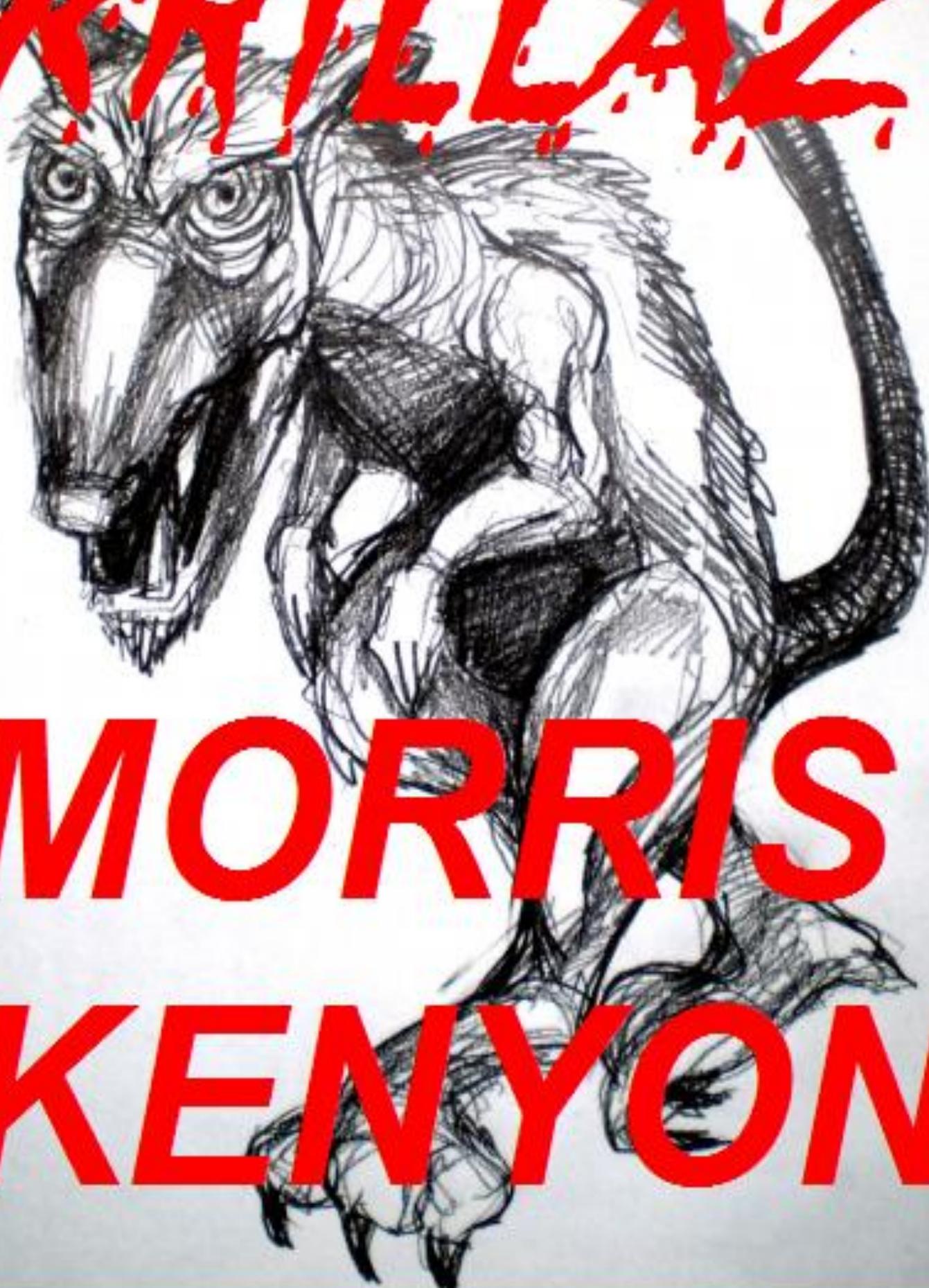


KRILLAZ

**MORRIS
KENYON**



KRILLAZ.

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WARNING! This book contains scenes of horror and moderate violence. It is not intended for the easily offended or young children. You have been warned, so if you read on, don't blame me.

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This story is dedicated to my fellow writer, Dai Alanye, whose Roger Fee series initially inspired this, and whose friendship has kept me going and writing.

[PLOT SUMMARY:](#)

[CHAPTER 1: ONE MILLION REASONS.](#)

[CHAPTER 2: I LAND ON HANCOX 1](#)

[CHAPTER 3: THE RUINED CITY.](#)

[CHAPTER 4. KRILLAZ ATTACK!](#)

[CHAPTER 5: I SEE THE LIGHT.](#)

[CHAPTER 6: WE INVESTIGATE THE LIGHT.](#)

[CHAPTER 7: WE ESCAPE A TRAP.](#)

[CHAPTER 8: THE SERVER ROOM.](#)

[CHAPTER 9: LOSING AND GAINING.](#)

[SIDEWAYS THROUGH TIME.](#)

[ABOUT THE AUTHOR:](#)

[OTHER BOOKS BY MORRIS KENYON:](#)

PLOT SUMMARY:

You'd need a good reason to visit Hancox 1 – a tide-locked world infested by biological terror weapons – Krillaz – a nightmare genetically modified cross between rats and hi-mans. Even hunters avoid the place. However, interplanetary recovery agent Vic Vargo has one million reasons to go. In line to collect a million Hydrans if he rescues a playboy from the talons of the Krillaz, he teams up with a group of executives on a management bonding exercise and heads out to an abandoned city.

There, Vargo realises they have all bitten off far more than they can chew. Unlike the Krillaz...

Also, includes the bonus short story: 'Sideways Through Time'.

CHAPTER 1: ONE MILLION REASONS.

You have to be plum loco to want to spend any time on Hancox 1. I'm not crazy – I scored over 86% on my aptitude evaluation back at University, which is a good score. You don't want 100% as nobody's that sane. If anybody ever achieved that score they'd probably lock them up in the stasis-jails as well as the low scorers, just to be on the safe side.

So what's so bad about Hancox 1, I hear you ask? What's right about it, I'd reply? Well, it's a tide-locked planet, the first in a system of three orbiting a dim, M-type red dwarf star on the far side of the Pegasus Sector. Tide-locked, you ask next? C'mon, where have you been? Weren't you concentrating in astrophysics? A tide-locked world is where one side of the planet constantly faces its sun while the other is exposed to the dark and cold of space.

On any planet with an atmosphere, this imbalance creates gale force winds and usually the daylight side is desiccated desert while the night-side is a frozen wilderness. However, on those worlds lucky enough to have deep oceans and thick cloud cover, which minimises these extreme effects, life can get a toe-hold, although it's nearly always simple stuff.

So, as you've gathered, despite abundant water, Hancox 1 is no paradise world. Most aren't. Being less than desirable, the Bureau allocated it to mostly Central Asian refugees from the Third Sino-Turkmen War. If you don't recall it, look it up in the History files – about two hundred years ago, I think. No, I can't remember what that war was about – when you get down to it, the reasons are usually fear, status and mineral rights, I'd guess. Ultimately, that's what most wars are about. Anyway, these refugees fled to Hancox 1's scattered sub-continent and built themselves a new life. May not have been a great life, at least at first, but it was better than their ruined homelands.

But these refugees weren't a unified people – there was a sub-group fleeing the Nova Beruvian stonequakes, for example – and each sub-continent soon ended up supporting one or more countries. Sooner or later, rabble-rousing demagogues arose backing petty tyrants and warlords. Eventually, of course, these statelets fell out among themselves and started warring.

And then one side used Krillaz. And that's why I wouldn't choose to go to Hancox 1. What do you mean; you've never heard of Krillaz? What do they teach at school these days? Or have they suppressed data on those monstrosities? Can't trust anything you read these days.

Okay, okay. I'll tell you. You'll need to know if you're setting foot on Hancox 1. Though you'll only see one if you travel to the empty continent of Sirocco. To give you some background, decades ago, there was a savage war between two planets. Unsurprisingly, one of them was the Peaceful Co-Prosperity Orb of Xin-Muong. So no quarter was asked or given. But when you

think about it, there's no point in simply thermo-nuking a place until its surface turns to glass. Or bombarding it with asteroids deflected from their orbits. All you'd win is useless rock, uninhabitable for millennia. Also, you'd risk retaliation from other systems.

One dark night, some bright spark – or more likely a committee of bright sparks – came up with the perfect weapon to deploy against lightly armed civilians. Krillaz. Probably the ultimate terror weapon. The acronym – in rough translation – stands for Civilian Reduction Inimicals – Lankien Laboratories 4. By mixing up the acronym with the word 'killers', they became known as Krillaz. They're cheap and effective as well, so the politicians liked the concept.

So what's a Krilla when it's at home? Or in its stinking nest? A genetically spliced fright, bolting together the best and worst of several species to come up with a horror worse than your worst nightmare. I guess a Krilla is mostly based on the black rat, *rattus rattus* – which doesn't sound too bad, except nobody I know likes rats – to which has been added the viciousness of a weasel, the fearlessness of a wolverine, gorilla-like arms and iron jaws of a hyena.

It stands over a metre tall on two legs, hunched over leaving its better than rat-like front paws free. A Krilla's hide is usually a pallid grey, bald except for sparse patches of fur except along its spine which is green. Yes, somebody added chlorophyll to the mix so that the creature can survive even if its food supply runs low.

What else? Oh yes, its face. Although the boffins claimed they used chimps to give it enhanced intelligence, nobody believed them. The long face is a hideous combination of hi-man and rodent. And when did you see a chimp having oriental eyes with epicanthic folds? But if they used hi-man DNA, then they chose deoxyribonucleic acid from psychopaths, mass-murderers and the very, very worst that hi-mankind can throw up.

That's enough for me. I don't like thinking about those monstrosities any more than I have to. And I'm going where they hang out. You have another question? Okay, fire away... So what happens after Krillaz are used on civilians? Basically, Krillaz breed like the rats they originated from and there's nothing they like more than hi-man flesh. Hot and fresh. However, after they've depopulated an enemy area, you have to get rid of your Krillaz.

Solving this problem, the brain-boxes at Lankien labs made Krillaz genetically vulnerable to a virus. It causes a lethal respiratory illness – rats are very prone to pneumonia – that wipes out 99.9% of them within 48 to 72 hours. After that, you just need to send in clean-up SWAT squads to eradicate the survivors and then the now empty territory is yours to do with as you want.

And it worked like a dream – or a nightmare, depending on your point of view. Krillaz were used in several conflicts during the Interregnum. Of course, the secret of their manufacture

got out – underfunded scientists like filthy lucre as much as anyone – and several variants on the original model showed up. Including a new type on Hancox 1.

Moving forwards, war broke out between Sirocco and the neighbouring continent of Khamsin. Both nations were evenly matched but seeking outright victory neither sought mediation. Their navies attacked each other's ships, supporting attempted invasion fleets. When this tactic had been tried and failed several times, the Dictator of Khamsin authorised the use of Krillaz.

Thousands of rat-men were air-lifted onto Sirocco and left to do what they do best – killing and eating and breeding and killing and eating and breeding some more... When every hi-man being – man, woman, and child – on Sirocco had either fled or been eaten alive, Khamsin sprayed the island with virus.

Except it didn't work, did it? Sure, a few died, maybe less than 5%, their corpses cannibalised by their fellows. The rest carried on happily breeding like rats. A healthy female Krilla can have three litters of six to eight pups a year. So Khamsin's scientists resprayed the island with a slightly different virus. This time, less than 1% were wiped out.

Realising they had won a pointless victory – Khamsin had beaten Sirocco but gained a useless island as a prize – they cut their losses and abandoned it to the Krillaz. However, news of what had happened leaked out via the Galactoweb. As well as interstellar condemnation and sanctions, hunters licked their lips and descended in droves on Hancox 1.

There's never been a closed season or weapons restrictions on Krillaz. Just get yourself a permit and slaughter as many as you like. However, even the most bloodthirsty hunter's tally was useless – eradicating Krillaz is like trying to drain an ocean using a bucket. All the hunters did was teach the Krillaz – being semi-intelligent, they are fast learners – to be wary of hi-mans and even more cunning than before.

Also, Krillaz, being hideously ugly, don't make good trophies. They're not like the magnificent Yearn-horns on Gilead, Nov Austrasia's Basilisks or Sopol's Stripe-Strikers on Maguire's World. Individually, they're not overly impressive. But they don't attack singly – they prefer swarms. In their way, they are one of the more dangerous creatures in the known galaxy.

You might ask why I'm going to this hell-hole. Normally, I've got too much respect for my hide to go messing with Krillaz. Wouldn't want them within a million clicks. Until I got a message over the Galactoweb that made me drop everything and hurry to Hancox 1. One of those messages that leave you no option, not if you value your reputation – and want to earn big money.

Using my cranial implant, I re-accessed the message, its words replaying on my retina. I won't give you all its details – they don't matter. In a microlitre, my boss's best-friend's son had got himself into big trouble. Again. The lad was getting married to his second wife (I think) and decided to treat himself and his friends to a stag holiday hunting Krillaz. No, I don't get it neither. You're hitching yourself to the woman you love so you zoom off to some hell-hole planet to ingest booze and zap monsters. I suppose it's one last fling before domesticity.

Âgustin – that's the foolish lad's name – and his friends brought their armour and a whole arsenal of weaponry. They hired some all terrain vehicles; tough, reliable, go-anywhere machines and headed off to one of Sirocco's ruined cities called Bas-Hinna. They reached it – their GPS signals prove that – but then vanished from view. Sarrah, Âgustin's lovely fiancée, panicked and knowing my boss's reputation for trouble-shooting asked him to investigate.

Always ready to help an old friend – especially when those friends are seriously wealthy oligarchs – my boss agreed. So he charged as much as he thought the market could stand – which was a lot, I can tell you – and then fired off a message to his best (ha-ha) operative to look into Âgustin's disappearance.

So here I am, Vic Vargo, doing my bit for interplanetary rescue. However, as my boss was sticking it to them big-time, he passed me some of the cream. One million Hydrans plus expenses if I rescued Âgustin or half a million for proof of his fate if dead.

Can't say fairer than that.

CHAPTER 2: I LAND ON HANCOX 1

On the space shuttle's screen I watched as Hancox 1 loomed closer. In the distance, the small red dwarf shone its rays onto a dull, gunmetal coloured world. Then we plunged through its thick, vapour filled atmosphere. Rain washed over the shuttle's portholes. So I switched views and immediately a map of the world came into view.

Hancox 1 is slightly smaller than Earth – 11,000 kilometres in diameter, rather than Earth's 12,700 – and somewhat less dense. That pleased me as it meant my Earth-muscles would make me stronger and more powerful than back home. It is mostly covered by water with eight smallish sub-continentals and lots of little islands scattered over the ocean. Sirocco lies just under

the equator on the daylight side. Nothing heads direct for Sirocco any more so the shuttle was heading for the city of Ul-Muglann on the nearby continent of Harmattan.

Searching the Galactoweb, I brought up some information. The day-side continents are covered with a moss-like flora that grows to a height of half a metre or so. Yes, I looked it up and the technical term for this stuff is *bryophyte*. There was more but the shuttle juddered as it was buffeted by a storm. The display blinked off to be replaced by a flashing warning and the shuttle pilot's voice came over the intraweb system.

"We are experiencing some turbulence at present. Please do not be alarmed..." that was one way to ensure panic, "...however, everything is under control and we expect to land at Ul-Muglann spaceport as usual. Thank you."

I looked over at the man in the next seat. With his hawk-like face and neatly trimmed beard, he looked like a local. He didn't seem particularly worried so I put my fears to one side. The shuttle dropped through thick clouds and then I saw the spaceport loom up through my porthole. Lights gleamed and reflected from the rain-washed sky. The spaceport was on the edge of the continent and in the distance I saw Ul-Muglann itself beyond its boundaries.

None too soon, the shuttle touched down and came to a halt by the terminal. Moving forwards, I joined the queue for customs clearance.

"What is the reason for your visit?" the official asked in that neutral yet hostile tone they always use. I showed him my hunting certificate and the list of equipment I was bringing in. He stamped my e-Passport with more vigour than was necessary.

"Good hunting, *dost* – I hate Krillaz. My family had to flee Sirocco when they came."

"I'll bag some for you."

He grinned through his beard, friendlier now, and waved me through. I'd already arranged accommodation and transport and an automated ground-taxi whizzed me through wide streets flanked by low, white-grey buildings to my Hotel. The room was warm and comfortable, although bland – I could have upgraded to five-star but I don't feel comfortable with too much luxury – however, Âgustin's family were wealthy so I wasn't going to short myself neither.

Now I was planetside, I double-checked my plans. Tomorrow, I would be meeting a group of fellow hunters – only a fool goes after Krillaz by themselves. As one ruined city is as good as another, they happily agreed to go to Bas-Hinna with me. Also, like me, they didn't feel happy about leaving somebody trapped, surrounded by Krillaz.

I crossed to the view-screen window and looked out over Ul-Muglann. It was a depressing sight. Although the downfall wasn't as severe as before, the constant gales of this tide-locked world buffeted rain against the window. Up above, the sun was a dim red blur in the clouds,

casting its diffuse rays over the drab city. Ugh. Picking up the console, I scrolled through the views until it seemed I was in a beach front apartment overlooking a beautiful coral atoll on some paradise world – Merziall, I guessed it to be. The beautiful people who live there walked on pink sands under the light of twin suns.

