

THE NOVELIZATION OF THE FULL CAST AUDIO EPISODE!

Nerry Nation's

# BLAKES 7

WARSHIP

PETER ANGHELIDES



**BIG**  
FINISH  **VIDEO**

**Blake's 7  
Warship**

**Peter Anghelides**

**BIG FINISH**

*For June Summerfield*

First published in February 2013  
by Big Finish Productions Ltd  
PO Box 1127, Maidenhead, SL6 3LW  
*www.bigfinish.com*

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Based on the original television series Blake's 7 created by Terry Nation.

## **Dramatis Personae**

### **The Liberator and crew:**

**Liberator:** A powerful spacecraft that far exceeds anything known to Earth technology, it is equipped with neutron blaster weaponry, force wall defences, auto-repair systems, and a teleportation system. The main computer, Zen, is the speech interface to the ship's systems, and coordinates navigation, battle computers, and information systems. The current crew discovered *Liberator* abandoned and drifting, apparently after a space war, and commandeered the vessel in their fight back against the Federation.

**Kerr Avon:** A technical expert, particularly with computers, Avon's attempt to embezzle millions from the Federation saw him imprisoned and exiled from Earth. He escaped to *Liberator* with Blake and Jenna, where his instinct for self-preservation meant that he became the most unwilling member of Blake's team – perceived by the others as a man whose cold calculation is primarily self-serving. By the time they reach Star One, he has exacted a promise from Blake that control of the *Liberator* will be handed to Avon after they have completed this mission.

**Roj Blake:** Once leader of the Freedom Party and a charismatic opponent of the Terran Federation, Blake was captured in a lethal ambush by Travis. When their attempt to brainwash him failed, the Federation trumped up charges to disgrace Blake and banish him from Earth. En route to the penal colony Cygnus Alpha, Blake escaped from the prison ship *London*, and commandeered the derelict *Liberator*. Since then, he has cajoled or bullied his reluctant outlaw crew in a renewed fight against their enemies – with fatal consequences for both sides. Blake has targeted the Federation's facilities, rallied its enemies, and tracked down its Central Control system to Star One – where he had a final confrontation with his nemesis, Space Commander Travis.

**Cally:** A telepath from the planet Auron, who can communicate her thoughts directly to others. Sole survivor of a guerrilla attack on a Federation facility, Cally has felt unable to return to her isolationist home world. Her mutual distrust of the *Liberator* crew mellowed, and her growing empathy has made her an instinctive medic. Lately, her loyalty to Blake has been sorely tested by his obsessive campaign to destroy Star One, no matter what the cost.

**Orac:** A unique supercomputer created by Professor Ensor, and appropriated by the *Liberator* crew after his death. Orac can access anything that contains a Tarial Cell, also invented by the Professor and now a standard component in all modern computers. Orac shares many characteristics with Ensor, including a thirst for knowledge and an ill-tempered intolerance of anything perceived as less intelligent – including the *Liberator* crew.

**Vila Restal:** A petty thief, a conjurer, but most of all an expert lockpick who can breach even the most complex security systems. Vila has been in trouble with the Federation since he was a juvenile. He was eventually exiled to Cygnus Alpha, but rescued from there with his friend Gan by Blake and brought aboard *Liberator*. He prefers to be lazy, even if that might look like cowardice, and has a weakness for drink and an eye for pretty women. Vila is smart enough to know that playing the fool can be a good way to stay safe. And safety is something he has thought about since Gan died in Blake's abortive attack on a Federation facility.

**Jenna Stannis:** A smuggler sentenced by the Federation to exile on the penal colony Cygnus Alpha. Jenna assisted Blake's mutiny aboard the prison ship *London* and commandeered the *Liberator*. The ship's name was taken from her thoughts when she first came aboard. Jenna's expertise has made her the *Liberator's* principal pilot. Although she has some reservations about their fight against the Federation, Jenna is loyal to Blake.

### **The Federation:**

**Servalan:** Supreme Commander of the Federation's entire military organisation. Servalan is responsible

for the brutal repression of all resistance, and has been charged with destroying Blake and his crew – though she wants to capture the *Liberator* for the Federation. In an organisation governed by men, Servalan is a rare, powerful woman who has exploited her seductive charm and amoral ruthlessness to fight her way to the top. She is prepared to use and discard anyone, including Travis. In the panic that ensued when Star One failed, a military coup sees her appointed as President of the Federation.

**Travis:** A brutal Federation Space Commander appointed by Servalan to lead the capture of Blake and the *Liberator*. Travis previously encountered Blake on Earth, when he ambushed a group of Freedom Party rebels and slaughtered them after they had surrendered. In the attack, Blake severely wounded Travis – who required a cybernetic eye replacement, and a prosthetic limb which incorporated a laseron destroyer. Frustrated by his repeated failure to capture Blake, and Servalan's flagrant manipulation, Travis eventually betrayed humanity by helping alien invaders to infiltrate the Star One facility. In a final confrontation, Travis shot Blake with his laseron destroyer. But Avon finished off Travis, who plunged to his death.

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# Chapter 1

## Fight or Flight Deck

Cally hesitated in the corridor. From here, she could listen to the sounds of the ship as its systems powered up. Back on the flight deck, the others were readying *Liberator* for the fight. For the confrontation with an alien battle fleet that loomed on the edge of this galaxy.

Jenna was ordering the battle computers to calculate intercept courses and strike ranges. Vila had put up the radiation flare shields, and was clearing the neutron blasters for firing. And Avon...

He'd sent Blake back to the medical unit, which left Avon in charge. That much was no surprise to Cally, at least. But what had astonished her was that Avon hadn't used that opportunity to steer the ship away from danger. Instead, he'd made Blake a promise, a commitment to stay and fight. Behind the building thrum of the engines and the ticks of systems coming online, something niggled at the back of Cally's mind. A mental itch she couldn't quite scratch.

The others could manage without her for a few minutes. She had to go to the medical unit.

Cally continued down the corridor, determined to talk with Blake.

Blake had told them they could deliver a death blow to the Federation. They would destroy the central command system used to subjugate hundreds of planets, that suppressed entire populations, that controlled every aspect of their lives. That's why he'd brought the *Liberator* out here, to a nondescript planet circling an uncharted white dwarf star. He wanted to tear down Star One forever.

It seemed their enemy Travis must have had the same idea. But for very different reasons. Travis knew Star One had another purpose. That it controlled a satellite minefield – a barrier between the Federation galaxy and the next. If the *Liberator* crew shut down those satellites, that alien battle fleet would swarm across the barrier and attack humanity. It was to be the former space commander's insane revenge against his own kind, after the Federation had betrayed him. Travis didn't care that his reprisal could cost the lives of millions... maybe billions of people. There would be no way back for him.

Was that what was scratching at the back of Cally's mind? Why she could sense voices whispering in her mind, probing, questioning, worrying? Perhaps it was her own conscience, her own anxiety about their actions. Blake's actions. And before the battle began, before she joined the others in the fight, she needed to know.

The door slid open, and light from the corridor spilled into the half-light of the medical unit. A figure stirred on the far side of the darkened room.

Blake shielded his eyes awkwardly to work out who it was. 'Cally?'

She slipped into the room, and the door closed behind her. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the subdued lighting.

Blake half-rose from the bed, but subsided again with a pained groan. 'You should be on the flight deck.'

'And you should lie still.' She moved across to his bed, and checked the readings on his monitors. His heart rate was rising, and the pain indicators had spiked. She adjusted the soma infusion, and eased Blake back down. 'Do not try to get up. I saw you leave the flight deck, and came to check whether you were all right.'

He grunted a short laugh. 'I've had better days.'

'But none so lucky. The shot from Travis's gun missed your heart by a fraction.' The monitor bleep subsided again, and she nodded with satisfaction. 'Stay still. Let the machines do their work here. And let the rest of us do ours.'

Blake sighed with exasperation. 'But the alien fleet...?'

Cally could see from his expression that he felt trapped. No, it was more than that. She sensed it in



his mind. That was new, she thought. Unexpected.

‘What about that fleet?’ Blake insisted.

Cally gestured for him to stay calm. ‘Several hundred ships are queuing at the hole in the satellite grid,’ she said. ‘Avon believes we can hold them until the Federation fleet arrives.’

The monitor showed a fresh increase in Blake’s heart rate. ‘That could be hours!’

‘Then we will hold them for hours.’ Again, there was that chattering at the back of her mind, like a half-heard conversation from an adjacent room. ‘You already know that, don’t you, Blake?’

Cally pulled a chair over from the lab table, and sat beside the bed. She absently took Blake’s hand in hers. She wasn’t sure which of them the gesture was intended to comfort.

‘Are you all right, Cally?’

She bit her lip. She had come here because there were things she wanted to know from Blake, not to answer his questions. But there were those voices at the tip of her consciousness again. Sensations. Emotions. Inarticulate to begin with, but slowly becoming more focused, turning into words.

‘There is something odd about this area of space, Blake. I feel as though my telepathic abilities are...’ She struggled to find the right words. ‘They’re enhanced. I can sense other thoughts.’

‘You can read people’s minds?’

She smiled at Blake’s startled look. ‘Not exactly,’ she said, and patted his hand.

Blake’s fingers squeezed hers reassuringly. ‘Intelligent guesswork, then?’

‘Something like that.’

She almost said more, but the strident chime of the intercom interrupted her.

‘*Cally? Cally!*’ Avon’s voice crackled over the audio. He evidently wasn’t in the mood for a long conversation. ‘*Wherever you are, get back here. Now!*’

Blake released her hand. ‘You should go. Avon’s waiting. Sounds like leading the fight has gone to his head.’

‘What about you?’ she replied.

‘I’m still plugged in here.’ He nodded at the nearby equipment. The motion provoked a little wince of pain from him. ‘Like you said, I should let these medical units do their job.’

‘That is not what I meant, Blake.’ Cally studied his expression carefully. ‘Did leading the fight go to *your* head?’

Blake didn’t disguise his surprise. ‘Cally?’

‘Before we went down to the planet,’ she said, ‘you did not answer my question. Would you have done it?’

‘Done what?’

‘Would you have risked the lives of so many by destroying Star One?’

His heart rate was increasing again. The medical instruments suggested a surge of adrenaline, too. Cally didn’t need to read the display screens to tell that his breathing had become more ragged.

‘Is that what you really came here for?’ he snapped at her. ‘To ask me that?’

The intercom interrupted again.

‘*Cally, where the hell are you? Those alien ships are closing in.*’ There was little doubt from Avon’s tone who he thought was in charge.

She scraped her chair back, and crossed to the far wall. ‘I’m on my way,’ she said into the speaker, and switched off the intercom to deny Avon the chance to comment. ‘You and I will talk later, Blake.’

‘About what?’

‘About whether our reprisal could have cost the lives of so many innocent people.’

Blake’s only reply was a non-committal grunt.

Cally opened the door to leave. ‘In the meantime, perhaps Avon can hold back that oncoming fleet and save millions, instead.’

Avon, she'd said. Across the room, in the harsh light spilling in from the corridor, she saw the disappointment in Blake's eyes.

\* \* \*

If anything, the flight deck was busier than when Cally had left it. Jenna sat in the pilot's seat, and calibrated her controls in readiness for the oncoming attack. Vila fidgeted at his own console as he checked and rechecked the display, not quite ready to trust the readings. Zen's flickering lights revealed that the *Liberator* systems were primed and active.

Avon looked up from his own preparations, and watched Cally take her own familiar seat. 'Nice of you to join us.'

Cally ignored his sarcasm. And perhaps there was something more, but the chatter in her subconscious made it hard to discern.

Jenna's look was easier to read. 'Is Blake all right?'

Cally nodded briefly. 'But his condition is still dangerous.'

'So is ours!' said Vila. He prodded a display control, and stared in agitation at what it told him.

'We're ready for them,' Avon said. He stepped calmly across to the main view screen. 'Zen, zoom in on the gap in the defence zone. Display our projected intercept course.'

'CONFIRMED.'

Cally saw the screen dissolve and reform as it plotted the vectors. A principal red line curved across the image that represented the satellite grid around Star One. The *Liberator's* path had stopped in front of a gap in the defence zone. The trajectory of the enemy vessels indicated they were en route for the same position, a myriad red lines converging on a single point. The point where *Liberator* stood ready to confront them, alone.

Avon nodded with grim satisfaction. 'There they are.'

'There's hundreds of ships,' wailed Vila. 'Hundreds!'

'What's the outlook?' asked Avon. For a moment, Cally thought he was talking to Vila, but his gaze had hardened on her. 'Come on!'

Cally was determined to remain composed, even as she realised how she'd only just returned to the flight deck in time. 'One minute to strike range.'

Vila was a lot less calm. 'We can't hold all of them.'

'They can't all come through that gap at once,' Jenna said.

Avon took his seat, and stared impassively at the main screen. 'Stand by to fire.'

'Avon,' protested Vila, 'this is stupid!'

'When did that ever stop us?' Avon's outstretched finger hovered over the weaponry controls, though his eyes never left the screen. He was unnervingly calm, thought Cally. She wondered if any medical instruments would show he'd had a surge of adrenaline. Detect that his pulse had actually increased. Whether they could even find a heart.

She could hear the tick of the computers. The hum of the engines. The sound of her own breathing. And faintly, in the background, a babble of distant voices.

Avon's finger stabbed down onto the controls. 'Fire!'

## Chapter 2

### First Contact

The *Liberator*'s hull groaned with the strain of another brutal change of trajectory. A deep, guttural moan, like a wounded animal protesting as it was forced into a painful turn to avoid a predator. It seemed to Jenna as though the flight deck warped and twisted in front of her eyes while she wrestled with the controls. But it was probably just the sweat that drenched her forehead and stung her eyes.

How long had they been fighting? It must have been hours since the first engagement, and yet it felt like a lifetime. Jenna ruefully thought of how all her smuggling career had been about avoiding the enemy. Hiding from them, or making a swift retreat if detected. It went against every instinct she had to steer her vessel into a confrontation. And yet here she was, principal pilot of the *Liberator*, and facing down hundreds of alien vessels as they forced their way through the single hole in the Star One defence grid.

She risked a look up from her controls. Cally was monitoring the battle formations, and remained calm despite the buffeting of the ship's abrupt movement. Jenna had long abandoned warning them before she made any sharp manoeuvres – the crew had got used to the idea hours ago that they should expect the unexpected. Vila managed to maintain a firing procedure against the approaching ships, despite his plain terror at the onslaught. It was clear that his every instinct was to flee from the room and cower in a distant corner, but he gripped the weapons controls with grim desperation.

Avon was preternaturally calm, a still point amid the chaos. Jenna suspected it was a cold anger that let him remain in quiet control of the *Liberator*. How different Blake would have been in this situation. But was that necessarily better?

A hail of shrapnel rattled across the hull, and Jenna wrenched the controls aside to avoid the remaining debris. The flaming wreck of an alien ship, gutted by the neutron blasters, tumbled past *Liberator* and into the cold depths of space. Like so many of its predecessors, its bulbous shape seemed utterly inimical to conventional space travel.

Avon was already snapping out fresh orders. 'I want a full sensor sweep, Zen. Have we enough energy in the primary power banks to sustain this strafing pattern ahead of us?'

'PRIMARY POWER AT THIRTY-SEVEN PERCENT. SECONDARY POWER IS STILL RECHARGING.'

Avon moved over for a closer look at the main view screen. He clutched at the bulkhead to help himself stay upright when the ship lurched again. 'Initiate pattern sigma positioning. Random manoeuvres at your discretion.'

'CONFIRMED.'

The next bizarrely-shaped alien ship was squeezing into their sector from beyond the Star One defence grid. 'Look!' called Jenna. 'That's another of them through.'

This one, however, had an extraordinary turn of speed. Even at that distance, Jenna saw its knobbly hull fluoresce in a rainbow display of colours before it sped at incredible velocity towards *Liberator*. Vila was caught by surprise. He gave a little squeal of alarm as the vessel loomed impossibly large, impossibly quickly in front of them. Before Jenna had time to wonder if the shield would deflect it, or Vila had time to retarget, the ship had whooshed past and vanished from the screen.

Jenna let out a huge breath. 'I thought it was going to ram us.'

Cally was already tracking it with the detectors. 'Vila, can you pick it off with the rear neutron blasters?'

'I can't see it,' he admitted, becoming flustered. 'Wait... er... No.' He flapped a bit more. 'Yes! Oh... it's out of range.'

‘Should we pursue?’ asked Cally.

‘Leave it,’ said Avon. ‘Stay focused on the gap in the grid. A handful of fugitives can’t do much harm.’

‘That’s what *you* used to say about us,’ muttered Vila.

‘And now look at us,’ agreed Jenna. She thought about the fluorescing vessel that had just escaped through the defence grid. The display screen showed that another strange ship was easing its way through the breach, growing larger before her eyes. ‘How many alien ships have slipped through now?’

Cally pondered the question. ‘Eight? Maybe nine?’

‘And we’ve destroyed twenty in the past hour alone,’ Avon reminded them. His finger stabbed at the controls for the neutron blasters. A fierce shaft of brilliant green light speared into the oncoming attacker and tore it apart. ‘Twenty-one now,’ said Avon. ‘Zen, how many more?’

Lights flashed across the main fascia of the ship’s computer. ‘SENSORS INDICATE NEARLY ONE HUNDRED AND SEVENTY-NINE VESSELS BEYOND THE OPENING IN THE BARRIER. THERE ARE AN ESTIMATED FOUR HUNDRED AND FIFTY-EIGHT VESSELS PROBING THE SATELLITE NETWORK AT OTHER POINTS.’

Movement on the screen made Jenna realise they’d forgotten something. ‘Incoming debris!’

‘Hold tight!’ yelled Avon, his previous composure gone. He threw himself into the nearest flight seat and held on. A metallic clatter on the hull indicated that the momentum of pieces from the shattered ship had carried them through the *Liberator*’s defences.

‘INFORMATION. DEFENCE SHIELD AT TWENTY PERCENT EFFICIENCY.’

Vila groaned. ‘Now they can see us as well as hit us! Oh, where are those Federation ships?’ He seemed to ponder this irony. ‘We spend years trying to avoid them, but when you *really* need them to turn up...’

‘You are babbling, Vila,’ said Cally.

‘Babbling is what he does best,’ said Avon. ‘Concentrate on the neutron blasters.’

Vila looked furious. Jenna smiled encouragingly at him, but he wasn’t amused. ‘I’m not a soldier in your army, Avon,’ he snapped. ‘Picking pockets is what I’m good at. And picking locks—that’s my area of expertise. I’m a genius at that. But this is just... madness.’ Even so, he continued to focus on the screen, and his hands flickered over the blaster controls in anticipation of his next target.

Avon wasn’t interested in Vila’s protests, and was already considering their next options. ‘Zen, can you intercept any alien communications? Tell us what they’re saying.’

‘SENSORS HAVE DETECTED ALIEN COMMUNICATION, BUT TRANSLATION IS NOT AVAILABLE.’

Jenna was intrigued. ‘What do they sound like, Zen?’

‘NOW PLAYING INTERCEPTED MESSAGE.’

At first Jenna thought that there was interference in the signal. It soon became plain that the noise they could hear was actually the alien communications. This was what they sounded like. A warbling, guttural gargle of noise, swooping across a full octave and utterly dissimilar to any voice she had encountered. Unlike any animal noise she’d ever heard, too. It was completely... well, alien to her.

‘Turn it off, Zen!’ said Avon. ‘Keep monitoring for anything that makes sense. But if we can’t understand them, I don’t want to hear them.’

Vila agreed. ‘It was just gibberish.’

‘Maybe I should have asked you to translate,’ Avon told him.

This was no time to undermine Vila, Jenna thought. But she didn’t have time to comment, because of a sudden new turn of events. ‘Two more ships are through!’ She pointed urgently at them as they loomed larger and larger on the main screen, spiralling towards the *Liberator*. She considered an emergency manoeuvre, but concluded that the corkscrew pattern of the aliens’ approach had locked

*Liberator* in their sights. Could she reverse away from them? That would take *Liberator* off-station and allow other ships unfettered access through the hole in the defence grid.

Perhaps it was already too late.

‘They’re locked on,’ Jenna yelled. ‘Brace for impact!’

## Chapter 3

### The Unknown Universe

Vila's hands froze over the neutron blasters. The two alien ships coiled through space towards *Liberator*. Their hulls blazed with light, and a glittering tail of luminescence curled in their wake. It was almost hypnotic.

Jenna was yelling something at him. Or someone else. Or everyone. Or maybe just yelling. He felt like screaming himself. Instead, he grabbed hold of the console before him, just as the alien ships smashed into the flare shield.

A deep vibration struck up throughout the flight deck, juddering and shaking him to his core. It was disorienting, slightly nauseating. Vila slammed back in his seat, and gripped the console even more tightly in a desperate attempt to stay upright. Distant alarms blared. A rattle of debris on the outer hull echoed throughout the room.

There was fresh yelling in his ear. Too close for Jenna. It had to be Avon.

'You have them, Vila. Fire!'

Vila risked letting go of the console with one hand, and prodded hopefully at the activation control for the neutron blasters. It loosed off a fusillade of shots. Two, three, more...

The lights on the view screen flared brilliantly, blindingly. The flight deck tilted sickeningly to one side, and then just as abruptly to the other. When his eyes recovered, Vila saw only sparkling debris where the two alien ships had been.

'Got them!' he shouted, almost delirious with delight. 'I got them!'

'Well done,' said Avon. There was a grudging note in his voice. 'Stay alert. There'll be plenty more.'

Vila stared at the back of Avon's head, visualising a target. 'It's only your encouragement that keeps me going, you know.'

But Avon had already crossed the flight deck, and was sliding Orac out from a side cabinet. He swept his hand across a table, scattering onto the floor what few items had not already been thrown there during the violent manoeuvres of the previous few hours. When he had Orac on the table, Avon slotted the activation key into place. A querulous whine indicated that the computer was active.

Avon placed his hands either side of the transparent box. 'Orac, what have you discovered about the alien fleet's intentions?'

Orac responded immediately in his familiar irritable fashion. 'As I have mentioned before, your frequent and impertinent interruptions do not change the situation.'

Avon slapped one palm against the side of the computer. 'Your regular and predictable evasions aren't helping, either.' He tried again. 'What have you found?'

This time, there was a pause before Avon got a reply. Vila thought that Orac's tone was now more evasive than aggrieved. 'The alien technology is too inferior for suitable analysis.'

Avon gave a great laugh of derision, an odd contrast to his coldly imperious command of *Liberator* so far. 'Of course! Their systems do not use Tarial Cells. Therefore, *you* cannot interrogate them.' Avon's humour didn't last as he pondered the implications of this. 'That doesn't make them stupid, Orac. It makes them impenetrable.'

'I thought,' said Vila, 'that all computers in the known universe were based on Tarial Cells?'

'Well, you're looking at the unknown universe now.' Avon gestured expansively towards the view screen. In the distance, hundreds of alien ships lurked beyond the satellite defence barrier. 'Orac, try something else. Assimilate all Zen's current long-range scan data, and cross-reference it against the known movements of the alien fleet over the past two hours. Extrapolate their next moves, and advise.'

‘If you insist,’ grumbled Orac.

‘Oh, I do.’ Avon snatched at the activation key, and the chattering whine disappeared as he left Orac to complete the assignment. Avon slid the computer back into the side cabinet.

Vila wanted to ask what Avon had actually asked Orac to do, but Jenna was already calling over to him.

‘Watch it. Some of the smaller ships have broken through.’ She studied the display in front of her. ‘Must be...’

‘Half a dozen,’ suggested Cally.

Jenna was already steering *Liberator* back into a defensive position. ‘Here they come.’

Vila looked wildly at the view screen. A scattered group of gleaming points of light twisted towards him. Two of them executed an eccentric route that followed no logical pattern. The others zoomed larger and larger, aimed unerringly at the *Liberator*. He stabbed repeatedly at the neutron blasters, unsure whether just to blast away at random in the hope of catching all of the attackers, or to concentrate on fewer, more targeted shots and risk missing some of the others.

