass, and after a few moments more – rather bravely – bent down to nibble at it. Beck took another cautious step forward up the wooden steps. Just then, he heard a sudden familiar clicking sound. He froze.

“Don’t move bounty hunter!” A rough voice grated from somewhere close behind, “Don’t you even breathe!”

“*He’s got the drop on me!*” Beck swallowed nervously. “*This is where I really start sweating.*”

“Hi, Corrigan.” Beck called out as casually as he could manage. “We should stop meeting like this... people might talk.”

He heard Corrigan growl with irritation. Well, Beck reasoned, he tended to have that effect on some people.

“Cut the crap and drop the hardware. The pistol too.” Came the barked retort.

Reluctantly, Beck dropped the shotgun. It clattered to the gravel, fell over – and rather unexpectedly, went off! A hole magically appeared in the dry trough close to the horse, sending wooden splinters flying. The horse bolted – and so did Beck! A couple of shots rang out, bullets whistling off eerily into the distance as he ran, keeping his head down. Then he reached the relative safety of an alley, and kept on going as fast as he could until he reached the next corner, where he took cover behind a dilapidated old water barrel. He breathed hard, and the dust in the air only made it worse. Considering his next move, Beck eased the pistol from his holster. A sudden shot rang out, followed by a loud thud as the bullet struck somewhere close by. Beck stuck his gun-hand over the top of the barrel and fired three shots blind. Corrigan’s reply to that came so close he could feel the heat!

“*Lousy cover!*” Gary Beck mentally cursed, taking stock of all the holes in the crumbling wood planks of the barrel.

Gary turned and saw his only possible escape – a low window in a wood wall opposite his position in the alley. Without hesitation, he leapt towards it – shots fired by his adversary trailing him as he jumped through it. As glass shattered, flew and fell around him, Gary Beck landed on a wooden floor and, scrambling across it, made for the nearest doorway he could see in the dark. He cursed as he realized he’d lost his hat! Hats were precious to those who wore them on Deanna – under Deanna’s hot sun, one could end up looking like last week’s bacon ‘n beans by the time one hit thirty! He loved his hat! But there wasn’t time for that now – he kept on going, making a quick note of where he lost it, so he could go back and get it later.

The old ruined building was dark inside – broken abandoned furniture and rubbish lay piled everywhere. Some pieces were covered by dust sheets, and lots of cobwebs and dust – which only made the place seem all that much more spooky... not that *spooky* bothered the renowned Gary Beck much. The darkened passage into the old dead building wound a bit before it led to a room with some large windows, through which light streamed in spite of the decaying stringy old curtains. The light fell on several collapsed piles that Beck made out to be former bar tables, and the skeletons of bar stools and chairs.

From there, he heard a muffled noise outside, like footsteps! Time to run! Beck knew Corrigan's reputation – and he sure as heck didn't want to go up against a stone-cold convicted wife-beater – at least, not *unprepared!* The man was capable of *anything!* He just made it to the derelict bar, when a spray of bullets shattered old glasses and empty bottles on either side of him. Without thinking, Gary vaulted over the top just as the stained old mirror behind the bar exploded shrapnel at him! It was a hard landing behind the bar – the floor planking was a lot harder than he was, and there were bits of old glass and other crap lying scattered everywhere across it that made things a good deal more painful. More gunshots rang out, growing louder – Corrigan was close now – far too close! Glass was shattering and raining down, tinkling and clattering everywhere! Wood splinters and dust danced to the melodious chaos... and then abruptly, silence fell.

Beck's nemesis crept up to the bar, cautiously moving around it. It looked to Beck like Corrigan was copying all the moves he'd seen in old cop movies and westerns – and doing it all rather badly. Corrigan lowered his pistol upon realizing there was no one behind the bar after all. There was however, an open trapdoor... *And that would mean the bounty hunter was -*

“*Don't move!*” Came Beck's distant, slightly muffled – and subterranean barked order. “My turn, I think!”

From his vantage point in the old basement, Gary Beck had a good view of his prey. Or at least, a good view of his feet. The rest of him could only be in so many places. The gaps and knotholes in the floorboards came in handy: one he aimed through, the other had the muzzle of his ten-mil in it, aimed upwards at Corrigan. It was a 10mm Jupina Black semi-auto pistol, one of the finest handguns known to Human-kind – or anyway, at least to Beck. He didn't *have* to warn Corrigan – after all, the man had spent the entire morning trying to kill *him* – but Beck had a conscience. Anyway, dead men were a lot harder to carry than live ones.

* * *

It was the dawn of manned spaceflight. Well, okay – more like just after tea time. The Terran Empire had been around since – well, a century or so ago, and more colonies were being established every year. *Tordrazil* was one of those planets that any average citizen of said Empire had probably never heard of, at least, not unless they were investors in the *Beljan Interstellar Mining Company*, and if they were really studious about reading the company prospectus and cared where their minerals came from. That particular company specialized in deep space mining operations, and also the transportation of raw materials and related equipment. Oh, there were other similar companies in the same field, but Beljan Interstellar was

the largest, having a fleet of mineral survey ships and loderunners almost an eighth the size of the Imperial Space Fleet, which as you can imagine, was pretty darn big. If there was a demand for it, Beljan Interstellar would be out there digging it up. The Tordrazil operation was their latest, and of necessity, it was on the fringe of then explored space. How else could they stay ahead of claim jumpers and the competition?

TR424 Duval was on such loderunner belonging to Beljan Interstellar. She was of the Bannor class, and equipped for long-term deep space voyages. Bannor class ships required little maintenance. Fully automated, the Duval had a remarkably long fuel endurance, which meant it could be out for years at a time, much to the consternation of the small and less vital crew – but more about that a little later.

Bannor class loderunners were not to be taken lightly. Just one look would convince you that you were facing *gigatons* of hi-tech transport. With a length of 4.3km and a beam of 800 meters, it would be a gross understatement to call such a vessel at the peak of modern Terran starship engineering a mere ‘loderunner’. In its five major mixed cargo holds, the Duval could carry enough food supplies to feed a whole Terran colony for several months. The Duval was, as a consequence, a very profitable ship, which was just as well, because the Bannor class didn’t come cheap.

This particular example was only eleven years old and had been cruising the regular Samor – Barantis run for the past five years. Transporting ores and metals was the main purpose of these ships, but sometimes there would be open spaces in the cargo holds – and Management didn’t like open spaces. Open spaces were bad for business. Open spaces in the payload could result in another open space in the crew or loading dock manifests, so to keep Management happy a portion of the Duvals’ cargo space would be assigned to carry items dispatched by private individuals – and sometimes, even a small compliment of passengers... that is, passengers who didn’t mind long periods between stops without many sights to see, unless cruising the arse-end of the galaxy was their thing. On the plus side, it was cheaper than a ticket on one of the really big cruise-liners... and it was more *subtle* way to travel.

Currently however, the Duval’s cargo manifest boasted several superkegs of export-quality Samorian sherry, a variety of miscellaneous industrial, colonizing and farming equipment. Aside from all that, she also had on board a vast cargo of semi-processed platinum ore on route to the heavy industries on Gorda. All told, that would take care of the Duval’s traveling arrangements for the next year or so, or pretty much.

Being the skipper of such a vessel was not a stressful job, despite the sheer size of the thing – which was enormous! Everything on the ship was completely automated, which meant this behemoth could be efficiently handled by the ship’s computer – or, by a far less seasoned captain than the one she currently had. Besides, the Company knew that hiring mature skippers with actual experience would cost them *real* money – and hey, the computers ran everything anyway.

Everything on Duval was automated, from navigation to engineering. Even transportation fees were negotiated with Head Office via the interweb. No negotiating skills were needed on the part of the crew whatsoever. Despite the overabundance of automation, insurance companies still

wouldn't insure fully automated ships unless they had at least a token crew aboard, so that's what he and the other eleven were – a *token* crew. The small crew of twelve was only there in case – gods forbid – something went wrong that the computer couldn't handle – or with the computer itself. And at least, if something did go wrong – gods forbid – and horribly so, the company would only have to answer for the loss of a mere twelve people, and not several hundred.

It is on this note that Captain Bran Johannsen enters our tale – as a fine young 25 year-old man, a relatively inexperienced graduate of the Merchant Space Academy in Mars City, who only got his Executive Officer's ticket four short years ago. His demeanor as he sat back and relaxed on top of a bar stool alone in the ship's recreation area belied his true feelings about his choice of career. The observation deck was nice and quiet. "Deserted" would be a better word. His feelings on the matter aside, it wasn't all bad, being a passenger on his own ship, especially considering he was getting paid for it.

The rest of his potentially expendable crew was either sleeping or eating – or both, in various amusing combinations. Only five of them would be on duty at any particular time – two on the main bridge, one in medical, one in cargo control and one in engineering, although mostly – with nothing to keep them occupied – they could be found in their cabins watching movies or pursuing their latest hobby. The computer would handle everything as far as navigation and management was concerned. All they had to do was be there and watch and to give the occasional input. Bran couldn't help feeling that he wasn't needed. Perhaps this was for one very obvious reason – he really wasn't. This wasn't good for his ego, this not feeling important gig. Sometimes Bran even felt like a stowaway on his own ship, out of place, like he didn't belong there. His dreams had slowly changed...until they weren't the same anymore – they'd adopted the tendency to become worn out through all the editing and reediting and sometimes, the complete redrafting of the script.