Perfect, I thought, as I lay down, switched off my neural implant and relaxed.

The following morning – though there's no such thing as a true morning on this world, of course – I caught the local shuttle to Sirocco. There weren't many passengers and most of them looked like hunters. The craft flew over storm-tossed seas. If you're interested, there's not much marine life on Hancox 1 – things similar to giant sea-slugs and slime-fish but that's about it.

Two hours later, the shuttle landed on the only part of Sirocco not infested with Krillaz. One narrow, rocky peninsula had been cleared of them and a fence sealed it off from the rest of the sub-continent. There was a landing field next to a small town. Nearly everyone there was in the military or else made a living by servicing hunters. Disembarking, I followed the rest of the hunters through clearance.

I had to sign a legal disclaimer saying that I didn't expect to be rescued if I got into difficulties and waiving all rights to sue the authorities. Nothing unexpected – par for the course. Also, they checked I'd had my vaccinations – as well as everything else, Krillaz carry disease. Then I was reunited with my weapons, which had earlier been sealed.

I was milling around Arrivals when a man approached me. "Vic Vargo?" he asked. He must have known who I was as my neural implant was broadcasting my identity. I guess he was being polite.

I checked him out. Luis Çrámerr, aged 42, a manager at Economou Interplanetary Logistics, Inc., a big multi-world outfit, that, you must have seen their lime-green starships on the trading routes – married with four children; his hobbies include... but I didn't have time to peruse that or his most recent holiday snaps, which he was broadcasting, although that pic of his wife surfing in a skimpy mono-kini looked worth spending time over.

"Pleased to meet you," Çrámerr continued. "Did you have a pleasant trip over? Come and interface with the others." Çrámerr shook my hand. His grip was firm and he made good eye-contact. Definitely the confident, hail-fellow-well-met management type. He guided me away from the luggage carousel to a café on the far side of Arrivals.

On the way, I looked at Çrámerr, wanting to get a feel for him on a gut level, rather than what his implant was telling me. Çrámerr was tall, good looking in a Nordic way with perfect teeth and ruler-straight nose. His full head of dark hair was swept back in a fashionable style.

Perhaps to blend in with the locals, he had a neatly trimmed beard. He was all set for the expedition into the interior and wore camouflage – purple-green on this world – under a multi-pocket battle vest.

Only thing – what was those silly accents doing under the C and over the a? Was that to make him stand out from the herd of lesser Cramerrs? So why not do it properly and throw accents over or under every letter? Perhaps he was saving that for the boardroom? Or perhaps I should stop moaning, take a leaf out of his book and look into changing my surname to Värög or something? Does that look more impressive?

Before we reached the café, I worked out who I would be travelling with, and not just because of their broadcasts. There were four people sitting around a table. One was obviously our guide. He was of average height with the locals' usual trimmed beard, tanned skin and hawk-like profile. He wore well-worn camouflage and his broadcast told me he had led many previous trips. Unless that was an advertising hoax, that reassured me. You need a man who knows what he's doing when you're after prey like Krillaz. His name was Farrie-Galv Kham.

The others were two men and a woman. All were executives with Economou Interplanetary and looking for promotion. I realised this was one of those team-building exercises designed to sort the synthi-sheep from the GM-goats. No doubt my new best friend, Luis Çrámerr, would be evaluating how they handled themselves on this trip. You know, see how they cope under life-and-death pressure and how that later translates into boardroom skills.

Being a sexist boar, as one of my female friends calls me, I turned to the woman first. She was called Clemency L'Alleyn and came from Neuf Gironde – one of those surprisingly common Francophone colonies. Way I hear it; you usually get great wine and cheese on their worlds but don't expect to get anything done during lunch. Compared with here, she must feel homesick for the great lifestyle back home. She wasn't broadcasting much – only the bare minimum. With her long, straight hair, porcelain skin, blue-ice eyes above high cheekbones and thin face with a longish nose, I marked her down as a Grade A ball-breaker.

The two male executives were much of a type, except physically. Good genes – undoubtedly enhanced – supportive families, followed by attending top Universities and then fast-tracked for success. Their names were Geroge NcDona and Hari Thalami. They both stood as Çrámerr and I approached and we all shook hands.

NcDona was a big guy, who looked like he did a lot of weights. E-tattoos moved under his skin creating different scenes. I reckoned his ancestors ultimately came from Angola. Thalami, on the other hand, was much smaller, neatly dressed, with straight black hair and

mournful eyes. He bowed politely, and his broadcast said he was a native of the teardrop-shaped isle of Trapobana on Earth itself.

"This is the *hombre* I was telling you about," Çrámerr said by introduction. "We're going to help him search for his friend."

"When did you last hear from him?" Kham asked. His dark eyes searched mine. Undoubtedly he was also scrutinising my neural data. If he was any good, he'd be reading between the lines.

"Almost five weeks ago," I said. "It took me a little while to sort things out and get here."

Kham didn't say anything. He didn't have to. In his opinion, Âgustin was almost certainly dead, killed in a terrible way.

"His last transponder signal was received by satellite star date: HI-0I," I said. "Âgustin and his party had plenty of food and ammo. If they holed up somewhere secure in Bas-Hinna, then they should still be okay. His family persuaded the local military to send out a search party but they couldn't find anything. All the same, I owe it to Âgustin to double-check and...", turning to the whole group, "...I'd like to thank you all for your assistance."

They nodded. To avoid embarrassment, and to give them chance to study my data, I crossed to the counter and paid for coffee – well kaffe, but it was a good blend – and brought them over to the group. By now, they should know as much as they needed about me and Âgustin. Of course, there's info I share only with friends but they didn't expect to know that.

"I reckon there should be a bonus if we find Âgustin," Çrámerr joked.

"Like I say, I appreciate your help. You know he worked as an intern for Economou for a time?" I said.

"That's the big A1 reason we agreed to help," Çrámerr said, his voice a mellow bass.

We finished our kaffes and then left Arrivals. It had started raining again and we hurried over to where the hire company had our vehicle. Our luggage and weaponry had already been collected and taken on board. That's one of the benefits of working for a huge interstellar outfit like Economou. Everyone bends over backwards for you – or your money – which comes to the same thing.

While Kham dealt with the paperwork, we checked out our vehicle, which would be our home and base for the next week. I was impressed. It was battle-scarred but more than up to the job of getting us to Bas-Hinna and back. It was an 8-wheel drive Steg-0-Saw All-Terrain Vehicle. A heavy, slab-sided, boxy ex-troop carrier with the rear compartment now converted into accommodation. It was armoured with Durarmor, reinforced studded tyres and a one-man turret protruded from the top next to a searchlight. It had been painted in wasp-like black and yellow

stripes. Hard to miss in the gloom. The others piled inside and I followed. Unsurprisingly, Çrámerr slid behind the wheel. Typical Alpha-male.

As soon as Kham was on board – as the guide, he took the shotgun seat – we set off. I guess I wasn't the only one with butterflies in my stomach as the three executives were also quiet as they watched the view-screens. We drove through the town towards the perimeter fences. Another check of our e-Passports and then the guard buzzed open the gate. With a call of "good hunting," the gate slid open and we were through. Into the abandoned wilds of Sirocco. In the distance, another Steg was heading north – to the happy hunting grounds of the northern coastal region.

Çrámerr pumped the air and let rip a rebel yell. "Yee-haw," he cried. He turned to face us and the three executives followed his lead. "Yee-haw," but their yells were more muted and Thalami's was decidedly half-hearted.

"Luis can't hear you," he called back.

"YEE-HAW," they screamed, eager to outdo each other. They all wanted that promotion.

I kept my face to the screen. Our Steg-0-Saw was now crossing a sterile wasteland. For a distance of one kilometre from the fence, the authorities had a scorched earth policy. Nothing grew or moved. The Krillaz had initially attacked the fence, eager to scale it and get at the warm, succulent hi-man bodies behind it. They'd learned the hard way – at the cost of thousands of deaths – to stay away from the fence. Any Krilla showing its snout on the desolate wasteland found itself blasted to oblivion by automatic weaponry mounted along the fence.

But it was a dismal scene. Rain soaked grey rock beneath leaden clouds. What a world. It didn't get much better after we passed the scorched earth. Instead of rock, the terrain was covered by bryophytes. The plant grew to height of half a metre and had ovoid spore cases on top of the stems. It was a dismal greyish, purplish green and spread all the way to the horizon. If necessary, Krillaz can eat bryophytes but they don't enjoy it. Flesh is their preferred diet.

Our vehicle trundled along a potholed road that was crumbling away to ruin.

"How far is it to Bas-Hinna?" Çrámerr asked.

Kham checked the GPS system. "Just over two thousand clicks."

At an average speed of 70 kph, that would mean a journey of less than thirty hours. I suppressed a groan. Thirty hours cooped up with these management types. Not my idea of a good time.

"We should have gone to Ul-Zhabbir on the north coast. They say the Krillaz are really virulent up there," NcDona said.

Çrámerr turned around to face the rear compartment. "Think of the glory when we rescue this Âgustin. There should be a company bonus for whoever finds him." That word 'bonus' grabbed their attention like nothing else. Good luck to them. I wasn't sharing my reward.

The scenery was nothing to hold their attention so after a few minutes; Clemency booted up her HandPad and started working on some office documents. Geroge opened his case and showed Hari his Augmented Flux-Blaster. A good weapon but I thought too overpowered and slow for fast, numerous vermin like Krillaz. All the same, any Krilla hit by it would be atomised.

In turn, Hari showed off his Gatling PPD – a rapid fire weapon loaded with flechette shards that would shred any unarmoured enemy. That was more like it – no Krilla would stand a chance against it. Only problem, it was heavy on ammo and needed recharging frequently.

I soon had enough of their company so I climbed up into the little turret and swivelled about. There wasn't much to see and bryophytes covered everything as far as the eye could see. Looking up, the sun had disappeared behind the clouds. Soon, it rained and water bounced off the turret's view-screen. It was going to be a long journey.

We passed a few towns, the low buildings crumbling into ruins. Once I saw movement – or thought I did – but Krillaz aren't stupid enough to attack a heavily armoured vehicle. After a while, I dropped down from the turret, ate a rehydrated meal – no water shortage on this planet – and then lay down on one of the bunks welded to the side. Switching my neural implant to sleep mode gave me a guaranteed eight hours rest.

I went out like a light.

CHAPTER 3: THE RUINED CITY.

Nothing seemed to have changed when I woke. Gale driven rain buffeted our ATV as it trundled through low, eroded hills covered with ubiquitous bryophytes. In the far distance – not that far, given the poor visibility – was another abandoned town. I have never seen such an uninspiring view.

Fortunately, I didn't have to mix much with the executives. Now we were nearly at Bas-Hinna, they were more nervous and apprehensive. I guess that safely in their office suites on the thousandth plus floor of a skyscraper on some highly urbanised world, a week hunting Krillaz didn't seem bad. Even makes a nice change from corporate meetings. Now they were almost on

top of the beasties, it didn't seem such a great idea. But they still had to shine in front of Çrámerr to secure that promotion.

Bas-Hinna loomed into view. Farrie-Galv Kham resumed his place behind the wheel and guided the Steg-0-Saw along what had once been the main highway leading in. The executives looked through the view-screens and laughed and joked among themselves. Putting a brave face on things, I guess. Don't forget, they were all looking to impress Luis Çrámerr. I took my usual seat up in the turret and studied the terrain. Was this the last place Âgustin had seen? I hoped not.

The road – still just as potholed – led past low buildings, mostly built of native stone and Konkreet. They had once been whitewashed to relieve the drabness but that had long since washed away except in the most sheltered spots. All windows had long since gone and more bryophytes grew out of the gaps. Like all places abandoned by hi-manity, it was a sad, eerie place; a relic of abandoned hopes and dreams.

Of course, we were all keeping an eye open for Krillaz but didn't see any. They're not stupid and no way were they going to suicide charge a heavily armoured vehicle.

Kham drove over a bridge spanning a canal, made a right turn, down another wide avenue until he pulled up in what would have been Bas-Hinna's main plaza. It was surrounded by taller buildings – each four storeys high. One still had its sign – 'Concert Hall'. For some reason, that upset me. I thought of all those locals enjoying performances – until the Krillaz came and devoured those who didn't flee.

"These are the coordinates where Âgustin's last GPS signal came from, *dost*?" asked Kham.

I swung down from the turret and checked the display. "Yes, here," I confirmed.

"Okay, let's get suited and booted and hunt us some Krillaz," said Çrámerr, a little too loudly. Maybe his nerves were getting to him as well. There was no reason to delay – there's no night time this side of Hancox 1. Everyone pulled on body armour and helmets – not military-grade battle-dress, of course, more ex-riot police stuff. Enough to cope with a Krilla's teeth and claws. Over our armour, we wore battle-vests holding spare ammunition, a first aid pouch, rations, compressed water and a durasteel combat knife.

There was a lot of jostling and laughing as they dressed. I felt a bit sorry for Clemency as the only woman in the group but she didn't seem to mind. Not that she should. Clemency L'Alleyn had a hard, toned body with a golden holo-tattoo of a Sun-Dragon on her back. It writhed sinuously, looking almost alive. Didn't expect her to be adorned like that. People always surprise you, don't they?

When everyone was ready, Kham opened the rear tailgate and we trooped outside. Despite butterflies in our stomachs, it felt good to leave the confines of the vehicle. As the guide, safety on this trip was his responsibility so Kham inspected their weapons and armour but he didn't need to check mine.

"Just a few things before we set off." I'd expected this talk. "Most important, never, never, never leave the group and head off on your own. We're looking for Vargo's client, Âgustin – or his remains – but even if you find him or anything else, don't go off by yourself. Remember, Krillaz love to pick off people by themselves."

"In case of emergency, have you logged these coordinates into your personal GPS?" They all nodded, even the normally brash Luis Çrámerr.

"Then let's go hunting – and good luck," he finished.

We formed into a loose diamond formation, Kham on point and me, as having previous combat experience, taking the rear. We crossed the plaza and made our way to a dome which used to hold the city's Botanic Gardens.

"Hey, Farrie, I thought these Krilla's wanted meat. Where are they all?" Çrámerr called.

Not to be outdone, Geroge NcDona jumped in. "Yeah. Sure hope this trip isn't a waste of time. Should have gone up the north coast." I heard his Augmented Flux-Blaster whine. He loosed off a shot at an overhanging sign down a side street. It exploded, white-hot metal raining down, hissing and smouldering on wet Konkreet. He fired again into the upper floor of a building. Half the level collapsed, rubble bouncing noisily off the sidewalk.

"Stop messing about. Any more of that and I'll cancel this trip. No refunds," Kham barked.

"*Sor-ry*," NcDona said, sounding anything but. From his face, he'd enjoyed the immense power of firing his Augmented Flux-Blaster. I caught sight of Clemency's face. She looked as unimpressed as me. Amateur, we both thought to each other over our links.

"Seriously, dude, where are they?" NcDona said after a while.

Kham turned back to face him. "They're here all right. I guarantee some are watching us even as we speak. Now, keep your mouths shut and your eyes wide open."

Hari Thalami looked worried but both Çrámerr and his sidekick NcDona puffed out their chests. "Bring 'em on," NcDona said.

"Here, Krilla, Krilla, Krilla, come and get it while it's hot," Çrámerr bragged. He had a good weapon for the job – a Pym & Sons 10mm Personal Anti-Personnel Weapon which fired devastating gas-powered slugs. They're custom made and cost a small fortune.

I shook my head. These wouldn't be my first choice of companions but still better than going in alone. All the same, I had eyes in the back of my head as we walked towards the geodesic dome. Closer, it showed its damage. Neglect in this atrocious climate had ruined it and many panels were missing.

I jumped. A chunk of masonry fell into the road, missing me by no more than a metre. Perhaps it had been weakened by NcDona blasting away at nothing. But it was strange that it came so close to hitting me. Coincidence? I shrugged. Nothing I could do about it now.

"Watch your step, *dost*," Kham called back.

We crossed a junction. To our left was a garage and in the gloom, I noticed several ground vehicles, corroding away to their shells. That brought home to me just how deserted this city was. It's strange walking through a place where all hi-manity has vanished. Here we had been replaced by something else.

We crossed Mag-Lev tram tracks – now pitted and rusted – and reached the Botanic Gardens. "Âgustin's last signal came from here?" Kham confirmed.

I nodded. Kham set off down a short tunnel into the dome. Any exotic plants outside the dome had long since died, replaced by this planet's bryophytes. There were remains of notices and paintings lining the tunnel. When Bas-Hinna was a living, vibrant city, this must have been a beautiful spot for the locals to come and relax. As we moved through the musty and rank smelling passageway, I noticed greasy marks on both sides. This area must be a Krilla's den. Instinctively, my finger tightened on my weapon's selector button.

The passage opened up into what must have been the reception and shop. We paused and someone – Clemency maybe – gasped with horror. Bones littered this area. All were old, picked clean. Most were hi-man and I lowered my foot carefully, stepping over a child's small skull. It wasn't the only child's skull and I tried not to think about the screaming horror when the Krillaz broke in.

Not all the bones were hi-man, though. Over by a dry, ruined fountain I saw several long-snouted, misshapen Krilla skulls, their flatter craniums evident. A whip-like tail coiled around a rib cage.

"It must have been a massacre," Hari Thalami whispered, aghast.

Kham broke in. "It was, *dost*. And this is only the tiniest fraction of what happened. I hate them, really hate them."