‘They’re too fast!’ he wailed. ‘I can’t pick them off.’

Jenna wasn’t making it any easier, he decided. Perhaps as a result of the previous attack, she was shimmying the ship from side to side to make it less obvious which direction they might finally commit to. The engines swooped and boomed. The view screen wobbled in response, and Vila quivered along with it.

‘There are more coming!’ Jenna warned him.

‘Another four,’ Cally confirmed.

Jenna twisted *Liberator* aside, and the ship rolled abruptly. But it was to no avail. ‘They’ve got us in a pincer formation!’

A coruscating barrage of alien blasts pummelled the *Liberator*. The flight deck lit up, brilliant light searing from the main screen until the automatic filters cut in to compensate for the painful brightness. The ship’s engines dipped ominously, then re-established their familiar note. Vila wondered if the defences had been breached. Were they holed? Could they still defend themselves from this fresh onslaught?

He examined his readouts worriedly. He wasn’t optimistic at the best of times, but this really didn’t look good. ‘Our neutron blasters are almost exhausted.’ He looked over at Jenna for reassurance.

She had none. ‘The force wall is failing, too. Zen, what’s our status?’

‘DEFENCE FIELD NOW AT TWELVE PERCENT EFFICIENCY. BATTLE COMPUTERS PROJECT THAT CURRENT RATE OF DAMAGE WILL EXHAUST THE AUTO-REPAIR SYSTEMS IN TEN MINUTES.’

‘What was that?’ asked Cally.

Vila saw that she had her head tilted at an angle, as though straining to hear something. ‘That was our last chance of survival!’ he told her.

She didn’t seem to hear him. Or maybe she was concentrating on whatever had caught her attention. Though what she could possibly hear above the cacophony of the alien assault, Vila couldn’t imagine. He returned to his controls, firing the neutron blasters as the alien counter-strike continued. *Liberator*’s hull groaned ominously.

‘Can’t you hear it?’ Cally asked. Her voice was insistent, but so quiet that she was barely audible beneath the noise of the attack. ‘It’s a babble of voices... a kind of continuous chattering...’

‘The aliens!’ groaned Vila.

‘Or,’ suggested Avon, ‘she’s been listening to you for too long.’

‘INFORMATION. DETECTORS INDICATE SEVERAL HUNDRED ADDITIONAL SHIPS APPROACHING *LIBERATOR*, VECTOR SEVEN-NINE.’

‘At last!’ A surge of relief flooded through Vila, almost as good as a slug of soma. ‘The Federation fleet! I never thought I’d be glad to see them.’

‘Impossible,’ snapped Avon. ‘They are a long way off. Zen, identify those ships!’

‘THAT INFORMATION IS NOT AVAILABLE.’

Jenna already seemed to be considering other possibilities, but the instrumentation was not helping her. ‘Rear sensors have been knocked out.’

‘I only realigned those the other week,’ grumbled Vila. The emotional rush had well and truly dissipated. ‘I don’t fancy going out there again, Jenna. Those hull suits make me claustrophobic.’

‘Auto-repair should be able to handle it,’ she reassured him.

‘Not at this rate of damage,’ said Avon. Trust him to crush any remaining optimism.

Vila was exasperated. ‘We’re surrounded! Defenceless. Blind. Let me know if I’ve missed any other kind of catastrophe. I’d hate to die misinformed.’

Avon clearly still couldn’t believe the evidence of the readout in front of him. ‘How the hell did so many alien ships get behind us?’

Vila glared at him. ‘You know what they say about “fight or flight”? Well, I’ve always been quite keen on flight. How does that sound to you, Avon? Jenna?’

‘Neutron blasters are depleted,’ she replied. Her choice was clear, at least.

Avon was still searching for straws to clutch at. ‘We’re running out of options.’

‘Running out sounds like a pretty good option to me!’ Vila retorted. ‘So what’s keeping us here?’ He twisted around to appeal directly to the others. ‘You agree with me don’t you, Jenna? And you, Cally?’

Jenna was frowning. But it wasn’t Avon she was worried about. ‘Cally? Are you all right?’ There was no reply.

A fusillade of alien fire raked across *Liberator*, and a control panel next to Zen exploded in sparks. Everyone ducked instinctively.

Everyone, Vila noted, except Cally. She remained standing by her console, rocked from side to side by the lurching movement of the flight deck, yet otherwise unmoved by the bedlam around her.

Her expression had glazed over. Despite the commotion of the alien bombardment, her attention was somewhere else entirely.



## Chapter 4

### Ragtag Army

Cally could feel her body swaying to and fro. She sensed movement around her, the flicker of lights in her peripheral vision, and the sense that her friends were trying to talk to her.

But there was a more insistent conversation in her mind. She'd perceived it faintly at the start of the alien attack, but dismissed it as her mind playing odd tricks at a time of great stress. Odd sensations that had tickled at the edges of her consciousness since arriving in this sector had continued to build, like a voice calling ever more insistently from a distance. Was it trying to attract her attention?

It had grown into many more, all calling, all appealing... to her? Low whispers that were building into a shout. Becoming a chorus of voices.

She concentrated. Tried to make out what they were calling out to her. No, it wasn't a chorus. They were not all chanting the same thing at once. The words were not the same. But surely, Cally sensed, their *meaning* was the same. Not the same words, exactly. Not the same vocabulary. Not even the same language. But the same *theme*.

Cally focused in on that theme. They were not even voices – they were minds.

She felt a thrill ripple through her whole body. A mixture of dread and exhilaration. For a brief moment she contemplated the prospect that she had reached out to the consciousnesses of the alien fleet. The excitement faded as she realised that the enemies' thoughts were utterly closed to her. Unknown. Unattainable.

Despite this, she felt no disappointment. Because there was something else. Something reassuring. Something familiar. Sensations she knew all too well.

She sensed fear. Not her own, but the fear of whoever was out there. Cally felt like weeping in acknowledgement and relief, because she also felt in every fibre of her being that they knew fear could not hold them in its cold grasp. Because the coiled spring of anger was driving them onward. The primal urge to defend and survive.

They were relentless. They were defiant.

Cally laughed out loud. 'They are humans!'

The flight deck surged back into reality. Weaponry slamming its relentless bombardment against the hull. The heat of the flight deck around her. The yaw of the *Liberator* as the alien assault continued. Her friends staring at her in concern.

'Humans!' Cally repeated. 'Not alien vessels. There are human ships coming!' She took a few unsteady steps across to the main computer. 'Zen – visual.'

'CONFIRMED.'

The main screen flickered and refocused, revealing a motley array of space vessels approaching from sector ten. Although they had many and varied designs, their appearance was reassuringly familiar. A comforting alternative to the unrecognisable shapes of all the alien attackers they had faced so far.

Cally almost laughed again at her friends' expressions. 'I could feel their emotions,' she explained.

'What? You can read their minds?' Vila looked amazed. And then he had another thought. 'Can you read *my* mind?'

'No-one would want to read your mind, Vila,' she smiled.

'Where did they come from?' Jenna wanted to know.

Cally closed her eyes to concentrate. Trying to recall the intense emotions and intentions of the approaching humans. She focused her mind again on what disparate humans were saying, thinking, hoping 'It is a flotilla from the nearest frontier worlds,' she explained.

Avon was already checking the call idents from the arriving ships. He ordered Zen to filter key

information and incoming messages. Cally could see relief in everyone's faces as human voices spoke to them over the audio, rather than the impenetrable noise of the aliens.

There were military cruisers arriving from Vilka and Herom, not Federation standard but still armed and ready to engage. There were also mining vessels out of Carthenis, their industrial laser cutters adapted as crude weaponry. Solar shuttles from Palmero flitted in and around the larger vessels. It was clear from the chatter over the comms systems that there were even tourist craft from Harnup and Moran, whose asteroid repulsion systems had been converted in a makeshift manner into armaments.

Jenna had completed her scan of the approaching fleet. 'Hundreds of them!' she confirmed, her voice cracking with excitement and relief. 'All armed.'

'They heard about the invasion,' said Cally, 'and they have come to defend their galaxy.'

The first of the human ships had started to engage with the enemy. The nearest of the alien ships peeled away from their attack on *Liberator*, and veered off in the direction of this new threat.

'Defend the galaxy?' Vila snorted with disbelief as he looked at the view screen. 'That ragtag bunch of ratty little ships?'

'Those ratty little ships are holding off the alien fleet,' Avon said.

Vila looked dubious. 'But for how long?'

'Long enough for us to fall back for a while. Give the auto-repair systems time to recover, and the weapons systems time to recharge.' Avon began a swift set of calculations and adjustments at his console. 'Jenna, get us out of range, standard by seven.'

'I'm on it.'

'Zen,' continued Avon. 'Keep monitoring the alien fleet.'

'CONFIRMED.'

Cally heard the engines surge as the ship prepared for its manoeuvre. On the view screen, she saw the human flotilla swarm around them and interpose itself between *Liberator* and the aliens that poured through the defence grid. For the first time since the war had begun, *Liberator* was pulling back from the front line.

## Chapter 5

### Unknown Variables

The clattering of alien salvos against the outside of the ship gradually faded, and then ceased altogether. The engines took on a steadier tone as the ship travelled to a comfortable distance from the main conflict.

Cally watched Jenna steering them to safety, and was once again impressed with her friend's calm, almost casual confidence. It was as though Jenna and the *Liberator* were connected through the flight controls. Jenna was instinctively at one with the ship. Completely at home. This was where she belonged.

Avon was busying himself with some calculations at his console. Vila tapped his fingers impatiently on his.

With a final flourish, Jenna completed their manoeuvre and released the flight controls. 'This should be far enough.'

'Not far enough for me,' said Vila. 'Are there still alien ships following us?'

Cally ran a rapid scan of the immediate area. 'One small vessel. Vector eight six.'

'Definitely not far enough!' concluded Vila.

Jenna was already reviewing their options. 'We should be able to pick it off with the neutron blasters.'

Cally continued to scan the solitary alien ship. Unlike their previous attackers, this one was making a direct approach. It accelerated on an intercept course, barrelling its way unerringly at them. Its trajectory steered it directly away from the main conflict, way over at the defence grid. The vessel had the *Liberator* clearly in its sights, and had the turn of speed and manoeuvrability to get in very close, very quickly.

'Vila, are you ready? There may be just enough residual energy in the neutron blasters to pick this one off.'

At the last moment of its approach, the alien vanished abruptly from the view screen. Almost immediately, there was the pop of a small explosion outside the *Liberator*, and a metallic rattle as a hail of shrapnel cascaded across the hull.

That was odd, thought Cally. Had Vila managed to pick it off? Or had it just lost control and crashed into the hull?

'Where did it go?'

'You must have hit it, Vila.' Cally checked the readings again. 'The ship just... disintegrated.'

'Did I?' The idea clearly pleased Vila, and he sat a little straighter in his chair. 'I mean, yes, obviously. I must be getting the hang of this now.' He smiled at his own cleverness.

Cally smiled back at him. 'Looks like you can relax, Vila.'

'Adrenaline and soma?' he asked her.

She wagged an admonishing finger. 'Not that relaxed.'

'I think I need a drink.'

'I think you need to concentrate,' said Avon. 'Monitor auto-repair. We'll stay here until *Liberator* is back to battle-readiness. Zen, is there any sign of alien hostiles?'

'A LARGE, UNIDENTIFIED OBJECT IS APPROACHING FROM VECTOR NINE-FIVE.'

Cally stared at her display, astonished that she had not spotted this while scanning for alien pursuers. 'What does "large" mean?' There was nothing visible to her at her station.

'SENSOR DATA IS LIMITED. THE OBJECT HAS DIAMETER 2.397 KILOMETRES. IT HAS MASS 1.935 x TEN TO THE TWENTY-TWO KILOGRAMS.'

Vila boggled. 'What does that even mean?'

'It means it's too big to be a space vessel,' said Avon. 'So, what is it, Zen?'

'THAT INFORMATION IS NOT AVAILABLE.'

'Oh great!' grumbled Vila. 'Zen doesn't know.'

Jenna joined Avon at his console. 'Are you sure it couldn't be some kind of alien battle cruiser?'

He contemplated her question. Cally knew Avon didn't like to admit when he was baffled, but that he liked even less to be wrong. He produced Orac's key with a flourish. 'Let's find out.'

The computer flickered into renewed life, and grumbled away in anticipation of Avon's question.

'All right, Orac. What have you got?'

After the briefest of pauses, Orac said, 'Would you care to be more precise?'

Cally smiled as Avon's eyes narrowed. 'What,' he said in a measured tone, 'have you been able to extrapolate from the movements of the alien fleet?'

'I have analysed a substantial body of data from a wide variety of available trusted sources,' boasted Orac. Nevertheless, the computer concluded: 'I have identified no strong correlation outside the parameters of normal variance.'

'Hah!' snorted Vila. 'He doesn't know either. Computers, eh? Who needs 'em? I suppose they're company for Avon, though.'

'There are too many unknown variables,' Orac replied dismissively.

'At least Zen was more honest about it,' added Vila.

Avon clearly wasn't satisfied with this. He placed his hands so that he was leaning on either side of Orac's casing. Cally thought this made it look, improbably, as though Avon was literally pressing the computer for an answer.

'What about this large, unidentified object that's approaching us?'

Orac seemed more interested in this. 'It is fascinating.'

'So, fascinate us,' said Avon.

'It is a dwarf planet that circles Star One's sun on a wildly elliptical orbit.'

Cally hadn't heard of anything like that before. 'A dwarf planet?'

'Its operational signal indicates that it is called Megiddo.'

'Sounds charming,' said Jenna.

Vila shared her pessimism. 'Ideal for a short break. I'll start packing. Might be able to get a drink down there,' he added sourly.

'None of us,' snapped Avon, 'are going anywhere.' He straightened up, and was about to give them another piece of his mind when something seemed to strike him about what he'd just heard. He turned back to Orac. 'Wait a minute... you said *operational signal*?'

'Of course,' replied Orac, apparently exasperated that he had to repeat anything. He was sometimes like an unwilling teacher forced to remain patient with a class full of inattentive pupils. 'I have detected an extensive technological complex buried beneath the planetoid's surface.'

Cally decided that she, at least, was prepared to be an attentive student. 'So what is it?'

Orac sounded almost cagey. 'The Federation technology pre-dates the original Tarial Cell.'

'That must make it old,' said Cally. 'Much older than Star One.'

'Further information is mere extrapolation,' Orac told her sniffily.

Avon wasn't in the mood for niceties. 'All right then. Extrapolate.'

Orac's operating note quavered and steadied, as though reaching a reluctant conclusion. 'The technology is primitive. It could be a simple storage capacity, or a weapons facility, or an abandoned earlier...'

'Weapons facility?' Cally was startled by Orac's casual inclusion of this possibility, and apparent lack of curiosity about it.

'Kindly do not interrupt while I am enumerating the possibilities,' snapped Orac.

Cally pulled a face at the computer.

'As I was saying,' continued Orac, 'Megiddo could also be an abandoned earlier iteration of the Star One complex, or even a waste disposal site.'

'But,' insisted Cally, 'you say it *could* be a Federation weapons facility?' That was good enough reason for her, she decided. 'Avon, I say we should go there and recover what we can.'

'I say none of us are going anywhere.' Avon turned away from her, rudely underlining his dismissal of her suggestion. 'We cannot spare someone to go down there based on mere... extrapolation.'

Cally refused to accept this, and stalked across the flight deck. She stood between Avon and the view screen to confront him. 'Can we afford to let this thing fall into alien hands?'

'Assuming the aliens *have* hands,' observed Vila.

'Oh Vila, you know what I mean,' she sighed. It wasn't so very long ago that the human crew of the *Liberator* had thought of her as an alien. It had taken her a while to earn their trust, to overcome the parochialism of people from Earth about the trustworthiness of off-worlders. And now here they were, faced with the truly alien. Faced with the annihilation of all humans, whether from Earth or from Auron or from anywhere in the known galaxy. And this dwarf planet might be the solution. She couldn't allow the opportunity to pass them by.

'I will teleport down to Megiddo,' she said firmly. Her eyes never left Avon's.

He blinked slowly, and turned to Orac.

'What are the odds that it is weaponry?'

'There are too many...'

'... unknown variables,' interrupted Avon. 'Yes, I thought you'd say that, Orac. And it answers your question Cally.' Now he was staring right back at her. Impassive. Unyielding. 'You're staying here.'

He snatched the activation key from Orac, and the computer powered down with an ill-tempered yelp.

Cally watched Avon walk away from her, towards the exit. 'So, where are you going, Avon?' she demanded.

He shouted over his shoulder as he left the flight deck. 'Narrowing down the variables.'

## Chapter 6

### Strange Allies

The solemn tick of the chronometer echoed through the observation deck. Blake held his breath for a while, so he could listen more attentively to the sounds of the room. There was only the clock, marking the seconds, one by one, from its position on the wall.

It was more calming than the noises of the medical unit. They had been driving him crazy – the monotonous regularity of the health systems, the steady wheeze of respirators, the clicks and bleeps of the monitors, and the sound of his own ragged breathing. Or more likely, the fact that he was lying there helpless, spending far longer to heal than he wanted while having much too much time to lie and think.

So he had attached himself to a portable medipack as best he could, and traipsed through the *Liberator's* many interconnecting corridors to get here. To the place where, on so many previous occasions, he had secluded himself in silent contemplation.

Time spent here was very different to the frustration he had felt in the medical unit. The original builders of the ship had found some way of ensuring that this room was silent, despite its position at the rear of the vessel. None of the engine noises permeated its soundproofed walls. There was a comms unit, but Blake had switched it off. It was utterly silent.

Perhaps that was why Blake had, months ago, fixed the clock on the wall. He had wanted some indication that he was not alone here. Even in his most profound meditations, when the events that had brought him here seemed insurmountable. In his most dejected moments, when he had feared none of his crew supported him. When none of them believed in him. When he was plunged back into the helplessness that he'd felt on Earth after seeing his friends and comrades gunned down. After the charade of his trial. Or while locked in his seat on the prison ship *London*. Until he had found the *Liberator*, and a crew to lead, and a new purpose.

And here he was again, on the observation deck of this fabulous vessel. Wondering about his future. Thinking about how narrowly he had escaped death at the hand of his oldest enemy, Space Commander Travis. Literally at Travis's hand – a shot from the laseron destroyer built into the man's artificial limb. Travis had caught Blake unawares on Star One, and shot him without a thought, with no word of warning. Despite his injury, Blake had recovered enough strength to wound the space commander, to stall his plan to allow the alien fleet into human space. But Travis had only finally perished when Avon shot him down, after he'd arrived to take charge of the situation.

Now Avon had taken charge of the *Liberator*.

Blake leaned his forehead against the vast external viewport that curved from wall to wall, from floor to ceiling. It felt neither cool nor hot. The huge transparent partition opened out directly into space. Even when the lights were on in the observation deck, there was no reflection on the partition's surface. On his previous visits, Blake had liked to extinguish all the deck lights, and gaze out uninterrupted into the depths of the universe.

He finally let out his breath. There was no condensation on the partition. So he still had a perfectly clear view. The position of the observation deck meant that you had to lean right into the curved partition and crane your neck to get any sight of the *Liberator's* exterior. Instead, he stared out and considered his current position.

The flickering lights of the war peppered the inky blackness of a sector without stars. Somewhere out there was Star One. Somewhere beyond that was a vast alien fleet, leaking through the satellite defence grid. The sporadic, silent explosions told him that the war was in full spate. And behind him, oblivious and uncaring, the clock still ticked, ticked, ticked.

Blake tried not to show his surprise when the door to the observation deck slid open. There was

no way of anyone letting him know they were entering. The thrum of distant engines came in with Avon, only to be silenced as he closed the door behind himself.

Avon looked at the comms unit on the wall, and grunted. 'Well, that might explain it,' he said, almost to himself, and switched the unit back on. He turned his attention to Blake. 'You were supposed to be in the medical unit.'

Blake peered at him in the darkness. 'You were supposed to be on the flight deck.'

'When you agreed to remain under observation, I didn't think you would be so literal about it.' Avon stood beside Blake, and stared out at the distant lights of the war. 'Is the view helping your recovery?'

'Something like that.' Blake chuckled. 'I suppose I should be touched by your concern.'

'Is this where we embrace and make up?'

Blake shrugged a gesture to indicate his injury, and winced as the effort made the pain lance through his side. 'You can hardly embrace me while I'm in this sling.'

'That wasn't what was stopping me.'

Blake thought about this for a while, waiting for the ache in his chest to subside. 'I imagine it was hatred,' he said eventually.

'Don't confuse hatred with indifference.'

'You mask your indifference very badly.'

Blake glanced sidelong at Avon, to gauge his reaction. Avon continued to stare impassively out into the blackness beyond the edge of the galaxy, and his expression gave nothing away.

'Were you sincere in what you said, Avon?'

That seemed to get his attention. He stopped looking into the distance, and started looking at Blake. After what seemed to Blake like a long time thinking, Avon said: 'I made you a promise. You know me well enough to understand what that means.' He was studying Blake for a reaction. 'We've pulled back for a short while to let the auto-repair systems do their work.'

Perhaps Avon thought he was questioning his strategy, not his motives. Blake nodded at the vista through the viewing portal. 'I've been watching the battle from here. Those aren't Federation ships. They can't be.'

Avon nodded agreement. 'The nearest Federation squadron is overdue. That jumble of ships you see are from the nearest frontier planets, Blake. They've rallied to the cause. That must... please you.'

Blake made a dismissive gesture with his uninjured arm. 'They didn't need *me* to do that.'

'It's not always about you.'

Blake decided to let that one go. He was still pondering what Avon had told him about those distant ships. Pinpoints of light, flaring up like distant dying stars. But in truth, they were ships dying. People dying. 'They can't think that they could possibly survive an onslaught like this.'

'And we did?'

Blake wasn't sure from Avon's tone whether he thought *Liberator* and her crew could survive or not. Certainly not on their own. And here, before his eyes, was an ad hoc flotilla of humans – civilians, to be precise – putting themselves in the line of fire. Another flare of distant light told the story of another death. Bigger than the other explosions. Was that a mining vessel? A cruiser? How many had perished?

'Look at them, Avon. They're prepared to fight to the death against an alien invasion.' Blake had finally acknowledged what was puzzling him. 'Why didn't they do this when their own kind threatened them? Why didn't they rise up against the Federation?' It made him baffled. It made him angry. 'When we needed them?'

'When *you* needed them,' said Avon.

'And soon,' continued Blake, his voice rising in the quiet room, 'they'll be fighting alongside the

Federation. Strange allies.'

He heaved a deep breath. His heart was racing. In the sudden silence of the room, the clock's tick sounded louder than ever.

'The people you choose as allies don't have to be your friends,' Avon told him quietly. 'They just have to be the enemy of your enemy.'

For a while they stood in silence, and watched the changing patterns of lights in the far distance. The ebb and flow of control in a far-off struggle. Blake itched to be involved again. But he'd made his agreement with Avon. And he was still struggling with his injuries.

'I told you that I've always trusted you, Avon. And I meant it.'

'I expect you to keep your promise,' replied Avon. 'It would be a mistake to betray me.'

They stood in silence. After several minutes, Avon pointed through the view port at something far up and to their left. 'Look over there.'

'Where? Ah...'

Orange-red points of light, grouped in threes to form triangles that arched towards the conflict.

'A familiar formation,' said Avon. 'One we've previously tried very hard to avoid.'

It was a detachment of pursuit ships. Odd how reassuring it was to see them on this occasion, Blake reflected. 'Our strange allies are starting to arrive.' He noticed that Avon's foot was moving, almost tapping the floor in anticipation. He clearly wanted to be elsewhere.

'When *Liberator*'s auto-repairs are complete, Blake, we'll join them.'

The sound of the intercom chime was loud and unexpected. Cally's worried voice filtered into the quiet of the room. '*Avon? Where are you? There are Federation ships arriving.*'

Avon had already moved swiftly over to the intercom. 'Yes, all right. We've seen them.'

There was a short pause on the other end before Cally asked: '*We?*'

'I'm coming back now,' Avon said.