He'd joined the Company four years ago with his brand new Skipper's ticket in one hand and in the other, a bag filled with all his worldly possessions, ready, keen and eager to see the galaxy... and found himself posted to the Duval. At first, it was great – but then, perhaps inevitably, boredom struck. There was no excitement in his day anymore. After a while, the sheer thrill of riding a huge space ship as it accelerated to beyond the speed of light became as dull as a ride on a Mars City bus – with even less scenery, if that were possible. He'd sought relief for his boredom in different ways. Relationships? *With crew?* Hmm. That might alleviate the boredom somewhat – but then again, too risky – besides, he knew where all of them had been, and in some cases, where they were headed.

Even the regular girl-in-every-port-phase had slowly ground to a halt for Bran. After a few years visiting the same old ports, Bran had found he'd already run through all the pickings to be had at all their regular stops... and aside from local company that took payment, his options were rather slim. Generally his dockside flings provided little real distraction or excitement – with the possible exception of the last girl he'd canoodled with on Salus. Bran remembered her husband somewhat resentfully as a violent, unfriendly man with a tendency to just turn up without warning and start shooting at him. The local Sheriff wasn't too thrilled about it either at first, and it cost Bran practically a whole month's pay to keep Management from hearing about it.

Consequently, Bran generally kept to himself socially, and didn't hold with paid company either, particularly since the rest of his crew had from time to time made a game out of comparing STD's and running a monthly pool on who could catch the most exotic one. "Show 'n Tell" they called it, giving a little irritated eye-roll at the thought... He hadn't actually bleached his eyeballs after the first time his crew members began a session in the canteen one night after dinner, but part of him wished he had. At any rate, his crewmates now knew never to do that in his company again, so they kept him out of that activity since.

Bran Johannsen was more than just bored, he was beginning to feel that he might be depressed. Having not much else to do meant he had a shit-ton of time to just sit and think – that was the main problem – he *thought*. He thought all the time. He fantasized and dreamed – not about his future, or to plan, or about anything really constructive... no, he'd begun to doubt himself. Lately he spent hours thinking about his choices in life – the choices that led him to this particular point in his life, to this career, to stagnation, where his once bright shiny dreams had faded, wilted, turned brown, and had started to sprout molds and spores and to look more interesting in a gothic sort of way. These days, to pass the time, Bran often caught himself day-dreaming about one of his crew having an industrial accident – perhaps one of his less favorite subordinates, just to liven up the unending tedium. In his fantasies, the decks were awash with blood, strewn with fallen limbs and the silence drowned by frantic screaming... He caught himself start to smile again, and shuddered.

Tearing himself away from the cruel fantasy, he looked back at his former life... *former* because here on this ship – this nothingness, limbo – it didn't feel like life. It was like he was asleep, or in a coma – while back home, and everywhere else, people carried on living their lives. Here in the belly of this ship, time stood still. Limbo? No, wait, perhaps it was more like a Purgatory, where he couldn't live life as such, but he could review his past mistakes and berated himself for them... It occurred to him that perhaps he'd gone to the *wrong* Academy. Instead of the Merchant Space Academy, he should've enlisted in the Space Fleet! The guys in the Space Fleet – the ones he met sometimes when he visited spaceport bars and so on – always had more interesting stories to tell. You know, tales about the dude who got vaporized in a plasma accident in the engineering section, or the chick who got turned into a blob of weird space jelly by some alien virus – or the time someone flew a starship into an astor-field at warp four by mistake (apparently they were still trying to find the black box on *that* one). The Imperial Space Fleet's recruiting office sure didn't go around advertising '*Join up, see the universe, meet interesting aliens and die screaming*', but it was known there were risks involved. It was part of the job after all, and yet somehow, *they* still got recruits signing up in droves! Yes, indeedy – their stories were far more interesting than *his* – took a load of ore to Gorda, nothing happened. Took a load of mining equipment back to Tordrazil, nothing happened then either. Took a load of machinery to Salus – more nothing – picked up and dropped off a few passengers on the way – and, you guessed it, no action there either.

Through the huge observation windows, each spanning at least ten feet and almost reaching the whole stretch between the deck and ceiling, he could see the star-splattered universe outside. Even through triple layers of alloyed plasti-steel, it reminded him – more than ever – of an ant's

view of the inside of a shower nozzle. The Duval was about to enter the next system where they were due to stop for a brief layover.

Just about the only time something had happened to liven things up, was the time when the Duval's previous cargo-master was incinerated by a female Florpavian flame bird with a bad case of hiccups. Of course it had been an accident – perhaps even an industrial one – the birds were notoriously dangerous cargo... as nigh on every loderunner skipper and cargo master in the galaxy knew. They were damned tricky to transport – which is probably the only reason he'd had any entertainment at all on that trip... How long? About six months previously – it felt like *years* by Bran's reckoning. The female of the species was widely known to be way more stable than the male – chemically stable, that is – perhaps similar to most other species. The male birds, on the other hand, only tended to explode unexpectedly. As a result, almost all Florpavian Flame-birds transported through space would be female. Males would as a rule only be transported if they'd been suitably sedated – in other words, rendered unconscious with good drugs, and transported in a cryogenics chamber – preferably lined with lead and concrete.

Still...even that little flash in the pan had only provided temporary relief. All Bran had to do was fill in a few reports about the incident, send a few emails – and the Company took care of everything, including insurance and funeral arrangements (matchbox and postage). He also made a mental note to stay as far away from Florpavian Flame-birds as possible in future. The more uneventful his job was, he'd felt initially, the safer it was going to be for him. Well, so far, so good. He was safe, but bored. Bored, bored, bored. But he was safe. Bran was far more likely to live long enough to spend the all the money he'd saved from this rather lucrative gig... one day. Who the hell *else* got paid what *they* did for the amount of *actual* work? Seriously.

“*Money – now, money's important!*” He thought with resentful positivity, other than politicians who got paid to fool themselves into thinking they actually ran the Terran Empire, he couldn't think of anyone. Well, except maybe the crews of *other* Bannor class ships. A few more years of this lark and he would be able to retire before he even reached 30. Then he could *really* start living! Until then, he was stuck here aboard the SS Nowheresville, thinking up amusing ways for his crew to become statistics.

Thing is, he really, really didn't like where this seemed to be headed. It wouldn't be long, he felt, before he would start talking to the potted plants on the rec-dec. Trouble was – as bad as he made his lot out to be – one of them would *actually* talk back to him. Like, really. It would *talk*. Bran Johanssen didn't like talking plants; it made him doubt his sanity a little more than he already did.

An artificial voice with a hint of *dictator* about it, came over the intercom and derailed his train of thought.

“General - announcement. (Pause) We - are - now - entering - the - Ramalama - System. (Pause) E-T-A - Deanna - orbit - twenty - three - hours - six - minutes. No - crew - action - required. Thank - you.”

“*I only want to hear vun click!*” Bran muttered sarcastically in mock-Nazi under his breath, just as the distant sphere of one of the outer planets crawled into view and distracted him from his intended routine of holding two fingers vertically under his nose and raising his right hand in

a little mock Nuremburg salute. The sphere was a breath-taking swirl of multicolor cloud patterns, which created the impression that it could've been the last work of a mad artist with a fondness for narcotics.

The S.S. Duval had a passenger this time around. One passenger. Yes-sir-ee-Bob, a bona fide passenger. "*Someone actually paid for this?*" The thought shrieked rudely between the unraveling code of Bran's bored mind. The passenger was a woman, bless her cold un-beating little heart – a cute platinum blonde type, with a body and figure any man would go weak-kneed for! In fact, he'd skinned his a few times recently, by complete coincidence – alone in his bunk. She was stuck up and distant though, kept to herself, didn't talk much. In fact, aside from the occasional short reply to one of his questions and attempts to elicit conversation, she'd all but ignored him flat! The Duval's only legitimate passenger had boarded at Salus a month ago, bound for Deanna. "Just about time for her to be leaving, then." Bran Johannsen thought, relieved, as his loop of self-recrimination and sanguine fantasy closed and reset.

Meanwhile, the object of Captain Johannsen's present frustrations – and the one who had been more or less the reason for his recently recurring persistent wrist strain injury – was currently enjoying the respite offered by the rec-dec. It was a pleasant recreational facility, roomy, well decorated, ambient lighting – the whole trip! Potted plants stood arranged on a stand in a semi artistic manner in an attempt to create an atmosphere conducive to relaxation. For some unfathomable reason, some people felt that plants and relaxation were inexorably linked, and that one couldn't have one without the other – especially not in deep space. A little fountain lost somewhere in the cluster of potted vegetation made – well, plumbing noises. Honestly, it didn't gurgle or meander or even sound relaxing at all. *This was probably because of a blocked pipe*, the passenger thought absentmindedly. A decent fountain ought to gurgle or at least go *splish-splash*. This one did a fair imitation of an elephantine bowel movement after a heavy night at the marula fruit.