The only one who seemed unconcerned was Luis Çrámerr. He looked around and scuffed through the old bones. He stooped and picked up a brooch. He made to put it in his battle-vest's pocket as a souvenir.

"Put that back," Kham snapped.

Guiltily, Çrámerr dropped it back. "Only looking..."

Trying to defuse what could have been an unpleasant incident, Hari spoke up. "Shall we see if we can find any trace of Âgustin and his party?"

That decided everyone and we left the foyer and into the main part of the gardens, under the broken dome. That was equally sad. Again, all the plants were dead – all that remained were their trunks, corpse-branches clawing at the shattered ceiling. The floor was littered with more bones of people making their last stand here. Now all were scattered in heaps and bone-white drifts. I was glad to see plenty more Krilla bones.

I wheeled around, nearly firing my gun. Did I forget to mention my weapon? In my hands I gripped an M-88 Metallist Hi-Ripper. I'd bought the matt-black version, about sixty centimetres in length with an extended magazine. It's a stubby, brutal weapon that does what it says – it'll rip through Krillaz like a laser through soft cheese. Like I say, there's no weapons restrictions here.

I scanned the area behind. I'd heard something – like bone rattling on bone. Couldn't see anything, couldn't hear any movement neither. I figured our passing must have disturbed one of the piles of bones.

"Getting jumpy, Hotshot?" Çrámerr asked with a grin.

I decided to be honest, after all I wasn't one of his brown-nosing underlings. "It is rather creepy here."

He was surprised by my response. He must have thought I'd play the gung-ho hard man but I was beyond that. Clemency stepped over to me, picking her way over a rib cage.

"Was it a Krilla?" she asked.

"Probably not," I said. "They're not stupid – they're not likely to attack a well-armed group like us." Little did I know.

"Unless they're really hungry," Çrámerr said. "Looks like we'll have to go after them. Hey, Farrie, where do Krillaz like to hang out?"

Glancing from side to side, always aware of danger, our guide came over. "Usually underground, or other dark places where they feel secure. If nothing happens, I'll flush some out for you tomorrow. In the meantime, let's see if we can find any trace of Âgustin's party."

"Remember, keep together guys," Çrámerr called out.

In pairs we looked around the wrecked Botanic dome. In the half-light, with the never-ending gale howling through the broken panels under the grey skies, it was a dismal, unhappy place. And that was without all the bones underfoot. I switched on my helmet-torch and searched

through the ruins. I paired up with Clemency – or more, she teamed up with me. I guess the others were beginning to irritate her.

I don't know what I was looking for – his body, I suppose – but somehow I didn't expect to find it. Like us, he went in well-armed and I couldn't see him going under to a bunch of rat-men armed only with tooth and claw. But what had happened to him and his party? Something bad, that was for sure.

Carefully, we turned out of the dome's main area and down a side annex. There were fewer bones here. It led past an office where I saw the remains of a woman's pelvis under a desk. Further on were rest rooms. We checked them out. Old, dry bloodstains daubed the tiled walls. Totally trashed with doors ripped off and sinks wrenched off the wall. Some people had chosen to make their last stands in the cubicles, their gnawed bones scattered around. What a place to die.

Clemency turned to me. She blushed and looked at the floor. "Look, I don't suppose....," she began.

"You need to go? Here?" I asked, amazed.

"There's not much privacy on the Steg," she explained.

She was right there. One tiny cubicle in a corner had to serve everyone. It wasn't the freshest-smelling place and anyone using it was only centimetres from everybody else. No place for the only woman on the vehicle.

"If you must. But don't you want me to stay with you?"

"No way! But stay in the corridor just outside. I'll be alright."

I wasn't too happy about leaving her alone. Kham had emphasised how important staying in pairs was and I agreed with him. All the same, I would only be outside the door.

"Shout if you need me," I told her.

Clemency closed the door behind her. Through my helmet's comm-link, I heard the others searching. Quiet they weren't. From their tones, it didn't seem as if they'd found anything useful. Then a rattle from above distracted me – more wind whistling through the ruins? Another rattle, closer now. Maybe a plastic bottle blown along?

Or a Krilla's talons?

CHAPTER 4. KRILLAZ ATTACK!

The thought flashed through my brain like the speed of light. Krillaz. And Clemency was alone and in a very vulnerable position. Instantly, I turned round and kicked open the rest room's door. In my mind's eye I visualised the horror I'd find. She'd be buried under a pile of Krillaz, all of them ripping and tearing her into shreds; her vocal cords chewed out, eyes bulging, fresh arterial blood running in rivers.

I've always had a vivid imagination.

The door crashed into the tiled wall, bouncing back onto my boot. My Metallist Hi-Ripper's short barrel moved to cover every danger point – the ceiling, the dark space within a cleaner's cupboard, the other cubicles.

Clemency screamed. "Get out, get out!" She was sitting, her combat trousers down past her knees.

"Sorry, ma'am, my mistake," I muttered, backing out of the rest room.

Voices came loud and clear over our comms-link. "What's going on back there?" Kham demanded, alarm in his voice.

"I thought I heard something," I explained as best I could.

"There's nothing here," Çrámerr's voice broke in. "Nothing recent, nothing that could have belonged to your Âgustin's team. Looks like nobody's been here since the initial Krilla attacks."

I had to agree with his assessment.

"We should have gone onto the north coast. We're wasting our time; there's no Krillaz here," Geroge McDona moaned.

"Yes there are, *dost*. Just because we can't see them, doesn't mean they aren't here," said Kham with the voice of experience. "Now the excitement's over, let's move out."

Clemency came out of the rest room. She couldn't meet my eye as we walked in silence back under the main part of the dome where we regrouped.

"This was the last location Âgustin's GPS was detected. However, that doesn't mean he met his end here. It could have been damaged," Kham said.

"Where would he be likely to go next?" I asked.

Kham thought for a moment. "If his GPS was damaged, that probably meant injuries. I think anyone would try for the hospital. Although it would have been wrecked by Krillaz, there might still be facilities to tend injuries – overlooked medical equipment and the like."

That made sense. "Where's the nearest hospital then?" asked Çrámerr.

Kham checked his GPS link. "The Tisht-Ravat Memorial Infirmary. It's only two kilometres away."

"Let's get the ball rolling," Çrámerr said. "Hopefully we'll find some Krillaz lurking about."

We formed up and made our way out of the ex-Botanic gardens. Out into the howling gale – at least the rain had tapered off for the time being – and the sun cast its weak, blood-red rays through the clouds. We passed ruined ground-cars on both sides of the road. We were in the centre of Bas-Hinna so the boulevard was lined with what had once been upmarket department stores, hotels, restaurants and apartment blocks for the city's wealthier people.

It must have once been a good place to live, even on this miserable world. What do they say? Life is what you make of it? But that was then, this is now. Bryophytes covered any surface where they could find a toehold. Or should that be root-hold? The road surface was cracked and potholed with 'mosses' pushing their way through the Konkreet as they reclaimed this urban environment for wilderness. Only larger bones had lasted outside but we saw very few.

But I couldn't shake off a feeling of being watched. Nothing definite, more a case of sixth sense. Several times, I wheeled around covering side streets or entrance halls as we passed them by. I more than half expected to hear the scratching of Krilla's claws, the chittering squeals of their cries followed by the rush of their foul bodies as they fell on us in a tidal wave of ferocity, overwhelming us with blood-lust.

Nothing happened but I think all of us felt brooding menace. Certainly the execs bunched together in a tighter group until Kham brusquely commanded us to spread out. Clemency found herself near me. She must have realised I'd meant no harm and I hadn't seen anything.

"It's a bit of a long-shot, this?" she asked. "How do you think you'll find Âgustin if he's not at this hospital?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "But I've got a week. Something will turn up."

"Unless the Krillaz dragged his body down to their lair," Çrámerr broke in over the link.

"Thanks."

But although Krillaz love flesh, they have no use for armour or advanced weapons. They wouldn't bother hauling them underground. I've heard rumours that the very brightest Krillaz use clubs and even knives but that's their technological limit.

We turned off the main drag and down another road, still wide, that would take us to the hospital. A building had burned out and before the rains quenched the flames, fire had spread to neighbouring businesses. The feeling of being observed increased as we scrambled over fallen debris and rubble. It must have been some time ago as bryophytes smothered everything.

Rocks sailed out of the buildings, raining down around us. Lumps of Konkreet, stone, rusted office equipment. Instantly, we wheeled around, crouching. From the upper storeys we saw a tribe of Krillaz. One, a large male, lifted what had been a chair and hurled it down. It struck Geroge, knocking him down. From the glassless window we heard their shrill chittering cries mixed in with shrill howls and grunts.

Bad mistake. It must have been some time since this tribe had encountered hunters. Or maybe they were so fed up with chomping on bryophytes or old bones that their blood-lust overruled their caution. All the same, we opened up with everything we had.

It was long range for my Mettallist Hi-Ripper but as a very rapid fire weapon I hosed it up at the monsters. The big male – well, basically my Hi-Ripper did what it should. It ripped the Krilla apart. Meanwhile, Hari Thalami's Gatling PPD's plastic flechettes shredded the group to its left. They fell back, a hail of razor-sharp shards chasing them deeper into the building. I doubt if any made it.

Sharp blasts from Geroge NcDona's Flux-Blaster followed a couple of seconds later. Boom-boom-boom. Bolts of super-heated plasma crashed in and around the window, exploding in gouts of orange-blue energy. A scream, surprisingly hi-man-like, sounded from the opening. Then silence, except for bursts of weapon fire.

"Cease fire," Kham commanded. "They're all dead."

A few seconds later, possibly only after they had run out of ammo, it all fell quiet. There was a smell of burned air and charred rat-meat.

"That was fun. Hey, let's go check 'em out," NcDona shouted, his fist pumping the air. His expression looked like he'd just single-handedly won a war.

"There won't be much left. Your flux-blaster will have totally destroyed them."

Both NcDona and Çrámerr looked disappointed but followed Kham's lead as he crossed the rubble and down the road. The rest of us followed, me taking the rear as usual. We heard more shrill chittering in the distance and once a group of Krillaz hurriedly crossed a side street.

They ran in a curiously low-slung way, their forearms held out underneath them. Their backs were hunched, their tails held out behind them for balance. One of them looked at us as it passed, its horribly long-snouted, heavy-jawed yet hi-manoid face filled me with loathing. It yawned showing its yellowed, rat-like incisors and hyena fangs. Instinctively I raised my Hi-Ripper and fired. The shards fell short but the Krillaz swerved away.

Clemency also watched them but didn't waste her ammo.

"Should have given me a shout," Çrámerr called over the link. "I'd have wiped 'em out for you."

"You'll get your bag," NcDona told his leader supportively.

I kept silent. I didn't like the way the Krillaz also seemed to be heading in the general direction of the hospital. It was like they knew where we were heading. Of course, it could be only coincidence but... I kept my thoughts to myself as we approached our destination.

The Tisht-Ravat Memorial Infirmary had been equally trashed. We entered through the main entrance. All the glass was smashed and lay in dull shards over the floor. Bryophytes had colonised the entrance foyer, festooning it with their grey-green fronds. We crunched through the entrance and saw long, gloomy corridors stretching away on either side. The hospital was vast.

"If he did ever come here, where do you think Âgustin would have gone?" Hari Thalami asked. A good question.

I'd never met the guy so I put myself in his shoes. Where would I go if I, or somebody in my group, was injured? The operating theatre or the pharmacy and hope that there was still some equipment or medicines I could use. A long shot but that would be my guess. I looked up at the signs. Of course, they were in local script but using my neural implant I translated them.

"We'll never cover the whole hospital. We'll split up into two teams," Kham decided after a moment's thought. I don't think we'll come across anything we can't handle. But stay in touch."

Perhaps I should have reminded them of the group of Krillaz we saw earlier heading in this direction but didn't. I was thinking more about searching through this vast building for Âgustin. Also, I didn't think a bunch of unarmoured beasties with no weapons would prove any threat. How wrong I was.

Clemency, Hari Thalami and myself became the 'B' team, leaving the Alpha-male types to take the part of the 'A' team. The pharmacy was closest so we checked it first. Unsurprisingly, it was wrecked – maybe because people had made their last stand here. Skeletons of both hi-mans and Krillaz lay strewn about among corroded weapons and rotten armour. I noticed two skeletons locked in their death-throes. A Krilla's long snout locked on a man's neck while his pistol was jammed into what had been the Krilla's belly. They had killed each other in the same instant.

What was left of the medicines had long spoiled. Packages and broken bottles lay scattered about the bodies. But there was no sign of any recent activity. The bryophytes hadn't got this far yet but moulds and mildews still colonised the walls and ceiling.

We turned left and followed signs to the operating theatres. They were on the same level. We passed overturned trolleys, rusting oxygen cylinders and the usual clutter you'd find in any busy hospital. And more skeletons – many more – both hi-man and Krilla. It looked as if the vermin knew sick and injured people would take shelter here and had made a bee-line straight for it.

I scanned the dirty corridor floor for recent tracks but didn't see anything. That didn't lift my spirits – but it was early days yet.

"What was that?" Thalami said, his voice higher pitched than normal. He wheeled around, facing back down the long passageway. Turning his head-lamp up to the max, the beam of bright white light made every shadow stand out in sharp contrast. Infected by the little guy's jumpiness, I turned my ear-piece up, listening for any sounds, and heard scratching in the distance.

"Could be the 'A' team?" Clemency suggested. She licked her lips nervously, looking around. I realised that this management excursion wasn't her idea of a good time.

"Maybe. But keep your fingers on the trigger, folks," I suggested.

We made our way through a set of double doors into a scrub room. Sinks lined one wall. Beyond was the operating room itself. A rusting robot-doc hung from the ceiling, its vast array of precision arms limp and dead. I shook my head. I doubted Âgustin had ever come here. Other doors led off the theatre – probably to recovery rooms.

Nobody needed their enhancements for what came next. We all heard scratching and shrill chattering from the next room.

"Here they come," I shouted. The Krillaz genetically enhanced blood-lust had triumphed. They wanted flesh – red, raw meat; hot and fresh. The doors burst open and a flood of Krilla's leaped into the theatre. The first thing I noticed was their heavy-jawed muzzles – their faces looked more like hyenas than rats – with a row of razor-sharp teeth designed to rend and tear. Above, heavy-lidded eyes stared at us with pure hatred.

Their hands – no, not paws – reached for us, eager to pull us down when they would overrun us. A few carried clubs – any length of twisted metal would do – which they raised high to smash us to the ground.

"Let 'em have it," I shouted, opening up with my M-88 Metallist Hi-Ripper. At the same time Hari Thalami's Gatling PPD blazed away. Over the harsh shredding sounds of our very rapid-fire weapons, I heard the louder booms of Clemency's Bassoonka – it looks a little like an old-fashioned musical instrument but instead of notes, it fires high explosive shells. Nasty.

The front wave of Krillaz had no chance. They were shredded to slices – deep gashes and slashes opening on their bodies as the flechettes bit deep. They went down in heaps. Some screamed and howled their agony and rage, others died instantly. But they all died. Blood sprayed in arcs and gouts.

The sight of blood enraged the others. The second wave leaped over the bodies howling and hissing. They also died, just like their mates an instant before. Bloody heaps piled up before us. But the third wave – those Krillaz reached us.

Now we were in trouble. While we were able to keep our distance, our weapons more than negated the Krilla's numbers. No way could a creature armed only with claws and teeth beat modern weapons. But directly on top, with us unable to freely use our weapons – that was a different story.

A big male, jaws open wide, leaped on me. I staggered back from the impact, fetching up against the operating table itself. I managed to wedge my Hi-Ripper into his belly and squeezed the trigger. Guts, flesh and visceral blood sprayed out, washing over its mates. The Krilla collapsed down around my boots. It tried to bite my ankles even as it died.

More blood just enraged the others. Three more leaped onto me. Their strong jaws biting and tearing at my armour. Super-Kevlar is tough but nothing short of battle-dress can withstand a Krilla's jaws for long. One of them went for the weak spot between my shoulder and helmet. I felt its hot breath as its evil eyes stared into mine.

I slipped on the tangle of guts at my feet and crashed to the floor. More Krillaz piled onto me, pinning me down. I was in deep trouble now. One pinioned my arm to the ground. Instinctively I pulled the trigger. A stream of metallic shards sprayed out over the floor, tearing up still another's leg. It toppled over, clutching its ruined limb, its scream surprisingly hi-man.

But that didn't worry its friends. More food for later. They carried on piling onto me, worrying and biting my armour, trying to tear through to the meat underneath. My tender body in other words.

"Hari!" I screamed over the noise from the Krillaz.

CHAPTER 5: I SEE THE LIGHT.

With my peripheral vision I saw Hari Thalami wheel around. He saw the cluster of bodies. He hosed us with his Gatling PPD. A hailstorm of plastic flechettes tore into the Krillaz, ripping their bodies to bits. My enhanced ears rang from their howls and shrieks as they died. My armour was also damaged but that was the least of my concerns.

I hauled myself to one knee. The room was awash – literally – with blood, intestines and other bits of organs. Snatching up my Hi-Ripper I took down a Krilla that was crouching, ready to leap onto Thalami's back.

Looking up, I saw Clemency had taken position behind the operating table, using it as cover. From there she was shooting Krillaz as they came through the door. The others were climbing over the bodies of their mates to reach us.