'*Avon, what did you -?*'

But Avon had already disconnected. He switched off the intercom completely, just as he'd found it when he'd first arrived. Blake wondered if that was because Avon didn't want Cally to call back, or because he was going to leave Blake alone and undisturbed.

The door hummed open, and the sounds of the ship began to permeate the room once more.

There was something else, thought Blake. Despite everything about his body language that spoke of his intention to leave, Avon still lingered by the doorway.

'Why did you really come here, Avon?' Blake turned his back on the window. 'What do you need me to do?'

Avon laughed. Maybe he'd known Blake would work it out before he made his intentions plain. 'There is a planetoid almost within teleport distance. Orac thinks there is a small chance that it conceals a Federation weapons system.'

Blake didn't reply. He'd wanted Avon to tell him specifically. To ask him.

'The others are needed on *Liberator*,' smiled Avon. 'But you are...'

'Expendable?'

'Available.'

Blake waited just long enough for Avon's smile to waver. 'All right. Enough observing. I can make myself... available for duty.' He took a couple of steps towards Avon, wondering whether he should offer his hand to formalise the agreement. The effort made his wound ache again, and he stifled a groan.

'Do you need anything?' Avon asked him, cool and calm.

'Just get me to the teleport,' said Blake.

He strode past Avon as confidently as he felt able, determined to be the first out of the room.





## Chapter 7

### Taking Sides

Cally was quietly furious with Avon. He had not been prepared to let her investigate this mysterious planetoid, and had left the flight deck with merely a cryptic comment. He wouldn't trust her to take the initiative, but was equally unwilling to explain what he was doing.

'Zen, where is Avon at the moment?'

'THAT INFORMATION IS NOT AVAILABLE.'

Cally scowled. 'Which room in *Liberator* did I just connect to on the intercom?'

'THAT INFORMATION MAY NOT BE PROVIDED.'

'May not be...?' She tried to hold her temper.

'When Avon doesn't want to be tracked down,' Vila observed mildly, 'there's no point in trying.' He put his hands behind his head and relaxed into his flight seat. 'Let him get on with it. We're safe enough here.'

'Don't get too comfortable,' Jenna said. She was reviewing systems status. 'Those aliens haven't gone away. We'll be back in the fray soon enough.'

'Putting ourselves in harm's way,' he said.

Jenna tutted at him. 'Going to the rescue of that flotilla from the frontier worlds. And the Federation fleet is due at any minute.'

Vila closed his eyes. 'Now might be a good time for a nap, then.'

'Orac, where is Avon?' asked Cally.

'You're wasting your time.' Vila hadn't even opened his eyes. 'Avon took Orac's key. As usual.'

Cally felt her frustration boiling over. Jenna was busy, Vila didn't care, and even Zen seemed to be in league with Avon. The only way she was going to track him down was to go and look for him herself.

She pondered her recent conversation with Avon over the intercom. It was plain from his incautious comment that he was working with someone else. And it didn't take a head count around the flight deck to work out that person must be Blake. Who ought to be concentrating on recovering from his injuries.

Without a further word to the others, Cally left for the medical unit.

\* \* \*

Blake set off at a rapid pace as soon as he left the observation deck. Avon stayed a step or two behind him – he didn't want to put more pressure on the injured man than Blake was already putting on himself. Let him prove to his own satisfaction he was ready for this mission, Avon decided. Besides, Avon wasn't entirely sure Blake was up to it.

Once or twice, Blake took a wrong turning. Avon allowed him make the correction without comment, and studiously avoided meeting his eye whenever he looked across at him to check for a reaction. What conversation they had was stilted, and Blake seemed to reserve his strength for the effort of walking rather than talking.

Blake would need all his energy to survive down on the planetoid. From what Zen had discovered about Megiddo, the surface was freezing. So en route to the teleport area, they took a short detour into the stores, to obtain and unpack a thermal suit. The medipack could not fit inside it, and so Avon helped him carefully into the suit, conscious that pulling the one-piece over Blake's torso and shoulders must be extremely painful.

With Blake suited up, they rounded the corner to the teleport area. Blake made an effort to remain

upbeat, and explained to Avon he had every confidence that leaving him on board with the rest of the crew was the correct decision. As though, Avon reflected, it was actually Blake's decision to make now. Let him think that, if it made things easier.

Blake slowed to a halt as they entered the room. He leaned heavily on the teleport control desk. 'I know that you'll look after them, Avon.'

'I'm moved by your confidence in me.' Avon wondered if Blake still had any strength left to make it to Megiddo. His face had turned a worryingly grey colour and his breathing was irregular. Perhaps the adrenaline shot he'd taken before suiting up was taking its time to kick in.

Avon picked up a teleport bracelet from the rack, and handed it to Blake. He wasn't sure at this stage whether Blake had the energy or the inclination to get one for himself.

Blake slipped the bracelet around his wrist, and clicked it shut. 'Have you worked out the destination coordinates?'

Avon reached behind him, and adjusted the teleport locator. It whined as the cross-hairs resolved on the display.

'There.' Avon indicated where the teleport was set. 'It's as close as I can get you to the entrance. You should turn up the dial on that suit. It's going to be cold down there.'

Blake cranked up the control, and even seemed to relax a little as the heat began permeating his clothing. With a little grunt, he levered himself off the edge of the control desk, and walked slowly into the teleport area. 'All right. I'm ready.'

'Ready for what?' asked a voice in the doorway.

It was Cally. She glared accusingly at Blake, and then favoured Avon with an even darker look. 'Blake was not in the medical unit. I suspected something like this. Avon, you cannot let Blake take such a risk. Not in his condition.'

'Can't I be the judge of that?' asked Blake, and squared his shoulders. The effect was somewhat undercut by his accompanying wince.

Avon dropped his eyes to the desk, and began to lock in the teleport coordinates. 'He's the only person we can spare, Cally.'

'And I'm moved by Avon's confidence in me,' added Blake sarcastically. Cally tried to interrupt, but Blake forestalled her with a gesture. 'No, don't argue, Cally.'

Avon was astonished when Cally turned on her heel and left the room without another word. But he was even more surprised when she reappeared carrying a thermal suit. She was already pulling it on as she spoke. 'I see you will not be persuaded.'

'What are you doing, Cally?' groaned Blake.

She smiled sweetly at him as she fastened the final clip on her suit.

'I am going with you.' She took a teleport bracelet from the rack, and awkwardly fitted it around the cuff of her thick glove. 'Now, *you* should not argue with me, Blake.'

Avon and Blake exchanged resigned looks.

'Very well,' said Blake. He indicated the dial on Cally's suit. 'Turn that thing up. It's going to be cold.'

Avon wasn't yet convinced. 'You can't be spared to nursemaid him, Cally. We need everyone on board.'

'Everyone?' Blake's eyes sparkled with amusement.

'You cannot stop me, Avon.' Cally wasn't amused. 'This is not your ship yet.'

'Thank you for "yet",' said Avon.

'I know that *Liberator* is what you want most of all,' she said. 'But my people have a saying, Avon

—  
'I was afraid they might.'

‘They say: Before you desire, you should deserve.’

Avon placed his hands palm-down on the counter. ‘I have a saying too: Blake can handle this alone.’

‘It’s her choice, Avon,’ Blake observed mildly.

Cally moved over to join Blake in the teleport area. ‘Avon, there will be no requirement for you to remain here on station.’

‘I have no intention of remaining here on station.’

Blake and Cally stood, side by side, in the teleport area. Their faces were turning pink as the thermal suits boosted their temperatures, in anticipation of Megiddo’s freezing conditions. They didn’t say a word. Avon wondered if he should let them turn lobster red before he made a decision.

Instead, he enabled the teleport activation switches on the desk before him. ‘Very well,’ he said briskly. ‘I’ll teleport you both down. If for any reason *Liberator* has to leave the area, and the auto-repairs are complete, we will not wait for you. Either of you. We will be gone. Your ship will have sailed.’

Blake seemed amused. ‘Whose ship, Avon?’

Avon didn’t answer. He had already activated the teleport. Before his eyes, Blake and Cally rippled out of existence.

‘Goodbye, Blake,’ he said to the empty room. ‘And good luck.’

The words had barely left his lips before a howling alarm sounded throughout the *Liberator*, echoing and re-echoing down the corridors.

Avon leapt to his feet, looking around himself in apprehension. ‘What the hell is that?’

As if in answer, the intercom chimed, its insistent note cutting through the cacophony.

‘Avon?’ Vila’s panic was evident through the speaker. ‘Avon! Get back here! We’re under attack!’

## Chapter 8

### Cold Welcome

The surface of the planetoid was nothing that Cally had anticipated. Blake had been right about their preparation. Cally was shivering, despite the heat in her thermal suit. She fumbled awkwardly with its dial through the fingers of her thick gloves.

‘Are you all right, Blake?’ she shouted. Her words were snatched away by the howling wind even as she spoke them. She turned to see if he could see she was talking, but he was staring off into the distance. Or what distance there was – the marked curved of the horizon was barely visible through the sheets of water that swept across the pitted white surface of the planetoid. This lashing rain seemed to whip horizontally at them. The noise of the wind ebbed and flowed. It was oddly like the sound of a crowd, she thought.

She yelled again, just as Blake turned in her direction. His eyes were wide behind his goggles, and his lower face was masked, so it was hard to fully discern his expression. He pulled the scarf away from his mouth clumsily. Cally wondered why, until she saw him lift his teleport bracelet up to his mouth. The device chimed faintly beneath the continued shriek of the wind.

‘Down and safe,’ he said, then sighed in exasperation when he worked out that his voice was inaudible. His breath sparkled into condensation, before even that was blown away. ‘Down and safe,’ he yelled again. ‘And freezing!’

Cally leaned in closer to him, sheltering the teleport bracelet between their bodies in the hope they might hear the response better. There was no answer from *Liberator*.

‘Avon?’ shouted Blake. ‘Avon!’

Even with the volume cranked right up on the bracelet, Cally could only hear the faintest static crackle from it. ‘He said he would not remain on station,’ she shouted at Blake.

‘Or it may just be this storm,’ Blake replied. A huge shudder seemed to shake his whole body. ‘Oh, it’s worse than I’d expected. So cold it *stings!*’

Blake was stooped over. Was it his injuries, or was he just trying to compensate for the brutal, disorienting weather that swirled around them?

Cally tugged her scarf away from her mouth, and leaned in closer to Blake. ‘We have to get under cover.’

He nodded vigorously to emphasise his agreement. He positioned his face close to hers, so she could hear him better. ‘Avon managed to put us down close to an access shaft. You can see the hatch, over there?’

He pulled away from her, and made a broad, clear gesture to indicate what he was talking about. So, that was what he had been staring at when they first arrived.

A raised lump of rock jutted awkwardly from the surface of the planetoid, about forty metres from where they stood shivering. A curving line of smaller boulders led towards it, around a flat white expanse of ice and slush. Fixed into the rock was a stark round metal door, with an old-fashioned hatch wheel set in the middle. Even from here, it looked rusted.

Blake took a couple of steps towards it. Above the noise of the storm, Cally could hear an ominous cracking sound. A stark line appeared by Blake’s feet, tapering away from him towards the access hatch.

Cally tugged at Blake’s thermal suit. ‘Careful!’ she shouted. ‘The ice is breaking beneath you.’

Blake staggered away from the crack. He huddled close to Cally again so that they could hear each other better. ‘We must be too heavy for it.’

‘You must be too heavy for it,’ she teased him. ‘It was fine until you started walking.’

Cally thought of the information that Avon had been able to glean about Megiddo. Everything they

had reviewed back on the *Liberator* flight deck. She remembered an image that illustrated the planetoid's eccentric path through this sector. 'Megiddo's orbit has brought it back near its sun,' she said to Blake. 'The surface temperature has risen very quickly. That's started to melt the ice.'

Blake gave another big shudder. 'I can't see an alternative route.'

The hoods on these suits made it difficult to simply turn your head. Cally shuffled around to look for a different way to reach the entry hatch. Even this slight change of position was enough to crack the ice. She felt it move beneath her feet, and staggered back in surprise. As she did so, Blake abruptly dropped half a metre into the ice and slush. He flung his arms up in alarm, though there was nothing to cling on to.

Cally reached out her hand, and helped him struggle to a firmer surface. Together, they watched the ice where he had been standing rise up again.

'That's very unstable,' yelled Blake.

The storm seemed to be worsening, which Cally hadn't thought possible. The stinging rain was turning into a vicious hail. Her goggles were frosting over, and her lips were numb.

'We can't just stay here. We have to get to that access shaft.'

Blake shuffled cautiously to his right. He tentatively probed the ground in front of him with an outstretched foot. 'This way,' he shouted back to her, gesturing with his arm. 'Come on! We can lean against these boulders.'

Cally hesitated.

'It'll take our weight,' he reassured her.

A further alarming crack in the ice beside her was what convinced Cally to move. She scuffed her way cautiously after Blake. Every step made her wonder if the surface would suddenly give way and plunge her into icy water.

The short journey felt like it took forever. Even the thermal suit wasn't coping with this environment, and by the time they reached the hatch she no longer trusted the impression of the ground beneath her feet because she could no longer feel her own feet inside her boots.

There was a clear patch of icy water between them and the hatch. Blake jumped across it, almost lost his balance, but then fell forward onto the rock with a yelp. Cally forgot her worries about the ice, and leapt over next to him to check that he hadn't injured himself further.

She crowded next to him in concern. What at first sounded like grunts of pain turned out to be his unsuccessful efforts to turn the hatch wheel.

'No good,' he grimaced. 'Frozen stiff. And we will be, too, if I can't get this open.' He gave another great tug at the hatch.

'Stop!' Cally admonished him. 'You will make your injury worse. Let me try.'

She shuffled around him, aware that the ledge of ice on which they both stood was dangerously narrow. She took as firm a grip as she could, forcing her thick gloves hard against the spokes of the locking wheel. Which way did the hatch turn, she wondered? Was she opening it, or locking it tighter? Whichever way she tried, it would not budge.

'It's either frozen solid, or rusted shut.'

The ice jolted beneath Cally's feet. A large crack split the surface between her and Blake. Further out, the ice shelf from which they had jumped had already disintegrated.

Blake scrabbled at his teleport bracelet. There was nothing but static hiss.

The storm howled around them with a renewed intensity, battering them with sharp hail.

Cally stared at the unresponsive hatch. No way in. No way back. And no way to contact *Liberator*.

## Chapter 9

### All Mine

Avon hared down the *Liberator* corridors, charging towards the flight deck. The swooping alarm that filled the air around him was new. He'd never heard it before, in all the time they had been on *Liberator*.

Avon didn't have to flatter himself about his own abilities as a technician to *know* that he understood *Liberator* better than any of the other crew. His was an understanding based on fact. Not the instinctive connection that Jenna had as a pilot, and because of her initial connection with Zen that had named the ship. Nor the emotional attachment that Blake seemed to have for the vessel, ever since he had commandeered it. They had taken charge of *Liberator* when it was abandoned after a huge space conflict. Were they about to lose it during another?

The Zen computer's usual reluctance to provide comprehensive information had not prevented Avon discerning the basics of the *Liberator*'s capacities. Then Orac had managed to glean additional technical specifications for him after their encounter on Space World with the System, the vessel's creator. Whether it was enhancing the ship's detector shield, or tuning the neutron blasters' recharge capacity, or even improving the quality of the food machines, Avon was the unchallenged expert. And once he had fulfilled his promise to Blake, the ship was all his.

Avon knew he had barely scratched the surface of *Liberator*'s potential. He had tested its capacity at speed, optimised its asymmetric thrust computers, refined its weaponry after skirmishes with the Federation, and even explored its connection with negative hyperspace. Yet the more he learned about *Liberator*, the less he realised he really understood. And this unexpected new alarm, filling the corridors around him with its alien insistence, reinforced that thought as he ran onto the flight deck.

'Vila, what the hell is going on?'

Vila's head jerked in his direction. 'Where the hell have you been?'

Avon wasn't sure whether Vila's wild look signified relief or fear.

There was no such difficulty working out Jenna's feelings. 'Where's Cally?' she demanded. 'She went to look for you.'

'Otherwise engaged,' Avon replied. He took up his usual position at the controls. The undulating wail of the alarm continued all around them. 'All right, Zen, turn that racket off. We've got the message.'

'CONFIRMED.'

The alarm gave one last chirrup before it stopped.

'That's better,' said Avon. He paused for a moment while his hearing returned to normal after the dissonance of the unknown alarm. The after-effect seemed to be a distant clanking sound. Or maybe it was more like metal scratching on metal. An irregular noise, somewhere in the distance. Was he just imagining it?

'That doesn't sound better at all,' moaned Vila. 'In fact, I think it sounds a whole lot worse.'

So, not his imagination, Avon concluded. 'Zen, what was that noise for?'

'THE SOUND IS FROM *LIBERATOR*'S PROXIMITY ALARM.'

Avon didn't understand. 'But we're well away from the main battle. The conflict is far from here.'

'Not far enough,' grumbled Vila.

'Closer than you'd imagine,' Jenna said. Her fingers moved swiftly over her controls, and the main view screen flickered and changed. A view of the distant conflict near Star One was replaced with the external view of a spaceship in extreme close up. The camera showed a lattice of bonded metallic plates, interlocked and stretching off into the distance. Service robots, squat little devices that scuttled to

and fro, were attending to impact damage. The surface of the vessel was pockmarked with craters, as though it had come off worse in close combat. The robots didn't seem to be making much impression on the damage, and were perhaps fighting a losing battle of their own.

Avon puzzled how it was possible to get such a clear and detailed view from this kind of distance of one of the warships engaged in the battle. Maybe he knew less about the *Liberator's* capacity than he'd assumed.

Then he worked it out. It wasn't the hull of a distant warship. Jenna was showing him this because it explained the noises they could hear. That was an image of *Liberator's* hull.

'That's the alien ship that disintegrated earlier...' she began.

'The one Vila shot down,' Avon noted sourly.

'Not exactly.'

'Then *what*, exactly?'

Jenna didn't react to his anger, he noticed. 'Vila didn't shoot it,' she explained calmly. 'And it didn't explode. The ship just split apart. Into dozens of limpet mines that have attached themselves to the outer hull.'

Avon stood up, to study the view screen more closely. No wonder those service robots were not keeping pace with the damage inflicted on the hull. They were *causing* the damage. As he watched, one of them scuttled across near to the camera and clamped itself to the hull. There was a bright flash and the camera image cut out completely.

'They're locked in place,' Vila explained plaintively. 'We can't shake them off.'

'They've already disabled the port sensor array.' Jenna alternated the main screen's display to illustrate her point. Image after image revealed only static. 'We're blind on that side.'

From outside the vessel, they could hear the continued scratching and scraping of the alien devices.

Avon stalked angrily across the flight deck. 'Zen! Are those things able to penetrate the hull?'

'THAT INFORMATION IS NOT AVAILABLE.'

'Oh, come on! Give me something useful!'

Jenna had moved across to stand beside Avon. 'It's alien technology. Zen can't tell how dangerous they are.'

'It could tell enough to activate the proximity alarm,' Avon snarled at her. He closed his eyes to concentrate on what his next line of inquiry should be, but that only meant that he focused more on the scratching sound of the mines on the hull. 'Zen, can you confirm that these devices pose *no* danger to the continued safety of the *Liberator*?'

'NEGATIVE.'

'What about the auto-repair systems? Can they clear these limpet mines?'

'NEGATIVE RESPONSE.'

Vila seemed to share Avon's exasperation. 'We could do with something more positive, Zen.'

Avon glared at Vila. 'We could do with something more positive from *you*.'

'What did I say?' protested Vila.

What indeed, thought Avon. Perhaps that was the answer. He stood behind Vila's seat, placed his hands on the back of his chair, and spoke softly. 'You said they were locked in place.'

Vila was obviously suspicious at Avon's more emollient tone. 'So?'

'So suit up and get out onto the hull.'

'What?' Vila turned his chair around so quickly that he almost knocked Avon over. Avon merely laughed at the appalled expression on his face. 'You can't be serious,' squeaked Vila.

Avon didn't say anything.

'You are serious!' said Vila. He was evidently struggling to find the right way to protest. Avon folded his arms, enjoying this rare moment of Vila being lost for words. In the end, all he could manage



was: 'Why me?'

'Firstly, you've been out on the hull before, so you know your way around. And secondly, you can pick a lock.' Avon smiled at the logic of this. 'It's your area of expertise, you said it yourself. Well, now's your chance, genius.'

'But thirdly,' blustered Vila, 'I don't want to!'

'Two out of three is good enough,' Avon told him. He was already walking back to his own control seat, deeming the discussion to be over. 'Get suited up, Vila. You're wasting time.'

Jenna came over to put a supportive hand on Vila's shoulder. Avon knew that she wasn't going to disagree with the suggestion. What other choice did they have? Perhaps she would even persuade him.

'I'll come with you,' she told Vila. 'I can help.'

'This is a mine clearance,' Avon told her sharply. 'It's not a sightseeing tour.'

Jenna clearly wasn't going to be bullied by Avon. 'It'll be faster with two. And I can watch out for any other incoming attacks until the hull sensors are back online.'

Avon studied her as she explained this rationale to him. She was talking to Avon, but all her comments were directed towards Vila. Encouraging and reassuring him.

'All right,' said Avon eventually. 'You can both get out there. I'll work with Orac on alternatives.'

Jenna smiled at him. Whether to thank him, or because she'd got her own way, he wasn't sure. Not that he cared either way. 'Hurry up,' he said. 'There's no time to lose.'

'Oh great!' complained Vila. He remained in his flight seat. His eyes were fixed on the console in front of him, unwilling to meet Avon's gaze. 'You're staying safe in here, Avon, while me and Jenna go out and face death by alien bomb.' He folded his arms in a feeble gesture of protest. 'You saw on the view screen what those things did to the scanner. Blew it to pieces. I'd quite like all my pieces to remain firmly attached to each other, if it's all the same to you. And even if it isn't all the same to you, for that matter.'

He fell silent. Alongside the usual ticks and hums of the flight deck, he thought he could hear the scratching of the devices out on the hull, with the occasional small explosion.

Avon placed himself right in front of Vila's position, so that he could not miss his presence. 'Do you think you'll feel any safer here on the flight deck?'

'Yes,' Vila replied. He looked up hopefully at Avon. 'I really think that I would...'

'Safer here on the flight deck,' continued Avon in a dangerous tone, 'with me?'

Vila stood up at once. 'You're right,' he said. 'I'll get suited up. Come on, Jenna.'

And with that, he turned on his heel and walked straight out of the flight deck.

Jenna eyed Avon thoughtfully as he chuckled to himself. 'You really know how to motivate the troops, Avon. You're very persuasive.'

'Well,' he replied, 'I know how to persuade Vila.'

Jenna shook her head disapprovingly, and started after Vila. As she reached the exit, a thought seemed to strike her. 'Where is Cally, really?'

Avon considered what to tell her. It wouldn't help Jenna focus on helping Vila if she was worrying about Cally and Blake down on the surface of Megiddo. And if she knew, she'd prevent Avon from any attempt to move *Liberator* out of the planetoid's teleport range. But telling her nothing would raise further suspicions. And being caught in a blatant lie could backfire later.

Jenna was persistent. 'Where is she?'

'Looking after Blake,' he concluded.

'We could do with her help, too, at the moment.'

'I know,' Avon said. He smiled at the memory of his last conversation with Cally in the teleport area. 'But not everyone is so easily persuaded.'

Jenna hovered by the doorway, unsure.

‘You’d better get after Vila,’ he told her.

He saw from her expression that she’d reached a decision. ‘All right,’ she said. ‘I’ll route the hull suit audiolinks through channel nine. Let us know if you come up with any better ideas.’ And then she was gone.

Avon suspected Jenna was a reluctant participant in this foray outside the *Liberator*, but that she had concluded it was the best possible option. He located Orac and placed the computer on a table. Orac powered up as the activation key slotted into place.