The Duval's only legitimate passenger – that is, the only passenger who had actually paid to be there – was Cindy-Mei Winter, a young lady who'd once thought that life in space ought to prove rather fun and exciting. This probably wasn't the most appropriate word to describe space travel under the present set of circumstances. After all, it's dangerous out there – it's cold and cruel! In fact, insurance companies depended on the misfortunes of deep space travel for their income. Consequently, the less excitement there was, the longer one's life expectancy ought to have been. These thoughts looped through Ms. Winter's mind like a roller coaster – belying her innocent and naïve appearance as being only skin-deep, as she watched the stars settle back into the inky black curtain of space through the large space windows. "*A voyage through some undiscovered systems, a little exploration*," She'd thought originally, "Perhaps a few alien encounters? How romantic! What fun! What a thrill!" Oh yes, this is just the sort of hopeful attitude of one who is just begging to be proved *wrong*.

"Funny how the stars look out here." Said a masculine voice close to her ear. "So dull. So dead."

Mei saw the stars in question, hanging lifelessly a few million light-years away on the other side of the large viewports – or if you will, windows. They looked, for all the universe, like little off-cut bits of badly painted tinsel.

“Oh. It’s you, Fred.” Mei said. “Yes, I suppose it’s because there’s no atmosphere to give them that luster. On Mars – and on Earth, they seem to wink at you. On Jez-El they’re all different colors because of the way the air splits their light like a prism.”

“I’ve been to Jez El.” Said Fred, skillfully avoiding getting drawn into a debate about light spectrums, atomic density fields, magnetospherics, and quantum physics. “I’ve never been to Earth.”

“Oh, it’s lovely.” Said Mei. “At night the sky is dark and they twinkle. You can feel the cool wind on a summer’s night and there’s not a cloud in the sky.”

“Wind.” Said Fred. “Yes, that’s one of the things you never get on a ship. I miss the wind.”

“Me too.” Mei sighed. “I miss taking a walk on my Grans’ farm. We used to visit there often when I was a kid.”

“Don’t walk much these days either.” Said Fred. “Don’t actually *do* much at all.”

“That sounds awful sad, Fred.” Mei sympathized, “You really should get out more next time we make planetfall.”

“Love to.” Said Fred.

“Get out a bit, take in the sights. Feel the wind blowing through your hair...”

“Leaves.”

“Leaves – the warm sun on your sk...” Mei stopped. “Sorry, Fred. I feel like a bit of a twit. Keep forgetting.”

“No problem.” Said Fred. “Makes me feel more a part of things. All I need is a bit of water nice and regular and some good conversation.”

“Being stuck here on the rec-dec can’t be much fun, huh?”

“Well, the music’s good. Computer plays Mozart and Tchaikovsky when I ask for it. The stuff the rest of the crew likes is... well, it’s pretty awful.”

“You mean rock music?”

“Not good for growth, that stuff. As far as I’m concerned, rocks belong in the substratum, not in music.”

“Your leaves are looking greener.” Mei remarked pleasantly. A roughly meter-high generous bush of thick fleshy green wiggled a few leaves at her in gratitude.

“Thanks. I got the computer to turn up the UV a little.”

Mei smiled, realizing that if she had seen that happen a few months earlier, she’d be half a block away by now, screaming. She made a mental note to remember to include sun-block in her morning routine – she didn’t want UV damage to her hard-won milk-white complexion.

“Fred?”

“Yes, Mei?”

“Something I’ve been wondering about...” She paused. “I don’t mean to pry.”

“Well, as you Terrans say – spit it out.” Said Fred plainly. “Ask away.”

“Erm. Okay, what’s it like to be a plant?”

Fred sighed. Being on the rec-dec meant that he spent a lot of time alone. The other plants weren’t much company. The ship’s computer was very accommodating, acceding to his requests for what he called *good* music – but its capacity for reason and conversation were somewhat

limited. However, being the only member of his species on board meant that he spent a lot of his time, well, *vegetating*. The ship's tiny crew came here fairly often in an attempt to relax. Crewmen would often sit and talk to him at odd hours of the cycle, often while slightly pickled – while wondering where that strange disembodied voice was coming from. Sometimes they would unload their worldly troubles on him and make him feel like a bartender – and a rather confused one, at that. They asked him questions that presupposed he somehow soaked up the wisdom of the universe through his aerial roots. He still didn't understand the animal obsession with reproductive activities.

“Well,” said Fred after considering the question carefully. “Suppose I asked you ‘what’s it like to be human?’ I suppose you’d say, ‘Well you’ve got lots of muscles to move, squishy bits inside, you feed by actually sticking things into yourselves and you’ve got rocky bits inside called bones that stop your body from collapsing into a blob of goop on the floor.’ Well – now suppose I told you being a plant I don’t get around much, being pretty much rooted to the spot. I don’t like the nightlife ‘cos it’s too dark and people keep picking my flowers in spring. Suppose someone came along, ripped your balls off and walked off sniffing them? The point being, actually, that you couldn’t imagine my life as a plant any more than I could imagine being human. Understand?”

Mei waited for a definite pause before answering. “Umm. I suppose.”

“What kind of name is Winter, anyway? Not some sort of seasonal thing, is it?”

“It’s my last name. My full name is Cindy-Mei Winter.”

“That is a full name.” Said Fred. “Mine’s just Fred. Plain old Fred, first and last, all in one.”

“Tell me, Fred.” Said Cindy-Mei, risking another question, “What is it you like most about being a plant?”

Fred barely hesitated.

“I suppose it’s not having to pause for breath.” He replied almost smugly.

* * *

Meanwhile on Deanna, Gary Beck, the famous bounty hunter also known as Beck the Badfeller, was at the wheel of his Jeepo, which bounced happily along the dry dirt-track that led back to the small farming town of Lugaluru. His prize, Corrigan, alive and well, sat beside him, cuffed and loudly cursing Beck, his mother, his father, and lawmen and society in general. After a few kilometers, Corrigan settled down a little. At least he’d finally stopped swearing, but that could be on account of the rough ride. He didn’t bounce too much as the jeepo traversed the rough terrain – not as Beck, who occasionally became airborne out of his seat in mid-bounce – but this may have been because Beck had tied him down to the seat frame. After all, one couldn’t be too careful with a wife-beater – and Beck sort of knew what to expect from an axe-murderer, but as far as he was concerned, a wife beater was capable of absolutely *anything*.

“What you done wi’ muh horse?” Corrigan growled as they found a more level stretch of the dirt track and the bouncing subsided.

“I didn’t do jack to your horse.” Gary rebuffed. “It slipped the knot and ran off when you started shooting at me. I guess he’ll be okay as long as he steers clear of the crabby-grass.”

Crabby-grass was a known hazard of living on Deanna, and trying to eat crabby-grass was a guaranteed unsettling experience for any native Earth creatures on Deanna, especially cattle and horses. The little creatures closely resembled clumps of regular inanimate grass, but came preloaded with rows of snapping teeth they weren't afraid to use. A horse might be screwed up for days afterwards, maybe even for good. Even a man like Beck the Badfeller, who had a shiny reputation and considered himself to be a tough guy, didn't go blundering around the wilds of Deanna without safety boots. He loved his toes and ankles too much – and everything between.

“Damn.” Corrigan muttered, “I really liked that horse!”

Beck kept driving, as Corrigan fell silent again. Lugaluru was still about ten clicks ahead, and that was just on the outskirts of the capital of Deanna, Atro City. Lugaluru was a small farming community where news tended to get around a bit. Mr. Corrigan's main crime had been assault and battery, which he'd inflicted on his nearest and supposedly dearest. Beck didn't hold with that kind of thing. Neither did the law – and neither did the good Mrs. Corrigan, who just last month had fired two barrels of buckshot through the toilet door while her lesser half was sitting on the can. Lucky for him, Corrigan happened to be leaning over forward to read the paper at his feet at the time, and thought his ass had exploded. Of course, that illusion only lasted as long as it took for him to look up and see the missus reloading the shotgun through the hole in the door. This bit of spicy gossip led to all sorts of jokes, some of them of the ‘*knock knock*’ variety, and the local gossip rag had a field day, even releasing a special bumper edition. A picture of the wrecked outhouse door made a fine cover.

Ten years of marital abuse had become too much for Mrs. Corrigan to handle any longer – after all, she'd been a fine upstanding member of the Lugaluru community for thirty eight years (not to mention Mayor Crawley's sweet little sister) and so, Mr. Corrigan was promptly arrested, given a three-year jail term – and promptly divorced in absentia. At least she didn't take getting stomped on lying down. Gary liked it when women put *that* kind of male in their place.

The way Gary thought of it, it was understandable to a degree if someone went out to rob or assault a stranger to them, or to kill even, for whatever reason or motive – that meant they still cared about and spared those closest to them... but – Gary felt, men like Corrigan, who inflicted harm on the one person he supposedly loved and should've protected from harm... well, prison – even the awful conditions at the local Lulu Penitentiary – was a little better than they deserved!

Be that as it may, two weeks ago Mr. Corrigan had managed to escape from Lulu, evaded the dogs and guard patrols, and had been on the run until Beck caught up with him. The bounty on this man was not that much, but it would probably cover his expenses and leave him with enough for a few comforts of home to ease his conscience. The streets of Atro City already felt a mite cleaner, which put a contented smile on his face! Besides, he smiled, his friend the Warden missed Corrigan's fine conversation at dinner.