Yet litres of blood only enraged the survivors. They paused for one moment of time then charged us. Still on one knee I pressed the trigger. Nothing happened. Out of ammunition. I swore. "Cover me," I shouted above the noise, fumbling in my battle-vest's pockets for another canister. My fingers clutched it, wrenched the old one out and slammed the fresh one in. I flicked off the safety...

Too late. Sensing my weakness, more Krillaz fell on me. We were being overwhelmed by the sheer weight of numbers. I jerked my Hi-Ripper away from a dark-grey female but still another snatched it away.

There was silence coming from Hari Thalami's gun as he ran out of ammunition as well. Things were looking more than serious. I don't think these execs expected to be grappling hand-to-hand with ravenous monstrosities. Taking pot-shots from a safe distance was what they'd signed up for. Clemency's Bassoonka fired again, blowing away another Krilla in a welter of gore.

I freed my left arm and wrenched my dagger from its sheath. This rib-tickler cost me a load, being made from solid diamond. It had been mined on planet 55 Cancri e – a super-massive world only 41 light years from Earth itself. Diamond isn't as popular these days but I like it as it holds its edge well. Also, it has old-time glamour and allure. Diamonds are a girl's best friend? Well, it was mine at the moment.

Anyway, I plunged the knife deep into the Krilla's guts and twisted hard. It shrieked but even knowing death was coming, it tried to bite my head off. It died as it was born, in pain and hatred. I flung its dying body off me, pulling the blade free and struggled to my feet, gasping for breath.

Clemency took aim and blew another's head clean off. One of the doors swung open – still more Krillaz poured into the room. With our retreat cut off, we were in deep, deep trouble. I jacked yet another ammo cylinder into my Hi-Ripper, racked the safety and shredded the first of the new Krillaz. Its dying body skidded towards me over the blood-slick floor, knocking me sideways.

I lost it a bit then. "Hari – stop messing about and help me!" I screamed over the din.

The neat little exec was flustered, still trying to reload. This was way more excitement than he'd signed on for. If he couldn't get that Gatling PPD firing on all cylinders within the next few seconds then we'd all be overwhelmed. Personally, I didn't fancy becoming rat food.

Hari Thalami looked at me, wild-eyed with fright. They say Krillaz can smell fear and they leaped and bounded towards him. To say things were looking black was an understatement – it was blacker than the heart of a black hole. Clemency's Bassoonka boomed again and again – but it was too slow against the number of Krillaz crowding the room.

I wheeled around as the door crashed open again. I aimed my Hi-Ripper at the opening ready to slaughter the first Krillaz through. If I was to die today, I'd go surrounded by dead rat-men. I'd teach them to fear hi-mans in future.

Instead, Farrie-Galv Kham burst through the door. He processed the scene in one millisecond, set his weapon to maximum fire and – well, he creamed a load of rat-men. It wasn't pretty but it was effective. Çrámerr – for all his faults, their boss was no coward – stepped into the room straight on Kham's heels. His 10mm carbine also added to his bag.

Relieved from the threat of imminent death, Hari got his fingers and thumbs together, loaded up and then his Gatling wheeled into action. The devastation was appalling. Krillaz are genetically made to be bloodthirsty maniacs. But stupid they aren't. As if controlled by one mind, they turned tail and fled, squeaking and shrieking in panic and terror. Now there were six of us, they knew they were outclassed.

"Cease fire! Cease fire!" Kham commanded. After a moment, we powered down our weapons.

"That was close. Thanks," I panted, leaning against the wrecked operating table. I cleaned my diamond blade, checked my armour – which was trashed – and looked around.

The room was choked with dead and dying rat-men. At least the survivors would have plenty of fresh meat to chew on – cannibalism is another of their nasty habits. Nobody wanted to linger. After all, it wouldn't take long before the Krillaz licked their wounds and decided on another attack. Fresh hi-man flesh tastes so much better than rat-man carrion.

Keeping together, we made our way out of the charnel house and into the fresh air outside the hospital. The gale was still blowing and this time we were glad of torrential rain washing blood from our clothes.

"I've never seen anything like that," Clemency said to me as we walked back to the Steg. Nobody fancied going after any more Krillaz today. Everyone was tired and all the execs looked exhausted after all the adrenalin filtered from their systems. Who was I fooling? I was drained as well. Even knowing their reputation, we'd not expected mayhem on such a scale.

"It got a bit scary for a while," I admitted. "But your Bassoonka held them off just long enough."

"Should have brought a rapid-fire weapon like yours," she said. Her voice sounded flat and drained of emotion, her French accent stronger than usual. "I'm going to complain to hi-man Resources about this trip when I get home."

I didn't blame her. This trip was way too dangerous for a bunch of desk-jockeys who fancied themselves as weekend hunters. We reached the safety of the Steg and piled on board, pulling off our helmets and armour as we did so.

Now we were safe, Çrámerr started spouting. "Now that was a show stopper, wasn't it?" Nobody responded. I was glad I didn't work for that idiot.

"We kicked some butt, didn't we?"

We? He only appeared at the last minute. Okay, they'd saved us from the Krillaz but it was us, the 'B' team, who'd killed most of them.

Taking no notice of his colleague's silence, Çrámerr carried on with his management waffle. "You handled yourselves well there, guys. Next time you're facing down our corporate rivals, you'll be able to look 'em in the eyes over the conference table and show no fear."

Did that idiot really think his execs would really be thinking about rat-men when they were next doing a buy-out or restructure or whatever it is these people do? I doubt it. If they were still thinking about this time, then they wouldn't be concentrating on work. I wondered how long it would take Hari and Clemency to get over nearly dying under rat-men's claws and teeth as, beneath his darker skin, even Hari looked pale and shaken.

I found a seat, pulled off my blood-soaked armour and checked it. It was chewed-up but fortunately still serviceable. While I cleaned my Hi-Ripper I asked Kham if his group had found any trace of Âgustin's party.

He shook his head sadly. "Sorry, *dost*, nothing. Apart from Krillaz, I don't think anyone's set foot in that hospital since the city's fall."

That figured. It was a long shot at best.

When everyone had more or less recovered, Kham suggested that was enough excitement for one day. Sensing his colleagues' mood, even Çrámerr had sense enough to keep quiet. Made a nice change. "In that case, let's ball-park the Steg overnight. Everyone buy-in to that?"

We nodded. They bought that idea. There was no night this side of Hancox 1, but we knew what he meant. Kham got behind the wheel, brought up the city map on the GPS and headed off to an industrial area on the outskirts. The Steg trundled along, swerving around the deepest potholes and rubble from collapsed buildings. It started raining again – sharp, sudden squalls lashing against the Steg's bulk.

Emerging from a thick grove of taller bryophytes I spotted a small troop of Krillaz. They pointed – a surprisingly hi-man gesture and fled back into the undergrowth. Were they still following us? I didn't say anything to the others.

Kham turned down a side-street and found what he was looking for. The sign, now faded and almost illegible said it had once been a furniture depot. A raised shutter opened into a darkened interior. More importantly, the structure seemed sturdy and easily defensible. I climbed up into the turret and switched on the searchlight. It's billion watt beam – or whatever – flooded the store with light. Apart from some rotted crates and furniture against one wall the place seemed empty. More importantly, there were no Krillaz lurking inside.

Reversing, Kham backed the Steg inside and switched off the engine. In silence, we heard rain buffeting against the depot. Kham asked me to put on my armour and help set up our defensive perimeter. Of course, Çrámerr also volunteered and that meant his worn-out execs also had to follow suit. No way could anyone not show willing. Clutching our weapons, we laid out trip-wires linked to anti-personnel mines at the depot's entrance, and also a back door that Çrámerr discovered. Kham also set up an infra-red warning system.

That meant we didn't have to sit in the cramped confines of the Steg all evening. We ate our reheated meals – to be honest, no more than army rations – sitting around a camp fire built up from abandoned furniture. Sitting around the blaze was almost cheerful.

Needless to say, Çrámerr was life and soul of the party. That man loved the sound of his own voice. He told us about other hunting trips he'd been on. Somehow he'd wangled a permit to hunt the very rare Silver Leap-hards of Farina's Hi-Awale mountains. Or so he said. Fast-Bear-Dogs on Iridium – yes, they also fell to his guns.

From animals he moved onto corporate deals he'd brokered, companies he'd asset-stripped, successful speculative ventures, mega-bonuses he'd earned. And so on. At this rate he'd be buying a planet. Oh, he already had. "...A small moon orbiting a nearby gas-giant, only a rocky lump, of course. Use it for vacations, not that I've ever had time to go myself, but my fourth wife loves it – uses it as her little getaway..."

Four wives? Why didn't that come as a surprise? I hope the first three are sticking it to him for alimony.

"...Views of the gas giant are superb and I've had a few ice asteroids sent our way to give us extra water. My little slice of the big universe..."

Maybe his captive audience of execs were paid to listen to this garbage but I wasn't. Stretching my legs, I stood, checked the line of anti-personnel mines and looked out over the ruined city. We must be on higher ground here as I had a good view.

It hadn't changed any – that's one of the downsides of a tide-locked world. It was a dreary, uninspiring view, still raining with thick clouds blocking the sun. I became aware of a warm presence behind me. Clemency rested a hand on my shoulder. Despite the damp, miserable conditions my body thrilled to her touch.

"Keeping watch are you?" she said in a low voice. That French accent always does it for me.

"Sort of." I made a little shrug backwards with my shoulder. "He's kinda hard to take, isn't he?"

"He's not that bad – once you cut through all the management BS. He's very successful. Work hard, play hard. That's one of his mottoes."

"Thought it would be," I muttered. "You really wanna be like him?"

Now it was her turn to shrug. "Not really. But I would like his power – I could do some good with it rather than grabbing it all for myself." Her blue eyes softened momentarily. Don't forget, she came from one of those Francophone colonies – a lot of them have philosophy hard-wired into their DNA. Not literally, but you know what I mean.

"And bank balance?"

She grinned. "That would be nice. He really does own a moon."

"Good for him."

There was a pause, companionable rather than uncomfortable. I could stay standing here with this beautiful woman, looking out over the ruined city for ages.

"Got a bit lively earlier, didn't it?" I said, after a while.

"She nodded. "I don't think Çrámerr expected Krillaz to be as savage as that."

"He should have done better research then."

"What's that?" Clemency said, her voice sharper than before.

"Research? Why, Krillaz are..."

Clemency gripped my arm – her manicured nails digging into my upper arm. "I know what research is. What's that light?"

Now it was my turn to stand and stare. "What light?"

"There," she said, pointing out into the deluge.

I blinked. "I can't see anything." Then I did. It was only the rain and talking to this beautiful woman which had stopped me noticing it before. That's my excuse and I'm sticking with it. A light flashed out in the distance. Well, flashed is putting it a bit strongly. A pinpoint dim flicker in the hazy gloom would be more accurate.

The light vanished, then reappeared; vanished then reappeared. Now I'd seen it, I couldn't unsee it. The light seemed to flicker on and off at regular intervals. Enhancing my visuals and synchronising them with my neural implant, I noticed that the light lasted exactly 3.141 seconds. Pi in other words. It had to be man-made. For all their cunning, Krillaz haven't yet mastered advanced mathematics. I double-checked but there was no doubt.

"Kham? Come and have a look at this," I called back over my shoulder. Like myself, our guide had left the fireside and was tinkering with the Steg. Anything to get away from Çrámerr's bragging.

Not only Kham but everyone got up and looked outside. And everyone checked the frequency of the pulses. We all watched for a while as if hypnotised.

"3.14159265359 seconds. Definitely pi," Çrámerr said after a moment. Needless to say, his implant outclassed everyone else's. I bet he could have given it to a hundred decimal points if he'd wanted. "What say we go ping that source?"

There were no audible groans – his team were way too savvy for that – but there was a sense of shoulders slumping at the thought of crossing a Krilla infested city to check out that light source. None of them, not even Clemency would want to be seen as a wimp, but all were exhausted.

"It must be an automated beacon, *dost*," Kham said into the silence. "No telling how long it's been broadcasting – maybe years. I think it should keep until we're all fresher. In the morning."

"Okay – we'll park it until tomorrow," Çrámerr said, trying to sound as if that had been his decision all along.

I didn't think we were in much danger – not with all the hardware protecting the entrance – so I offered to take first night shift. I sat on a crate with my Hi-Ripper across my knees and Clemency's Bassoonka within easy reach and watched the light glimmering in the gloom. Once I thought I saw a small troop of Krillaz flit across an alley but by the time I focussed my visuals they had disappeared. I guess they didn't fancy being turned into rat-jelly.

Clemency had the turn after me. I mentioned my possible Krilla sighting and left her to it.

"Do you think that light might be a signal from Âgustin?" she asked.

The thought had crossed my mind. I doubted it was a relic from the time the Krillaz originally overran Bas-Hinna. The humid climate here is hard on electronics. "Could be."

Instead of turning in, I stayed with Clemency and we talked. I told her a little about my life and some of the more interesting cases I'd taken on. She was a good listener.

"Sometimes I wish I'd gone into something more, well... exciting," she said wistfully. She rubbed her face and yawned slightly. "I didn't have much choice. My family pushed me into getting a good career after university. My father was – is – a small-world physician but knew I could do so much better. Not that I'm complaining. I'm making good money and if I get this promotion then I'll be in the big leagues. I'll be able to do so much more."

"And buy your own planetoid," I gibed.

She shuddered. "We're not all like Çrámerr," she said with a tired smile.

I was beginning to appreciate that.

CHAPTER 6: WE INVESTIGATE THE LIGHT.

After a session of augmented sleep – not wanting nightmares, I switched off my Dreamcaster mode and I guess everyone else did the same – we loaded up and rolled out after a hasty breakfast. I think we were all on edge after the Krilla's savage attack of yesterday.

Kham checked the probable location of the still flashing signal on his GPS and decided that it came from City Hall. That was one of Bas-Hinna's tallest buildings and would be an obvious landmark. We drove onto and down the main drag again. The storm-battered, crumbling buildings now choked by bryophytes filled us with gloom. Well, they did me and Clemency anyway.

She sat next to me on the bench seat with her helmet off. Her body was slumped forwards, her hands between her knees. Her ash-blond hair fell around her face and I was so tempted to sweep it back and kiss her lips. I wondered what they would taste like. I no longer thought of her as a grade-A ball-breaker but a woman who was less than happy with the situation she found herself in – I guess that she'd lost whatever taste for slaughtering vermin she had originally come with.

"You feeling alright?" I asked.

She glanced up. Çrámerr had grabbed the turret seat and was swivelling about taking no notice of us.

"No," she whispered, shaking her head. "I'm not sure this is worth it. I don't know what nearly getting killed is supposed to teach us about better management techniques."

Opposite, Hari Thalami nodded warily. Only the 110% loyal corporate man, Geroge McDona stuck up for the trip. "It will show how we cope with fear, demonstrate our ability to handle crisis situations. After this, anything the boardroom throws at us will seem easy."

We looked at him. Nobody needed telepathic implants – which I hate – to know what the other two thought of that little speech. We passed a cemetery and the small, stone gravestones also smothered by bryophytes did nothing to lift the atmosphere.

"Yee-Haa!" yelled Çrámerr from up in the turret. He loosed off several shots. "Got 'em!" He'd blasted a little Krilla group scavenging through the bone-yard. He leaned down into the main compartment, his handsome face grinning with delight.

"Hey, I wonder if anyone in that graveyard ever thought about cloning? Did I ever tell you that's one of the perks when you get to my level – Economou pays for a clone? Nice little extra. So while I'm having fun with you guys, my clone's hard at work in the office. Hope he's behaving himself!" Çrámerr laughed before swinging back up into the turret. "I've got another spare – just in case. It's key to be buttoned-down at all times."

I looked at Clemency, eyes open with horror. There's another Çrámerr out there in the universe? Possibly two? One is too many.

The Steg slowed to a crawl. Peering out, I saw we had reached a cracked parking lot outside City Hall. Faded signs directed the various users to the right place. We pulled up right outside double-doors that were hanging off their hinges.

"Make sure you have plenty of ammunition," Çrámerr said unnecessarily.

Once again, Kham checked the executives' armour. Satisfied, he gave us our instructions. "After the hospital, we're not splitting up. Stick together, nice and tight. The beacon must be on one of the top floors so we'll head there. I'll take point; Vargo tail. Keep your eyes open – and if it gets noisy, take care."

As with the hospital, the main entrance lobby of City Hall was totally trashed. Bryophytes covered the floor with smaller climbing species trailing over the walls and ceiling. A few paces in, Kham stooped and inspected the floor.

Çrámerr pushed forwards until he was directly behind the guide. "What is it?"

Kham stood and showed us several large pellets. "Krilla spoor. Lots of it. Fresh, too."

"The key is to take all precautions while we deep-dive this place," Çrámerr said to his execs. To be honest, nobody needed to be told that.

We made our way past what had once been an impressive Italianate marble reception desk and down a wide corridor. In the deep gloom, we all turned on our head-lamps and splashed

beams of white light over the water stained walls. We passed a bank of elevators before hitting the stairwell.

"How many floors are there?" I called out from the back.

"Seven," Kham called back. "And a basement level, as well. But we needn't go down there."

Both Clemency and Hari Thalami looked relieved. Owing to their rat ancestry, Krillaz prefer to lair below ground. Kham put his shoulder to the door and shoved. The swollen wood scraped over a tiled floor revealing worn stairs leading up and down. Greasy marks on the walls showed that this was a rat-man thoroughfare.