The scrabbling noises from the hull seemed to have intensified. It was time to investigate alternatives. Avon had some thoughts about his other options. But he knew that Jenna was going to like those even less.

## Chapter 10

### Beneath the Surface

Cally shrank back against the locked metal hatchway, pressing close to Blake. The tempest swirled and howled around them. It pitched a flurry of stinging ice crystals at her face. She swiped at her goggles. The smeared view that this afforded her revealed that the storm had closed in. The curved horizon was now obscured by waves of sleet that washed inexorably towards them.

Despite the raging clamour of the fierce storm, Cally could hear the splintering sound of ice sundering all around the raised platform to which they clung. The fierce wind tugged at their clothing, threatening to drag them aside at any moment to pitch them into the icy water.

There was a sudden movement beside her. For a heart-stopping second, she thought that Blake had slipped and fallen. She struggled to turn, and saw that he had shuffled several steps away from the hatchway.

‘Get off the ice, Blake!’ she called out to him. ‘Hold on to the rock!’

He was fumbling with his suit, desperate to remove something from the thick folds of its material. ‘No, Cally! Just stand back!’

She couldn’t understand what he was doing, until she saw the handgun.

Blake beckoned to her with his free hand. ‘Stand away from the hatch!’

Cally hesitated before taking a few tentative steps out onto the ice. She was so cold that she could no longer feel her feet. Even so, the sensation of sinking into the melting ice was palpable. Her overriding instinct was to stay by the hatch. And her next was to slide over to Blake’s side, to check that he was all right. It only took a moment’s thought to conclude that this would put too much weight on the ice at the same point, and result in them both plunging through it. Besides, if she stayed away from him, it gave Blake more chance to aim his handgun.

She scuffed to a halt on the ice, looked across to Blake, and gave an exaggerated nod to indicate she was ready.

Blake braced his feet, aimed his gun, and fired.

The shot sliced through the storm, a fierce column of steam boiling in the air. The metal hatchway rattled. Chunks of rock splintered from around it, scattering across the ice towards them in hot sharp fragments.

Blake holstered his handgun, and gestured across to Cally. To avoid putting too much pressure on the ice, they sidled their way separately over to the hatch.

Blake grasped the hatch wheel and tried to turn it. His grunt of effort became a cry of pain. He flapped his gloved hands. ‘That’s still quite stiff. And very hot!’

‘Let me try.’ Cally reached over and twisted. Even through her heavy gloves, she could feel the heat of the hatch wheel. With a shriek of final resistance, it turned.

The hatch pulled up and out to reveal a pitch-black gap behind it.

‘Easy,’ smiled Cally.

Blake’s eyes were unreadable behind his frosted goggles. ‘I must have loosened the thing.’

‘Keep telling yourself that,’ said Cally.

There was an ominous cracking sound as the ice at their feet crumbled.

‘Quickly,’ she told him. ‘We must get inside.’

As she was closer, Cally swiftly clambered into the dark opening. She could see nothing beyond the hatch. Cally tested with her numbed feet for a firm surface. There seemed to be a hard, flat platform just inside, so she manoeuvred carefully until her whole body was through the hatchway.

She helped Blake through, and they stood together on a small landing. It was a metal square, at the

side of which the looped handles of a ladder led down into darkness. The storm sounds were already starting to recede.

‘Blake? Are you all right?’

He had climbed in behind her. ‘I’m fine.’ She could hear him struggling with something. ‘Switch your torch on. I’m just pulling the hatch shut.’

Cally had a torch positioned in the hood of her suit. She switched it on, and a sharp cone of light spilled out into the dark chamber.

Above her, the storm sounds ceased abruptly as Blake pulled the metal hatch shut with a resounding clang. The echo spoke of depths beyond the platform on which they now stood. In the comparative quiet, the sound of air moving was like half-heard whispers from an unseen group of people. But she and Blake were alone in the darkness.

Blake exhaled a huge breath. She wasn’t sure if it was the effort, or simple relief to be out of the gale. ‘You should be more careful,’ Cally warned him. ‘You could have reopened your wound.’

‘I think I’d prefer that to plunging into icy water.’ He clutched for a hand-hold as his feet slipped from under him.

‘Steady, Blake.’ She angled her torch to show where they were standing. Although the platform was made of corrugated metal, the storm had washed enough icy water over the lip of the hatch to make the surface treacherous. ‘You wouldn’t want to slip over the edge.’

Where it wasn’t covered in slush, the platform showed as heavily oxidised metal. There was no rust, but there were rock fragments and dust. The only marks that disturbed this powdery covering were their footprints. No-one else had been here for a very long time. The platform and the ladder suggested it had been designed by humans – or at the very least, designed *for* humans.

Blake tugged his hood down, and took off his goggles. Cally fumbled to remove her own goggles, hampered by the thick gloves and lack of feeling in her fingers. The goggles caught on the edge of her suit and jiggled out of her grasp. They bounced once on the platform, and then dropped over the edge.

Cally groaned in annoyance. She stood looking angrily in the direction they had vanished, as though that might make them reappear. Some seconds later, she heard the distant clatter as the goggles finally hit a lower surface.

‘Wow,’ said Blake. ‘That’s some drop.’ He nodded towards the ladder behind Cally. ‘How deep d’you reckon it is?’

Cally removed her gloves to adjust her torch. The cone of light splayed out wide to illuminate the whole platform. She edged towards the ladder, took a hold of the guide rail, and peered down cautiously.

It was a narrow shaft, dropping vertically straight through the rock in a roughly hewn passage. The ladder was thin, with no guide rails beyond the first half-dozen rungs. Far below, perhaps forty metres down, Cally thought she could make out another metal platform. She relayed this information to Blake, before swinging her legs out onto the ladder and beginning her descent.

Above her, she could hear Blake preparing to follow. ‘Hey, wait for me!’

Initially, Cally carefully tested each step. The platform above her had shown little sign of deterioration, but she didn’t trust that every rung in the ladder was sound, nor that any one of them might not be treacherously covered in dust from a rock fall. Not even that every section of ladder was securely fastened to the wall.

Sensation gradually returned to her feet. The thermal suit clearly coped better in here, away from the savagery of the ice storm. If anything, the effort of her descent meant it was getting uncomfortably hot. With both hands on the ladder, there was no safe moment to adjust the temperature level. Cally decided to persevere, anticipating her next opportunity would be at the next platform below.

Blake seemed to have had the same idea. His boots thumped onto the rungs above her, getting

nearer and nearer.

‘Don’t rush!’ she called up to him. Away from the entrance hatch, now, the echo was deadened by the rock walls that surrounded them on all sides.

‘Don’t fuss!’ he called back at her.

Cally stopped for a moment. She reached up to his oncoming boot, and slapped the side of it with her palm to indicate how dangerously close to her he was getting. ‘Why do you insist on defying good advice?’

‘Oh, it’s advice, is it?’

Cally recognised a familiar, slightly indignant tone in Blake’s voice. He was used to being in command on *Liberator*. And it clearly aggravated him to think that he was being given instructions by a member of his own crew.

‘Is my advice not welcome?’

‘You’re full of questions me for me today, Cally.’

‘Am I?’

He chuckled at this. ‘Is that why you ignored Avon’s advice? Why you’re here on Megiddo?’

Cally stared up at him. Or as much of him as she could see from this angle. ‘I do not know what you mean.’

Blake twisted so that he could look down at her. The torch in his hood spilled onto the rock wall. The light from Cally’s torch softly illuminated his face. She could see he wasn’t chuckling any more.

‘What I mean is...’ he continued. ‘Well, everything you said before. Back on *Liberator*. In the medical unit. About destroying Star One.’

Cally gave a little sigh. This wouldn’t be the moment she’d have chosen for this conversation. She thought about how long it would take to complete the remaining few hundred rungs before they reached the next platform. Perhaps he’d have changed his mind in that time.

‘You were prepared to destroy the Federation,’ she began. ‘But you didn’t question whether that would cause the deaths of innocent people, too.’

Blake pondered this for a moment. ‘You’ve fought,’ he said. ‘And you’ve killed. Do you question that now?’

That didn’t seem fair to Cally. ‘I have always faced those to whom I brought death.’ She continued climbing downwards, foothold by foothold, hand after hand. It only reinforced her feeling that this conversation needed to happen later.

‘That’s never been a problem for the Federation,’ said Blake. ‘A faceless administration that exerts anonymous control over its citizens.’ He must have realised that she was moving away from him, because he raised his voice. ‘Only they weren’t citizens, were they, Cally? They were numbers. They were head count.’

Cally stopped again. She suddenly felt hotter, and it wasn’t just the thermal suit causing it. For a moment, she thought about climbing back up to Blake, to face him directly.

‘Is that how you see the people in those ships?’ she snapped. ‘The ones just arriving. What’s the difference now between their pilots, whether they are from the Federation or the frontier worlds?’

Blake didn’t reply at once. She hoped he was reflecting on what she’d said. Eventually, he said quietly: ‘I’m not sure any more, Cally.’

They clung to the ladder in silence for a moment.

‘Yesterday,’ said Blake eventually, ‘those people lived at the sufferance of the Federation. It enforced surveillance, military access... It even decided the weather!’

Cally shook her head. ‘You say surveillance and military access. But from another perspective, the Federation also monitored transport safety. Secured supply routes for food. It protected people from extreme climates...’

‘It’s not that simple!’ he snapped at her.

Cally started down the ladder again. ‘That is exactly what I mean about perspective.’

Their descent continued largely in silence. She thought she could hear Blake muttering to himself, but whether it was his grumbling or just stifled grunts of pain, she would have to wait to discover.

The shaft seemed to widen out. From the mental count she’d been making of the number of rungs, Cally decided it was worth risking a look down. Sure enough, another metal platform was about five metres below her. In the scattered light from her torch, she could just make out the cracked lenses of her lost goggles.

When she reached it, the platform was secure and dry, with the now-familiar covering of dust and scattered rocks. Cally checked for the platform edges. Was there a further ladder and another drop into pitch darkness? Instead, it appeared to lead through a rock archway.

She stepped carefully to one side, and allowed Blake to descend the remaining rungs. His boots thudded onto the metal surface, and Cally could now hear how the sound echoed. It was clearly a large space.

They angled their torches over the rock wall beside the ladder. The metal of the platform extended up one stretch of wall. A panel of old-fashioned switch-levers was set into it.

‘What do you think?’ Blake asked, walking over to the controls.

Cally wasn’t sure. ‘The lights?’

‘Or the self-destruct? Only one way to find out.’ He reached out, and pulled down every one of the levers.

Cally stumbled forward to stop him. ‘Blake!’

There was a crackle of electricity and a flash of light behind them. Blake tapped his finger on a notice next to the switches that read *Main Lighting*. His grinning face was lit by a growing illumination.

‘Interesting,’ said Cally. ‘The language of that label shows that this whole thing was constructed by humans.’

But she seemed to have lost Blake’s attention. Could he hear the same distant whispering that she could? ‘What’s the matter?’ she asked.

Blake wasn’t grinning any more. He stared over her shoulder, his jaw slack with amazement.

Cally turned to look. And found that she was lost for words, too.

## Chapter 11

### Going Out With a Bang

‘I think this one might be better.’ Vila tugged at the sleeve of the hull suit. It stayed attached, which was a good sign, he decided. But then, it looked a bit battered.

Jenna glared at him. She had arrived in the airlock antechamber after Vila, but was already almost completely dressed in her own hull suit. She had seized the first one she saw, and tugged it on in double-quick time.

‘Is this suit the one I used last time?’ he asked her.

‘How would I know?’ she replied, and started to fit her gloves.

‘Only I thought that one might have had a faulty pressure seal. It sounded like it was leaking air.’

‘It’s when you can’t hear air hissing in your suit that you need to start worrying.’

Vila fingered the sleeve of suit that hung on the next peg along. ‘You can’t be too careful.’

Jenna rolled her eyes. ‘I think you’re making a very concerted effort to be too careful.’

‘This one, then.’

‘Oh come on, Vila!’ she snapped at him. ‘This is just displacement activity. You can’t put it off forever.’

‘I can try,’ he muttered.

Vila didn’t like hull-crawling. For the most part, it was unnecessary, because the auto-repair systems conveniently handled the day-to-day maintenance of the ship’s externals. Even after a major skirmish with Federation pursuit ships, *Liberator* seemed perfectly capable of reinstating any damaged sections without the need for human intervention. The automatics just got on with it, calmly returning systems to a perfectly restored condition, while Vila stayed safely inside restoring himself to a different kind of calm with a perfectly mixed drink.

That was all fine until the auto repair systems themselves needed repairing. Or if Avon needed them to calibrate the *Liberator*’s equipment into a new configuration. Zen could be unhelpfully reluctant to facilitate any change other than the presumed factory defaults. And that was when the crew had to suit up and go out to handle the adjustments manually.

Perhaps, Vila thought to himself sourly, that was why there were so few safety features. No attachment lines, for example. He dreaded the prospect that he might be separated from the hull in mid-repair and float off into the void. Though even that might just be preferable to Avon’s brutal mockery if Vila had to be retrieved and brought back safely.

Jenna was completely ready, and Vila had only just stripped off his shoes and tunic. ‘Hurry up,’ she insisted. ‘We need to remove those things from the hull.’

‘They’re not going anywhere,’ he said.

‘Neither are we. Here...’ Jenna thrust the nearest hull suit into his hands. ‘Put this one on, or I’ll open the airlock and you can go out there in just your underwear.’

In the end, she helped him into the bulky suit. She clipped the helmet shut and, sure enough, he could hear the steady hiss as a cool stream of oxygen played over his face.

They stepped through the nearest door, and the antechamber door slid silently shut behind them. Vila knew it was foolish to feel claustrophobic in the small airlock, when he was already fully encased in his hull suit.

Jenna’s voice crackled over the comms in his helmet. ‘Ready, Vila?’

‘No,’ he replied.

‘Good. Here we go. Don’t forget your toolkit.’

The outer airlock door dropped away to one side, and the darkness of space beckoned them.

Jenna led them out. Vila attached the toolkit to his belt, and used both hands to haul himself out onto the hull.

Frightened as he was of the prospect of another space walk, Vila had to admit that the view it afforded was beautiful. The last time he'd done this was to realign the rear sensor array. They had been in orbit around an uninhabited world. The force wall was deactivated at the time, and so there'd only been the transparent shell of Vila's suit helmet between him and the swirling green surface of an unknown planet. When he had worked his way around the hull that time, and looked back out into space, the stars had glittered back at him from the pitch blackness with a clarity he had never before witnessed. Even the burnished orange-gold surface of *Liberator's* hull could look beautiful in the unfiltered illumination of a nearby sun.

Today was very different. Way off to the one side of the ship, the satellite grid shimmered behind the silent sparks of distant conflict. The other direction revealed an even more isolating view of their home galaxy, impossibly far away and yet looking like he could reach out and touch it with his glove. It was a giddy thought.

'I don't like this, Jenna. When I look up, all I can see are stars. Distant stars. They make me dizzy.' His own voice reverberated in his helmet. He was conscious again of the air hiss. He looked at the stars again, and knew he was alone. 'Jenna? Jenna! Where are you?'

*'I'm right beside you, Vila.'* Even over the comms, he could hear the exasperation in her voice. *'Don't shout. Just speak normally into your helmet microphone.'*

Vila squinted at the device at the front of his helmet. 'Oh. Yes, all right.'

*'And there's a solution to the stars making you dizzy.'*

'It it drugs?'

*'No. Just stop looking at them. Keep your eyes on the hull.'*

Vila adjusted his tool holder, and reached out for the next handhold. Jenna was right. If he just looked at the hull, it would be like a simple crawl along a corridor inside *Liberator*. He'd done that once or twice, depending on what sort of night he'd had.

Yes that was a helpful comparison. Only this was a very wide corridor. With a pronounced curvature to the floor. And no ceiling. The more he thought about this, decided Vila, the less encouraging the comparison became. And telling himself not to think about it wasn't stopping him from thinking about it.

He focused on the surface in front of him. That was even less reassuring. He was appalled at what he saw.

The *Liberator's* hull no longer shone with a burnished brilliance. It had become dull, as if some huge flame had scorched across it. A trace of lines criss-crossed haphazardly, like slug trails over its surface. And everywhere, he could see the alien devices.

*'Can you see all those limpet mines?'* asked Jenna.

'There are dozens of them,' he replied. There was one at the end of each slug trail, where the devices must have dragged along and come to rest. 'And that's just on this section.' Vila pushed himself up with both hands, to look further over the horizon of the hull. 'There could be hundreds. We'll be here forever!'

*'Then we'd better get started.'* Jenna was already moving further along, towards the nearest of the devices.

Vila hesitated. He was in no rush to follow her, and eyed the first of the alien mechanisms with suspicion. 'What if they go off while we're removing them?'

*'If they do,'* she told him, *'you'll be seeing a whole load of different stars.'* She beckoned to him urgently with one gloved hand. *'Come on! Bring your equipment, and let's get started.'*





## Chapter 12

### Down and Unsafe

Blake blinked in astonishment as the lights flickered on. He hardly heard what Cally was saying, because his attention was focused on what was being revealed before his eyes.

After the darkness of the climb down from the hatch, his eyes had become accustomed to the low light of their torches. Even when he had taken his goggles off, he could barely see further than a hundred metres. But now this...

The last of the illumination rippled into life across the room. If 'room' was the right word for it.

'This place is...' Blake could hardly find the words. 'It's huge! It must go back... what, half a kilometre?'

'Maybe further.' Cally had turned to look now. The stark lighting revealed to Blake very clearly that she was as dumbfounded as he was.

It was a natural cavern below the surface, stretching further than he could see. A bowl-shaped floor was criss-crossed with metal gangways that connected islands of equipment. Closest to them, maybe a hundred metres from the platform, were control desks. Empty chairs were dotted around them in a random fashion, some lying on their sides as though knocked over in a rush.

Next along were rows of rectangular boxes arranged in semicircles around another, solitary desk. In the further distance were huge devices that stretched up towards the high roof. Blake thought he could make out thick power lines, and possibly some antiquated but industrial-scale transformers and circuit breakers. At the far side was what looked like a cooling tower. At this distance, it was impossible to see where it vented.

Above this, apparently inaccessible from the floor, were the lights that had sprung so reluctantly into life at his command. They were strung in serried ranks on looped metal cables that spanned the enormous width of the cave, casting a pitiless clarity on the massed equipment that sprawled in scattered sections across the floor space.

'Can you hear that, Blake?'

'What?'

Cally paused. 'I thought it was distant voices.'

Blake listened for a moment. 'The movement of air,' he said. 'This place can't have been disturbed for years.' He switched off his hood torch, and indicated for Cally to do the same. They stepped through the main archway entrance, and contemplated the extraordinary view.

At first, the whole place gave the illusion of being covered in thin reddish-brown veils. And then Blake noticed the faint scattering of dust that floated down from the lighting rigs. It had been disturbed when the lights had rattled into life, and was slowly falling from way above. The veil across the equipment in the room was, in reality, a thin patina of dust that had settled in a regular layer across it over... well, years. Decades, maybe. Centuries? Who knew.

Blake couldn't remember seeing an underground facility like this since the time they'd tried to rendezvous with Avalon. But while the caves in the system on Kelvein had been extensive and interconnected, none of them had the scale of what they were looking at now.

And it was warmer here, too. He saw that Cally was already adjusting her thermal suit. He turned the dial on his own down to fifty percent, before he cooked. The heat had helped his injuries, mitigating the pain caused by any abrupt movements he'd made on the surface.

A walkway led from the arrival platform. Their progress down it kicked up whorls of dust that spilled and scattered over the edge and towards the cavern floor. At the end of the walkway, they crossed a cantilever bridge that led over the cavern floor to the first island of equipment.

Blake used one glove to brush the red-brown dust from the surface of the nearest apparatus. 'Look at all this equipment!' His gesture encompassed the whole of the cavern. He had seen stuff like this before. Back on Earth, the Aquitar project had a dedicated zone of fifteen sub-levels in the primary dome. But nothing this extensive. And he could tell it was still operational, from the droning background hum that permeated the chamber.

Cally was baffled by what she saw. 'Does this mean anything to you, Blake?'

'A little,' he admitted. 'Some of this equipment is really old.' He flicked at some of the control switches, amused by Cally's worried expression. 'Don't worry, if I see a button labelled *Self Destruct* then I promise not to press it.'

'Orac said it could be weaponry.'

'He also said it could be a storage facility,' Blake reminded her. 'This equipment has been here a very long time. I'd hate to think that we braved that ice storm just to break into a junkyard.' He straightened one of the fallen stools, slapped the dust from its upper surface, and sat down on it beside the largest computer desk.

Cally made her way across the next bridge, towards an adjacent island of equipment. 'Can you tell how old it is?'

'A lot of this stuff dates back to... well, it's from long before my project work back on Earth.'

'That is indeed a *very* long time.'

Blake smiled. 'Thank you.' He scrubbed the dust away from the side of one machine. This revealed an image of five arms forming a pentagon, each hand firmly grasping the wrist of the next. 'Look at this,' he called out to Cally. 'It's the original Federation insignia. If that was embossed on this machine, then it goes back at least a century.' He noted that the indicator dials on the computer showed low-level activity, and its lights flickered sporadically. 'The equipment is barely ticking over. But it is still going.' He was about to tap on the control keys. Then he thought better of it, and tapped his fingers pensively against his lips instead. 'I wonder what's keeping it operational?'

'Perhaps its operating personnel are doing that,' said Cally from across the bridge.

Blake indicated the empty, overturned chairs around him. 'Not that I can see.'

'Then come and look at this,' she called.

Something in her voice made Blake hurry across to join her. His boots clanged on the runway as he ran over the metal bridge.

Cally sat at a control console within the semi-circle of oblong boxes. As Blake approached, she rose to show him what she'd found. She had scraped the dust from the nearest three boxes to reveal a glass partition on top of each of them.

Behind the glass of the first one was a human body. She had been a young woman with medium-length brown hair and pale skin. Paler still in death, thought Blake. Her sapphire eyes were glazed and unseeing. Protected from the dust, the woman's purple uniform looked as pressed and clean as the moment she had first put it on. All the signs indicated that had been a very long time ago. The right-hand side of her tunic was emblazoned with the five-armed Federation logo.

The next box along contained the body of a young man, about the same age.

'Corpses,' Blake said. 'Which would explain why they're in coffins.'

Cally nodded at the boxes, and encouraged Blake to look again. 'Are you sure?'

'They've got commemorative plaques,' he said. Each one had a neatly printed sign attached to it. 'Maykel Coleman, Barni Stafford, Geraint Jones... and look, it shows the date they died.' He scraped the dust off a fourth box to reveal an older man. 'This one's called Roshan Nichani.'

Cally pointed at the signs. 'They are in adjacent cabinets...'

'Coffins,' Blake insisted.

'All right, adjacent coffins. But their supposed dates of death are years apart. Decades, in some

cases.'

Blake looked blankly at Cally.

She tutted at him. 'They are dates of birth. And those are not coffins. They're life-support cabinets.'

## Chapter 13

### Facing the Enemy

Vila reached back into his toolkit for an adjuster. The work was fiddly, because the delicate instruments were hard to manipulate in his clumsy gloves.

He made the modification to the tool, and applied it to the outer edge of the next limpet mine, at the point where it had attached to the *Liberator*. The mine was a flattened sphere with odd blotches across its surface. Vila didn't know if this was alien writing or some kind of design. Whatever it was, they were different on each of the mines. He had successfully detached a couple of the devices, and found that these alien things were not just clamped to the surface, they had managed to dig themselves in. Once he had prised each mine away, he saw the *Liberator* auto-repair kick in as it began to re-cover the outer surface, and the ship's protective skin began to reform. Until then, auto-repair seemed unable to dislodge these foreign bodies.

Vila kept up a commentary on what he was doing. In part this was so that Jenna understood what he was up to – she could take over when he needed a break. But mostly, it was to keep his own spirits up, and not to think too much about the implications of what he was doing. In the middle distance, a patch of hull was brilliantly illuminated as one of the mines exploded. He dreaded that one of the other, nearer devices might explode beside him. Or worse, in his hand.