* * *

There was a Ruminarii proverb which very few non-Ruminarii had ever heard. It went something like: "*Mansk pohl D'uvah Llshahl*". Its meaning, more-or-less, was something

follows: ‘The ‘*Sword of Darkness*’ has been drawn, and it’s time to kiss your ass good-bye!’ Remarkably compact language, Ruminarii, don’t you think? At any rate, this quaint little proverb had just started going round and round the hammerhead in the form of a chant as it reached visual distance from Deanna.

Half-Lieutenant *Kluss’ta* found the rhythm of the chanting crew pleasing. For some odd reason, the rhythm reminded him of the sound his walking ring had made when he was still a little hatchling learning to walk and simultaneously maul ankles with the blades on the wheel hubs. It had been rather a nice walking ring, painted in a cheerful bright shiny green color, the same shade as the Gahork people from planet 129576’s intestines. Marsh’k had put it away for when he had offspring of his own – and just two years ago, gave it to his infant son – who on the first day promptly gored one of his older female cousins with the wheel-spikes and later ran over the family *g’haargh*’ with it. Twice. Like father, like son, or so the saying goes, not so? It was a proud family moment indeed! Oh well, Marsh’k had always wondered why a *g’haargh* was called that – and anyway, it was proof negative of the claim that watching gratuitous violence on TV made children into killers.

Two of the Ruminarii ship’s bridge crew had stripped down and were performing the ritual Dance of the Annihilator, naked. The dance was an important part of Ruminarii military tradition, and was significant for several important reasons we won’t go into, but suffice to say, mainly because it primed the troops for an impending battle. It involved much twirling and posturing from the participants, and hissing at each other. The rest of the crew applauded whenever one would suddenly stab at the other with the short ritual knife. In a proper contest points would be awarded for artistic style and the tonality of the hisses and even for the artistic expression in the slashes inflicted to the loser’s body. This of course, was not a contest – not that Marsh’k frowned on competition among his crew, in fact he encouraged it. It was bad for morale. It worked up their fighting spirit before an attack. Anyway, it gave them something to do – a distraction for one or more of them who may have been giving his command seat undue attention. Perhaps he might make a full ten years as a ship commander yet. That would make him something of a record, as the longest-serving example currently had been something in the line of nine years, seven months, three weeks, and two days – and that happened to be *him*.

This unusual longevity was not because he was unusually lucky or because the gods and demons scowled on him. It was because unlike his subordinates, who competed parallel and upwards of their respective positions (as was the usual tradition), Marsh’k also secretly competed *downwards*. This meant, effectively, that his executive officer was usually someone who had just recently assassinated his predecessor and was just settling into the post nicely – and beginning to think the title of ‘Ship Commander’ sounded nicer, when he would suddenly find himself leading his own funeral procession. It was always assumed that some other aspiring candidate of lower rank was the culprit. Or that his attempted assassination of the Ship Commander had gone pleasantly awry. It might have been a somewhat unorthodox method, but hey, it worked for him. And it was kind of fun. Yes, Marsh’k was an unusual Ruminarii – which, given the Ruminarii’s uniqueness itself, was quite remarkable.

Why hadn’t he advanced in rank since attaining the rank of Half-Lieutenant? Well, mainly because a Half-Lieutenant was a Ship Commander, and once he had command of a ship, there

was nobody else onboard higher than *him* to assassinate, but also because this too meant that promotion meant an office job at the headquarters of the Ruminarii Fleet, and held the consequence of losing the freedom he now enjoyed – the freedom to go where he willed when he willed it, to command – and somewhat surprisingly, Half-Lieutenant Marsh’k Kluss’ta rather enjoyed his freedom.

To Marsh’k, being in deep space for months at a time was *true* freedom. He didn’t have to cover his tympana with his hands so he wouldn’t hear his mother-in-law’s incessant hissing. Unfortunately, the killing of a spouses’ immediate family was forbidden since it led to strife between the clans – but irritating little brat nephews who went for your ankles with their walking rings were fair game, however. A recollection of a walking ring careening down a steep hill, accompanied by brief terrified screams of delight brought a warm happy feeling to Marshk’s ordinarily cold chest cavity. Just then, the tactical weapons officer, a young corporal-major suddenly slashed home and hit pay dirt. His opponent, a lance-captain in mid twirl, hissed, gurgled and spun noisily into the bulkhead while managing a final flourish before crashing heavily to the deck. Satisfied with his new status, the new lance-captain took up the ‘stance of victory’ and bowed deeply to Marsh’k, who raised a glass of bile brandy in acknowledgment of his new security officer and his new rank and status, and caught a glimmer of deep thought on the face of his Exec, who seemed to be watching the proceedings with considerable interest.

Whenever Marsh’k sat and thought about it long enough, it was amazing that his species hadn’t managed to extinct itself just through its own malicious nature. Aside from the Ruminarii propensity for being pretty good at conquering and dominating other species, Ruminarii seemed to be actually better at killing other Ruminarii.

* * *

Beck the Badfeller and his bounty were still on the way to the local Sheriff’s office to collect their respective rewards. Corrigan would go directly back to the slam where he belonged to serve the remainder of his three years plus interest, and as for Beck, he was overdue for a beer at the local bar to celebrate with a well-earned cold one. Happy endings all-round.

They’d eventually joined a tarred road, and in the distance, the ocean – that is, the Landlocked Ocean – wasn’t too far away; the blue freshwater glimmer of it was easily visible on the horizon, on the outskirts of the other side of the city beyond Lugaluru. Nope, this sure wasn’t paradise, and this wasn’t a loaned Ferrari he was driving, but it sure felt good to be this close to home again – even if home happened to be just a trailer park on the cheaper side of town.

The small town of Lugaluru was a quiet place by most modern city standards. It was an outer-suburb of Atro City, the capital of Deanna – but people still tended to think of it as a town on its own, as it once was when the colony was first settled. The streets were dry and dusty, the buildings were new, but modest in design. People here habitually went about their business, hardly socializing, except at the bars and other gathering points. People walking on the sidewalks paid him no mind as he drove down the main road with his prisoner beside him, still tied firmly to the seat of the Jeepo. The locals wore mostly jeans or three-quarter pants and leathers made from the hides of the local cattle. Hats were also something of a local fashion. You needed them

when you worked in the sun most of the day. Jeeps and pick-up trucks, mostly electric, were parked here and there. Some of the wealthier folk had up-market hydrogen-fuelled SUV's, either cruising or roaring through the boonie-town, as the rich folk called it, or ego-parking their fancy wheels on street corners outside the latest hip places in the area for rich folks to hang out at, to feel better than other folk.

They drove on through Lugaluru and into the city itself. Gary eased the Jeepo into a parking bay outside the main Sherriff's Office in downtown Atro City and heaved a sigh of relief. It felt good to have another job done, safely, and with no holes in his body he wasn't born with to show for his time. Almost a thousand credits richer now, he could just about taste that beer already! Corrigan spat through the open window of his door in disgust.

"So, guess this is it, huh – bounty hunter? I hope you enjoy your blood money."

"Chill, Corrigan – it's not as if you're going in for life or as if you're facing a death sentence – it's just a three-year holiday in one of Deanna's finest state-run institutions. Make good use of it – broaden your horizons, work on your education. Get in touch with your sensitive side. Hey – here's a thought, maybe you'll learn how it is to be somebody's abused wife while you're inside?"

"Hey, screw you, man!" Corrigan hissed back, launching into a tirade of cuss-words interlaced with snarling and wriggling inside his bonds in a frustrated effort to do immediate violence to Beck.

"Honey," Beck the Badfeller smiled back maddeningly, "You will die with that fantasy!"

* * *

Cindy Mei Winter, soon to be ex-passenger of the Duval, had packed all her belongings into her traveling trunk. She did a last sweep of her cabin and was certain she'd remembered everything. It's easy to forget what you brought with you when you last unpacked almost a month ago, she thought. She was careful not to accidentally pack anything she hadn't arrived with, like say a towel or a bar of soap. The pictures of her family and friends had been the hardest to put away, especially the one of her mother. They seemed so much closer again, especially now that everything was over and she was living her new life. Her scars were healing nicely and had almost completely disappeared. This little cruise out into the wild was her little gift to herself, her little way to sort her life out, figure out who she really was inside – especially after everything that happened. In a way, Mei was celebrating. She'd arrived at Deanna – or would in just a few minutes – and she intended staying there for a few weeks, to have a nice time at the tropical paradise resort, and then move on to somewhere else. She'd resolved to work *that* little detail out while holidaying here. Mei closed the lid and heard the click as it auto-locked.

"Come on." She told the device. "It's time to go."

"Beeple-beep!" It acknowledged, and silently began to move behind her. Perhaps if she'd had enough of traveling by then, she'd just go back home again. She wasn't sure about that in any case. She did suspect that perhaps her own healing wasn't the only healing that needed to happen before she would feel right about going back – but right now, she was making her way to the rec-dec, the trunk following her in quiet obedience on its large quiet rubber wheels. The familiar feeling of being followed was coming back to her. A few minutes' walk was all it took

for passenger and luggage to reach the Duval's rec-dec. The familiar pair of large transparent doors slid open noiselessly as she approached. Inside, she walked up to Fred and smiled her greeting to him.

"Come to say good-bye?" He asked. She nodded.

"Time goes on." She said. "They say it flies when you're having fun."

"Did it?"

She grinned. "Not really. But it was okay. I needed time to think and, you know, sort things out."

"Did you?"