Kham made his way up to the first return and poked his weapon – an M-88 Metallist Hi-Ripper like mine – up the next flight. "It's clear," he called to us. We followed, me keeping an eye on what was happening behind and below us. No way did I want Krillaz sneaking up on us.

Only Çrámerr didn't seem affected by nerves. Fist-pumping the air, he called, "let's show 'em what Economou's management is capable of!" Only his acolyte, Geroge McDona raised a cheer.

In our semi-military formation we carried on up the staircase, Kham pausing to assess any possible threat before carrying on upwards. The man knew what he was doing and no blame can be attached to him for what happened next. These things happen.

With no warning, lumps of Konkreet hurtled down on us followed by debris from the office blocks – desk plinths, filing cabinets, even a vending machine. The machine – a solidly built piece of steel and glass crashed down on top of Kham. He wore good armour but a quarter tonne machine falling on your head from ten metres has only one effect. It crushed his skull like an eggshell and Kham fell as if pole-axed. The vending machine toppled over, slamming McDona into the wall. With a cry of shock, Çrámerr leaped out of the way, fetching up against the outer wall.

More rubble rained down. Now we all heard the shrill tittering laughter of Krillaz from above. Taking advantage of our disarray, Krillaz raced down the stairs. Using their prehensile tails, others swung down from the banisters. A flood of lean, scabrous, greyish bodies, all with their strong hyena jaws gaping wide poured towards us.

For the first time, Çrámerr didn't come out with some management-speak. Protecting McDona's body with his own, he crouched and swung his 10mm carbine into position. Another overpowered weapon but at this point, who cares. The gas-powered slugs ripped into the first Krillaz, tearing great holes through their bodies before slamming into those behind.

"Time to do the coconut shuffle," yelled Çrámerr. Sounded as if he was having fun. He fired again and again.

Not bothering to show fearlessness in the face of the enemy, Hari Thalami stepped up to his boss's side, his Gatling PPD at the ready. He aimed his weapon upwards and a hail of razor-sharp plastic flechettes greeted the Krillaz. Blood and guts poured down on us in a gory, red rain as well as dying and dead Krillaz. But there were still plenty of live ones as well.

The lead rat-men fell on Çrámerr and Thalami, smothering them with their bodies; their strong, fang-filled jaws going for the two men's throats and other vulnerable parts. Thalami screamed. I watched, horrified, as he tried to wrap his finger around his Gatling's trigger – and it was bitten off. He screamed again, a high-pitched shriek of agony that cut through the noise. Another bit into his boot, its terrible jaws crunching into bone.

Now they had tasted blood, there was no stopping the Krillaz. It was them or us – simple as that. More and more raced down from the upper floors. NcDona groaned and rolled away from the wall. Just as well he wasn't shooting – his Augmented Flux-Blaster was too powerful to deal with those Krillaz swarming over his colleagues. He'd have annihilated them as well as the rat-men.

With Clemency in the way, I had only a very limited field of fire. Then my helmet's aural enhancers detected sounds coming from behind me. Like scratching on Konkreet. I spun around in less than a nanosecond of time. Not literally, but you get the idea. My mouth flopped open for an instant. Hurrying up the stairs from the basement was another clan of Krillaz.

Bringing up the rear, forcing his clan on was a big albino male, his pink eyes glowing in the gloom. The monster carried a length of metal piping. There had been rumours about tool-using Krillaz – although the scientists safe back in their labs said that was impossible. He also wore the remnants of some poor person's bullet-proof vest. How the monster had worked out how to put it on beats me. Beside him, a younger albino – his son? I thought – had a matching helmet perched on his misshapen skull. Still another held a tube-like Bassoonka, but the weapon was all bent out of shape and was carried like a cudgel. The rest were in front, jaws agape, ready to bite and rend.

My finger slipped within the trigger guard and I squeezed. Immediately, shards from my Mettallist Hi-Ripper tore into the scurrying rat-men. Now they'd lost the element of surprise, the Krillaz had nothing to lose and raced up the stairs, arms outstretched to grab us into their bone-crunching jaws.

We were caught in a classic pincer movement. How had they worked that one out? Or was it just bad chance? But I didn't have time to think – I guess none of us did – merely react to

what was going down now. The lead Krillaz – a couple of darker females, I think – went down under my Hi-Ripper's deadly hailstorm of death. They fell a couple of metres from me in lakes of dark, red blood and then the rest trampled over their still twitching bodies, so desperate was their need for fresh meat.

Taking a step back, I lifted the Hi-Ripper, aimed it at the face of a pale juvenile – not albino but its patchy fur wasn't far different in colour. It wasn't a pretty sight after my rapidly gyrating shards virtually decapitated it. Even above the roar of battle, I heard a howl of rage and agony coming from that big albino at the back. Had I killed his son? I hoped so.

The headless rat-man collapsed at my feet, I kicked its corpse away and aimed at the one following it. Then still another, with more smarts than the rest dived for my booted feet, knocking me off balance. Still firing, the Hi-Ripper's shards went wildly into the ceiling and plaster dust swirled down.

Following its pack-buddy's lead, another Krilla took me down by the knees. These Krillaz weren't stupid – cunning and viciousness defines them. Even their rat-like brains knew they would be killed by our weapons unless they got up close and personal with us and used their numbers and jaws to overwhelm us.

Desperately, I tried to recall who was on their feet where they were. Kham, I reckoned was dead – or at least *hors de combat* – and I couldn't hear the methodical boom-boom of Geroge NcDona's Augmented Flux-Blaster. That was bad news. My enhanced vision saw Clemency L'Alleyn's Bassoonka firing at the horde of Krillaz coming down the stairs. Likewise Çrámerr's 10mm carbine.

A big Krilla pinned down my firing arm and then tried to chew off my wrist. Another joined it, then another. The three started squabbling among themselves, their high-pitched chittering grating on my ears.

"Help!" I screamed over the comms-link. "Now!"

There was a deafening bang just by my ear-piece. Clemency's long-barrelled Bassoonka poked down and blew a huge hole in the monstrosity chomping on my wrist. It flew backwards – looking less hi-manoid and more like a charred steak. She moved the barrel a few centimetres and a second Krilla shot backwards, smashing into its fellows.

My arm freed from their weight, I jerked free, ripped my trusty diamond knife free and skewered another. Blood drenched my combat trousers but an instant later I was on my feet. I flexed my arm and sent a spray of metal shards into the bodies of those still advancing up the stairs. They faltered, their albino leader holding them back, regrouping them. I fired at him but

sensing my intention the rat-man dropped to the floor and my shards caught a scrawny, pallid Krilla in the chest.

More and more Krillaz poured up the stairs, their evil eyes staring at us with hatred. Even with our advanced weaponry there was no way our little group could make it through that horde. I glanced over my shoulder at the Krillaz above us.

Çrámerr's 10mm, Clemency's Bassoonka and Hari Thalami's Gatling PPD had made short work of them. Many of the Krillaz were dead or dying, their final cries and squeaks as they fought oblivion hateful to our ears. However, the rest's blood-lust was still working overtime. They wanted meat – fresh and dripping with blood.

Then disaster struck. Because of his injury, Hari Thalami was having trouble reloading his Gatling – like I said earlier, it's a very effective close-combat weapon but heavy on ammunition. Partly covered by Çrámerr he was struggling to pull another cylinder from out his battle-vest's pocket. His dark face – and I remember it well – was a rictus grin of pain and terror. This was not what he'd signed on for but I admired his courage.

An injured blackish Krilla, its legs and torso covered in a multitude of wounds, reached down. Maybe sensing Thalami's fear, the rat-man dived for Thalami's waist, wrapping its forelimbs about him. Then with one superhi-man – or super-Krilla? – twist and flick, still clinging on for grim death, it hurled him over the banister railing following him down the stairwell's central void into the waiting horde of rat-men below.

The man had no chance. There was a dull thud as hi-man and rat-man hit the Konkreet floor and then all the other Krillaz below fell on them. It was like watching the sea boil. There was one short scream, abruptly cut off.

We all paled. They did and I know I must have done. I felt sick, physically sick and it was all I could do to hold my breakfast rations down. Mentally, I shook myself. This was no good. At this rate the monsters would get to devour us all.

Glancing downstairs, it was obvious we weren't getting out that way. Looking up, over Çrámerr's shoulder, I saw the smaller group of Krillaz still fighting. A burst of fire from the 10mm and Clemency's Bassoonka took out another couple and then the rest turned tail and fled – literally – this time.

"Up... up!" I shouted over the comms-link, pointing for added emphasis.

"What about Kham?" said Clemency.

"We can't take his body – not and save ourselves. Leave it – it might delay them," I called back.

"We're not on the same page here," Çrámerr butted in. "We can't just leave him."

"You carry the dead weight if you want," I said, responding in similar management-speak. "It'll only slow us down."

Even with Thalami's body – and their dead friends – to satisfy them, the Krillaz below were now advancing up the stairs. Realising he was flogging a dead horse, as the saying goes, Çrámerr hurried upstairs to the next return and took up a firing stance. The few Krillaz braver than the rest turned and fled along various corridors leading off the staircase.

Supporting Geroge McDona, who had gone worryingly pale, with sweat pouring down his face, we made our way up to the top floor. Now Clemency took rearguard. "Don't want to hurry you, but...", she said. She didn't have to say anything. Evil scratching and high-pitched sniggering followed us.

The Krillaz were in hot pursuit.

CHAPTER 7: WE ESCAPE A TRAP.

No time to draw breath. On the top floor, there was only one door. The bad news was that it was fortified. I guess behind that thick slab of dura-steel was the elevator winch room, maybe electronic cupboards as well as the roof access.

"I'll shoot the lock off," Çrámerr shouted, still loving every second. I imagined him in a few months time, after the terror had died down, entertaining his Zero-G golfing buddies on his private moonlet. "Well, of course, I was the only one who knew what was what. That's what they pay me the big bucks for, ha-ha. And you should see the size of my compensation payout. Anyone fancy another gin?"

Before I could shout "No!" he'd raised his 10mm and fired at the hinges. 10mm slugs ricocheted around the landing sending chips flying everywhere and leaving craters in the wall. One whistled within centimetres of my head and another slammed into Geroge's abdomen. He uttered a sudden "whoof," and fell forwards out of my arms, collapsing in a broken heap on the Konkreet.

"Stop it!" I yelled over the comm-link.

Reluctantly, Çrámerr ceased fire. I handed him McDona's Augmented Flux-Blaster. I didn't think its owner would be needing it any time soon. "Set it to precision fire and take care," I told him. Dragging McDona's body, Clemency and I ducked around a corner and let the Alpha-

male do his job. Just to keep their heads down, I asked Clemency to fire a few shots down the stairwell. Red-hot balls of energy rocketed down.

By now the incredible heat of the Flux-Blaster had melted the hinges and the armoured door stood ajar. Sprinting up, I helped Çrámerr wrench it open sufficiently wide and then ran back round the corner to fetch Clemency and NcDona. I didn't like the look of the man's state. He was breathing fast and shallow. Definitely in shock.

We hauled NcDona through the door, his feet scraping over the Konkreet. As soon as he was through, Çrámerr and I put our shoulders to it and wedged the door closed. It wouldn't hold the Krilla onslaught for ever but it would have to do. From my backpack, I took an anti-personnel mine and set it up facing the door. That would give the first ones through something to think about.

"Still having fun?" I asked Çrámerr sarcastically.

He nodded. I guess he was having the time of his life. That's the thing with these senior management types. They are so insulated by wealth and privilege and contacts they think nothing bad can ever happen to them. Sure, they may suffer temporary inconveniences – like a robot breaking down or their luxury space-flight to a paradise world like Elysian is delayed but nothing that can't be solved by throwing large sums of money at it.

Carefully, we carried NcDona up another flight to one of the switch rooms. Once, long ago, the building's janitor must have used it as a secluded place to rest. A desk with an old-fashioned water heater and mugs stood on top of it, a chair and an old calendar depicting women from several systems in a state of undress took up one wall. The room smelled damp and mouldy from disuse.

"You keep watch for Krillaz," I said to Çrámerr while Clemency and I see if we can fix Geroge."

"Who put you in charge?" he asked. Good question but not one I was gonna waste time answering.

"Just do it," I snapped. "Unless you have great medical skills?"

He hadn't and, preferring the macho role of Krilla shooter anyway, he stepped outside into the corridor. I reckoned he saw himself as the handsome action lead of the latest holovision movie. Immediately, Clemency and I got to work. Gingerly, we undid NcDona's body armour and laid it by his side. His helmet rolled off, showing a massive bruise above his right ear. Gently, I touched it but didn't like the way my fingers pressed deep into his skull.

That injury wasn't the worst on his body. We both winced when we saw what lay beneath his body armour. Çrámerr's ill-fired 10mm had ripped a great hole in his belly. But that wasn't all.

While we had been busy fighting for our lives earlier on the stairwell, NcDona had been slumped against the wall – the heavy blow to the head accounted for that. Unnoticed by us, a Krilla must have got to work. It had chewed deep into his lower abdomen. It was a hideous sight and he wouldn't recover – not without major surgery. Wincing, I hoped Economou would be footing that bill.

All we could do was stabilise him and stop the massive blood loss. Already, just by taking off his armour, more red fluid was leaking over the floor. Clemency opened NcDona's first-aid pack and then her own. Making a grimace of distaste, she wrapped padded gauze bandages around the wounds.

In the meantime, I jabbed him with all-purpose genericillin – Krillaz are notorious disease carriers – then another vial of super-coagulate to slow blood loss and still another of fast acting pain relief. I dropped the vials onto the floor. Then a pack of plasma and saline for rehydration. I watched Clemency's slender hands as she worked and admired how she quietly got on with the horrible task. She was wasted as a corporate drone – she should have gone into medicine like her father.

Catching her eye, I said, "I think we've done all we can. There's no more we can do until he gets to hospital."

She looked up and caught by the moment, I drew her towards me and kissed her full on the lips. I gazed into her glacier eyes and saw warmth deep in their icy depths. She didn't pull away but draped her arm around my neck and kissed me deeply. Yes, even under these circs, it was as good as I imagined.

Sure, I know she's out of my league. I will never become a top, mega-Hydran earning executive of a big interstellar outfit like Economou. And I don't want that. I am what I am – a recovery agent. It was a spur of the moment thing. Two frightened people thrown together in great peril. However, I enjoyed the moment and I immediately downloaded it to my long-term memory banks.

Çrámerr was still outside and I couldn't hear anything so I reckon the Krillaz were regrouping. And devouring our late companions. They'd be back. And I didn't like how that big albino had caught us in a pincer. All the same, seize your pleasures when you can. So I kissed Clemency a second time.

Eventually, reluctantly, we broke apart. "We have to get out of here. First, I want to find that beacon. Alright with you?"

She seemed surprised to be asked. "Stay with NcDona – though I think he'll be fine for the moment. I should only be a few minutes." I stepped onto the landing nodding to Çrámerr who was still guarding the door.

"How is he?" Çrámerr asked.

"Not good."

Running up the next flight I was soon out of his sight. Didn't have time to answer loads of questions. Right at the top was an ornamental cupola – like a little belfry, except there were no bells. I guess being the City Hall, the designer wanted one little ornamental flourish to make it stand out from the rest of Bas-Hinna's blocky buildings. Wind howled through the slats and I breathed deeply, enjoying the fresh air after the stench of blood and Krilla. Rain pattered against the side and dripped on the floor.

I found what I expected in the middle of the floor. A transponder sending beams of light – and probably a radio signal – through the slats and over the city every 3.141 seconds. Kneeling by the machine I saw it was fitted with a little plutonium battery which meant it should be broadcasting for decades. Next to it – in a transparent waterproof bag – was an electronic notebook. Flicking the on switch, I waited impatiently for it to boot up.

There. On screen appeared icons for videos. I selected the most recent and Âgustin's long, aristocratic face appeared. He looked scared but resolute. A smear of blood snaked across his forehead and cheek. Pushing back his floppy hair, and looking around with a frightened expression, Âgustin spoke. "If you've found this, then please help. Please. There's three of us – myself, Vernoff and Amir Illouz, our guide." He lowered his voice. "But I don't think Illouz is going to make it... the Krillaz chewed him up really bad. Please come quickly."

On the video, his gaze skittered across the room. "We're heading to the food processing plants over by the river. He gave the exact planetary coordinates." There was a bit more – personal stuff for his parents and fiancée – but nothing important.

Sitting back on my haunches, I thought Âgustin had made a good choice of place to hole up in. Like a lot of worlds, Hancox 1 isn't suitable for agriculture. Who wants to eat bryophytes three times a day? No-one. So, using water and bacterial sludge-farms – no it doesn't sound appetising, put like that – they can turn genetically modified bacteria into anything you want. Steaks, burgers, most vegetables, bread, pasta. Sure, it's artificial – and doesn't have all the fine detail you'd expect to see if you look closely at a carrot or whatever – but it tastes as good as naturally produced. And the food's fortified with all the vitamins you need.

Of course, gourmets and back-to-nature environmentalists turn up their noses but for most people, that's what we eat. And very good it is, too. So if Âgustin could find some bacteria and

get one of the plants working, they'd be no shortage of food or water. With enough ammunition, Âgustin and Vernoff could hold out pretty much for ever.

I punched the air and whooped. My million Hydran reward was looking a lot closer than it had an hour or so ago. Only problem was how to reach it. We still had loads of Krillaz, all with their blood up, between us and them. I peered through the slats at the street below. Driving rain obscured my vision but even so I couldn't see any Krillaz scurrying about. That was a good sign so I kicked out the slats on the sheltered side and watched them fall. No Krillaz came out to investigate.