He tried to concentrate on this latest one. There was a click beneath his fingers as he pried it loose. 'That's another one done.' He flicked it up and away, so that it vanished into the darkness. There was something very satisfying about flinging them into space. He shuffled along a few metres and removed another one.

Jenna had patched Avon in to the communications, so that they could keep him informed of progress. 'How's it going?' his voice asked in Vila's earpiece.

'Ten down,' Jenna's voice replied.

'Two hundred to go,' added Vila.

'There's certainly plenty of this alien ordnance up here,' agreed Jenna. 'That explosion scattered it over quite a wide area.'

Vila twisted his head and shoulders to take in a wider view of the hull. 'Are you getting these images, Avon?'

'Keep your head still. It makes the scan easier.'

'OK. How's that?' Vila bent back to face the hull, and paused over the nearest mine. He remained motionless for several seconds, to allow his suit sensors to capture the data. 'See the marks they leave? They're burrowing into the outer hull.'

'Like ticks on an animal,' suggested Jenna.

Vila didn't like the suggestion. He shuffled along on his hands and knees, and began to apply his tools to the next one. 'Avon, I hope you're getting all of this. Have you worked out what's powering these things yet?'

'Orac is analysing your scanner data. He might have something.'

'Or he might just be sulking.' The limpet mine clicked out of its slot. Vila tugged it free, and cast it away into the darkness. He flexed his fingers inside his thick gloves. 'Oh, it's going to take forever. My hands are starting to spasm already.'

'Let me have a go,' suggested Jenna. 'I've seen how you do it.'

Vila shunted sideways so that he could see her properly. He was usually reluctant to let others do his job, let alone explain to them how he worked his magic. But at the moment, his professional pride hurt less than his cramped fingers.

He cautiously held out the tool he had been using. ‘Be careful with this,’ he said. ‘It’s a sub-atomic probe. Can be dangerous.’ He indicated a limpet mine to her left. ‘Use it on that one there.’

Jenna waggled the probe in her gloved hand and her helmet moved from side to side as she considered several options. ‘Which one?’

Vila gestured with one gloved hand. ‘There. The one that’s...’ He stared at the limpet mine. ‘The one that’s moving!’

His helmet prevented him from rubbing his eyes in disbelief, so he blinked several times to dispel the illusion. It did not. He let out a little cry of alarm. Two of the blotches on the flat round top of the limpet mine had sprung up. They rotated, as though searching for something. Or, Vila thought, like a pair of eyes.

‘It’s looking at us!’

Jenna shuffled aside, and bumped into Vila. He clutched for a handhold, terrified of being dislodged from the hull and floating off into space – where, no doubt, the limpet mines he had thrown overboard would be waiting, peering at him with their eyes on stalks.

Vila saw more movement in the corner of his eye. Several of the alien devices had sprouted legs, and begun to sidle sideways, scratching the surface as they dragged along.

‘They’re all starting to move,’ Jenna said.

Right across the hull, the limpet mines were popping up antennae. Some had short, stubby protuberances that barely broke the surface. Others had longer, more slender feelers stretching curiously into the vacuum.

Revealed by the lights in her helmet, Jenna’s eyes were wide in amazement. ‘D’you know what I think, Vila?’

‘That it’s time to leave?’

‘I think that these aren’t just bits of ordnance left by the aliens,’ she continued. ‘These are the aliens!’

Vila gulped. The sound was disconcertingly loud inside his helmet. ‘They’re burrowing into *Liberator*, ready to explode. Avon?’

The brief pause seemed to last forever.

‘Answer, Avon! These things have all spotted us.’

‘What is it?’

‘Trouble, that’s what! We’re surrounded by alien suicide ticks!’

There was no pause this time. Avon had obviously seen the sensor readings from their hull suits. ‘You should get back inside, Vila. Now.’

‘Oh, d’you think so?’

‘Orac says he’s worked out how dislodge them all.’ Avon sounded muffled, as though he had his head buried in something he was working on. Unless he was hiding under a table. ‘We’re going to reflect our radiation flare shield back onto the hull.’

‘Very clever,’ said Vila.

‘Very dangerous,’ Avon told him.

Even as Avon spoke, Vila felt a tremor underneath his body. The hull was vibrating. The audio channel on his earpiece crackled like sizzling bacon. ‘When were you planning on doing this, Avon?’

‘No time like the present.’

The alien limpets nearby quivered and clung to the hull. Vila decided it was a good idea to do exactly the same.

‘It’s working!’ shouted Jenna in his ear. ‘Look, Vila – at the far end.’ He followed her outstretched arm. ‘The aliens are detaching from the hull.’

It was an autumn leaf fall in reverse. At the farthest part of the *Liberator*’s scarred exterior, limpet

mines came loose and floated off like specks until they vanished into space. One of them, as it span away, exploded in a magnesium flare of light.

‘So much for them,’ Vila told Jenna. ‘But what about you and me? What happens when the flare shield reaches us?’

*‘Like I said...’* Avon’s voice was calm but insistent. *‘Get back inside.’*

Avon’s words were starting to vanish into the comms background crackle. Vila could still just hear Jenna’s urgent voice. *‘Vila! We have to get to the airlock. Now!’*

He twisted to look back at the doorway in the middle distance. A crowd of alien creatures bristled and shivered, and started to converge on his position.

## Chapter 14

### Megiddo

Cally studied Blake's reaction. He'd been so confident that these were corpses, and he was evidently finding it hard to believe they could have survived.

'No,' Blake told her emphatically. 'Look at this one. He can't possibly be alive.'

Cally could sympathise. If those were dates of birth, then these people had been in the life capsules for hundreds of years. And Blake obviously thought he knew enough about this whole facility to realise how improbable that was. After all, he'd already told her that he recognised a lot of the equipment, even if it pre-dated his own experience of Federation technology. And if this sort of thing wasn't feasible when Blake was working for the Federation, how could even older technology achieve it?

Blake edged further around the semi-circle. Cally watched him wipe the red-brown dust of centuries from the glass covers of several more cabinets. 'All these others are the same. Eyes wide open, but sightless. No breath. No visible pulse.'

He reached across the nearest cabinet. He rapped on the glass with his knuckles. Cally smiled at the thought Blake might wake the man from his deathly slumber.

'See? No reactions whatsoever. There's no respiration on the other side of the glass.' Blake bent down to examine the box more closely, his head pressed against the side panel. 'It's making a faint ticking sound. Some kind of machinery.' He ran his fingers along one side of the casket, and slid them to the other edge. His fingers fumbled for a release catch.

Cally jumped up from her chair, alarmed. 'Don't open it!'

She was too late. Blake had located a clasp on the left-hand side of the casket. He stood up, very pleased with his discovery. The locking mechanism clicked under the pressure of his fingers.

The casket lid creaked briefly. As it opened, Cally heard the sucking sound of a vacuum breach, the sharp hiss of air. For an awful moment, it was as though the occupant of the cabinet had tried to take in one last whooping gasp of breath. And then there was a noise like a dull explosion.

A cloud of greyish, foul-smelling dust spewed from the casket, forced out beneath the half-removed lid. Blake leaped back with a startled cry, dropping the lid as he did so. It slammed back into position on the casket, wafting the disgusting cloud of grey dust across the room. It hung in the air for a while, before starting to settle slowly on all the surfaces around them.

Cally clasped her scarf to her nose and mouth, in a futile attempt to stave off the dreadful smell. At least she wouldn't inhale any more of the cloud, whatever it was. Though she thought she could guess.

Blake coughed an apology. He wafted the remaining cloud out of his view, despite Cally's renewed protests, and peered into the cabinet through the glass.

'Well,' he said, 'that one's certainly dead now.'

'Oh, Blake!' Cally slapped him on his arm, outraged by his cavalier attitude.

Blake had the decency to look slightly ashamed. 'I'm sorry. His body just... disintegrated.' He peered in at the occupant of an adjacent casket. When he saw Cally's infuriated expression, he raised his hands to indicate that he had no intention of opening this one. 'So if the others aren't dead, what's happened to them?'

Cally removed the scarf from her face. 'It is a form of profound sleep.'

'You mean stasis? Suspended animation?'

'No,' Cally explained. 'This is not a cryogenic system. These men and women are on the extreme periphery of life.' She considered what this meant. 'Perhaps that's what I could hear. The whispers. It could be these people, a hair's breadth from death.'

Blake pondered this. 'They're like Archangels, then?'



Cally considered this. ‘No,’ she concluded. ‘This is not cybernetics. And Kodyn’s project was long after this. You said it yourself – this is much older.’

‘And that’s my point.’ Blake stared around the huge cavern disbelievingly. ‘Just look at this place. Look at the age of the equipment. If the people in those coffins...’

‘Cabinets.’

‘Yes, all right. If they’re still alive, then they must have been like that for...’

Cally nodded. ‘For hundreds of years, yes.’

Blake set one of the fallen chairs upright, and beckoned for Cally to sit down again next to him. He stroked his chin in a gesture she found both familiar and reassuring.

‘Why do you think that is, Cally?’

Cally sat a little straighter in her chair, and closed her eyes in preparation. ‘I shall try to find out.’

‘What do you mean?’

She shushed him. ‘I need to concentrate.’

‘Is this more of your intelligent guesswork?’ he asked.

His voice was already getting fainter, along with the noises of the room as the background hum slipped beyond her hearing. The stark lighting filtering through her eyelids darkened. The acrid stench from the cabinet faded from her nostrils. She could no longer feel the warmth of the thermal suit against her body. It was like she was floating... floating...

She was in the cabinet. She was... in all of them.

She knew all people. She knew each of them. She *was* each of them. Coleman, Stafford, Nichani, Mattro... and all the others. Faint at first, so weak, but strengthening as she reached out. And from so long ago, so very long ago.

It was a kaleidoscope of their experiences and beliefs and emotions. She saw their homes. The families they left behind. Brief glimpses into their everyday lives. Gathered around the table for a meal, laughing at some absurdity, arguing amiably over some minor information... unwilling at first to acknowledge their true purpose.

They resisted her. Did not volunteer their thoughts willingly. But she knew they were old. So very old. And over these past centuries, imprisoned in these boxes, they had only had their private thoughts and memories to accompany them on their long, lonely journey down the decades. And now, through Cally they could reach out to each other again. Once they realised that, the dam burst. The relief in knowing that they had survived the centuries together gushed out in an unstoppable torrent.

Cally feared she would be washed away by the outpouring. But she had to know. Had to listen.

Behind the joy of new contact, there was much old pain. It had been such a long time since the Federation had found them. Taken each one from their loved ones and brought them here. They did not know the pretext for their work, at first. And once they had done, it had repelled them.

That was before the Federation had set to work on them. When it broke into their psyches. It took their recollections, their beliefs, their values... and disassembled them, piece by piece, memory by memory. Until they had nothing, and were built up again from scratch. Until they accepted their new purpose.

At first, their reluctance had made them prisoners in this Federation facility. Trapped far from their home worlds, unable ever to return. They knew that the Federation had chosen them for a combination of mental agility and perseverance, so they also knew that they could outlast their prison guards. That they were stronger together than they were on their own.

That’s why the Federation placed them in the life-support capsules. Sedated them. Separated them from each other, and from the world. And as the months went by, they were no longer just prisoners in their individual caskets. Their mental fight faded as their incarceration made them prisoners in their own bodies. Fighting a battle within the trap of their own physical forms.

Ready for their true purpose.

The purpose the Federation would never reveal. The purpose these prisoners carried with them on this silent, watchful journey down the centuries. The longest war in Federation history. One that could only end one way.

Cally awoke with a jolt. She was lying on the dusty walkway, beside the silent cabinets. Blake knelt beside her to hold one of her hands and stroke her forehead.

The room returned to her in a rush. The lights and the sounds and the smells. In her thermal suit, she suddenly shivered. She realised she had been crying.

‘Welcome back,’ Blake said softly.

He helped her to sit up. She coughed a little at the dust around them. ‘They are alive, Blake. They did not die.’

‘I was worried *you* might.’

‘And I know what this place is.’ Cally focused on Blake’s face as she mentally returned to the present, trying to separate now from then. ‘They told me, in their own way. This place pre-dates Star One by two hundred years.’

Blake harrumphed. ‘I think we’d established that much.’

‘Listen to me, Blake.’ She fixed him with a stern look, and he fell silent again, suitably abashed. ‘This is the failsafe, in the event that Star One is ever threatened.’

‘Ah.’ She saw how worried Blake looked at this thought. ‘I can’t imagine that Star One has ever faced a bigger threat than now.’

Cally nodded. ‘When Megiddo’s strange orbit returns it to the satellite grid, the men and women linked together in their caskets take over the operation. They override Star One and... and...’

‘What, Cally? Did they tell you?’

She was close to tears again. Mourning what these people had lost two hundred years ago. Grieving for their loss yet to come. ‘This facility is a bomb.’

Blake looked around the room. ‘Which part?’ He straightened to peer across the cavern at the distant generators. ‘Over there, perhaps?’

Cally stood up next to him. ‘All of it.’

‘What? How can they launch it?’

‘No, Blake.’ She took his arm. ‘The whole of Megiddo is a bomb. When it reaches the satellite grid, the planetoid will consume itself in a massive plasma explosion. It is designed to wipe out the alien fleet.’

Blake stared at her. She hoped it was because he was taking in the enormity of what she had discerned from the sleeping operators, and not because he simply could not believe her.

‘That’s old technology,’ he said. ‘It long pre-dates the focused plasma bolts of today’s Federation weaponry. Not subtle. Not discerning.’

Cally recalled a word from the heart of the operators’ gestalt. ‘Cataclysmic.’

Blake was still considering the consequences. ‘A plasma explosion that big will wipe out *everything!* The alien fleet, the Federation pursuit ships, the whole flotilla of Earth ships. Not to mention the *Liberator*.’

Cally released his arm, and moved over to the nearest semicircle of cabinets. ‘It will kill all these poor people, too.’

Blake’s dismissive gesture waved away her comment. ‘We have bigger things to worry about.’

‘You are missing that perspective again,’ said Cally sadly. ‘They’ve been trapped here as part of Megiddo’s operating system for hundreds of years. But they are people, Blake. Not headcount.’

‘They are a weapon.’

‘They are humans,’ insisted Cally. ‘They have a right to live.’

‘They surrendered that right two hundred years ago.’

She rounded on him angrily. ‘And what would you know about them?’

Blake raised his hands to placate her. ‘All right, all right. They spoke to you, and not to me. I understand that.’ He was pacing between the caskets now, peering into them occasionally as though he might get a clue from the long-silent occupants. ‘But it’s not as though they can discuss it with us over a drink and light refreshments...’ He fell silent as a thought came to him.

‘Or perhaps we can. Can’t you reach them telepathically? Can you explain? Ask them to stop it?’

‘No.’ Cally looked mournfully through the glass of the nearest casket. It was one of the young men, Geraint Jones. Over two hundred years old, but he still looked Cally’s age. ‘No,’ she said again. ‘Over the centuries, their purpose has been indelibly etched into their minds.’

Blake was his usual brisk, decisive self again, though he spoke softly to her. ‘Well, that means we *can’t* save them.’

‘But it does not mean we cannot *feel* for them.’ Cally reached out for some of the rock dust, and scattered it over the glass so that she could no longer see the man’s face.

‘We could open all the cabinets,’ suggested Blake. ‘Destroy the operators, defuse the bomb.’ He looked at Cally pleadingly, almost apologetically.

Cally thought back to what she had detected in her contact with the gestalt. ‘The system is already under way,’ she decided. ‘Kill them, and there is no reversing it.’

Blake paced back along the semi-circle, grimacing with frustration. ‘What about an override? The Federation brainwashed them – so they must be able to issue a counter-command as well?’

Cally considered what she had learned. Even now the contact with the gestalt, the experience of being them, was fading into faint memories. What had seemed so real, so vital, so immediate only a few minutes ago was becoming history, anecdote. ‘I suppose that must be true,’ was all she could say.

‘Well, come on then!’ Blake had been galvanised into action. He stormed off across the bridge, en route to another collection of equipment. ‘Those pursuit ships are within range. And there must be a comms system in this place.’ He was already at the next island of machinery in the cavern. He brushed the dust off the paraphernalia he found, and examined it in fresh desperation. ‘If we can contact the Federation, they can defuse this bomb before it’s too late.’

## Chapter 15

### Close Encounter

Vila wondered if it was too late to escape the limpet bombs. They scratched and scraped their way across the hull toward him. Their antennae twitched as they sought out their targets. He and Jenna were only part way to the airlock door, and the creatures had already closed in. One of them perked up on spindly legs, eyed him with its antennae, and then exploded in a ball of flame.

Vila reeled back, throwing his hands up to ward off the explosion. He heard a spattering of fragments strike his helmet. It was a disconcerting noise from outside his personal bubble in the quiet of space. He rolled forward, over and over, away from the blast. He was frightened that his suit might be holed. Even more terrified that he would bounce away from the hull and vanish helplessly into space. Tumbling forever, until the air in his suit was exhausted and he died a cold, lonely death.

‘*Vila!*’ Jenna’s concerned shout brought him back to reality. And grabbing a nearby handle brought him back into contact with the hull. He had rolled within reach of the airlock. Jenna was forty metres behind him.

He tried to calm down, so that he could listen for tell-tale suit alarms or a sudden, increased rush of air. All he could hear was the sudden, increased rush of his own breathing. And then Jenna’s voice again.

‘*Vila, you’re all right. It wasn’t close enough to rip your hull suit.*’ And then, in case he’d forgotten: ‘*Open the airlock door!*’

He stared back at her. The first thing he noticed was a fine line across his helmet. Not a reflection of the *Liberator*, as he first thought. When he focused more closely, there was a second line that stretched to meet it. With a thrill of horror, he recognised that there was a crack in the visor of his helmet.

Beyond that, the limpet mines had moved into the gap between him and Jenna. The nearest was only a metre away. It had popped up on its stilt-like legs, and slowly rotated to survey the area. Vila saw the dark circle where it had originally burrowed into the hull, its thin limbs still clinging to the torn metal.

He thought it should be easy to dislodge it, simply by activating his sub-atomic probe on one or two joints. But the probe was not in his toolkit. Because he’d handed it to Jenna earlier, when she offered to help him.

The creature turned to look directly at him. Assessing him before it blew up in his face, Vila supposed.

Well, he wasn’t prepared to let that happen. He seized his toolkit by the strap, swung it in an ungainly circle around his body, and slammed it against the alien. The antennae shot protectively back into the creature’s body, but it didn’t compress its legs fast enough. The toolkit slammed into its side with a very gratifying thump. The thin legs buckled and bent. Vila gave the toolkit another great heave, and this time the blow severed the creature from its legs, and it tumbled off into the darkness.

Vila looked for Jenna. She was still some distance away. ‘*Get to the airlock!*’

‘What about you?’ He reattached his toolkit, and hesitated. Should he help Jenna clear a path through the limpet mines so that she could reach him? Or turn and open the airlock?

The urgency of his decision was underlined as another alien ignited twenty metres from him, between him and Jenna. The light that blossomed from it didn’t fade as fast as the others. He wondered whether that was an after-image of the flare, until he worked it out. Beyond the exploded alien, and far behind Jenna too, an aurora of light was building over the horizon.

‘The flare shield,’ he gasped. ‘It’s like a wave! Cresting over the hull!’

Jenna didn't look back. *'Stop admiring it and start avoiding it!'*

*'Watch out for those alien ticks,'* he warned her. *'They're everywhere. Converging on us.'* He scuttled backwards as best he could, towards the airlock.

Avon's voice crackled and spat in his helmet. *'Hurry up, you two. Another alien ship is approaching.'*

*'I see it!'* acknowledged Jenna. *'Go on Vila. Get inside!'*

He'd reached the airlock door, and managed to bat away another limpet mine. Vila scabbled at the hatch, panicking that he couldn't find a handle in its smooth, sealed surface. *'I'm at the airlock, Avon. Open up!'*

He looked back to locate Jenna. She had barely covered a further ten metres. The shield's wave of energy washed over the hull behind her, towards her, a tsunami of power that tore up the limpet mines and discarded them indiscriminately in every direction.

And above that, an alien spaceship closed in. It was the size of a planet hopper, but shaped like no ship Vila had ever seen before. Its lines were not like any conventional vessel. It wasn't even symmetrical. The surface glistened with an oscillating pulse of lights in a melting, changing melange of colours, like oil on water. It loomed ominously over Jenna.

*'Vila,'* she said. She had no need to shout, because she knew he could hear her over the comms. It made her voice sound unnaturally calm. *'Don't let these things in with you!'*

An abrupt movement told Vila that the airlock door had dropped away beneath him. Even from where she was, Jenna must have seen this.

*'Get inside!'*

*'Then hurry up,'* he told her as he began to climb in through the hatch.

Jenna wasn't making up any new ground. In fact, it looked like she had stopped moving forward at all. Alien limpets were closing in on her from three sides.

*'I have a better idea. Close the door behind you!'*

*'I can't leave you!'* Vila no longer cared that he was shouting. Almost every instinct told him to dive back inside *Liberator* to safety. But a tiny part of him was urging the opposite – to go back and rescue Jenna, despite the overwhelming odds.

Fresh light crested over the hull. The surface vibrated with a further burst of energy. The crack in Vila's visor looked to have a fresh fracture joining the other two.

*'You have to go. Close the door!'*

Vila watched her stand up, unsteadily, and turn her back on him. She had made her decision. She wasn't hiding from the oncoming threats of the shield wave and the bizarre alien ship. Jenna was facing them down, right to the end.

Vila looked away, appalled. Around him, alien limpets scuttled closer on their gangling legs, and surrounded the airlock door.

He dropped down below the hull, and whacked the door control on the inner wall. The hatchway above him sealed with a clunk he could feel through his boots.

The wall gauge showed air was rapidly pumping into the airlock. It wasn't long before the room repressurised, and Vila could open the inner door.

He didn't go straight through it. Instead, he slumped down onto the airlock floor and tugged off his cracked helmet, ripped away his gloves and flung them to one side of the room. There was a skittering, scratching sound, but he didn't care what he'd damaged.

He put his face in his hands, his breath coming in great heaving gulps.

*'Oh Jenna. What have I done?'*

## Chapter 16

### Blunt Instrument

Blake slammed a frustrated fist down on the table. The vibration made his whole arm tingle. Beneath his thermal suit he felt a sharp point of pain at the site of his injury.

He and Cally had been hunting for communications equipment for too long. He caught her disapproving look from where she watched him, on an adjacent island of equipment beyond the suspended walkway. He sucked in a deep, calming breath. It would do no good for him to exacerbate the wound. They would likely have no more luck finding medical instruments in this enormous cavern than they'd already had locating a comms unit. It wouldn't help if he died down here of his gunshot wound, a victim at last of Travis's final attack.

Yet he and his crew had already made compromises. Back on *Liberator*, they'd swallowed their pride and contacted the Federation for reinforcements to hold back the alien invasion. A Federation that, until then, had lost all memory of the defence grid around Star One. It would be the worst of ironies for them to arrive only to be destroyed, along with everything else in the immediate vicinity, by an even older, deeper Federation secret. It was almost as though Blake could hear Megiddo all around him ticking, ticking, ticking towards destruction.

He tried his comms bracelet yet again. No signal at all. No way to contact *Liberator*. 'We must be far too deep underground,' he told Cally.

'Or they are not there,' she replied, walking across the bridge to rejoin him. 'Avon said he would not remain on station.'

Blake scuffed his feet on the dusty floor. 'Can you reach him telepathically?'

Cally shook her head. 'I have tried,' she admitted. 'But even if he could hear my messages, I cannot confirm that he has done so. And his continued absence suggests otherwise.'

'Or he can't get to us through the storm and ice outside.'

Cally seemed so frustrated with herself. 'I was able to perceive what the human fleet was thinking. My telepathic ability has been enhanced since we arrived in this sector, Blake. I think...'

'What?'

Cally looked across at the cabinets arrayed in semicircles. 'I think it is the powerful effect of these humans, connected into the Megiddo systems.'