"Pretty much. Still some way to go."

"Well, I hope everything works out for you, Cindy-Mei Winter. You're probably the most interesting Human I've ever met."

"Probably?" She teased, grinning. She couldn't tell if the joke had fallen on fertile ground or not – it was so hard to tell with Fred. "You look after yourself, Fred. Don't forget to get some exercise."

"I will." Said Fred. "Now run along, I hate long goodbyes – they make me want to cry."

Mei turned and walked back the way she'd come, all the while wondering what a crying plant looked like. Or sounded like, for that matter. Argh! She wanted to hug Fred, but didn't know what to do. She didn't want to hurt him or break anything. She realized he was tougher than that, but all the same. She turned to wave at him as she reached the door. Fred waved a few branches at her in a fascinating surreal freaky sort of way before she disappeared behind the closing doors. He'd grown rather fond of this odd little Human in the time he'd known her. They had talked a lot. Had they become friends? She did come specially to say goodbye after all... Yes, he thought that counted.

Being a plant had the advantage that people seemed not to mind spilling the beans to you, like you were somehow just a fly on the wall that happened to talk back when they thought aloud. It was interesting, listening to her experiences and her thoughts. He meant what he'd said – Mei was indeed one of the most interesting humans he'd ever known. Not that he'd really known that many Humans in his life of course, but he'd gotten to know some. Not many of *them* had ever come close in terms of interest level... except possibly for one mad dictator he'd met oh – quite some time ago. His claim to fame was in leading an ill-fated revolution against the Imperial governor on Salus shortly after the colony was founded. 'General' Juan Tana-M'era claimed to be the answer to the colonist's prayers, and had delusions of holiness. By the end of the counter-revolution some months later, he was proven right after all – by a rather large firing squad consisting of a howitzer and what remained of his own men, who had been squabbling over where to hang his head. Fred supposed, it was a human tradition to be canonized to be made a saint, but he didn't think heavy artillery was normally a part of the ritual. Perhaps that hinged upon what religion one followed – or perhaps on how unhinged their followers were.

Being a plant had some clear advantages. Nobody shot at plants. Nobody feared that plants had an agenda. Nobody even considered the likelihood of a movement demanding civil rights for plants. Nobody thought of him as a *threat* – except perhaps in an agricultural sense, at least not until it was too late. Mei was interesting, and unlike the crazed dictator, she was a *good*

interesting. Also, she was *nice*. She was amazingly open-minded, centered and balanced – for one thing, she hadn't run off screaming or tripped over a balustrade just because Fred said something. If he could compare her with music, then Mei was Mozart or Tchaikovsky. Everybody else was just rock music. He would miss her.

The *Duval* had reached orbit around Deanna. When Mei reached the shuttle bay, the doors were already open and presented a wonderful vista. It was quite a show. She could see the hugeness of Deanna below, the top of the blue-white sphere filling most of it. The Captain of the *Duval*, a handsome looking man about her age, came strutting up to her. *Cocky* was the word that came to mind, and not in the naughty sense of the word. No, that was more like *cock-sure*, she corrected herself. He was younger than her, she had decided – and rather obviously, to one of her experience, thought himself something of a ladies man. He probably thought that all the pretty ladies should swoon at the sight of his company uniform, chiseled jaw and somewhat awkward smile.

“Ready to go, miss?” Bran Johannsen asked, politely holding his arm out to her, all smiles as he eyed the trunk in slow faithful pursuit behind her. “Everything packed?”

“Yes, thank you.” She smiled, hoping to have answered both questions simultaneously as she fell in beside him, ignoring his offered arm.

The good Captain had been a little intrusive on the voyage, asking personal questions, getting far too friendly and familiar. Oh well, perhaps the poor creature was just bored. She giggled mentally as his face dropped. Outwardly, she held her composure, and the light smile playing on her red lips. Perhaps he was just lonesome, she wondered. He must've been, surely. After all, she'd just spent a month on this ship with naught but Fred for intelligent company – goodness only knew what Captain Johannsen did to distract himself for months on end. He wasn't bad looking exactly – it was more about his ...personality? Something about him just put her off, and in any case, she just wasn't interested in any kind of emotional attachments. Not right now, anyway. That's not why she was on this voyage; she wasn't looking for a lover – or a relationship. No, not even a casual fling. There would be plenty of time for that later, when she was home, back in familiar surroundings, where she felt more confident – more sure of herself. There were plenty of nice eligible young men back home, anyway. That is, ones who might be less closed-minded and perhaps even adventurous. Until then, she wanted to be by herself for a while.

* * *

Beck the Badfeller swung a leg out of the cab and inadvertently trod on a patch of crabby-grass. It yelped, sprouted legs and scampered off, in a little dust cloud, making muted angry muttering noises. It stopped only a moment to shake its seedpods at him, making a soft sound like tiny castanets. Momentarily surprised, he put his foot down again, and got out. Crabby-grass! Weird stuff! It looked and smelled like ordinary grass, except it was *aware* that you were looking at it or smelling it – and in the case of a naïve horse imported from somewhere else – trying to *eat* it. The experience of being bitten *back* by the grass it was trying to chew, then getting scratched, clawed at, and then chewed out was enough to drive any well-mannered steed

totally potty. In fact, locals could easily tell if their horse had been at the grass – it would be the one hiding *under* the trough, giggling nervous like.

A smile came to Gary's lips as he hauled the errant wife-beater from the Jeepo and led him towards the steps. He could just about *taste* that cold one already! He'd had enough of the hot sun, the dust and the warm stale water from his bottle – it tasted like plastic.

The local Sheriff was there to meet him at the counter. She was a stout-looking lass who didn't take crap from anybody – especially from Beck the Badfeller, but she was a good sort, fair, and had the makings of a good long-term friend. She looked up from where she was sitting behind a desk, nodding at him as he nudged the trussed-up and struggling Corrigan towards the gate that led inside the station.

“So, the famous Ike Corrigan.” The lady said by way of greeting, and sounding rather impressed. “All his bits attached too, by the look of him. Pity. Brought in practically hog-tied by the even more renowned Beck the Badfeller, no less. Will wonders never cease?”

“Hi, Peg.” Gary greeted, nudging his prisoner over to her. “Nice to see you again too.”

Peg grabbed Corrigan by his ropes and passed him over to one of the stouter-looking deputies who had just been idly flexing his knuckles.

“Mike, pay the man.”

The deputy called Mike appeared shortly, one thousand credits in hand. Peggy-Ann leaned closer to him over the counter.

“Why'd they call you that, anyway? *Beck the Badfeller*.” She asked him coyly. “You can't be all that bad – can't even beat up an escaped wife-beater properly!”

There was a general rumble of appreciative laughter from the deputies. Someone started calling out ‘knock-knock’ in the background and continued to tell muted jokes. Gary knew very well that she was pulling the piss out of him. It was their usual thing. He smiled coyly at her.

“Well now, Peg, if you were to join me for a cold one at the ‘Shock Diamond’ this evening, I might just be persuaded to tell you.”

“No thanks, hon.” Peg replied without missing a beat. “A sweet, innocent girl like me in a place like *that*? Who *knows* what I might be tempted into by a man of *your* reputation?” She passed him the cash. “There's your thousand. Don't spend it all in one place!”

“In *this* part of town – what, are you kidding?” He retorted, sliding it into a pocket. Then he exchanged grins with her as he turned to go. Before reaching the door, she called after him.

“Good job, Gary.”

He threw her a parting smile and a wave. He and Peggy-Ann Muller went back quite a way. No romantic interest to speak of, no history between them. Beck met her when she was just a cute young deputy from off-world with a cute smile. Now she was the Sheriff of Atro City and, he had to admit, the best one the city ever had. At least, in his humble opinion as Deanna's most famous son. Perhaps women were just naturally better at some things, he thought. They accepted responsibility and authority, and over all, did their jobs without letting power go to their heads. At least, most of them did. He could remember a few female teachers who needed anti-grav lifters to keep their craniums off the floor – but not Peg – she was one o' the boys.

The ‘Shock Diamond’ was only about fifteen minutes’ drive away. It was a comfortable little bar in Lugaluru, that tended to be frequented by average clientele, just the average Janes and Joes who came in for an after work drink with a few mates, before heading home to make dinner. A few solitary, silent, private types – not too unlike him, were already there drinking alone – and would be there, probably until closing time. The place got its name from the intense little blue diamond shape that would appear in the flare of a rocket engine at lift-off. Quite interesting, he thought, taking a seat at the bar – not many people knew that. Not many people even cared, really, since the only rocket engines they still saw were in old movies or one or two surviving relics of the rocket era that might be seen still, at the spaceport. Anti-grav, EM-drive and warp drive were the current modes of propulsion for all things vehicular and spacified – except for jeepo’s of course.

The bar-top was nice shiny aluminum, coated with some kind of mica, which helped in keeping it nice and clean and scratch-free – which it was, except for one or two bullet holes that happened to match certain similar features in the wall behind the bar, which originated from that *other* incident at karaoke night a few years back. A data-crystal jukebox was playing Nat King Cole’s “*When I Fall In Love*” softly in the background. If he listened real careful like, Gary swore he could hear somebody crying into his beer. Actually crying. It was just too damned tragic! He shrugged it off, and got that long-anticipated cold one, and went to sit at a quiet table all by himself.