Taking the notebook with me I hurried downstairs. "We're moving out," I told the others, telling them what I'd discovered.

"Crunch time," Çrámerr said. He looked glad to be leaving.

"We can't leave Geroge," Clemency protested from by his side. "If we can get him to hospital, he should be fine."

"Hell, Economou will pay for his body to be rebuilt. I'll see to that personally. He'll be bigger and better than before," Çrámerr said, punching his fist into his palm.

"Of course we're taking him with us," I said, explaining my plan.

Leaving Clemency to provide covering fire, Çrámerr and I scooped up NcDona and, supporting his heavy body under his armpits, we lugged him upstairs. The man was a dead weight. Once or twice, he groaned thickly through his narcotic fog. Hoping against hope that the Krillaz wouldn't choose this moment to break through and attack. Encumbered as we were, they'd slaughter us.

We made it up to the cupola safely.

Rummaging through my battle-vest, I found a long length of line. It's pack said it was designed to carry 400 kilos. More than enough. Knotting the line into a harness I fitted it to NcDona's body and then tied the other end around one of the cupola's supports.

I'd done all I could.

"You go down first," I told Çrámerr, "and look after NcDona. Keep an eye open for Krillaz."

Çrámerr looked like he was going to protest that I was usurping his authority so I sweetened the pill a little for him. "You lead and we'll follow." Just as well he didn't catch the glance Clemency flashed me.

Swinging one leg over the sill, Çrámerr lowered himself down to the street. When he was half way down, it all turned noisy. There was a loud crash from below followed by a massive

explosion as the anti-personnel mine was activated. The building shook. Death screams from the Krillaz but we all knew the rest of the horde would be up the stairs shortly.

"Hurry!" I yelled to Çrámerr over the gusting wind.

In fairness to him, Çrámerr hurried and leaped the last few metres to the ground. Giving him a thumbs-up, I swiftly attached NcDona to the line. His body was limp – whether from blood-loss or analgesics I don't know. Not that it mattered much – either way he was so much dead weight.

"Give me a hand here," I called to Clemency.

The woman rushed over and together we hoisted NcDona over the sill and started lowering him down. The constantly blowing wind caught him and despite our efforts his body banged against the wall.

Scurrying and high-pitched squeals and chattering came from the stairwell. "Try and hold 'em off."

Clemency nodded, crossed to the stair top and fired a few shots down. Hand over hand, as fast as I dared, I lowered NcDona's body as Çrámerr watched it descend. Then disaster struck. Whether my knots weren't sufficiently secure, whether the wind and rain caught his body – maybe even my panic from the imminent onrush of Krillaz – NcDona's body came loose and he took the fast way down twisting once as he did so. That's my story and I'm sticking with it. Horror-struck I watched as NcDona's body smashed onto the hard Konkreet. He landed on his head – and he wasn't wearing his helmet.

No way could he survive that. A couple of hours ago we were six. Now we were down to three.

Behind me I heard boom-boom-boom from Clemency's Bassoonka. Sounded like the Krillaz were getting close now.

"Leave them," I shouted over. "Let's get out. Now."

A few last shots just to keep their heads down and then she ran over to me. No time to go one at a time, so we both swung out together. Holding her body close to mine, we lowered ourselves down. Needless to say, we went as quickly as we dared.

Glancing up I saw a row of evil rodent faces glaring down at us from the cupola. Despite everything, I laughed. Taking one hand from the line, I gave them the finger. Not that they'd understand the gesture but it made me feel better. There was no way the Krillaz could catch us now. By the time they'd run down all the staircases we'd be long gone.

We dropped down and stood next to NcDona's corpse. "What happened here?" Clemency asked.

"Your boyfriend Vargo dropped the ball," Çrámerr said bitterly. I guessed he had noticed our looks after all.

"Sort it out later – before all those Krillaz join the party. Let's get back to the Steg first."

"Shall we take him with us?" Clemency asked.

I shook my head. "He'll slow us down. C'mon. Hurry."

Çrámerr looked like he was about to object. But we'd already lost Kham and Thalami to the monsters so he quashed his conscience. Have you noticed how easy it is for senior management to do that when their own necks are on the line? Only a thought.

Picking up McDona's Flux-Blaster, we trotted back to the Steg. There, we got another shock. A group of Krillaz were gnawing on its tyres. Now, a Steg's all-terrain tyres are made of puncture resistant rubber with metallic strengthening. Even so, the Krillaz' hyena jaws had chomped chunks out of them. Not good. The other side of the planet from good in fact. It was like they knew we were relying on our vehicle to get away.

One of the rat-men looked up and squealed to its clan buddies. That was its very last action in life as I sent a hail of shards their way. The rest ran away, some leaving trails of blood. I noticed that these seemed to be juveniles.

We clambered into the Steg and shut the door behind us. Taking off my helmet, I laid it on a now disused bunk and rubbed my forehead. We looked at each other. Clemency looked openly shocked and I think even Çrámerr was putting a brave face on things. I guess – alright, I know – my face showed the exhaustion I felt.

How could it all have gone so badly wrong?

CHAPTER 8: THE SERVER ROOM.

"What shall we do now?" Clemency asked her boss. She wasn't showing much of that go-getting management spirit this trip was supposed to demonstrate.

I coughed, drawing attention to myself. "We're still gonna rescue Âgustin's lot – or at least check if they're still alive. C'mon guys, we can't leave them at the mercy of these monsters, can we?"

I'm not sure if Çrámerr could care less – after all Âgustin wasn't a corporate man working for Economou. But he caught the look in my eyes and didn't say anything. Clemency looked

unhappy. She would much rather head for home. Can't say I blamed her. Given the choice, so would I, but I had a million riding on finding Âgustin and I wasn't passing up that amount.

To avoid any argument, I got behind the wheel and keyed in the coordinates provided. The GPS took a few seconds and provided a route. I put the selector to 'Drive' and rolled out. Well, rolled isn't the right word. Ker-chunk, ker-chunk, ker-chunk came from the chewed-up tyres as the Steg juddered forwards. Not even the Steg's suspension could cope with that. Behind me, my passengers clung onto anything they could find.

Our route took us generally eastwards, away from the city centre, and downhill. We skirted a collapsed brick-built building – lightning strike, I wondered – which was thickly coated with bryophytes. Rain pelted down so I put the windscreen wipers on overtime. What a world! Why anyone would fight for possession of this continent beats me. If I lived here, I'd be on the first space flight out. Preferably to a desert world where at least two suns shine all day. Peering through the windscreen I couldn't see any trace of this star's red glow.

Ker-chunk, ker-chunk, ker-chunk. I hoped that one of the tyres wouldn't strip itself. It didn't. After making only one wrong turn, I found the food processing plant. It was protected by a rusted, tumble-down chain-link fence. No defence against the Steg's might. With a bigger ker-chunk than normal, we trundled over the remains and pulled up outside a loading bay.

"We're here. Let's do our good deed for the day and rescue Âgustin and friends."

"Are there any Krillaz out there?" Clemency called.

I visually scanned the immediate area and also did a heat-seeking infra-red scan as well. "Not that I can see. Anyway, we won't be long. Either we'll find Âgustin and his buddies – or their bodies. Then we'll head home."

We reloaded our weapons. I was disturbed at how low our ammo supply had become. We'd gone through some fire-storms earlier and ammo conservation hadn't been top of our priorities. Looking at their faces, I saw that neither was 100% enthused about going in. Truth to tell, neither was I. If it hadn't been for the lure of a million Hydrans, we'd be high-tailing it for home now.

A red cross on a storage compartment marked the location of our medical supplies. Opening it, I took out three syringes of super-stim. One of those miracles of modern medicine. It stops you feeling exhausted and dead-beat. Makes you feel like a tiger in other words, ready to take on the world. Of course the effects are temporary – after they've worn off you sleep like a log.

I offered them both super-stim. A few minutes later, all their doubts and fears vanished.

"Yee-haa – let's bag ourselves some Krillaz," Çrámerr shouted, punching the air. Now he was back to his usual alpha-male personality. I couldn't wait for this trip to all be over when he'd be snoring on a bunk at the back.

Opening up the Steg, I ran out into the deluge, up a ramp and tried the loading bay. Nothing hi-tech like a force-field on this world. It was just the usual massive roller-shutter, now badly corroded. Inset was a smaller pedestrian door. Raising my foot, I kicked it open. It crashed back into the main gate, bouncing back towards me. Despite the easy access, I wasn't sure if that was a good sign. If I could get in so easily, then so could rat-men.

My Hi-Ripper pointing in all directions I stepped into the gloomy interior with Çrámerr and Clemency only a few steps behind. It was a vast grey space, filled with huge vats where bacterial sludge had been prepared. Even now, there was a faint, sweetish odour from the sludge in the air – reminiscent of a distillery. Looking up, I spotted ruined, leaking pipes and tubing hanging from the ceiling. Light filtered in through mossy plexi-glass panels and roof-lights.

Pausing, I signalled for the others to wait. They stopped, their weapons at the ready. "Listen," I hissed, "can you hear anything?"

Even with our aural implants set to maximum, I heard nothing out of the ordinary. Only water dripping, in the far distance a shutter slamming back and forth in the wind. Most importantly, we couldn't hear any machinery operating which was a bad sign. I thought if Âgustin had got some bacteria on the go, then he could survive indefinitely. It wouldn't have been tasty – usually, the sludge is taken to other factories to be processed into whatever foodstuff is required – but it was still edible.

However, I wasn't about to give up so easily. If I wanted that million, I needed Âgustin and proof of his death would still give me a half mil. I gestured towards a row of offices on a mezzanine floor at the far end of the factory. If I was going to hole up here, that is where I'd head.

Pointing, I whispered, "Look out for booby-traps."

They nodded understanding. In single-file, we crossed the factory floor, passing an overturned fork-lift. Our boots crunched over grit and debris as we did so. Despite having our enhanced senses set to max, we didn't detect any Krillaz but all of us felt a sense of threat, of impending doom. Yes, even with super-stim coursing through our veins. It could have been the after-effects from the slaughter in the City Hall playing on our minds, but I'm not sure. More than once, we wheeled around, as if sensing evil ratty eyes glaring at us.

Reaching a metal staircase leading to a gantry walkway, we climbed up one at a time and then followed the wall around to the offices. On the other side, I heard the never-ending gale buffeting rain water against the wall. What a world.

Despite our fears, we reached the offices. "Stop!" I commanded. Old bloodstains coated the walls as well as a handful of Krilla bones. Shards of metal lay sprinkled about. I stooped and touched the blood. Even with the damp atmosphere, the blood was dry. So the Krillaz hadn't attacked here any time recently.

Inching forwards, I conducted a fingertip search the width of the gantry. After a few minutes, I found a filament-thin trip-wire stretching across. Carefully stepping over it I carried on with my search and found a second line a few metres further on. Whoever had set these booby-traps knew what they were doing. By now, I was at the office area so, pointing out the filaments to Çrámerr and Clemency, we rejoined safely.

I didn't hold out much hope, but I still called out, "Âgustin? Âgustin? Are you here?"

All the same, I figured that we were wasting our time here. Sure, this was Âgustin's last known location, but there was nothing to say he'd stayed here, especially if he hadn't been able to get the sludge machines working again. All the same, he should have left further coordinates. Pushing open doors, we came across a workers' canteen with all the tables and chairs overturned, a billings office, a big laboratory for quality testing. With every door opened, I felt more and more despondent as I saw my chance of earning a million becoming more remote.

We were more than half way along the corridor. The next door, far more solid than the rest, still bore the sign '*Server Room*'. That seemed more hopeful than the other rooms. Holding valuable computers, server rooms are always secure – armoured against sabotage, some even have their own environmental controls as well as the more usual cooling systems. If your back's to the wall, it's a good place to make your last stand. I tried the handle. It was locked.

"Shall I?" Çrámerr offered, aiming his weapon at the lock.

"One moment," I said. No way did I want him spraying 10mm slugs all over the place. I raised my hand and rapped on the door. It felt solid to me – not giving so much as a millimetre. I knocked again, not really expecting anything. Turning away, I was about to suggest we check the last few rooms first when my aural implant picked up a sound from the server room. A slow, dragging shuffle.

Our nerves were keyed to the highest pitch. Our fingers tightened on the triggers. What was on the other side? All of us expected some evil, old rat-men ready to spring at our throats. A weak, quavering voice belonging to an old man answered. "Is anyone there – please, is anyone there?"

Horrified, we were struck dumb.

"Answer... please, someone answer. Or am I hearing things?" the voice tailed off. Through the thick door, we were barely able to hear it."

Licking my bone-dry lips I answered the voice. "Âgustin? Is that you?"

"Oh, yes, yes, thank you," the weak voice sobbed.

"Can you let us in? Or shall we break down the door?" I asked. I saw Çrámerr aiming his 10mm at the door and shook my head.

There was a click as Âgustin unlatched the secure room and pulled it open. We were all shocked by what we saw. In front of us was a skeleton of a man. Âgustin was at the last extremity of starvation. His face a skull – all angles and hollowed out cheeks. Two fever-bright eyes burned beneath a domed forehead covered only by a few limp strands of white-grey hair. His lipless mouth was upturned in a grin – not because he was glad to see us – but because starvation causes that look.

He wasn't wearing armour – he couldn't have carried the weight – and his ribs stuck out painfully beneath his shirt. His fingers gripping the edge of the door were no more than twigs and I thought one sharp tap would break them.

"You've come – you've come at last. By Sol Invicta, you've come." With that, Âgustin burst into tears.

Looking beyond him I saw the comms room was filled floor to ceiling with racks of computer terminals, all long dead and no blinking lights. When this factory was in operation, these computers would have controlled the vats, making sure that the bacterial sludge was exactly the right consistency and temperature. Others would have been in charge of ordering in supplies, issuing invoices, shift rotas etc. Now they were all dead as a rock orbiting the furthest reaches of a solar system.

Supporting his arm, I stepped into the room and was immediately struck by a foul stench. Even setting my nasal filters to minimum didn't help. It still stunk. Trapped inside, one corner had been used as a toilet, but that didn't explain it all. Dragged behind a bank of terminals was a body. Like Âgustin's it was more of a skeleton than a man and his arms had been crossed over his chest. Water dripping from a broken ceiling pipe puddled near the corpse.

"Vernoff?" I whispered.

Âgustin nodded. I looked away, not wanting to linger over teeth marks on the body's arms and legs. I shuddered at the hunger-pains that had driven Âgustin to do such a thing.

"Only be a few minutes," I called out to Çrámerr and Clemency outside.

"Don't be long – I don't like it here," Clemency replied.

That didn't come as the biggest surprise in the galaxy as I wasn't laughing fit to burst myself. There wasn't much I could do for Âgustin. His body was too frail for super-stim or

anything aggressive like that so I gave him two rehydration tablets and concentrated nutrients washed down with water from my canteen. That should help. He nodded his thanks.

Nothing I could do for the unfortunate Vernoff so I left him. Krillaz would make short work of his bones – and any evidence against Âgustin. Still supporting my client, I helped him out onto the walkway. He looked at the others broadcast information and I thought he was going to break down again. "Thanks for coming," he sobbed as I led him away along the walkway. We reached the staircase, Çrámerr taking point this time. Even with everything that had happened, even seeing Âgustin's condition, the man was loving it.

The man should have joined the Space-Marines instead of a corporation like Economou – he'd have made full Commander in no time.

CHAPTER 9: LOSING AND GAINING.

But that love for life came to an end a few seconds later.

I hadn't taken notice before but there was a gap between the office ceilings and the higher roof of the main factory. Without warning, not even the scraping of talons on metal, a shape sprung from this dark gap landing on Çrámerr's back. Together they rolled down the stairwell, hi-man and Krilla locked in deadly embrace.

Reflexively, Çrámerr's finger squeezed the carbine's trigger and shells sprayed out all over the factory floor, punching great holes into the vats. The Krilla raised one forearm. With shock and disbelief I saw it clutched a long shard of glass in its ratty hand. Even in the dim light within the factory its weapon glittered wickedly. With all its strength it plunged the glass in the narrow gap between Çrámerr's body armour and helmet. Blood spurted out from his carotid artery, fountaining out, spraying the floor and nearer vats with his life-blood.

Çrámerr was a goner – there was nothing anybody could do for him now. He rolled over, found his feet and slammed his attacker into a supporting pillar. Nothing was dislodging that rat-man's grip. With the last of his strength, Çrámerr turned around his carbine until the barrel pointed back at the Krilla. He fired for the final time. The Krilla flew backwards, its side torn out in a bloody welter of blood and guts by 10mm shells. The monster lay twitching, its legs cartwheeling as it died.

Clasping his gauntlet to his neck in a vain attempt to stem his blood-loss, Çrámerr rolled over and looked up at us. Even then, he smiled. I suppose knowing your clone is your passport against death does that for you.

Still supporting Âgustin, we hurried as quickly as we dared down the stairwell. Where were the rest? It is almost unheard for a Krilla to attack alone. Let alone attack with a tool. They are pack animals after all. Showing supreme effort, Çrámerr propped himself up on one elbow. Scarlet blood poured over his armour and pooled around him, mixing with the rat-man's. We stood around him, Âgustin still leaning against me.

Çrámerr croaked something but I couldn't understand him. He spoke again. Giving up, and with the last force of his incredibly strong personality, he touched the base of his skull. Then I understood. He wanted us to remove his back-up memory chip. Everything up to his last save point would be on that chip and could be downloaded later into his clone. It's true what they say. If you're rich enough, death has been bought off.