Blake laughed mirthlessly. 'Perhaps you should ask *them* to contact the Federation for us.'

'If only,' she admitted. 'They seem to have been reaching out to me since we got here.'

'Well that's it!' Blake was laughing again, but now it was in delight at a fresh idea. 'If anyone knows where the comms equipment is here, it's the operators. So why don't you ask them?'

Cally seemed to think this was a good idea. Blake watched, in a mixture of admiration and concern, as she composed herself and froze into immobility. Despite the machine hum all around them, she was able somehow to disengage from her immediate surroundings.

Within a couple of minutes, she blinked back to into life. 'It's no wonder we couldn't find the comms controls,' Cally said. She led Blake across a couple of the connecting bridges to one of the equipment islands at the very edge of the cavernous room. 'They stored it away, because they knew they would never use it again.' She drew a cover from what appeared to be a simple wooden box, and lifted out an antique-looking comms desk with an integrated monitor and speaker. 'And no, they didn't want to contact the Federation for us.'

Blake plugged in the comms desk and powered it up. 'Thanks for asking, anyway.'

'I was joking. They're the trigger for a bomb,' she said. 'They don't do requests.'

It had been a long time since Blake had used such old-fashioned equipment. He took for granted

that he could bark commands at Zen, and have the ship's computer handle the connections. Or bark commands at his crew on the *Liberator*. Perhaps he'd started to take them for granted, too.

The equipment was set up for an all-points broadcast to Federation channels. Blake had to wonder whether the same channels had survived for hundreds of years, or whether he had made the right connections in the comms desk to ensure that his message was getting outside of this room. 'This is an urgent transmission to all Federation vessels. Do you copy?'

Only a static hiss came over the speakers. The oval view screen showed a zigzag pattern of interference.

'D'you think this thing's even working?' Blake struck out with his open palm, and the equipment jolted.

Cally slapped his hand away. 'That won't help. You'll break it.' She repositioned the speakers and adjusted the camera lens.

'I think it's broken anyway,' grumbled Blake. 'It can't have been used for centuries.' He raised his voice again. 'Federation vessels, do you copy? This is an urgent transmission from the security facility on Megiddo.'

Cally sat beside him at the comms desk. 'Perhaps they are not yet in range.'

'We saw them starting to arrive,' he reminded her. 'Back on *Liberator*.'

'Unless they did not survive their first engagement with the enemy.'

'You're full of cheery thoughts, Cally. But it is odd that they would ignore us.'

He pressed the comms link one more time. This time, the static hiss was abruptly interrupted by an incoming signal. Blake tried to tune out the interference and boost the voice signal.

'*This is Escort Group Nine. We receive you. Barely.*'

Blake whooped with delight. 'They are out there! But the signal is corrupted...'

'*Switch to channel alpha-epsilon, the voice said. Those antediluvian systems are so antiquated as to be an embarrassment.*'

'Alpha-epsilon?' Blake puzzled.

Cally reached past him and cranked one of the handles. 'I suppose it must be this one.'

'We read you, Escort Group Nine.'

'*Your signal is clearer, now.*'

'This is Megiddo facility. My name is...'

'*Roj Blake,*' said the voice. '*I know.*'

'Oh.' Blake stared at the comms speakers. Then he stared at Cally, as though she might explain it somehow. 'Did you hear that from Space Command HQ?'

The zigzag interference was clearing now. An oval face with short hair was coming into focus. 'You seem to be in regular contact with me, Blake,' it said. 'I'm touched.'

Blake groaned. 'Look who it is, Cally.'

'*Oh, splendid.*' On the view screen, Servalan beamed with apparent delight as the camera showed her who sat beside Blake. '*You have Cally with you on Megiddo. All friends together. Quite a reunion.*'

Cally scowled at the camera. 'I am no friend of yours.'

Servalan sipped delicately at the elegant drink in her hand. '*And yet, here we are, Cally. Chatting away.*'

Blake stared at the woman on the screen. They had rarely met in person, and if they did it meant that one of them was usually at the end of a gun. And now his pursuit of the real Control, located at Star One, had brought both him and Servalan here. To the edge of human space. They weren't aiming guns at each other any longer. They were facing each other over a comms link. And facing up to a common enemy, as the alien fleet massed at the border of their galaxy.

'I wish I could say it was a pleasure, Servalan.'

She smiled her acid smile. *'It is for me.'*

Blake didn't know who in the Federation had received *Liberator's* original appeal for reinforcements, but this was unexpected. 'I didn't think you'd show your face on the front line, Servalan. Too dangerous. You'd rather let others do your dirty work.'

Servalan waved away some flunkey just out of vision, and continued smiling at Blake. *'You do seem to have contained the alien fleet. Thank you for that.'* She took another sip from her glass. *'And while the Federation vessels complete the job, what better than a morale-boosting visit from me? Bound to do the troops a power of good.'*

'Power!' spat Blake. 'A word that trips so easily from your poisonous tongue, Supreme Commander.'

Servalan glanced off to one side of her camera in mock indignation, as though appealing to some unseen person in the room. *'Madam President, if you don't mind.'* Her eyes stared right into him, now, piercing like lasers. *'So don't be hurtful, Blake. You're in no position. Whereas, thanks to you, mine does seem to have improved.'* She waved her empty cocktail glass at the person with her, and it was immediately replaced.

Cally was not intimidated. 'Your position is about to deteriorate, Servalan.'

'We're all in grave danger,' Blake emphasised. He could feel the situation slipping out of his grasp. Since Travis's death, Blake loathed the woman on this screen more than anyone he knew. He held her responsible for the death of Gan, for countless military actions against innocent civilians, and now for being the prime representative of the Federation itself. Every fibre of him wanted to make her pay for all of that. And yet, he knew it had to wait for another time. Today, he had to work with the Federation.

'Do tell,' Servalan prompted him.

'This war is by no means over. That huge alien fleet is barely contained.'

*'I know my Federation technology is far superior to theirs,'* she interrupted.

Blake gritted his teeth, trying to stay calm. 'Well, this Federation technology here on Megiddo is about to kill us all.' He widened the view on the camera lens, to allow Servalan a fuller view of the planetoid's cavernous interior. 'This whole facility is an enormous plasma bomb. You have to use your Federation command protocols to override these systems.' He leaned in closer. 'You must defuse this thing.'

Servalan leaned back in her seat. *'I don't think so.'*

Cally bent in towards the camera, her voice quiet and urgent. 'It will destroy the aliens, the humans, and every last one of your Federation ships.'

'The weapon is indiscriminate,' Blake agreed. 'It's a blunt instrument.'

Servalan seemed fascinated with the fingernails on her left hand. After a moment, she favoured the camera with her attention again, and said: *'I know.'*

Blake didn't think he'd understood her. 'What?'

Servalan took another indulgent sip of her cocktail. She licked her lips. Blake's bafflement seemed to amuse her. *'It was something the head of the psycho-manipulation team mentioned during his...'* She pondered what might be the right word. *'... during his debriefing. It didn't make sense at first. But then my interrogators worked it out. Megiddo.'* She enunciated the word as three separate syllables, delighting in the name. *'The Federation's armageddon device.'*

Blake looked at Cally. It seemed she couldn't believe what she was hearing either. 'It will destroy everything!' she said.

*'As I said. Superior Federation technology.'*

Blake could no longer contain his temper. He slammed his balled fist onto the comms console, and the speakers and screen rattled. 'What about the ships from the frontier planets? They've been defending your galaxy.'



The image on the screen settled down, and revealed that Servalan was still completely unmoved. *'There may be some... collateral damage.'*

'And your own fleet?' Cally asked quietly.

Servalan checked something on a read-out in front of her. 'It appears I have held back sixty percent of my fleet.'

Maybe if he pleaded with her, Blake thought. Maybe then she would see how serious this was. And she would see reason. 'Servalan, please! You have to prevent this. You have to stop Megiddo.'

Servalan looked directly into the lens. 'No,' she said. *'I really don't.'* She was already reaching for something on the control desk in front of her. She hesitated briefly. *'Goodbye, Blake.'*

Her image splintered into a million pixels, and the sound cut abruptly to static.

'Servalan?' yelled Blake, scrabbling at the switches in front of him. 'Servalan!'

Cally pulled his furious hands away from the comms controls he was crushing. 'She has gone, Blake,' she said quietly. She stood up, and walked away from the desk. 'And we must go, too.'

'Go where?' he wondered. 'Back to the *Liberator*? Maybe we could blast Megiddo into pieces.'

'Does the *Liberator* have that power?'

Blake pondered this. 'Or we could at least deflect its orbit. Send it back off into deep space.'

'What about the alien fleet?'

Blake had already thought of that. 'Servalan will have no option but to commit her remaining fleet to the battle.'

'Perhaps.' Cally looked uncertain.

Blake wasn't sure that he had any more words to convince her. He tried his comms bracelet again. The activation chime sounded lost in this vast room. And there was no response from *Liberator*. No way of teleporting back from here.

'Maybe we're too far below the surface. Come on, Cally.' Blake started across the bridge, on a route towards the cavern's arched entrance. He had to stop with a groan after only a few steps as the pain in his side kicked in again.

Cally was beside him at once. 'I do not think you can manage the climb.'

Blake thought about the difficult journey ahead, clambering back up that long, narrow ladder. And then, beyond the hatch, had that savage storm abated? Would they be able to contact *Liberator* even if they managed to get out of this place and back onto the surface of Megiddo?

He looked back over at the desk. The screen still showed the crisscross pattern of interference. 'That comms equipment...' he mused.

'I doubt the Federation will rescue us,' said Cally bitterly. 'Servalan will have relayed her own orders to them by now.'

'That's not my point,' Blake said. 'If it has a connection out of here to reach the Federation, then we must be able to reconfigure it to contact the *Liberator*!'

## Chapter 17

### Dropping the Pilot

Vila didn't know how long he'd been there, slumped against the wall of the tiny airlock. He couldn't bring himself to contact Avon. To tell him what had happened. He started to wonder if falling away from *Liberator* and vanishing into the depths of space wouldn't have been a better option after all.

With his hands covering his eyes, he could still visualise those last moments. Jenna waving him back, then standing, then turning away from him. The looming alien ship, its colours changing and coalescing. The shield wave bursting towards her, starkly silhouetting her.

He removed his hands, and looked bleakly around the airlock. His hull suit was peppered with burn marks, with a clear hole in one of the legs. That exploding mine must have been closer than he'd realised. His helmet lay to one side, its visor cracked. The toolkit and his gloves were discarded beside them.

'What have I done?' he muttered to himself, over and over. 'What have I done?'

No, it didn't have to be like this. He could fix this. He could get a gun and go back out there. Face down those alien things. Bring Jenna back inside to safety.

Vila pushed himself up the wall, new resolve filling his shaking legs. He lunged for the comms unit, jabbing furiously at the transmit button.

'Avon!' he shouted. 'Deactivate the flare shield! Jenna's still out there. I have to let her in!'

The comms unit hummed in response. '*You're too late,*' said Avon. He sounded resigned to the fact.

'What do you mean?' Vila choked back a sob, his mind whirling. 'You mean, she's dead?'

*'I mean, she's gone.'*

Vila struggled to find the right words. 'Don't dress it up to soften the blow, Avon. She's dead.'

'No,' said Avon levelly. *'I mean, she is no longer on the hull.'*

'What are you talking about?' Vila's mind raced. 'Is she floating out there in space somewhere? Can we get her back?' Another awful thought came to him. 'Or did the shield wave... y'know. Did it leave no trace? What are you saying, Avon?'

*'I am saying,'* Avon continued calmly, *'that she boarded that alien ship.'*

'What?' A conflicting jumble of emotions coursed through Vila. She was alive. But what fresh trouble was she in? 'Boarded the...? Well, tell her to get off it!'

He dashed across to his abandoned helmet, and crammed it back onto his head. He bellowed into the microphone inside it, desperate to get back into contact with her. 'Jenna? Jenna!' His own voice boomed inside the helmet.

*'You're wasting your time.'* The tinny sound of Avon's dispassionate voice filtered from the helmet's dangling earpiece. *'Those hull suits are designed for close-quarters work. She's already out of range.'*

'Get her back in range!'

*'If I can locate the ship. And that's difficult, because you didn't complete the repairs on the sensor array.'*

Vila fumed. 'Well, we both got a bit distracted. What with the mines exploding and the alien ship. And you trying to scrape us off the hull!'

*'Get back here to the flight deck,'* snapped Avon, and the comms link disconnected.

Vila put the helmet back down on the floor. It rolled over onto its side beside his toolkit.

The toolkit moved.

Vila stared.

The bag moved again. Fell onto its side. And revealed the flat round shape of an alien limpet mine.

Vila let out a yell of alarm. It had got into the airlock with him! If the one outside had cracked his visor and ripped his suit from a distance, what could this one do to him this close up?

He looked around frantically for something he could whack it with. All his tools were in the bag, right next to it.

The alien rose up on its thin legs. It began to vibrate.

Vila leapt back towards the inner airlock door, and threw himself into the antechamber.

The alien exploded with a dull crump. A gout of flame belched out of the airlock, and smoke roiled out into the antechamber. Vila banged hard on the wall control, and the inner door sealed the fire within the airlock. He peered back in through the inspection window. The ceiling sprinklers had kicked into action, dousing the flames.

He backed away from it in relief. His foot caught on something on the floor. Another alien mine beneath him. Vila leapt into the air with shock.

The alien's antennae were crooked, and the legs splayed out at awkward angles beneath it. Perhaps it had been damaged before it got in through the airlock with him.

Vila was taking no chances. He jumped into the air again, and came down on top of it as hard as he could. His hull suit boots crunched onto the alien. He repeated this, again and again, until a crack appeared across its carapace. An oily green liquid seeped out, staining the antechamber floor. Vila stumbled back from the mess and pressed up against the antechamber wall.

While he was catching his breath, he heard a grating noise from the corridor nearby. It sounded like metal being dragged along a smooth surface. Instinct told him to stay hidden in the antechamber, but nevertheless he stuck his head out into the corridor.

He groaned in dismay. He had peered out just in time to see more of the alien devices as they scuttled away down the corridor on their tiny appendages. Their antennae tweaked inquisitively as they vanished around the far corner.

\* \* \*

Jenna clung on desperately as the ship bucked and weaved on its departure route. Her hands clutched a ridge high up on the access door that she'd seized when the ship swooped low and close to *Liberator*. As the door closed, she caught one last glimpse of her ship as the shield wave crashed over its exterior. The limpet mines sparkled and burned as the radiation spilled over them and stripped them from the hull in a merciless wash of lethal energy.

This ship had artificial gravity. That much was clear from the buffeting Jenna got as it veered abruptly away from the shield wave's devastating effects. Otherwise the ship was, indisputably, alien. Like the limpet mines, it was a bizarre combination of the mechanical and the organic. Though what she might look like to the aliens in her battered hull suit, Jenna could hardly imagine.

She was in a loading area, of sorts. Or maybe it was a bomb bay. All around her were more limpet mines. Close up, she saw that they were concave underneath, so they could be stacked in piles ready for deployment. Unlike the ones on the hull, these were immobile, silent. Hibernating, maybe.

Jenna picked her way cautiously through the bay. She almost laughed as she realised she was holding her breath. There was no sound penetrating her helmet from the outside, and it was improbable that the aliens would be able to hear her breathing inside her helmet.

Or talking.

'Vila, can you hear me?' Her own voice echoed inside the helmet. 'Vila? I got on board the alien ship. I'm safe.' She gave the area around her a wary inspection. 'Or at least, safer than on the hull.'

There was no reply.

‘Vila?’ Not even a static hiss over the comms. ‘*Liberator*? Are you receiving? Can you hear me, Avon?’

Nothing.

Her hull suit made it hard to navigate the uneven corridor. In particular, the helmet – designed for a good all-round view when inspecting the *Liberator*’s exterior – was not so useful in the confines of this alien vessel. She dared not remove it, because it was unclear whether the atmosphere was breathable. Or whether there was any atmosphere.

Ahead was a star-shaped mark on the wall. Jenna approached it cautiously. It was an odd combination of machine and creature. When she got close enough to examine it properly, it twitched. She took an involuntary step backwards, but the thing had activated. The central point of the star split apart, and it irised open into an aperture.

It was doorway from the corridor, into what Jenna recognised as a flight control deck. A transparent forward screen offered a view of space – the satellite defence grid shimmered ahead, and the flashes of conflict flickered fleetingly in the distance. To either side were banks of inscrutable alien equipment.

And in the centre, facing away from her, was an equally inscrutable alien.

The noise of the aperture opening drew its attention – so, there was an atmosphere of some kind, then. The alien twisted around on the spot.

The thing was barely humanoid. Its bulbous head throbbed with cranial veins. Six eyes nictated in sequence as it surveyed this intruder. The eyes glittered hypnotically. Jenna almost didn’t see that the creature had extended a pseudopod arm that reached left towards the controls. Or maybe a weapon.

Jenna surged forward. She thought the eyes may even have widened in surprise. She plunged her hand at its pulsing forehead, twisting the switch on the device that she clutched between her gloved fingers.

The alien’s maw opened wide, revealing a dark gullet full of curved teeth. Jenna’s helmet visor spattered with vile mucus. She felt the vibration of the alien’s dying roar just before it slumped sideways, twitched briefly, and fell still.

Jenna clipped the device back on her belt. ‘Vila was right,’ she told herself. ‘This sub-atomic probe *can* be dangerous.’

She braced herself as the alien vessel lurched sideways. Its pilot was no longer in control. The strange door sealed behind her. She had no way of telling whether there were other crew on board. And just like the dead pilot, she would have no advance warning of any arrivals.

She tried a few of the controls in front of her, and was surprised to find that they were almost intuitive. A pilot’s instinct, she told herself

‘*Liberator*, do you read?’

Still no comms in her helmet.

‘If you can hear me... This ship is already heading back to the alien fleet. By the time I’ve worked out how to steer this thing, I’ll be a long way from *Liberator*. Well beyond the range of this hull suit’s communicator.’

She surveyed the controls again. Through the view screen, many alien vessels grew larger as the ship approached them.

‘*Liberator*, I hope you understand why I’m doing this.’

Jenna seized the controls, and felt a deep vibration around her as the alien engines responded to her command.

## Chapter 18

### Return to Danger

Avon paced up and down on the empty flight deck. He would never have let the other crew members see that he was this agitated. It didn't suit him to let them suspect he had uncertainties or doubts. And usually, he'd prefer to be on his own anyway. It wasn't unusual for him to spend plenty of time alone, away from the others, with only Orac for company.

This was different. Despite his clear desire to keep the crew together for this confrontation, they had ended up scattered who knew where. Cally off with Blake in the forlorn hope of finding salvation for them on some icy rock in the middle of nowhere. Jenna in the clutches of the enemy. Even Vila was taking his own sweet time getting back from his excursion outside the ship.

Avon stared up at the fascia of the ship's computer. It flashed pensively in response to his most recent command.

'Come on, Zen. Jenna can't be all that far away yet. Can't you get a signal from her?'

'NEGATIVE.'

Avon glared at the computer.

'Can you locate Blake and Cally?'

'NEGATIVE.'

'Damn it, Zen. What *can* you do?'

'THAT QUESTION HAS TOO MANY PARAMETERS.'

Avon laughed at this. If he hadn't known better, he'd have assumed the computer was being sarcastic. But it was, after all, only a computer.

He pressed the ship-wide intercom. 'Vila, what's keeping you?'

There was a pause, presumably while Vila located a wall communicator. And then presumably tried to operate it.

'Vila?'

'*What do you want?*'

'I want to know where you are.'

'*I'm on my way,*' Vila replied evasively.

'Where?'

There was a telling pause, before Vila replied. '*I'm in the weapons section.*'

Avon grunted in disapproval. 'That's an odd route to take from the airlock to the flight deck. Did you get lost, or are you taking the scenic route?'

'*I had a few things to... er... locate on the way.*' The intercom conveyed an apologetic cough. '*Tidying up.*'

Vila didn't sound any more convincing than usual, decided Avon. But there was no time to berate him further. Zen was interrupting with an important update.

'INFORMATION. THERE IS AN INCOMING MESSAGE FROM THE FEDERATION FACILITY ON MEGIDDO.'

'Put it through,' snapped Avon.

The main view screen crackled and spat, resolving itself sporadically into an image of Blake. He was crouched close to the camera, and his tone was urgent. 'Come in, *Liberator!* This is Blake. Two of us to teleport up. Quickly!'

The sound continued to crackle through the flight deck speakers, but the image had frozen. Blake's earnest face stared across at Avon.

'All right, Blake.' Avon switched back to the ship's intercom. 'Did you hear that, Vila? You're

needed in teleport.'

*'I heard him.'*

'That means now, Vila. No detours.'

\* \* \*

No matter how many times Vila had run through them, the *Liberator* corridors never seemed any shorter. His heavy boots weren't helping. Avon's insistent voice continued to squawk demands over the intercom system. Hounding him along to his destination.

'Oh, hang on, won't you?'

He stumbled across the final junction, and raced into the teleport room.

*'Vila, what's keeping you?'*

'Keep your hair on,' he muttered breathlessly. 'I haven't even had time to get out of my hull suit.'

He stumbled to the control desk and dumped himself heavily into the nearest seat, his heart thumping. After a moment to catch his breath, he flicked the intercom switch. The comms connected with a chime.

'All right, I'm in teleport.'

*'Not before time,'* said Avon. *'Bring them back. Get a move on!'*

The comms chimed off again.

'Thank you, Vila,' grumbled Vila to himself. 'Very grateful, Vila.'

The teleport controls were still set for the surface of Megiddo. He patched the communications connection from Blake into the coordinate tracker on the desk. Not from Blake's teleport bracelet. That was odd. Some unfamiliar Federation channel instead. A weak signal, but it should do.

The coordinates aligned, and he left the rest to the automatics. He pressed home the teleport controls, and a shimmer of power filled the arrivals alcove.

Blake's shape had barely finished coalescing before he was stamping over to him. 'What kept you, Vila?'

'Much appreciated, Vila,' muttered Vila to himself.

At least Cally looked pleased to see him. Her smile of thanks melted into a look of puzzlement. 'Why are you wearing a hull suit?'

Vila thought about some smart rejoinder about the grimy-looking thermal suits that Cally and Blake both wore. Instead he indicated his own torn suit. 'Jenna and I went out to do some repairs.'

Blake stood over him at the desk, 'Where's Jenna now?'

'Not sure,' Vila explained guardedly. 'Can't get a signal from her suit comms. She must be out of range.'

'Then fix it!' demanded Blake. 'Or get back out there and look for her.'

Easy for him to say, thought Vila. 'Bit of a problem with that, actually.'

'Such as?'

Vila waved his hands in a vague approximation of the devices they had been facing out there. The devices that, until a few minutes ago, he had been hunting in the weapons section.

'Infestation of aliens,' he said.

Blake was looking increasingly suspicious.

'On the hull,' added Vila. 'Well, mostly on the hull... you see...'

Suspicion had changed to incredulity. 'What about Jenna?'

Blake's shouting provoked a coughing fit. He clutched his hand to his chest, as though he was in considerable pain. Cally moved to his side, placed a calming hand on Blake's shoulder, and took the opportunity to turn down the heating dial on his suit. 'Let me try to find Jenna,' she said soothingly.

‘There’s something you should know about the aliens...’ Vila began.

‘Not now, Vila!’ snarled Blake. His coughing fit had subsided, but his temper hadn’t. ‘Just let Cally concentrate.’ He was quieter when he spoke to Cally. ‘Go on, try now.’

Cally sat at the teleport console with Vila, and closed her eyes in concentration. Vila recognised the signs of her entering a trance state, just as she had earlier on the flight deck when she had picked up the thoughts of the human fleet.

Her eyes fluttered behind her closed lids. ‘Jenna?’ she said softly, barely audible. ‘Jenna?’

There was a pause. Cally’s lips moved wordlessly, until she said clearly and distinctly. ‘She is not on the hull. She is some distance away.’

‘I could have told you that,’ grumbled Vila.