Peg’s question had caught him off guard. Everybody seemed to want to know – even more so since he’d become Deanna’s most famous bounty hunter...ever since that *other* case several years back when – *well*, that’s another story... Where *did* he get the name Beck the Badfeller? Well, it was a long time ago, when he was about twelve years old. At that time, he lived on Gorda with his dad, who was a lumberjack. It was back in the pre-industrial days of that colony, when people were landing every other week, and throwing up temporary wooden structures – not unlike parts of Lugaluru when he first arrived here... although those wooden structures were already the better part of eighty years old then. The cold one was going down cold and smooth, as advertised, and Gary started to relax. His thoughts ran back to his youth...

It happened one day while he was with his dad at work. Little Gary wanted to impress his Dad, and his Dad’s boss, so while his old man was on a lunch break, Gary pinched his saw and picked a nice big tree. He’d seen his Dad do it a dozen times already, and he got it just about right. The trouble was the timing. Er – and the direction he cut it in. The tree, six feet thick and almost a hundred feet high, came crashing down – right on top of the boss’s car! His old man was somewhat pissed at him for that – but not as pissed as his Dad’s former boss (who was inside it at the time). For a twelve year old kid, it wasn’t an easy thing to forget – or to live down! He’d been known as ‘the Bad-feller’ ever since, even though he changed his career aspirations and never went near a laser felling torch again! So, his nickname meant he *was* a bad *feller* – not really a bad *person*, as it sounded. Somehow the moniker followed him around – even after he left home and eventually resettled on Deanna.

As a bounty hunter he benefited no end from the name. Hell, a little poetic license didn’t hurt, and neither did the publicity. “Okay,” he admitted, taking another gulp from the neck of the

bottle, looking back, it was kind of funny, in a weird kind of way! Back then, his dad got mad at him for all sorts of funny reasons and little Gary always had to take off for a few hours till he cooled down. *Yeah*, Gary chuckled to himself – he did a *lot* of running when he was a kid! And hiding too, which is probably why he was so good at finding people who didn't want to be found. *Yeah...* Then there was the time he emptied a box of Grampa's shotgun shells into an old soda pop tin and buried it under a big rock in the garden – and lit the fuse, just to see what would happen. The rock lifted half a foot off the ground – that was really cool, thought ten-year-old Gary – but the blast knocked out all the windows on one side of the house, his dad cut himself across the nose while shaving, and his Gran fainted while doing yoga. It took a while to get her straightened out again. *Yeah*, he chuckled, a *lot* of running!

* * *

The tourist package deal at the Hawaiian-themed seaside resort on Deanna that Cindy-Mei had signed up for was not really that expensive. Of course, the term “expensive” is relative, but suffice to say, any average citizen earning minimum wage could manage to pay for it with just a little saving beforehand. To frame this in perspective, Mei had had a good job until recently – and she'd also basically traveled *coach* to Deanna by making use of the cheaper back-routes and less-used means of passenger conveyance. It also suited her, for reasons that will become clear later, to keep a low profile. The package deal started at the spaceport, where she was met by a representative of the resort, and it included the coach ride from the spaceport to the main resort, which overlooked the small harbor and a large expanse of beautiful beach lined with native trees.

Cindy-Mei was welcomed along with a group of tourists who seemed to be taking pictures of everything that moved, and even some things that didn't. Seemingly, all it took was for one of them to point at something and then came a predictable barrage of blinding flashes followed by an incessant chorus of ‘*Ahs*’ and a blabbering in mixed languages, including Terran. After a while – especially after having been virtually isolated from other people for the duration of her trip, Mei began to find it a little annoying. She could only smile sweetly so many times at strangers around her before her face muscles began to ache. Anyway, it would probably give her wrinkles, one day.

The hula girls in the welcoming party wore grass skirts that flared slightly as they danced to the Hawaiian-themed music, and hung flower necklaces on everybody. After all the fuss died down, the newly arrived guests were shown to their rooms to rest and freshen up. The traveling trunk silently followed her into her apartment, found a convenient spot to park beside the closet, and she began the arduous task of unpacking again. She already had a full itinerary planned for the week, which included a boat trip to an extinct volcano on the nearby resort island – that sounded lovely – a cruise on a party boat around the shores of the headland, and a few other things one could think of doing alone in paradise. There was a gym, a sauna and massage parlor (the respectable kind) where muscle-bound eye-candy might turn her into putty in their big masculine hands. She smiled. She could do that too, now – even naked if she wanted, without fear.

There was a lovely natural waterfall with a large rock pool beneath it right below her window. About twenty people in bikinis and swimming trunks were frolicking in the pool. Some

lay on deck chairs enjoying the late afternoon sun. In the distance she could see the ocean. Deanna's oceans were shallow, no more than two hundred meters at the deepest, teeming with freshwater fish and small dolphin-like creatures that swam in vast shoals of hundreds and thousands, darting between the shallow turquoise reefs. It made a huge difference from the artificial surroundings of the Duval. "*Hmm, I can wear my bikini too now,*" she smiled to herself. A month in the black depths of space would've driven her mad if it weren't for the gym and tanning salon on the Duval. But there was no pool. The movies in the library computer also helped to pass the time – and Fred too – he helped preserve her sanity. She felt suddenly sad that he wasn't near, and that she couldn't just saunter off to the rec-dec when the fancy took her, for a chat anymore. She missed Fred.

She shook off the feelings of regret and loneliness. It was time to relax, to forget about the past, to have a nice holiday and just enjoy herself. To let everything just hang out. "*No, that didn't describe it aptly,*" she thought, editing the script mentally. Not anymore. "*Just let it all fade away, along with the scars.*"

* * *

It was dark already, and ten or twenty cold ones later, Gary Beck – the one with the rotten reputation for tree felling – was sitting in his jeepo, trying to find the ignition switch. It didn't seem to be where he'd left it. *Hic*. Where'd he put it? He wasn't drunk, really, he was more tired than anything else. Fortunately, the trailer park wasn't far from wherever he was – he was – *now*. Yes! Eventually, the GPS beeped at him, the lights on the dash thingy came on, followed embarrassingly by the windscreen wipers. Curshing, he got them turned off without switching the vehicle off again too.

He took a slow casual drive, the sort where the mind feels like the video-feed is running through a four-minute buffer before reaching it... Everything seemed to be happening in slow motion. It was kinda nice, actually, but it definitely had its advantages. When the hookers standing at the side of the road in the red-light district lifted their skirts at him as he passed, it lasted somewhat longer than when he was sober. He didn't have a headache, but his eyes hurt, and he sure was glad when he pulled up outside his camper – home sweet home. It was a two-bedroom model, one of the nicer older mobile home types on Deanna – except the main motor was dis-fu-nk-um, dis fuh – well, fucked. So, pretty much it wasn't a *mobile* home anymore, exactly – but it sure was a nice place to stay in and call home. It was a bargain, he remembered, he'd bought it for only a few hundred credits right after he got stuck here a few years ago.

A press of the remote – once he found it – and the garage door opened. He drove up the ramp and turned the thing off. Clambering out the side, he saw Deanna's two little moons from the doorway, hanging up there – looking like they didn't exactly want to be there, but didn't have much choice in the matter either. The night sky was a dark, dark blue. *Ding* was the smaller of the two moons, only about a hundred feet in diameter... something. Hameter... but it was the brightest, consisting almost entirely of titanium. *Dong*, on the other hand looked like a small planet by comparison. S'right – it was *that* big. It was only a kilometer or so in diameter – big. *Whatever. Time for bed, Beck you bastard.*

The door rolled closed as he stumbled through the side door into the small lounge of his abode, and with admirable poise, fell headlong over the coffee table. Swearing and cursing, he rolled over and crawled to his bedroom, giving himself a minus 7 for style.

* * *

The night, meanwhile, passed pleasantly for Cindy-Mei Winter. First, she attended a welcoming banquet – a boisterous affair that featured quasi-Hawaiian music and topless dancers. She thought the men among them were rather nice-looking with their brown tans and flowing black hair – they had muscles galore, and shiny fake white grins that wouldn't look out of place on a plastic movie star.

The food was really very nice and made a change from what Duval had to offer. After avoiding in-depth conversation with an assortment of fellow guests, she enjoyed a nightcap at the bar, by which time she'd had enough. She picked up her clutch-bag off the countertop and rose from the stool. Her tube-top and wrap-around skirt had caused her to receive quite a bit of attention all evening, and even from a few of the womenfolk. A man sitting a few stools down at the bar almost twisted his head off trying to follow. As she breezed past she heard him go 'Ow-ow-ow' as his wife dug her nails into something delicate. She felt a naughty little giggle coming on, but stifled it. She really wasn't trying to make trouble, and she certainly didn't want or need any.