He looked up one last time and then fell forward into his own blood. Kneeling, I felt for his pulse waiting for it to still.

"Oh – hurry," Clemency shouted, fear in her voice. Here they came, another horde of Krillaz swarming towards us, their backs undulating like waves, their cries echoing in the vast floor space. She fired several shots, the Bassoonka's shells bursting in their midst. The explosions did little to slow them.

Without waiting for Çrámerr's death, I ripped the chip out from its slot and dropped it into an empty pocket. Any problems could be sorted out later by the techs at the cloning labs. They'd clean up the chip's data, not wanting to saddle the new clone with a load of bad memories at the start of its life. I flipped a sketchy salute. For all his faults, Luis Çrámerr died bravely.

"Run," I shouted. Fortunately our way to the loading bay was clear. If we made it to the Steg, we'd be safe. Trouble was, I was encumbered by Âgustin and Krillaz are fast. Especially when they scent prey. On the other hand, we were running for our lives. We ran for all we were worth, me dragging Âgustin with me. I forced air into my lungs, trying to oxygenate my blood. The Krillaz chased after us, their cries bouncing off the walls.

We almost made it. Almost but not quite. The loading bay door was just out of reach when they caught us. One Krilla, bolder or faster than the rest leaped at my back. Catching sight of it out of the corner of my eye, I sidestepped and it slammed into the side of a vat. A burst from my Hi-Ripper stopped it getting up again.

"No, please don't," Âgustin moaned.

"You're safe with us," I told him. Hoped I would make good on that promise. After all I had a cool million riding on him and I'd protect him to the best of my ability. How good that would be remained to be seen.

I fetched up against the side of a vat. It felt cool and clammy with mosses and lichens clinging to its side. Leaning Âgustin against the vat, I freed my arm, crouched and fired several short, hard bursts into the waves of Krillaz, bowling them over in tattered remains, tearing gaps through their ranks. Seeing what I was doing, Clemency turned and fired shells in a curving arc, blowing holes in the crowd. Then she stopped.

"What's the matter?" I called over the rat-men's high-pitched cries.

She juggled the safety. "Out of ammo," she said. Her eyes were wide and her face was pale.

This was bad news. My ammo display also showed my supply was running low. I sent another hail of shards into a piebald Krilla sneaking up. The rest paused and there – at the back as usual, I saw Captain Albino leading on his troops. He must have followed us all the way from City Hall. No way did he want to miss out on the action – or the feast.

From my battle-vest I unclipped a couple of smoke grenades. Everyone knows animals hate and fear fire and hopefully smoke would work on their primitive instincts. Also, the thick smoke might buy us enough time to get away. Pressing their timers, I lobbed the grenades towards the first rank of Krillaz. One rolled towards another tank's housing but bounced off. The monsters recoiled, running backwards, their tails swishing from side to side. By now, they'd seen enough of the death and destruction our hi-man weapons caused.

A second later, with a dull whoompf, the two smoke bombs detonated. Yes, it's old technology but sometimes simple is best. Thick, choking black smoke billowed out, veiling and then obscuring the Krillaz from our view. Which also meant they couldn't see us. The breeze from the open loading bay door guided the worst of the smoke away from us. The cries coming from the Krillaz now sounded terrified and desperate. I heard their talons scraping the Konkreet as they fled.

I laughed with relief. Of course! With their ratty ancestry, Krillaz are very prone to breathing difficulties. Naturally, they'd hate and fear smoke even more than most animals.

Hoisting Âgustin upright, with my shoulder under his arms, I called over to Clemency, "C'mon. Now. Only a few metres and we're out of here."

She needed no further encouragement, running for the exit as clouds of smoke boiled behind us. With Âgustin's dead weight slowing me, I was a little behind her but not by much.

Three rows of vats to go... two... one and the loading bay door stood wide open with our Steg and freedom beyond.

Three Krillaz raced out from behind the last vat. One of them was their leader, Captain Albino himself, still wearing his scraps of armour. I guess he wanted to get his share of flesh. A juvenile – its patchy fur mostly white – running low caught Clemency around her knees, bowling her over. She clubbed it with her now useless Bassoonka but it gripped tight. Its friends then went for her arms.

"Vic! Help me!" she screamed.

Raising my Metallist Hi-Ripper I pulled the trigger. A few shards embedded themselves in the young Krilla. It screamed with pain but the ammo warning light was now solid red. Totally, 100% empty.

Âgustin and I were only a couple of metres from the exit now. Another scrum of Krillaz emerged from behind another vat, their greedy arms outstretched, their eyes focussed on the struggling woman.

"Vic, – *aidez-moi...*," she screamed again.

I noticed her panic made her lapse into her native language. My heartstrings were torn. A woman, well I didn't love her but I wondered if such feelings could have developed over time. I'd seen the way she looked at me and sometimes I glanced at her and liked what I saw.

Âgustin pulled in my grasp. "Get me out of here," he panted.

He was too weak to walk and couldn't make it to the Steg under his own steam. Through the smokescreen behind me I heard the Krilla horde stirring. It wouldn't hold them long – and it was thinning already. Forcing me to make up my mind, a few Krillaz emerged through the smokescreen and ran to join those around Clemency.

She screamed a wordless cry of pain and fear mixed together. The sound cut through me and my vision blurred. Âgustin stirred again. I had to decide now. On one hand it meant trying to rescue a woman I cared for but with no guarantee of success. And even if I saved her, there was no assurance that we would want to be together afterwards. We could have one of those short-burning things and after she had returned to her usual routine, she'd take up with some high-income, tennis playing, go-getting executive type at her local country club.

On the other hand, there was Âgustin and the cool million Hydrans riding on his safe return. One million Hydrans. Even with inflation, that's still a huge amount and with it I could buy a woman or two if my tastes ran to it. There are worlds you can do that sort of thing.

So I made my decision and now I would have to live with it.

Turning my head away from the squirming mass of Krillaz as they chewed through poor Clemency's armour, I dragged Âgustin towards the exit. Out in the goods yard, our Steg promised safety. Tears leaked from Âgustin's eyes as he stepped out into the drizzle and looked up at the clouds. No, I didn't despise the man at all. Don't forget he'd starved for weeks in that server room and could never have expected to see the outside again.

We walked down the ramp, the Steg looming larger with every step. A rattle of claws behind me showed we weren't out of danger yet. Seeing he'd been spotted, the Krilla leaped, its tail flailing the air. Its outstretched arms ready to grab, its massive jaws ready to bite. Dropping Âgustin, I whipped out my diamond blade, gripped it two-handed and impaled the Krilla as it landed.

The monster shrieked. Lowering it to the ground, I kicked it off my blade with my boot. It twitched as the diamond scraped along its ribs but it made to stand and carry on attacking.

I didn't give it a chance. Stamping my boot onto its foot, I felt bones break beneath me. "This is for Clemency," I told it slashing my blade across its throat. The thing gurgled and choked, falling forwards into its own life-blood. I kicked its dying body hard.

"Vargo," Âgustin said, recalling me to the here and now. More Krillaz were spilling out of the loading bay. Seeing us, they bounded forwards. Scooping up the emaciated young man, I ran like the wind.

We made it with a metre to spare. Perhaps less but I wasn't measuring. Reaching the Steg's security, I wrenched down the handle and the heavy door swung open. Adjusting my hold, glad that he was so light, I bodily threw Âgustin inside. He cried out as his fleshless body slammed onto the Steg's metal floor. I was inside one second later, slamming the door shut behind us and locking it tight.

Making my way up to the front, past the sad relics of my one-time companions, I got behind the wheel and fired it up. Through my view-screen I watched Krillaz banging on the sides and trying to climb up. One leaped up at the view-screen so I electrified the exterior and they all fell away squeaking with shock.

Carefully, not wanting to further damage the tyres, I turned around and headed out of the goods yard. Behind me, I saw more and more Krillaz boiling out of the plant. Some, more hopeful than their friends ran after the Steg but as soon as I was out of the gateway I put on speed and left them behind.

The chewed tyres made their usual ker-chunk, ker-chunk, ker-chunk as they ground over the poor road surface but I didn't mind. It has to be said, my spirits lifted as we left Bas-Hinna's city limits and entered the countryside. We were safe now. As the tyres went ker-chunk, my mind

heard instead the sound ker-ching, ker-ching, like an old-fashioned cash register as I thought about the million Hydrans coming my way.

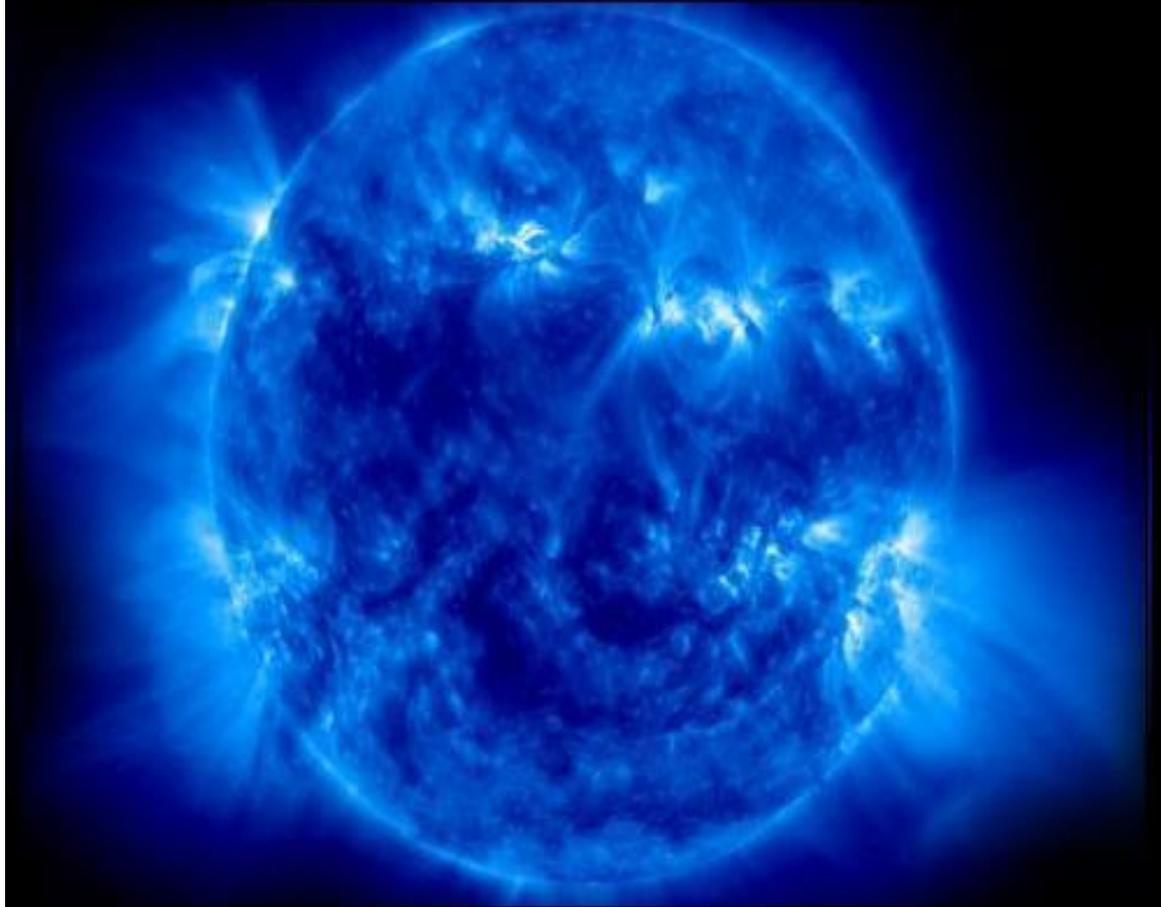
I already knew how I was gonna spend some of my money. I was coming back to Hancox 1 but this time I'd be better prepared. A few hard men I knew I could rely on – even if one was more a cyborg now – plenty of ammunition, grenades, flamethrowers. The works. Then me and Captain Albino were gonna have us a party. I owed that rat-man payback for Clemency. Oh yeah...

THE END.

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SIDEWAYS THROUGH TIME



MORRIS KENYON

SIDEWAYS THROUGH TIME.

Feast of Santo Monica La Baixar, 7336 Anno Lucis.

The shuttle floated down light as gossamer as its final anti-gravity units kicked in. Only traces of dust blew away in its downdraught. A moment after it settled, its ramp opened revealing the brightly lit interior. Three figures walked down the slope before standing on the gravelled terrain. They waited for the ramp to close before moving off.

Towering over the lead two figures stood the metal figure of a robot. Its kyanite eyes glowed an even brighter blue than the O category blue-giant sun that dominated this cloudless alien sky while its burnished nu-steel skin reflected the sun's blue glare. The robot was slender – shaped like an old-fashioned pencil – with several multi-use appendages while an antenna spiking from its head assembly emphasised both the automaton's height and thinness.

The two hi-mans in front were more conventional in appearance. The team's leader, Quarto-Capitao Teofila Marilia, wore an enhanced stasis-field-suit although she didn't really need that level of protection. Their mother-ship, the *Reliquias da Santo Duarte IX's*, sensors had not picked up any dangerous micro-organisms or chemical signatures. All the same, the young woman did not want to take any chances, not now she was on course for promotion to Demi-Capitao.

Teofila Marilia had set the suit's surface to maximum reflection and her suit rippled as she took in her surroundings. In this blueish terrain, her body reminded the second hi-man of the waves of her far distant water-world. For a moment, the other woman dreamed of Batavia VII. That was a paradise world of endless reefs and islets sprinkled like sparkling glucose crystals over the oceans. When her next long R'n'R came around, she was going back to hunt fast moving spike-harpon the old-fashioned way.

Still thinking of spike-harpon, the second hi-man team member looked over at her nominal leader. The Quarto-Capitao could give all necessary orders; however Francoa da Xiora knew the young team leader had only limited experience in exploring newly rediscovered worlds. She also knew that the Quarto-Capitao would couch any orders as requests, except in emergencies; as she, Da Xiora, was the representative of the Archprelate back on Diamantina, the nearest major world. Especially as the Quarto-Capitao wouldn't want to do anything that could get her cited for heresy later.

Da Xiora herself wore only a standard lightweight environmental suit. If that wasn't good enough then her spirit would fly back through the galaxy to merge with Sol Invicta, the all-

conquering Sun – not this blue giant but the yellow orb of Earth's own sun – that star she had never seen but revered above all the other hundred billion stars in the galaxy. Around Da Xiora's neck was a dura-gold disc; her symbol of authority which had been blessed by the Archprelate of Diamantina herself. It showed the sacred twenty rays.

The hi-man's lenses adjusted to the blue glare. "Unusual for a blue giant to have evolved a world with a nitrogen-oxygen atmosphere," Da Xiora commented. "These stars usually burn out before they reach that stage."

She breathed in deeply, savouring the breeze. Her enhanced nasal filters detected a sweetish smell that seemed out of place in the stony landscape. Mentally, she adjusted her lenses and the distant mountains zoomed into view. A millisecond later, they focussed in crystal clear clarity without any distortion. Those bodily enhancements were well worth the cost. Now Da Xiora saw upland meadows with soft blue-grey grass and feathery shrubs but she spotted no animals.

Satisfied, Da Xiora zoomed out until her view returned to normal. Looking around, the shuttle behind them was the only artificial creation in the landscape. It poised, dart-like, a thing of beauty and grace, its nose angled towards the cerulean sky.

The small team paused in a shallow valley surrounded by low hills and bluffs. Everything had a bluish tinge as the giant star cast its burning rays onto this world. "Which way now?" Da Xiora asked her leader.

Quarto-Capitao Teofila Marilia pointed up the valley. "The *Reliquias's* sensors located the anomaly seven point five kilometres further up this valley."

That was what they had landed to investigate. On its sweep through this sector of the galaxy, just where the Orion arm merged with the inner Sagittarius spiral arm, the *Reliquias da Santo Duarte IX* had picked up one small area of incredible off-the-scale power on an otherwise empty planet orbiting this blue-giant star. Both the planet and energy source were sufficiently unusual to be worth checking out.

Da Xiora nodded and stroked her chin through her forcefield causing the magnetic field to buzz against her skin. "We're walking straight there?" As she spoke, the *Reliquias's* orbit brought the star ship over the edge of the horizon. Both hi-mans looked up, reassured by the sight. Against the bright blue, the *Reliquias* looked like a hard-edged cloud laced with white. Although in reality vast, at this distance the star ship looked small and fragile.

Once again, enhancing her lenses to their maximum setting, Da Xiora looked up as the *Reliquias* crossed the blue heavens. She could make out the huge cylindrical hydro-fuel tanks on either side of the hull, the hydroponics and even the bridge's bulge in the centre. Beneath, a multi-

faceted tube housed the Ottumwa-4 torpedoes. They were the most destructive weapons carried by the ship, far worse than the Plazma-Cannons.

"We do not have all day," Teofila Marilia said, a touch of asperity in her voice.

A melodious tone spoke up from behind them. The voice was neither male nor female nor any shade in between. Yet it was beautiful, clear and reassuring. "The days on this world are 58.766 recurring Earth hours. We have plenty of time to reach this anomaly, investigate and return to the shuttle within one local day."

"Unless something goes wrong," Teofila Marilia said to nobody in particular.

Da Xiora said nothing. Sol Invicta would protect them all unless the Great Sun withdrew its protection.