‘Hush, Vila!’ Blake moved closer to Cally at the desk. ‘Where is she? Is she all right?’

‘She has control of an alien space vehicle,’ Cally said softly. ‘The original pilot is dead. I sense Jenna is... so alone. So determined. She cannot contact *Liberator*.’ Cally’s serene expression was hardening, and her brow furrowed. ‘She is steering the ship... away from us... towards...’

Cally’s eyes snapped wide open. Her expression was appalled. ‘No!’

Vila was startled by her explosive change of demeanour. ‘What is it?’

‘I think Jenna is steering into the alien fleet.’ Cally stared at Blake and Vila, an anguished look on her face. ‘It’s a suicide run.’

## Chapter 19

### Suicide Run

The hull suit gloves hampered fine control, so Jenna removed them. Her helmet stayed on, because there was no way of telling whether the atmosphere in here was breathable. She just had to hope that it wasn't toxic when in contact with skin. Well, she'd know soon enough. If that turned out to be important, anyway.

The alien controls felt unnervingly like warm flesh fused with cold metal. But in her experience, the basics of space flight were the same whether it was a space skimmer or a planet hopper or an interstellar cruiser. The fundamentals of yaw and pitch and roll were the same across the known universe. And if she wasn't familiar with the environment in which these aliens usually operated, well she knew for certain that they were in *her* galaxy now.

A pirate she'd once known had tried to teach her the rules of space flight, but the explanations of angular velocity and integration drift, hyperbolic trajectory and inertial reference frames had meant little or nothing to her. And he'd soon realised what she had always known – that her piloting skills were innate, instinctive. She was born to it.

Jenna had got to grips with an alien ship once before. She'd boarded the vessel after escaping from a prison transport. And she'd named it the *Liberator*. Had she known the ship, or had the ship known her? Something of both, of course. But it meant this latest alien vessel in her hands was nothing to be afraid of.

It just relied on complete concentration. Giving herself over to instinct once again. Nothing would get in her way. Not the many irrelevant controls that remained out of reach. Not the oozing remains of alien on the floor beside her. Not the glittering threat of the satellite grid that grew larger and larger through the view screen.

Nothing was going to distract her from the only option left to her.

The engines thrummed in response to her commands. The alien vessels loomed ahead.

She was going in.

\* \* \*

Blake stared in desperation at Cally. 'A suicide run?' He could barely dare to contemplate it. 'You must stop her, Cally. Tell Jenna we're coming for her.'

Cally closed her eyes again in contemplation. Her frown did not fade, and her jaw clenched. It was clear she was not making the connection she needed.

Her shoulders sagged in defeat, and she opened her eyes again. 'Jenna cannot hear me, Blake. She is too focused on what she is doing.'

Blake exhaled a long breath of frustration. 'There must be something we can do. There must be.'

Cally manipulated the controls on the teleport desk, gesturing for Vila to move aside and give her more space to work. Blake watched the tracker lines converge on new coordinates as she completed her adjustments.

Cally stood up, checking the bracelet on her wrist. She stepped over to the recharging unit, and picked out a second bracelet. 'You must teleport me across to her.'

Blake wasn't sure he understood. 'How?'

'Those are the coordinates of Jenna's spaceship.' Cally indicated the marker point on the teleport desk.

Vila shuffled back along his seat, and studied the display more closely. 'And *those* are the



coordinates of the alien fleet.' He tapped an adjacent area on the screen. It zoomed to show a shoal of bright points of light swimming into view. 'It's another suicide run, Cally. Only this time, it's yours!'

She strode into the teleport alcove, waving away Vila's concern. 'I am ready.'

Blake could see that Cally was utterly determined, but she was being unnecessarily reckless. 'You don't even know if there's air in that ship,' he argued. 'At least put on a hull suit.'

Cally shook her head. 'There is no time.'

'What are you going to do,' asked Vila, 'hold your breath?'

'Vila!' She glared at him, and pointed an unwavering finger at the teleport controls on the desk in front of him.

Vila shrank under her accusing gaze. 'All right, all right.'

Blake didn't have time to add another protest. Vila had already pushed forward the teleport controls. Cally's shape shimmered and dissolved in a ripple of energy. She was gone.

Blake stared at the empty alcove. 'Be ready to bring her back, Vila. I must get to the flight deck.'

He turned on his heel. As he strode towards the exit, his toe kicked against something unexpectedly. A flat disk covered with odd markings skidded away from him until it bumped to a stop against the wall. He walked over, and was bending to pick it up when a couple of eyes on stalks popped out of the top of it and looked around the room.

'Keep away from it!' called Vila. He hurriedly got up from the teleport desk, and tugged urgently at Blake's sleeve.

Blake didn't get any closer to the thing. It had started to make a chittering noise. 'What is that?'

'I tried to tell you,' wailed Vila. 'It's one of the aliens.'

'Oh.' Blake considered the innocuous creature that seemed to be cowering by the wall. The complex organisms he had encountered on Star One had been able to assume the appearance of humans. This wasn't at all what he had expected in his subsequent alien encounters. 'It looks like a machine.' He decided it required a closer look.

'Don't get too close!' Vila had not released his grip on Blake's sleeve. 'It's also a bomb!'

As they watched, the disk rose up from the floor, raised on half a dozen thin legs underneath it. The antennae stopped moving, and pointed directly at Blake.

\* \* \*

The glittering array of the satellite grid lay dead ahead. Jenna made a fine adjustment at the controls, and rechecked her forward view.

To starboard lay the human fleet, a motley assortment of civilian vessels and Federation pursuit ships that weaved a determined pattern towards the enemy. The alien fleet stood before her, a collection of shapes that seemed to defy the conventions of space flight. Yet, from her most recent experience, Jenna knew them to be extremely manoeuvrable and lethally quick.

She renewed her grip on the flight controls, and prepared for her final manoeuvre. This was it. 'Here goes nothing.'

The engines vibrated all around in response to her coaxing. The ship angled as it made its last approach.

And then there was a disconcertingly familiar flash of light. An outline snapped into focus to her right, and slowly solidified. It was Cally, wearing a tatty thermal suit and no helmet. Wasn't she going to asphyxiate?

Cally seemed to have her lips tightly closed. Perhaps she was holding her breath.

'How did you get here...?' Jenna's words stumbled to a halt as she listened to her own echoing voice. Cally would be unable to hear her words. Jenna reached for the clasps that held her helmet in

place.

*'I'm glad to see I have got your attention now,'* said Cally's cheerful voice in Jenna's mind. As Jenna raised her hand to her helmet, Cally reached out and clipped a teleport bracelet around her wrist.

*'No!'* Jenna called. The cry echoed unheard within her helmet. She shook her head, and mouthed the word again.

*'Do not argue with me, we have no time.'*

Cally stabbed urgently at a button on her own bracelet. From her expression, it was clear she was receiving no response. Jenna saw her try again, but to no avail.

She stared at Jenna with wild eyes. Cally had still not taken a breath.

*'There is no response from the Liberator!'*

## Chapter 20

### Damage Control

Vila clung to the teleport control desk, ready to dive behind it if the alien device made a move. It continued to stare at Blake, bobbing up and down slightly as it flexed its tiny legs.

Blake faced it, perfectly still, arms to his side. 'What's it doing?' he hissed.

'Deciding which of us to blow up first?' suggested Vila.

'Ah,' said Blake.

The alien's antennae flicked briefly.

Vila's tone was more urgent. 'Don't get too close.'

'Maybe I'll kick it over to you.'

'Don't you dare, Blake! It will explode...'

The next few moments were a bit of a blur. Vila's shouting drew the alien's attention. Its antennae turned towards him, and the rest of its body rotated too. With the speed of a gunslinger, Blake drew his weapon and fired.

The alien chattered wildly, fizzed and popped, then dropped to the floor as its legs collapsed beneath it.

Vila emerged from behind the desk where he had dropped for shelter. He stared over to the far wall. The alien was propped at an angle against it, smoke and slime oozing from its cracked carapace, and its antennae drooped pathetically to one side.

'What were you thinking?' Vila said quietly.

Blake holstered the gun. 'Call it a controlled explosion.'

Vila dreaded the thought of what an uncontrolled detonation would have done. He didn't have time to worry about it, though, because he was now receiving a telepathic message from Cally. Even though he heard her only in his head, she sounded angry.

*'Vila? Vila! I have Jenna. Bring us back.'*

Vila scurried around the control desk again, and operated the return switches.

The familiar electronic swirling heralded the arrival of Cally and Jenna in the teleport alcove.

Blake didn't hide his delight at their return, holding out his arms in a welcome that suggested he was going to hug them both at once. 'Well done, Cally! Vila, help Jenna out of her hull suit.'

His arms dropped to his side as Jenna shrugged off his embrace.

Vila was already at her side, reaching for the clips on her helmet. She wriggled away from him, pulled the helmet off for herself, and glared at them all.

'Get off me!' Jenna didn't seem remotely happy about what must have been a daring rescue. Why were none of them grateful for anything today, Vila wondered.

Jenna turned her anger on Cally. 'What were you *doing*?'

'Rescuing you,' said Cally.

Jenna sucked in a lungful of air, then exhaled a long and calming breath. 'I had things under control.' When Jenna set down the helmet on the floor, Vila noticed that she wasn't wearing the gloves. Well, he wasn't going to that alien ship to recover them, that was for sure.

Cally took in Jenna's anger, and made a calming gesture with her hands. 'But I sensed...' Her tone conveyed a mixture of apology and embarrassment. 'I thought you were going to kill yourself.'

Jenna surprised them with a laugh. 'I was steering straight at their fleet. The last thing they'd expect.'

'The last thing *we'd* have expected,' said Vila.

'I would have done a slingshot around the back at the last minute. And we'd now have control of

one of their ships.'

'Hmm.' Blake was surprised by that. 'Rather dangerous.'

'An old smuggler's trick,' Jenna snapped at him. 'I knew what I was doing. I didn't need rescuing by Cally.'

'Well, I am sorry,' said Cally. Vila didn't think she sounded very contrite. She also seemed to be half-listening to something else. 'What is that noise?'

It was an all-too familiar chittering sound. Vila's head jerked towards the far wall, but the alien lay there as still as it had since Blake shot it. Besides, the noise was coming from...

He leaped away from the teleport controls. On the side of the desk, just where he had been sitting, a second alien was stretching its legs. 'Another one of them!'

'Another one of what?' asked Cally, and moved nearer to look at it.

Vila pushed her unceremoniously aside, and dived for cover.

'Vila!' Jenna towered over him, glaring. 'You let them in?'

'Only one or two,' Vila protested feebly. 'I was trying to tell Blake that I was...'

The end of his sentence was lost in the sound of the alien exploding. The lights dimmed. A mushroom of smoke surged towards the ceiling and curled its way across to all four walls.

The sprinkler system surged into action, and everyone in the room fled into the corridor, hacking and coughing. A fire screen dropped down between them and the teleport area, cutting them off from the conflagration and the choking fumes.

'Thank goodness for the fire safety system,' said Blake. He peered through the filthy glass of the transparent partition. 'That seems to have done it.'

'It seems to have done for the teleport, too,' moaned Vila. 'That'll take forever to fix. You know what the auto-repair systems are like. Aaagh!' Something had caught his eye across the corridor. He stumbled away from it, pressing the back of his thick hull suit against the wall in a hopeless attempt to put distance between himself and another of the limpet mine aliens. 'Another one!'

A shot from a handgun rang out. Vila wheeled to see Blake had taken aim at the creature. But he had missed. The alien lifted itself up onto its scrawny little legs as though it was hoisting its shorts, and scuttled away around the next junction.

Blake chased to the junction. His furious expression told Vila that it had already vanished from sight. 'Lost it!'

'But it's gone, thank goodness.' Vila looked eagerly at Blake, who glared back at him. 'It has gone, hasn't it, Blake?'

'Into the ship somewhere.' Blake's furious expression was still there. Now it told Vila that he was in big trouble. 'How many of those things got inside *Liberator*?'

'Only a couple.' Vila watched Blake's reaction. He didn't look convinced. 'Or three. Maybe three.'

Blake took an ominous step closer. 'We've seen three already.'

There was no point lying any longer. Vila knew how many he had seen scurrying away from him in the corridor outside the airlock antechamber. 'Oh all right! There were five.'

Blake didn't look any happier. He exploded almost as loudly as one of the aliens. 'Five!'

'One blew up in the airlock. Another was already damaged.' Vila was babbling. The others were looking at him with growing incredulity. 'I tried to track the others...'

'Well?' asked Blake.

'I lost one in the weapons section. And it...' Vila hesitated. No point in pretending otherwise, he decided, and plunged on. 'Well, it blew up before I reached it.'

Blake turned away in despair.

'I had everything under control,' Vila pleaded. 'Until Avon made me come and rescue the two of you.'

Cally glowered at him. 'Thank you, Vila,' she noted pointedly, and walked off. She began to peel off her thermal suit to reveal her regular tunic underneath, and ignored Vila's fumbled attempts at an apology. She was making an exaggerated effort to concentrate on hanging the suit back in the storage cupboard, beside the entrance to the wrecked teleport area.

'So...' Blake was working out what to do next. Vila was relieved, because he himself didn't have a clue. 'There's just one of those things left?'

'I think so,' wavered Vila.

'You *think* so?' Blake looked intently at him, urging him to remember. The staring wasn't helping Vila focus. 'Come on!'

'Yes. Er...' Vila racked his brains. 'Yes, I'm sure.'

'Well, you'd better get after it. I have a bigger bomb to worry about.' Blake thumbed the wall-mounted intercom control at the corridor junction. 'Flight deck?'

The comms crackled in response. '*What's going on down there?*' asked Avon. '*Zen says that the emergency fire systems were activated.*'

'Some of those things on the hull followed Vila through the airlock,' said Blake. Vila shrank under his condemnation. 'Caused a bit of damage around the ship.'

'*That explains it.*'

'The damage?'

'*No, the fact that it was Vila's fault.*'

Vila shrank under the pitiless gaze of his assembled crewmates.

'It's all under control,' lied Blake.

'*Are you all back on board now? We need to move.*'

'Not yet, Avon. Megiddo is an orbiting bomb.'

'*It's an orbiting...*' There was a furious pause over the comms link. '*Did you not think to mention that when you first got in contact?*'

'I'm telling you now,' Blake replied placidly. 'It'll detonate when it reaches the alien fleet.'

'*Oh.*' Another, more thoughtful pause. '*And your problem with that is what, exactly?*'

Blake grimaced. 'It'll cause the biggest plasma explosion you've ever known. And probably the last you'll ever witness. It will take everything with it.'

'*Well, thanks for the update.*'

'We have to destroy it, Avon.'

'*With what? Those things that Vila let in have disabled our weapons systems.*'

Vila bridled at the relentless accusations. 'Oh, it's all my fault, as usual!'

'He has a point, don't you think.' Blake turned back to the comms unit. 'Avon, do we have enough power to deflect Megiddo instead?'

Avon's sarcasm was evident even over the intercom. '*Not unless you're proposing to crash this ship into the planetoid.*'

'Maybe I am,' said Blake harshly.

Everyone in the corridor stared at him. Jenna and Cally exchanged nervous glances.

Eventually, Avon said: '*Are you serious?*'

Blake looked like he was pondering an answer. After a moment, he simply said: 'I'm coming up to the flight deck.' And switched off the comms.

Jenna touched him gently on the arm. 'If you *are* serious, Blake...'

'Yes, I know, Jenna. I'll need you to steer *Liberator*.'

Jenna didn't question his decision. 'I'll get out of this hull suit,' she said, and started off down the corridor.

Blake indicated Vila's hull suit. 'You might want to do the same.'

‘All right,’ said Vila. He was pleased to have an instruction to obey, something to show willing, anything to redeem himself in the eyes of his crewmates. With the added advantage that taking off a hull suit wasn’t remotely dangerous.

‘Cally,’ Blake continued briskly. ‘You’d better help Vila to track down that alien... thing.’

The suit slipped to the corridor floor from Vila’s nerveless fingers. Chasing after an exploding invader wasn’t very high on his list of things to do next. In fact, thought Vila, it was the last thing that would be on his schedule, if at all.

‘But... but...’ he protested feebly. He indicated the torn and crumpled remains of his hull suit on the floor. The rips and scorches on that were evidence enough that he should be steering well clear of incendiary aliens. ‘I’ve only just taken that thing off.’

Blake’s look was withering. ‘Get a move on.’

‘What do you want me to do – hunt for it half-naked?’ He was already regretting stripping off. This corridor wasn’t as warm as he’d expected.

‘Well, get some clothes on!’ shouted Blake. ‘And then get after the one that scuttled off. Here, take this.’ He unbuckled his gun belt and handed Vila the weapon. ‘I’ll get another when I’m on the flight deck.’

Vila took the gun reluctantly, fumbled with it until he found the buckle, and fastened the thing around his waist. Cally looked at him curiously. Perhaps it did look a bit stupid to have a gun belt strapped over his underwear.

‘Those things have taken out our weapons,’ Cally said. ‘And our auto-repair systems.’

‘Precisely,’ agreed Blake. ‘So what would *you* go after next? Hmm?’

Even Vila knew the answer to that one. Suddenly the corridor seemed even colder. ‘Life support!’

## Chapter 21

### Breaching the Barrier

Avon had no idea what the others had been doing, and he didn't like that. The displays on his flight deck console continued to flash warnings at him, but it was hard to piece together a bigger picture.

Another caution light winked from amber to red on his screen. 'Zen, what is the status of the weaponry systems?'

'OFFLINE.'

He went to check a different display console. To reach it, he had to navigate a pile of debris that had fallen from the ceiling when a support beam had dropped onto the floor. A grey layer of grime covered most of the equipment. Avon brushed a chair clean with his hand before he sat down, and dusted his hands.

So much for their strategic retreat to let auto-repair catch up. Vila's carelessness had let the alien devices into the ship. And that had set them back to where they were before *Liberator* had disengaged from the war. Maybe even worse. The prospects of them returning to engage the enemy were diminishing by the minute. And the battle computer projections were pessimistic about the human fleet's chances of holding back the invaders. At which point, the aliens would seek out *Liberator*, and the ship would be helpless.

They were fast running out of plausible options.

'What about the teleport system?'

'OFFLINE.'

'Estimated repair time?'

'THAT INFORMATION IS NOT AVAILABLE.'

'Tell me something I don't know.'

'THAT QUESTION HAS TOO MANY--'

'Never mind, Zen.'

He spun round at a clatter of footsteps from the entrance to the flight deck. Blake and Jenna jogged in. Jenna slid into her seat, and began checking the pilot's controls.

Blake immediately cast a proprietorial eye over the flight deck, noting the damage. 'What *have* you been doing with the ship, Avon?'

Avon pretended to be fascinated by something on his display screen. 'I've had a busy day.'

'So I see.'

Blake tugged at the sleeves of his thermal suit. He'd obviously not had time to remove it since teleporting up from Megiddo. The effort made him wince, but the suit was eventually off. He dropped it over one of the empty flight seats, raising a brief cloud of powder. Avon thought that Blake's face looked as grey as the dust.

Blake sat down carefully, holding his injured side. 'Jenna, can you steer us closer to Megiddo?'

Typical Blake, thought Avon. He's only just back on the flight deck, and already he's issuing orders.

Jenna didn't seem to mind. She tapped a few commands into the flight controls. 'I'll see what I can do.'

Blake was reviewing his own display screen. 'The human ships seem to be holding the line out there. Even if they only have forty percent of the Federation fleet engaged.'

That couldn't be right, could it? 'Forty percent?' Avon asked. 'What about the others?'

'Servalan said she was holding the rest back,' Blake said casually.

'Servalan?' Avon's head snapped in Blake's direction. 'Is this yet another thing you've neglected to

mention?’

Blake smiled. ‘I’ve had a busy day, too.’

‘INFORMATION. ALIEN VESSELS ARE APPROACHING THE STAR ONE DEFENCE NETWORK IN SEVEN SEPARATE VECTORS.’

‘On screen.’ Blake stood in front of the main viewer. Indicator lines traced a pattern across the schematic. The alien movements were marked in blue, while the satellite grid showed as a twisted skein of interconnected white lines separating Federation space from the unknown depths of deeper space. Seven different blue lines slowly arced towards disparate parts of the grid. ‘What are they doing?’

Jenna looked up from her console. ‘It’s a suicide run.’

‘Like yours?’ asked Blake.

Jenna looked exasperated. ‘They seem to mean it.’

Avon wasn’t sure what the odd little exchange between Blake and Jenna had meant. But he was sure what the evidence on the viewer told him. ‘Of course!’

He got up to join Blake at the screen. He pointed out the nearest of the blue lines on the schematic as it edged closer to the satellite grid. ‘The first ships that reach the barrier will be destroyed by the blast.’ His outstretched hand encompassed a crowd of other, static blue marks on the display that represented the rest of the alien fleet. ‘But a dozen others could get through the gap before the satellite generators have reset.’

Blake had his hand to his mouth, engrossed in the evidence before him. His eyes flicked from point to point on the schematic, pondering the implications. ‘Zen, show me the actual ships.’

‘CONFIRMED.’

The visual representation faded away to be replaced by a live feed.

‘Hybrid view,’ Blake said. ‘Overlay the schematic.’

The diagram reappeared, superimposed over the image of the distant battle.

‘And now, zoom in on grid nine five.’

The picture refocused again. The satellite grid at this point appeared as a silvery haze, with hundreds of alien ships massed behind it. They all hung in space, apparently immobile, except for one. A globular shape with one end tapering to a sharp point, like a vast teardrop. Its hull shimmered with a rolling movement of changing lights as it approached the grid.

‘Here it comes,’ breathed Jenna.

The teardrop edged closer and closer. And finally splashed against the satellite array.

A huge surge of light burst from the grid, coursing out in an explosion of devastating energy. The alien vessel instantly blipped out of existence on the schematic overlay.

The force of the blast rippled out across space. Even though the other alien ships had held back from the devastation, they shifted in its backwash like flotsam and jetsam bobbing on an outgoing tide.

Or an incoming tide, thought Avon.

The force of the wave reached *Liberator*. The three of them clung to whatever was nearest as the flight deck groaned and lurched.

Just as they thought the worst was over, another shock wave buffeted the ship, and they were thrown down onto the dusty floor.

Avon struggled back to his feet again.

‘INFORMATION. ALIEN VESSELS HAVE BREACHED THE DEFENCE BARRIER IN FIVE CONTIGUOUS SECTORS.’

‘Zen, wide shot,’ barked Blake. ‘Show us everything.’

The image expanded in a sickening zoom outwards. The shimmering plane of the satellite grid was sundered, like a shattered window smashed by a thrown brick. Beyond it, the hundreds of bobbing dots that indicated the alien fleet began to settle. And then they began to move forward.



‘Won’t the defence grid re-establish itself?’ asked Blake. ‘It’s still active.’

Even as they watched, the edges of the gap were beginning to fill in again.

‘It can’t fully regenerate in time.’ Jenna stared in appalled disbelief. ‘They’re swarming through!’

Avon saw the dots grow larger. The alien attackers speared through the chasm in the defence grid, and sliced into the human fleet. ‘You can guess where they’re heading next.’

Blake’s face was greyer than ever. ‘For us.’

‘Don’t flatter yourself, Blake.’ Avon pointed to a red indicator at the far right of the display. The final connection in the ragged remains of the defence grid. ‘They need to deactivate it completely. So they’ll target Star One.’

## Chapter 22

### Counter-Attack

Vila shrugged on his jacket, and slapped his palm on the door release. He'd hurriedly changed in his quarters, and was now ready to hunt for the alien.

Ready wasn't quite the word. Resigned was more like it. He stepped into the corridor, wondering if this was the last he'd ever see of his room. Perhaps he'd just nip back for one more glass of that bottle of Menaii red he'd picked up during his stay in the vineyards of Tregar. It would go untasted otherwise, wouldn't it? And that would be a terrible waste.

Not as much of a waste, though, as it would be if he didn't track down this alien. The wreckage of the teleport had shown clearly enough what damage they could do inside the ship. Cally had already set out for the port side of *Liberator*. He was supposed to scour starboard. Was that left or right? He could never remember.