Back in her apartment, Mei let the feeling of freedom, safety and anonymity blanket her again. It was her new cocoon, and it was wonderful! She enjoyed the attention – of course – but she was still not used to it. After all, she hadn't become used to the idea of finding her own body attractive yet – how was she supposed to process the notion that others did, and in a way that appealed to her? Mei had always doubted she ever would! Sure, it was nice to be at the receiving end of male attention, but she found the adoration in their stares a little overwhelming. All the old doubts were still there, still not fully exorcised. Those nasty little voices were still there in the background, warning her that sure, the guys seemed very nice and they were very friendly – but they sure wouldn't be once they found out – even when she tried to be honest with them from the very beginning. Sure – like she'd never tried *that* before! That's when their dark sides would show and the games would begin – it always ended that way, badly. Luckily Cindy-Mei Winter could handle herself fairly well – better than most. If she were honest with herself, she knew she was still equal or better at it than most of the male population...it was why she'd survived this long, and why she was still alive now. But those days were over now, surely? Fighting and violence was something Mei was glad to be rid of. That wasn't part of her world anymore – that was a choice she'd made when she set down this path. As Mei undressed, she tapped into her emotional reserve to reinvigorate her resolve. There *were* nice men out there, *somewhere*. There just *had* to be. Nice eligible young men who really felt and meant what they said, and acted accordingly. And anyway, maybe they didn't *have* to know.

Mei enjoyed a nice hot shower in the apartment's bathroom, which was decorated with simulated raw stone tiles on every surface. At first she ignored the large mirror on the wall across the room, it was a habit. Mirrors had always been an archenemy, something she needed to make sure she looked presentable, but there'd never really been anything in there she enjoyed looking

at. She wondered now, as curiosity began to tickle her, if that would change? Her life had become a mull of changes lately, and all of them so far, for the better! The water smelled different to Duvals' tanked recycled water, cleaner, but more alive. It was fresher and had a unique scent that was all local, all Deanna. She relished it, letting the luxury of it overwhelm her, stopping short of actually trying to breathe it in when it flowed past her nostrils. When she finally stepped out of the shower she felt alive...for the first time since... Since that day six months ago. The Big Day. There was a lot of pain and discomfort – and for a time she was even downright miserable, but it *was* worth it, and with mounting joy, she again realized that she had no regrets at all. The mirror was misted over, covered in condensation, but she paid it no mind. Looking down at her own soft nakedness, exploring the sensation and drinking in the sight. This was better than a mirror. It was *definitely* worth it, she smiled. And anyway, there'd been pain killers.

As Mei turned off the light and dropped into another strange bed in her fluffy pink sleep-shirt, her gaze fell on the little travel picture frame she'd set up on the bedside table. It displayed in order, pictures of her mom, her dad, her two little dogs, Charlie and Skippy, and right at the end – *him*. She stared at them until she finally fell asleep.

* * *

In orbit over Deanna, on the loderunner Duval, Captain Johannsen had returned to the bar on the rec-dec, and was steadily getting drunker. Although he would never admit it to anyone, perhaps even himself – okay, *especially* himself – his ego was feeling a little bruised. Oddly enough, so were his aching fingers. Funny thing... Ms. Winter had firmly taken hold of his hand and removed it forcibly from her waist – not as if he had much choice in the matter, as resisting would have resulted in injury – *his!* A rejection of that magnitude was quite a slap in the face... without the formality of the actual slap! And after he'd taken time out of his *busy* schedule to escort her down in the shuttle to the spaceport – *personally* – despite having no other reason to go planetside at all! Being rejected that final time by Miss Winter was more than enough for him for one day. “*Bitch!*” He thought disdainfully, and raised another glass to the thought before draining it in one gulp. What had he really expected anyway? An invitation to her room at the resort? Ha! Idiot! Sometimes he wondered at the fixes his own desperation got him into! He laid his head in his hands for a while, and ran his fingers through his hair. He was already drunker... more drunk than he'd ever – wait, no... well, more drunk than he'd been in a long, long time.

The rest of the crew had taken a few poorly-earned days of shore leave, and Bran was alone on the ship now – all alone and lonesome. Sure, a few days off from doing nothing much was *always* a good thing – and why the hell *not*? Computers ran everything on the ship anyway.

“No - crew – action - required!” Bran mocked his audience of none, and raised another glass to his lips. After all, doing nothing was damned exhausting work, if done properly! Did he mention he was lonesome? Yup. He was sure he had. *Hic*. Anyway, having so much free time gave him a chance to spend some of that fortune that was just piling up in the bank account back on Earth. Theoretically, that is, without actually spending any of it or achieving anything. Building castles in the sky, it was called – meanwhile, his poorly-earned pay lay in the bank, collecting interest and gathering dust. Sort of like him. *Heh heh*.

Alone? Yes. ...No. We-ell, technically he wasn't *completely* alone. Bran smirked drunkenly, turning part-way round on his stool to give Fred a resentful look. *Fred* was still there – the invisible voice – a sentient plant that had somehow come aboard the Duval without anyone apparently knowing *how*. Of course, Bran had considered the question whether a plant coming aboard without permission qualified as a stowaway, but somehow he just doubted whether any attempted charge would stick. “Who do I call?” He remembered asking his first mate at the time, “Head Office – or Lost Property?” Besides the usual snarky comments, Bran didn't recall ever getting a useful reply – and the problem was just left to stay, to be dealt with another day, if it ever became necessary. Besides, the only person who wanted the trespasser off the ship, seemed to be *him*. Nobody else seemed to mind – and the last crewman he'd tasked to remove the alien from the ship, ended up mysteriously quitting at the very next port of call. Poor Luke – Bran heard he'd joined a monastery soon after – and the mysterious resident of the rec-dec pretty much had the run of the ship – or would have, if it ever wanted to leave the room! But the alien plant just stayed there, as far as Bran knew, all the time since.

Strangely enough, the silent and motionless object of his resentment on the plant rack wasn't saying anything tonight. Then again, Fred didn't much like talking to drunks... or to Bran, in *any* condition, even sober. Okay, so Bran wasn't totally alone, but tonight the drinks dispenser was his only *company*. He teetered a little on the stool at the empty bar counter, raising his glass so high above his head this time, that it splashed a little.

“*Here's ta the scaly devils of the uni v'herse,*” He slurred vaguely. “An' this bloody music – if I hear any more violence, I'm gonna get violined – *put on something newer!*” The computer immediately switched to a random selection of 1940's American swing. “No, no – not *that!* A *lot* newer!” A Barbara Streisand medley started blaring over the speakers. Captain Johannsen, in the middle of draining his glass, almost choked on his last drop of booze.

“Gods dammit!” Bran swore, gesticulating at Fred. “What've you done to the bloody thing? Modern music, computer!”

And on came glitter-glam-rock of the 1970's. Fred twitched his leaves with mounting discomfort and irritation. Rock music again – and not even the *good* stuff! It had got to the point where he'd had enough! Not just of Johannsen's taste in music, or Johannsen himself, or the rec-dec – or even the ship, but just enough of everything in that list! It was time for some change in Fred's life! Fred the Arborian extended some of his lower branches, and shifted his pot out of the mounting on the rack near to the little artificial rockery by the fountain, and stretched in a remarkably Human fashion. Then, using his lower branches like legs – or to be frank, tentacles – he began moving towards the door.

Johannsen turned round to see the cause of the movement and froze, eyes opened wide. The movement caused him to nearly topple off the stool! As it was, the glass slipped out of his hand, and fell neatly through the gap between his knees, and crashed into smithereens on the deck plating! It was a sight that stung Bran momentarily back to stone cold sobriety!

“Shit! All that hard work for nothing!” Bran murmured, staring at a plant roughly the height of an adult Human as it walked past him at a docile pace, with eyes the size of saucers. “*Wait – what the – where the heck’re you going?*”

“For a walk.” Said Fred disdainfully, and appreciated the way Johannsen winced as he did so. The automatic doors at the exit hesitated with digital near disbelief before opening to let the alien life-form pass. “*It’s something I should’ve done a long time ago.*”

Johannsen took a gulp of air from the ghost of the glass in his hand, shook his head – rolled his eyes, swore at the dispenser – and ordered another.

* * *

In the corridors and spaces aboard the Black Sunrise, the chant was being shouted now, passionately, angrily, violently. The Ruminarii shock troops – armed to the teeth, were already in a kill-frenzy. Marsh’k knew that if they didn’t land soon, they would probably turn on each another – or even better, on *him*. He was sure the warriors that would form the landing force could handle the few thousand or so inhabitants, provided nobody did the inconceivable, like resisting – or resisting in any kind of organized fashion, say like with actual weapons.

For the curious, a Ruminarii hammerhead carried up to five hundred crew, give or take a few promotional losses. Marsh’k was confident in the Ruminarii warriors’ reputation for being ferocious, fierce, and of course, utterly cold-blooded killing machines. The Human colony before them was sparsely populated, and only a few small cities and towns were scattered across the continents. There were no military ships within sensor range, and there was only one large settlement that had a spaceport, which was the best strategic position for their landing. Marsh’k looked at the display of the city and spaceport on the main screen. It was logical to assume it was the capital, the seats of governments usually were the largest because they attracted commerce and greed and all the bad things people loved like maggots to rotting meat. The Humans below appeared to be completely unaware of the impending threat approaching them. Ruminarii intel had already taken note that most of the colonists would be unarmed, not soldiers. Easy prey, the tactical officer informed him. It seemed like a bad place to start, so Marsh’k decided to take the ship down to the surface to soften up the target first. He would begin by dropping a few bombs on the city before making a landing at the spaceport to take possession of it.

A huge cargo ship in a geostationary orbit gave no apparent sign of having spotted them or any form of recognition whatsoever. With the capital city in the darkness of night, and with most of its people asleep and not actually looking up at the sky, the Black Sunrise approached the planet with a brazenness rewarded with inaction on the part of the authorities below. The brilliant sphere of the world grew to enormity on the view screen, and slipped past the edges and beneath them.