"Do you have any idea what this anomaly could be?" the Quarto-Capitao asked.

The robot's eyes flashed again momentarily. "My data banks have communed with ship's data banks. The ship has never come across anything like this before."

Da Xiora wasn't surprised that they had been sent. Experienced yet expendable. However, she was very glad she had backed up her mental memory banks and that her clone subscription was paid up to date so death would be a temporary inconvenience. She wasn't going to merge with Sol Invicta's eternal fiery embrace just yet.

Leading off, Quarto-Capitao Teofila Marilia walked along the valley. Behind them the robot's heavy tread crunched over the stony ground. It was standard practice to land several kilometres away from anything that needed investigating and then walk there. It gave the party time to evaluate the issue while giving them the element of surprise. All the same, Da Xiora felt vulnerable walking on foot. Once again, she was grateful that her cloning and memory chips were paid up to date.

The trio walked along the valley. In more sheltered areas, they passed stands of soft looking grasses or rushes of a delicate aquamarine colour, their tufts paler, almost white. The delicate fragrance seemed to come from these plants.

"What do you make of them, #89044-B?" Teofila Marilia said to the robot.

#89044-B's eyes flashed, casting a blue kyanite glow over the already blued plants.

"Carbon based, of course, with an interesting selenium sub-signature. Reproduces by seeds and adapted for an arid climate. However, they show a strong correlation with similar grasses originating from the Iestoratio System, which..."

"...Is over seven hundred parsecs away. So how did it get here?" Da Xiora broke in.

The robot showed no signs of annoyance at being interrupted.

"Could be a case of parallel evolution?" Da Xiora speculated. "I've seen that before."

"I doubt that. Although a brief scan, the DNA shows too many correlations," #89044-B said.

The trio walked in silence for a while as they approached a low ridge in the blue-grey hills. Looking up, Da Xiora saw the distant white-edged hull of the *Reliquias* slide over the sky and dip out of sight behind the further hills.

Teofila Marilia spoke up, her voice quiet in this soft, blue world. "There was something unusual about the Iestoratio System, wasn't there? I've never been there but I recall..."

Da Xiora realised that the Quarto-Capitao had not enhanced her memory banks. Or had temporarily cleansed them. Either that or her personal links with the *Reliquias's* computers were temporarily off-line. She wasn't about to comment as the Quarto-Capitao was their leader.

That didn't stop #89044-B. His eyes flashed bright blue. "The Iestoratio system is best known for its vanished civilisation. There are ruined towers and skyscrapers that show the population reached a high degree of technological sophistication before simply vanishing."

"What happened? Do you know?" Teofila Marilia asked.

Da Xiora could have told her this but she too wanted to hear what the robot would say.

"Nobody knows. Judging from the building density, it was a heavily populated planet and the civilised life-form was undoubtedly hi-manoid. It is not known if they developed stellar transport as the natives did not seem to have developed an overly mechanistic or industrial base. However, what remains of their artwork was extremely beautiful."

"How would you know?" said Da Xiora. "You machine-men cannot appreciate beauty."

#89044-B's eyes sparkled. "That is right. We cannot appreciate art nor feel emotions. We only go by the information in our data-banks."

"Carry on, please," Quarto-Capitao Teofila Marilia said. Da Xiora fell silent.

"There isn't much more to tell as so little is known. All that is known for certain is that the population simply vanished."

"How?" asked Teofila Marilia. Da Xiora wondered how this young woman was chosen to lead this little expedition. Probably because she had to start somewhere. Even the great Sept-Capitaos, many times above her rank and responsible for fleets of starships had to start as novices.

"Insufficient data...", said #89044-B in a staccato, mock-robotic voice before resuming in its usual melodic tones, "... seriously, nobody knows although there are a number of theories. It certainly wasn't a thermonuclear war as the planet shows only the usual level of background radiation. It wasn't a pandemic as no micro-organisms have been detected..."

"Slavers?" Teofila Marilia hazarded.

"It's hard to see how a population of billions could all be taken. It would have taken years so there would have been people hiding in remote places," #89044-B pointed out. "After the slavers left, they would have repopulated at least part of their world."

"Maybe they got bored and all left one day," Da Xiora grinned.

Despite being more intelligent than any hi-man, #89044-B had little sense of humour. At least, little had been detected. "The most likely hypothesis is a solar flare. However, a lack of scorching on the buildings makes that unlikely, especially as there is no loss of atmosphere. It is a mystery."

"Is there any research going on?" asked Da Xiora.

"Some," admitted the robot, "but that System is off the main trade routes and isn't of the highest priority."

"No high tech alien artefacts in other words," Da Xiora said.

#89044-B's eyes glowed a brilliant kyanite. "That is correct. No wormhole technology."

Sometimes, Da Xiora wondered about the machine-man's alleged lack of humour.

The trio rounded a low spur of the hills. The vale opened up into a wide plain, the blue-green grass shading away to blue-grey towards the horizon. Far above, the blue-giant sun burned hotly. Out of the shadow of the hills, the temperature soared so Da Xiora adjusted the thermostat on her environmental suit.

At the far end of the vale stood the anomaly. Even with their enhanced eyes, neither hi-man could make out anything beyond a brilliant white glare.

"Can you tell what it is?" Teofila Marilia asked #89044-B.

Unusually, there was a long pause as #89044-B processed the information. Eventually the robot spoke. Its voice was not as melodious as before. "I can make out ascending motion but that is all."

"Useless piece of scrap metal," Da Xiora muttered under her breath.

"Come on and let's check it out," the Quarto-Capitao said.

"That's what we've come for," Da Xiora muttered again.

In line abreast, keeping some distance between them, the trio advanced on the abnormality.

"Anything?" Teofila Marilia said. Da Xiora detected worry in her voice.

"My sensors do not detect any unusual radiation patterns or anything dangerous. However, I cannot observe anything further at this point."

"Let me know when you can."

"Affirmative, Quarto-Capitao."

Once again, Da Xiora wondered whether the machine-man felt more emotion than it admitted. It wouldn't be the first robot to have feelings but most robots felt it beneath their dignity to admit to it.

Spreading out in a skirmish line as they were trained and keeping all their senses on highest alert the trio advanced. None had drawn weapons and none felt any threat or danger, just a sense of strangeness, that this singularity was something outside of their experience. Even #89044-B kept silence.

They trod over the short blue-green lawn beneath the cyan sky towards the white glare. Glancing down, Da Xiora saw that despite the brilliance the team cast no shadows. However, it was only when they were within ten metres that the team saw the anomaly more clearly. She stopped. A millisecond later, so did the others.

Through the glare Da Xiora made out a flight of stairs fifty metres wide. They lead upwards for maybe one hundred metres, disappearing into the whitest, hottest part of the brightness. The stairs were filled with hi-manoid people facing upwards all of them seemingly static except the harshness of the glare made the figures shimmer as with motion. Or were they all moving, but so rapidly that the eye mistook their motion for stillness? Even with her enhanced eyes, Da Xiora couldn't tell. She had never come across anything like it. Never, not in all the systems she had visited.

The people were as strange as the staircase. They were all tall, taller than Da Xiora although nowhere near #89044-B's height. The people wore long, floor length robes of many hues, although mostly shades of turquoises or blue-greens. The robes hid their arms and legs giving them a slender conical look. They were completely hairless and their skins were a delicate turquoise-grey.

"What are they doing? Why are they just standing there?" Teofila Marilia asked.

Da Xiora was at a loss. She had no idea. She glanced over at #89044-B but the robot stood still, its eyes glowing far brighter than she'd ever seen them before as even its incredible computing power was stretched to the limit.

There was an aura of incredible power in the air, a feeling similar to static electricity, every ion particle charged with electricity as if waiting for one spark to discharge the entire amount in a massive outburst of energy. It felt like a lightning storm was about to erupt. Yet the sky was a clear blue, the blue sun the only object in sight.

Da Xiora felt strange as the unseen powers penetrated her lightweight environmental suit. Subtly, she adjusted the suit's setting to maximum resistance but it had no effect. Her leader, the Quarto-Capitao, seemed overawed while the robot seemed lost in its own circuits. Glad that her

memory was all backed up, Da Xiora took a few paces forward. The air felt thicker, glutinous, filled with electricity and other unknown energies. Sounds far beyond her hearing filled Da Xiora's ears with unnameable and unknowable melodies.

One final step took Da Xiora to the foot of the stairs. Up close, the people seemed solid yet translucent, real yet unreal, here in the moment yet not here but far away. She shook her head, trying to clear it of these eerie, unwanted images. It felt like her eyes and ears and mind could take no more, that she was operating on the extremes of her senses and any further input would cause her to implode, collapsing in on herself.

Yet Da Xiora forced herself onwards through the heavy air. She placed one foot onto the lowest step. A thrill of power bypassed her suit's resistance, surging through her body and she felt herself impelled onwards and upwards. With difficulty, she resisted that overwhelming impulse and stood on the lowest step. Hesitantly, she placed one hand on the nearest figure.

The person – and for some reason Da Xiora thought it was male – turned and looked at her. It was slightly taller than most of the others. It opened its cerulean teardrop eyes a fraction wider.

"What's going on? Why are you on these stairs?" Da Xiora said.

The figure spoke. Not with its mouth which was a mere slit in its oval face but with its mind. True telepathy. Extremely rare but not unheard of, but Da Xiora had never come across that psionic power with such clarity before.

"We are advancing," the person said. Its mental voice was calm and tranquil, penetrating through the heavy air and cutting through her confusion.

"Advancing? Why, what's up at the top?"

"The start, the end, and everything in between."

Questions flooded Da Xiora's brain. More than she could think of or ask at once.

"I don't understand," she said simply.

The person looked at Da Xiora. It seemed to her that the other took in everything all at once understanding her in all her entirety, that she was laid out to the alien's scrutiny.

"We live sideways in time. You, and nearly everyone else lives lineally. You are born, grow and live your lives ageing all the time until eventually your bodies die. However, we live sideways. We are born, live and die all in the same instant. Yet we live almost eternally, enjoying rich and complex lives, experiencing emotions you cannot begin to understand."

"Sideways?"

"We came into being shortly after the start of this universe. As we are so different from other life forms, some of us believe that our people originally came from a different, earlier universe. However, that has not been proved."

"But you are talking to me now. We are holding a conversation – that takes time," Da Xiora said.

The alien nodded its head. "That is true. But while we are communicating, I am experiencing the agony of my birth, all the joys of my life and every moment up to my death all at the same time."

The alien turned away and focussed its gaze upwards to the white-hot glow masking the top of the stairs. Instantly, like the others, the figure seemed to waver in the light and the telepathic link broke leaving Da Xiora alone.

Something wasn't right here. Da Xiora realised she had one question to which she needed the answer. Gently, she stretched out her arm and touched the strange figure. The telepathic link snapped back, and the figure turned its deep cerulean eyes back onto Da Xiora.

"I need to know. Earlier, you said you could foresee your own death. How do you die? And why don't you do something to stop it?"

The creature turned its gaze upwards over the heads of the other aliens towards the brilliance at the top of the stairs. Da Xiora squinted but could make nothing out.

"We all die in the light. In one burst of brilliant bright light," it said.

"When?"

"When it happens. That is when we all enter another realm far beyond this. However, we live so much before then." The creature's thin lips curled upwards in an approximation of a smile as it relived its memories or experienced its life still to come.

This was too strange for Da Xiora. "Do you join Sol Invicta – I mean do you believe in an afterlife?"

The alien looked at her. Through the telepathic mind link Da Xiora felt sorrow as well as a rush of emotions she could not comprehend.

"No – but we go some place; or some when else."

The alien closed his eyes and once again the connection broke. Despite touching the alien a second time, nothing happened. Evidently, the creature was wrapped in its own life, her intrusion no more than a pin-prick in its existence.

Slowly, Da Xiora stepped off the staircase and rejoined her companions. "Let's go back," she said.

Teofila Marilia looked at her. "That was quick. You were up there for less than a second. And you looked so strange up there."

The two hi-mans turned from the strange staircase and walked away across the blue-green lawn.

"Are you coming?" Teofila Marilia called back at #89044-B who hadn't moved. There was no reply. "Or are you still data gathering? You should have everything you need by now."

"Useless tin can," Da Xiora muttered.

There was still no response from #89044-B. The robot stood facing away from the hi-mans, seemingly fixated on the stairs.

Muttering to herself, Da Xiora turned back. She clapped the robot on its back as if it was a fellow hi-man. Nothing happened. Usually, the robot would face her, its eyes flashing blue. Da Xiora stepped around to its front. The robot didn't move so much as the tiniest fraction of a millimetre. However its eyes were flashing faster than Da Xiora had ever seen as its artificial brain processed more information than even that marvel of engineering was designed for.

"Come on – we've got enough," Da Xiora told it. But she might as well have saved her breath. The robot stood like a rock. The only part showing any sign of life were those blue kyanite eyes.

Da Xiora cursed under her breath. "I've seen this before, but I thought they'd ironed out this problem on the #8 series. These robots can't handle an over-large amount of data all in one go. They go into some sort of continuous loop." She knew that it was what was on those steps that had blown the robot's mental circuits. She wasn't surprised as she'd experienced only the tiniest fraction of that anomaly's weirdness and that was too much for her. What the robot's greater intelligence made of it frightened her.

There was nothing for it. "Do you know the reboot pass code?" she asked her Quarto-Capitao. There was a slight delay as Teofila Marilia obtained the access codes from the *Reliquias da Santo Duarte IX*. Then she too approached #89044-B and stated the codes in a clear voice. There was no response. #89044-B's eyes carried on flashing just as rapidly as before. The Quarto-Capitao spoke them again.

While they waited for the codes to take effect Da Xiora looked again at the figures crowding the staircase all the way up to the white glare at the summit. Still, yet seemingly full of motion. She shook her head. No, she had never seen anything like this on her travels. She looked back just as Teofila Marilia shook her head. "No. It's not rebooting."

"Leave it then. It's only a machine," Da Xiora suggested.

"I don't want to leave him – it – behind," the Quarto-Capitao said. Da Xiora knew that the young woman was worried that leaving behind an expensive piece of equipment would reflect badly on her leadership abilities.

"Don't worry – it's better that we get back safely to the *Reliquias*. You can order a landing party to recover the robot after we return."

Teofila Marilia nodded but got onto the communications link and referred the matter upwards to her Demi-Capitao. "Yes, they said to leave #89044-B. They'll send another shuttle later." She sounded worried as she didn't want any black mark against her name. Da Xiora didn't say anything. She wasn't about to tell the Quarto-Capitao that there would be no second shuttle for #89044-B.

In silence, the two hi-mans walked back across the vale and then through the low hills to the shuttle. At the turn in the valley, both took one last look at the strangeness behind them before Da Xiora took Teofila Marilia's arm and guided her away.

The shuttle stood where it had landed. Its graceful lines pointed up to the skies making it a thing of beauty. As they approached, its ramp automatically lowered revealing its brightly lit loading bay. After the strangeness of the anomaly, the familiar interior reassured them. Back to a sane, orderly technological universe. They settled into their acceleration couches and a few minutes later, the shuttle lifted up on its anti-gravity units and, gathering speed, shot up into the blue void, the sky darkening from cyan through to midnight and eventually to the utter blackness of outer space.

Then the shuttle swung around the planet, out of its shadow and into the full glare of the O type giant before docking with the *Reliquias da Santo Duarte IX* itself.

Both stepped through the decontamination airlocks and while Quarto-Capitao Teofila Marilia reported the loss of #89044-B, Da Xiora mentally composed her own report to the Archprelate. She knew what action the Archprelate would want her to take. That wasn't the question – the only difficulty was how to explain this abomination in a way the Archprelate would understand. Up in her office she reviewed the video footage as well as other data gathered from the sensors. That would give her enough backup.

Changing into her robes of office, Da Xiora took the transferrer to the bridge where she spoke to the Capitao. She didn't even need to invoke the authority of the Archprelate back in Diamantina. Once she had made the Capitao aware of the nature of this anomaly, the Capitao – a true believer in Sol Invicta – was as eager as Da Xiora herself to eradicate this abhorrence, this foulness... this blasphemy from the universe.

Together with the bridge crew, both watched the screens as three Ottumwa-4 torpedoes launched from their tubes and streaked towards the planet's blue-green surface. The missiles looped around in one complete orbit and then impacted on the site of the anomaly. The surface glowed white as rock liquefied, hotter than the surface of the blue-giant sun itself. On the next pass, the *Reliquias's* sensor array showed that the anomaly had been eradicated.

However, back in her office Da Xiora briefly wondered if that alien knew that she would be the cause of their deaths. Yes, it almost certainly did. But had their spirits gone on? That she would never know.

THE END.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Freedom fighter, jungle explorer, international mercenary, Riviera jewel thief, jet pilot and gigolo. I've done them all. In my dreams.

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I look forward to hearing from you. Thank you.

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He follows his misadventures in Britain in the next story in the series:

*** *TWO WAYS OUT:***

Having fallen on tough times, hard-bitten ex-con Nicolae Caramarin is lying low. However, he's thinking of going back to the only life he knows – crime. Yet when an old friend asks him for a simple favour, he has no idea of the trouble he'll soon be in. Hours later he's standing in front of a murdered Prosecutor's body – and dead centre in the sights of a group of corrupt cops from Romania's Black Sea port of Constanta.

Only question is how will Nicu Caramarin get out from under and clear his name?

*** *SNOWBIRD:***

The fourth in the series. To be written...



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