“Take us down!” Marsh’k ordered. “Prepare for a bombing run!”

“Yes, Lord!”

Some minor commotion broke out on the bridge as the helmsman seemingly miscalculated during the maneuver, and on the way down, the ship collided with what seemed to be a huge chunk of titanium in low orbit. After regaining control and executing the inept helmsman (whose

last words were something like: “*WTF was that doing there?*” only with some more hisses and clicks) and appointing a replacement, it was determined there was now a serious ding in the ship’s bow end. This might seem awfully pedestrian to point out, but even if Marsh’k had known the meaning of the names of Deanna’s Sun and moons, the humor of it would’ve been completely wasted on him.

Marsh’k remembered the old tales of the first war against these puny Humans, some hundred years previously, which took place on their home world, Dirt. That was an odd name for a planet, Marsh’k had always thought. Names aside, these weaklings held off a full-scale Ruminarii invasion for more than five years before completely routing them! Them! The mighty Ruminarii, defeated, beaten back! Not only was it the biggest military failure in all of Ruminarii history, but it was also the first recorded defeat *ever* suffered by the *Harrt’shisk Hab’arr’oun* (Empire of the Golden Sun). Unsurprisingly, this embarrassment caused some serious rethinking in the top structures of Ruminarii government. So many embarrassed high officials committed ritual suicide by climbing and jumping off the hundred meter tall *Spike of Oordis*, that it became known as ‘*the year of the exploding monarchs.*’ Many of the warrior caste slowly over time had lately grown to feel that it was time for a rematch. Oh, there was posturing and a lot of hissing and the like, but it was all just noise. A lot of noise and wind and smoke.

The defeat dealt to them had been such a psychological blow to the Ruminarii mindset that they’d never fully recovered. Ruminarii society became fixated, obsessed with all things Terran. In fact, after this setback, Terran became a required language and culture study at the Military Academy. The problem was that while the Ruminarii intelligence believed that in order to understand and outsmart the enemy, its warriors needed to be educated in the ways and mindset of the enemy – most of the ensuing generations had begun to actually *think* like the enemy!

The Ruminarii propaganda machine then entered the equation to try and save face. Back then, the whole fiasco surrounding the defeat had been portrayed as something of an exercise. An *exercise?* Hah! It hadn’t been a serious war of conquest, but rather a mere “operation” or worse, a “conflict” in which Ruminarii forces had only participated. In the meantime, things had changed in the worlds of the Ruminarii – and for the better. The society of the day reveled in the glories of the past, while the only thing Ruminarii warriors seemed to be really proficient at these days was killing *other* Ruminarii in an exaggerated celebration of ancient Ruminarii culture – and getting promoted for it. The Empire was in danger of crumbling – the High Command knew it – and even Marsh’k knew it.

It might take another century, Marsh’k knew, the decay hadn’t spread that far just yet, but the seeds had been planted, and had already grown. In fact, he had it from a very bad reliable source that several slave colonies, encouraged by slow-spreading news of the initial defeat, had begun to rebel against their overlords. They hadn’t managed to achieve any noteworthy victories yet, but somehow they were *still alive* – and as the Humans say, ‘*the night is young.*’

Marsh’k had watched as military resources gradually were being turned *inwards* – away from conquest – to suppress revolutions and revolts. This was the triumph of Good over Evil? *Impossible!* Good was too weak! Evil was strong, and as it had been proved time and again, force was the supreme authority in the universe. *They* were the masters of *hundreds* of star

systems and *billions* of conquered subjects – yet they had been bested by a backwater species that had barely stuck its little toe in the waves of the ocean of space – a species that had only a handful of its own colonies in its own home system at the time! They didn't even believe in slavery, yet claimed to be civilized! They were a people who believed the opposite of what his people held to be true – they believed *Good* was stronger – and they'd won through force nevertheless! Even worse, now *they* had an Empire of their own as well! Well, enough philosophy, he decided. Time would prove who was the stronger!

The hammerhead, seemingly undetected, was quite a large ship to make a fast reentry with, but hammerheads were tough. Emerging from its cloak of flame and smoke in the lower reaches of the atmosphere, it singled out the obvious capital and headed toward it. Reaching the outskirts, it began its bombing run at a fairly low altitude. As soon as the Black Sunrise loosed its first bomb, it fell with a hissing noise carefully tuned to sound like the chorus of the ritual *Dance of the Annihilator*. The hostile ship immediately changed course for the next target. Meanwhile, the oblong, black, finned projectile landed right smack in the middle of a dark street, bounced noisily on the brick cobbles, and went sideways down a flight of stairs into a deserted subway station. A massive underground detonation threw clouds of flame, ash and chunks of building into the air, and shook a piece of real estate the size of two football fields.

A second bomb landed right on top of a small house in downtown Atro City being used that night for a clandestine meeting of the *Children of the Erratic Moon Society*, ironically just as the Head Druid tapped his gavel on the iron skull on the lectern to call the meeting to order. It went clean through the roof and attic floor, and right through the floors below into the basement, leaving a hole right beside the lectern. The explosion in the basement was very likely the last thing those astonished faces staring down the hole saw that night – at least, until *after*.

Again, the Hammerhead changed direction, heading towards another end of the city, where it dropped another fiendish device intended to sow panic, confusion and terror. Panic and confusion began to sweep the populace, somewhat slowly as it was rather late and most people were either sound asleep or unconscious for a variety of reasons. Almost immediately however, alarms and sirens were going off all over the city. Little vehicles began to buzz this way and that across the city as firefighters and other emergency services were dispatched. People all over the city clogged communication lines by calling emergency services, which at first called the spaceport to query if the smaller moon, '*Ding*' had fallen out of orbit again, or whether any ships had perhaps crashed in the last ten minutes or so.

A fourth bomb landed hard in the middle of Lupini Square, right smack in the center of a large fountain, making a loud thud and a large splash – but didn't go off. Apparently even the Ruminarii didn't always get what they paid for. The spaceport traffic controller on graveyard shift, who had been rather rudely torn from his midnight movie-watching binge, finally picked up the mysterious craft and worked to identify it. When air traffic controller Harold Mac Dugless saw the identity of the hostile ship, he couldn't believe his eyes! He continued to track it as it circled the city and then turned on a course toward the spaceport! In a matter of minutes, this news reached the Planetary Governor of the colony, who had been roused from a sound sleep and was standing barefoot in a dressing gown on cold tiles in front of his vid-com, and was very grumpy.

Within twenty minutes of the first bomb, the Governor of Deanna sent a planetary distress signal to Earth, and an emergency alert system notified all civil defense bodies and able-bodied citizens to arm themselves as best they could, and to the spaceport to offer as much resistance to the invaders as possible, and if that failed, to hold out until the Space Fleet sent ships to defend Deanna. Of course, there was no guarantee that the entire populace of the colony wouldn't just flip the bird at him, but he hoped it would help... and that it wouldn't cost him the next election.

At this point airspace traffic controller Harold Mac Dugless looked at the ample display panel on the wall and shook his head with disbelief. Some of the other night staff were on the phone telling their relatives to get the hell out of town – all except one, who was calling her mother-in-law to say everything was fine, to turn on all the lights and to stay home. He could hear the boss on the horn alternately with the Planetary Governor and the Space Fleet, pausing to issue orders here and there to scurrying officials around him.

“Yes sir.” He heard the boss say. “Yes sir, I think it's perfect timing that there isn't a single Space Fleet ship in the sector. No sir, I was not being sarcastic! No sir, no disrespect intended... No sir!”

“There's nothing in orbit but friendlies.” Mac Dugless commented, noticing that there was still something that seemed to be *off* about the whole thing.

“So?” Said his supervisor, Mary Jane Smith, who stood behind him, looking tensely over his shoulder with disbelief. Was this really happening?

“*So where's their fleet?* There's only *one* hostile ship. What's *wrong* with these idiots?”

“That's a Gimp hammerhead, you know – like from the War?” Mary Jane said excitedly. “Just one of those carries more than enough trouble. Don't worry though; Space Fleet is going to send some ships this way pronto. You'll see.”

Mac Dugless certainly hoped he would. He'd seen something about the Ruminarii and their hammerhead ships on the History Channel. Mac Dugless's grandfather had told him all about the Gimp War and what his generation went through to get rid of them. It had been more than eighty years since a Human had seen a hammerhead close-up and not on a video display. It was somehow far more real and terrifying – and if it came there, to the space port, he was going to have a front-row seat to Armageddon.

END OF PREVIEW

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Thank you for reading my book! If you enjoyed it, won't you please take a moment to leave me a review at your favorite retailer? I also welcome your thoughts about my book, and you may send these to me at christinaengela@gmail.com

Thanks!

Christina Engela

About the Author



Christina might not be the only writer – or even the only sci-fi writer from South Africa, but she is most certainly the most authentic, eccentric and unique sci-fi/fantasy/horror writer to originate from that country! She now has more than 20 published titles to her name – including a ‘how-to’ book about VW Beetles, a children’s book about bullying, and numerous fiction titles. If you would like to read more about Christina’s life and experiences, please visit <https://christinaengela.com> or <http://christinaengela.net> for more information.

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