He tightened his grip on the gun Blake had given him, hesitating about whether to strap it around his waist. It was a very good bottle of Menaii. One quick swig wasn't going to do any harm, was it? He slipped back swiftly into his quarters.

Three quick swigs later, Vila emerged left his quarters for possibly the last time, and crept softly down the corridor.

Just beyond the next junction, he picked up the tell-tale marks left by the limpet creature. A series of serrated scratches caused by its odd little feet. They spread across the full width of the corridor, a meandering trail that suggested it was unsure where it was going, or may be damaged. Or drunk, thought Vila guiltily.

He kept walking. The scored trail veered off into the life-support section. Blake had been right. Somehow, these things knew how to target the *Liberator's* vital systems. They were smarter than they looked.

His mind was wandering. He needed to concentrate. The fumbling fingers of one hand found the wall-mounted light controls, and flicked them into the 'on' position.

Concealed lights faded up to reveal the complex equipment that ran ship-wide life support. A wide bank of equipment spread across the whole of one wall, with power lines dropping down towards it from the high ceiling. Oxygen reclamation tanks to the other side. Water recycling units gurgling busily. A control desk set in the centre.

But no sign of the alien scurrying about near the base of any of them.

Vila sighed with relief. The trail suggested it had come in here, but there were no scratch marks further than the doorway.

Perhaps it had doubled back. But he couldn't remember another trail going past the door.

He hurried back to the entrance. Sure enough, a serrated line was scored into the floor, and curled in through the doorway. But it stopped shortly after that, bent back at a sharp angle, and veered off to one side.

And upwards. The damn things could climb walls.

Vila followed the line up and across. It traversed the length of one wall, and cut across towards the power lines that descended towards the oxygen reclamation unit. In a poorly-illuminated cranny beside them squatted the alien.

The flat disk was pressed up against the ceiling. Its spindly legs were extruded beneath it, entwined around a downpipe. It must have heard Vila, because its antennae rotated to point in his direction.

Without taking his eyes off the alien, he reached around his waist. And that was the moment Vila

remembered when he had taken the belt off. Just before he'd sat down in his room to pour that first glass of Menaii red. Belt, power pack, and handgun were still lying on his bed.

The alien chittered angrily above him, and flexed its legs.

\* \* \*

Blake had ordered Jenna to steer the *Liberator* towards Star One. He saw Avon bristling with suppressed anger, probably worrying more about having his authority usurped than anything. Well, Blake had been down to Megiddo. He'd seen the threat that it posed, and now the satellite grid was clearly breached. He had to take charge, and Avon would just have to accept that.

'We're underway,' Jenna confirmed.

Avon sat at his own console, his arms crossed. 'And what do you think we'll do when we get there?'

'We'll think of something,' muttered Blake. Though he was racking his brains to think of what that might be.

'The weapons systems are offline, and our defences are down,' said Avon. 'Wishful thinking is not a plan, Blake.'

'What do you suggest?' Blake snarled back. 'We can't just leave them.'

'Can't we?' Avon looked across the main screen. 'Zen, status.'

'ENEMY STRATEGY IS NOW CONFIRMED. BATTLE COMPUTERS INDICATE FULL ALIEN COUNTER-ATTACK IS UNDERWAY.'

The view screen showed a mass of attacking ships bursting through the wide gap. Blake surveyed the scene with a sinking heart. The ragged edges of the grid began to encroach again, and slowly leached into the central rift within the defence shield. A handful of alien vessels near the perimeter were caught unawares, and exploded into glittering shards as the satellite grid detonated. But the regeneration was too slow to prevent the bulk of the alien fleet from flooding into human space, and each fresh explosion only tore a fresh hole in the defence network.

Blake's deliberations were interrupted by the comms chime, and a nervous voice over the speakers.

'Blake?'

'What is it, Vila?'

'I've got news about those alien bombs.'

Blake grimaced. 'We could do with some good news.'

'Ah. You see, it's good news and bad news, actually.'

'Go on.'

'The good news is that there are no more on board.'

Blake took a deep breath. 'And the bad news?'

'Er...' There was a crackle of static over the comms. Vila was clearing his throat apologetically. 'Well, the last one just blew up the life-support systems'

Avon obviously couldn't believe his ears. 'What happened, Vila?'

Blake thought it was just as well Vila wasn't reporting this to Avon in person. Nevertheless, he imagined him quivering somewhere in a corridor.

'I couldn't catch it in time,' babbled Vila. 'It was a sneaky little devil. Sorry, Blake.'

Blake blew out the breath he'd been holding in. 'You'd better get back up here.' He switched channels to a ship-wide broadcast, and the intercom chimed its response. 'Cally, are you there?'

'I heard,' she replied. Her tone suggested she was as frustrated with Vila as everyone else. 'I am on my way back, too.'

She may be shocked by what she finds when she gets here, thought Blake. He surveyed the grimy

wreckage of the flight deck. Still just about operational. As he looked around, he took in the faces of Jenna and Avon. They looked tired. Like the *Liberator*, their reserves seemed to be running low. ‘All right,’ he announced. ‘Once Vila and Cally get back, we need to—’

A brutal jolt to the whole ship interrupted Blake, and sent him sprawling to the floor. He landed heavily on his injured side and howled in agony and frustration.

Jenna recovered faster, and was next to him almost at once. He tried a smile of reassurance, to tell her he was all right, but he imagined that it looked more like what it really was – gritting his teeth against the agonising pain. ‘What was that?’ he managed to grunt.

The flight deck continued to rattle with the aftershock.

Avon indicated a pinpoint of light on the screen that bloomed brighter than anything else in the display. ‘That was Star One.’ He ran his fingers over the comms controls, and played in an external channel. The speakers crackled with distortion, but the anguished note in the voice was unmistakable.

*‘Battle Commander squadron six to flagship. Star One is destroyed.’*

There was no reply from the flagship. Only cross-contamination from several other channels used by the alien vessels. The bizarre gargling noises of their communications masked the Federation message.

*‘Do you copy? Repeat. Aliens have destroyed Star One.’*

Another bubbling, gurgling interruption. Avon snapped the speakers into silence.

Cally and Vila entered the flight deck at a run. Both came to a halt at the entrance, astonished at what they saw.

‘This place is wrecked,’ Vila said unhelpfully.

‘It’s in better shape than Star One,’ Avon told him.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Star One is in lots of little shapes now. Scattered across the whole of this sector.’

‘What?’ Cally was dismayed. She looked from face to face, as though for some reassurance that it wasn’t true. ‘That means the defence shield is gone, too!’

‘Oh, I should have stayed where I was.’ Vila slumped into a chair, the impact expelling a huge cloud of dust. ‘In fact, I should have stayed in bed today.’

‘You are of more assistance here, Vila,’ Cally reassured him.

Avon barked a short laugh. ‘That remains to be seen.’

Cally tutted her disapproval. ‘What has happened to the human flotilla?’

‘It is being utterly overwhelmed by the alien counter-attack.’ Blake adjusted the view screen to reveal the devastation now taking place at the former site of the defence shield. The rag-tag army of civilian vessels and Federation pursuit ships were hounded and harried from every direction by the overpowering might of the alien incursion.

Cally stared at the horrifying evidence. ‘Then where is the rest of Servalan’s fleet? She said she was holding it back.’

‘Still out of range,’ confirmed Jenna.

‘That alien fleet will be coming for us next,’ Blake said.

‘Why?’ Avon clearly wasn’t convinced. But he wasn’t making any constructive suggestions either. ‘Our weapons systems are down, auto-repair is marginal, and now thanks to Vila our life support is compromised.’

Blake stifled a groan of pain, and carefully made his way over to Avon’s position. ‘We can’t understand their communications or signals, Avon. So I doubt they can read ours. They’ll see us as their biggest threat.’

Avon was considering the implications of this. ‘And they don’t know we’re crippled.’

‘We’re not flattering ourselves,’ said Blake. ‘They’ve seen right from the outset that *Liberator* is

the strongest warship in the human fleet.'

'You're not one for false modesty, are you?' Avon favoured Blake with one of his familiar, sardonic smiles. 'But how does it help? What do we do when they reach us? Strangle them with our bare hands?'

Blake took an image pen from the desk, and began to sketch brief, efficient lines on the display. The screen updated to show his superimposed annotations. 'We use Jenna's smuggler's trick. Draw the aliens towards Megiddo as it arrives. And it will destroy them.'

Vila eyes popped. 'It will destroy *Liberator* too!'

'If we don't get out of range, yes,' Blake admitted.

They all stared at him, waiting for some further explanation. Even Vila didn't say anything, but stared at him in the wild hope that he had some further reassurance.

When that reassurance wasn't forthcoming, Avon spoke up. 'You'd better know what you're doing with this smuggler's stunt, Blake.'

'Don't worry, Avon.' Jenna had a tired smile on her face. 'He knows someone who does.'

## Chapter 23

### Spoils of War

When Blake contacted the human fleet, they were wary at first. Pummelled from every direction, vastly outnumbered, and completely outflanked by the alien opposition, their first suspicion was that this was some cruel final trick.

It may have been because his initial contact was an all-points broadcast to every human receiver within range. There was obvious disbelief that any potential ally would communicate their intentions over an open channel that the enemy could overhear. But Blake had persevered, explaining that the aliens were unable to translate his words.

Nevertheless, he'd needed Avon to persuade Orac to identify some strategic participants among the surviving ships. They chose a selection of both civilian and military vessels, to make a specific communication directly to them, to exploit Orac's ability to access their computers directly. Once the astonished captains of the chosen ships accepted that the message really was coming from the *Liberator*, they were prepared to accept what they were told.

And in truth, it was what they desperately wanted to hear: disengage from the enemy. Let them through, so that *Liberator* could handle them.

Blake studied the tactical display that Zen projected onto the main view screen. The jumbled collection of markers that indicated the relative positions of the fighting ships began to separate. Federation pursuit ships navigated a speedy route out of the central conflict. Mining vessels and tourist cruisers and civil defence craft swiftly extricated themselves from close combat, peeling away in dozens to leave the mass of alien attackers unopposed.

One or two of the aliens squirted off from the main bulk of the offensive, vanishing deeper into the Federation galaxy in search of plunder elsewhere. But the vast majority of the oncoming invasion coalesced into a solid bulk, and its focus was clear: the *Liberator*.

'All right,' called Blake. 'We're approaching Megiddo again. Jenna, take us in. Zen, advise on anything unexpected.'

'CONFIRMED.'

'Program epsilon zeta delta. Execute!'

The ship's engines surged anew as the manoeuvre commenced, and the whole flight deck rattled alarmingly. Blake clung to the console in front of him, feeling the vibrations shake his entire body, and trying not to shout in pain. 'Vila, how are we doing?'

He knew Vila had been obsessively checking his readouts. When he did so yet again, he would see that nothing much had changed. They were still in big trouble. 'They're gaining on us!'

Cally confirmed the diagnosis from her own data. 'Looks like most of the alien fleet is behind us.'

'And the Federation fleet is in front of us,' said Avon. He switched the main screen to a forward view. It revealed the blood-red arrow points formed by an array of arriving Federation military vessels. 'This could get interesting.'

'INFORMATION. DETECTORS INDICATE LIBERATOR IS DANGEROUSLY CLOSE TO THE PLANETOID SURFACE.'

'Compensate!' shouted Blake.

'NAVIGATION COMPUTERS ARE OFFLINE.'

Jenna wrestled with the flight controls. 'Yes, I know that!'

Avon glared at her. 'You'd better!'

The engine note became an almost unbearable screech of protest. 'Hold on everyone!' Jenna yelled. 'I'm going to execute a three-sixty slingshot around Megiddo.'

The artificial gravity must be overcompensating, Blake thought. It felt like he was being crushed into his seat. He looked wildly around the smashed flight deck to see what the others were doing.

Avon was ramrod straight in his seat, his face an impassive mask of concentration. Vila's head was thrown back, and he had his eyes squeezed tightly shut.

Cally's eyes were closed, too. She looked almost serene. Was she listening to the minds of the distant civilians, to know if they were now safe? Or the oncoming Federation crews, to discern their motives? Or perhaps the abandoned operators back on Megiddo, trapped throughout the centuries for this very moment? The final act after their long, long wait.

Over in her pilot's position, Jenna continued to wrestle with the flight controls. She had to physically lean against them to force them to her will.

On the main screen, the ice-white surface of Megiddo loomed large and threatening as *Liberator* skirted its ravaged atmosphere.

'Now, Zen!' Jenna was shouting. 'Standard by twelve, now!'

'CONFIRMED.' Zen's measured tones sounded odd amid the maelstrom of noise that shrieked around the flight deck.

Blake was pressed harder into his flight seat. Brilliant sparks flashed in his eyes. He couldn't tell if it was in his mind or on the flight deck itself. His consciousness was slipping away. He forced his eyes to stay open, glaring at the screen as *Liberator* finally cleared Megiddo's orbit and powered away towards... towards...

'The Federation are dead ahead,' said Vila.

As *Liberator* pulled clear of the planetoid, the pressure on Blake's bruised body started to abate. He pulled himself forward in his seat. 'Open a channel, Zen.'

'CONFIRMED.'

Blake reached for the comms. 'Federation fleet, this is the *Liberator*. We have no weaponry and our navigation systems are offline.'

The main screen dissolved into a frenzy of interference, before resolving into the image of a spaceship interior. No ordinary spaceship either, Blake noted. It might even be one of the Mark IV Star Cruisers that Orac had been hearing about recently.

What was certain, however, was that it was under the command of Servalan.

She peered from the screen at them, like she was conducting an unannounced inspection. '*Oh dear,*' she tutted. '*You are in a spot of trouble.*'

'Servalan,' Blake said. 'We are unable to control our approach vector, but pose no threat to you. We advise you to keep away.'

Servalan smiled broadly. '*I advise you to surrender, Blake.*'

A fresh rattle shook the flight deck as the ship picked up speed. 'You need to listen to me, Servalan.'

'*No, you need to obey me, Blake.*' Her smile and fake bonhomie had abruptly dissipated. '*Escort Group Nine is ready to take control of the Liberator.*' She leaned to one side, beckoning to one of her subordinates. A short, nervous man with a thin moustache trembled in anticipation of her next order. '*General Howells, target that ship. It is unarmed, and it is mine.*'

Blake struggled to his feet. He felt that he had to stand right in front of the view screen. To confront her directly. To show her that he was in command. That he was not afraid. 'The aliens are right behind us.'

'*And my fleet is right behind me.*' She looked to General Howells, who confirmed whatever she was looking for. '*So, consider Liberator to be... the spoils of war.*'

Blake felt the moment weigh down on him more pressingly than before. 'Which side are you on, Servalan?' he asked quietly.

‘Her own, as always.’ Avon had come to stand next to him. He too stared defiantly back at the main view screen. ‘To Servalan, everyone and anyone is a potential enemy. More so than ever, now.’

Servalan merely smiled back at them from the screen, utterly unmoved.

Behind them, Cally suddenly gasped. Blake whirled around just in time to see her clutch her temples. Her eyes rolled up into her head and, with a further cry of shock and pain, she slipped from her seat and onto the rubble-strewn floor.

Blake hurried over to her, checked her pulse, and put her in the recovery position.

He didn’t have time to do more, before Zen’s announcement filled the flight deck.

‘INFORMATION. THE PLANETOID MEGIDDO HAS REACHED THE ALIEN FLEET, AND EXPLODED. PLASMA EXPANSION WAVE IS APPROACHING AT SPEED STANDARD BY FOURTEEN.’

‘Here it comes!’ yelled Vila.

Blake hurried back to his seat. ‘Zen, on screen!’

‘CONFIRMED.’

Where previously the view beyond the defence grid had been a black, almost starless vista of space, now there was a violent flow of undulating yellow-white energy surging towards them. Megiddo no longer existed, and in its place was this concentrated hub of pure energy. It roiled and churned and bloomed to fill the whole of the screen.

The image zoomed out to provide the wider context. Between *Liberator* and the plasma explosion, the alien fleet looked like a scattering of dark specks against the approaching firestorm. One by one they winked out of existence, bursting even brighter for a transient moment before vanishing forever. A few at first, then handfuls, then swathes of the fleet.

‘INFORMATION. THE PLASMA EXPLOSION WAVE WILL OVERTAKE *LIBERATOR* IN THIRTY SECONDS.’

‘The aliens were too close to escape it,’ gasped Vila. ‘But can we outrun the blast?’

The screen cut back to reveal Servalan. She was studying the scene on the *Liberator* flight deck with an indulgent smile.

‘You think you have us,’ Blake told her coldly. ‘But you’re wrong.’

‘Ah,’ she nodded. ‘*The famous Blake optimism. Well, you really have no option. You must surrender.*’ She faltered at some fresh interruption. ‘*Oh, what is it now, Howells?*’

The General was whispering something urgently to her. Her smug smile faltered, then vanished.

‘*There’s a what...?*’

‘Your apocalypse device, Madam President,’ Blake explained. ‘Megiddo has destroyed itself, and everything in its vicinity. And the plasma explosion is still expanding. So even if you survive this shock wave, you are not getting your hands on my ship.’

Servalan had stood up now. She appeared to be clutching at objects around her, slapping away the attentions of General Howells and her crew. ‘*No!*’ she muttered. ‘*No!*’

Perhaps she was also clutching at straws, thought Blake. Making an attempt to flee. Though he had no idea where she thought there was left for her to run.

‘Goodbye, Servalan. I wish I could say it had been a pleasure.’

He jabbed a finger at the comms, and cut the connection.

‘I think that’s the last we’ll see of her,’ said Avon.

‘INFORMATION. PLASMA EXPANSION WAVE WILL OVERTAKE *LIBERATOR* IN TEN, NINE, EIGHT...’

‘It might be the last we see of anyone,’ said Blake calmly.

The countdown continued as Avon faced him. ‘She’s not getting her hand on *whose* ship?’

Blake put his hand on Avon’s shoulder. ‘Our ship.’



Avon smiled. 'That will do for now.'

Blake seized the console in front of him, and held on tight. 'Brace yourselves!'

'... THREE, TWO, ONE.'

And the plasma wave struck.

## Chapter 24

### Abandon Ship

The hull suit felt suffocating. Jenna tried to heave in another deep breath, but it hurt her lungs. There was a pressure on the side of her face, but when she squinted sideways in the restrictive helmet she could see nothing.

What she could see was *Liberator*, spinning silently on her axis in the distance. Jenna reached her hands out towards the ship, but it slipped further and further into the distance.

There was a tugging sensation on her outstretched arm, though she saw nothing in front of her now except the emptiness of space. Her suit was rotating her away from *Liberator*, slowly, slowly. She twisted her head in the helmet to keep her eyes on the ship, until she had turned too far.

When her body had revolved back to face the ship, it was too far away to identify. Just another brilliant white dot indistinguishable from the surrounding stars.

She needed to call out to the ship. She wanted to let the others know where she was. But there was a strange kind of peace inside her, and the words would not come.

‘Jenna! Come back!’ Vila’s voice was loud and insistent in her ear.

‘Don’t shout, Vila,’ she mumbled.

‘Cally, come on!’ Vila shouted.

‘Don’t shout,’ she insisted. ‘Just speak normally into your helmet microphone.’

The alarm sound in her suit was more insistent, dragging her back.

Alarm sound?

‘Jenna!’

She awoke to find herself slumped over her own console. She was still clutching the flight controls, her face pressed awkwardly against one of the arms. That was what had prevented her being thrown to the floor of the flight deck. The warning alarm continued to sound out across the room.

‘Oh, Jenna!’ Vila was right next to her, shaking her by the arm. He grinned with delight as she stared blearily up at him. ‘She’s all right, Blake!’

‘Good,’ called Blake from the other side of the room. ‘Zen, shut that alarm off. We know there’s a problem.’

‘CONFIRMED.’

The insistent alarm squawked into silence. Now Jenna could hear the fizzing and sparking of loose electrical cables. The scoosh of fire extinguishers wielded by her crewmates. The wavering, uncertain note of the *Liberator*’s failing engines. Vapour hissed in thin lines from fractured conduits across the ceiling of the flight deck.

Blake was beside her. ‘You did a brilliant job. You steered us away from the worst of the plasma blast.’

‘We caught the edge of it,’ Avon explained, ‘but we think the worst of it has dissipated.’

Jenna stared at the wreckage of the flight deck. ‘Doesn’t look like it.’ A jolting memory made her sit bolt upright. ‘Where is Cally?’

‘I’m here. I’m all right.’ Cally walked around to see Jenna, pale but evidently unhurt.

‘You collapsed,’ Jenna said.

Cally gave her a thin smile. ‘It was the Megiddo operators. For a moment, I was overwhelmed by their thoughts. Their final purpose. Or their final farewell, I’m not sure.’ She closed her eyes briefly. When she opened them again, her smile had faded sadly away. ‘They are gone now. I have lost them.’

Jenna rose from her seat, and embraced Cally.

‘Their work was done,’ Blake observed briskly. He stood before the main computer display. ‘Zen,

what's happened to the alien fleet?'

'THE PLASMA EXPLOSION FROM MEGIDDO DESTROYED THREE HUNDRED AND SEVENTEEN ALIEN VESSELS.'

'And the Federation fleet?'

'SIXTY PERCENT DESTROYED.'

Avon brushed dust from the sleeves of his tunic. 'The remains of the plasma explosion would have washed right past *Liberator* and over the fleet like a tsunami.' He tapped at a display, and registered the data with bleak satisfaction. 'I'm reading scattered remains over the whole quadrant.'

Cally was checking her own instruments. 'The rest are on a hunt-and-kill along with the civilian craft. They're pursuing the few remaining enemy vessels.'

'Then we can get after them. Help them finish the job.' Blake gave a great laugh of delight that broke down into a coughing fit. He hugged his sides to stem the pain. Jenna could see he was struggling, so she went across to him.

He hugged her in delight. His legs faltered a little, and she held him closer for support. There was a sheen of sweat across his face. He smiled weakly. 'We've done it!'

A fresh shower of sparks scattered across the front of the flight deck. The main view screen flickered and went dark.

'I think you mean we're done for,' said Vila.

Blake's brow furrowed as another thought crossed his mind. 'What about Servalan?'

'Who the hell cares?' Vila said. He seized an extinguisher and began to attack the fire beneath the view screen. A further furious flash of light and smoke sent him scuttling back out of the way again.

'Vila's right,' Avon snapped. '*Liberator* is spinning out of control. All the instrumentation on the flight deck is failing or unreliable.'

Blake's eyes narrowed. 'What are you saying?'

'I'm saying it's time to leave.'

'What do you mean?' Blake insisted.

'INFORMATION. NAVIGATION COMPUTERS NOW AT SIX PERCENT EFFICIENCY. LIFE SUPPORT IS AT ELEVEN PERCENT. AUTO-REPAIR SYSTEMS REMAIN CRITICAL.'

Avon smiled grimly and pointed at the flashing display of the main computer. 'Zen is saying it's time to leave.'

'You mean abandon the fight?'

'I mean abandon ship.'

'Abandon ship?' said Vila. He'd retreated from the fire at the front of the flight deck, and dropped the extinguisher to the floor. 'What, just run away?'

'Think of it as playing to your strengths,' Avon told him.

Jenna felt Blake tense. He gently disengaged from her embrace, but his voice was anything but gentle. 'We can't run.'

Avon rounded on him. 'Then stay here and die on your own, Blake. A glorious death, witnessed by no-one, signifying nothing. Hardly your style.'

Blake was furious. 'That's not what I meant.'

Their argument was interrupted by another insistent alarm.

Jenna scanned the readout quickly. 'System malfunction. Blocks four through six are offline.'

Vila peered at the readout too. 'That's not good, is it?'

Avon was already moving across the flight deck, checking additional displays and making swift decisions. 'The evacuation protocols are cutting out.' His tone was crisp, efficient, calm. As though the argument had never happened. 'Vila, you'll need to prepare the life-support capsules manually.' He looked at Vila, who was frozen with indecision. 'Go on!'

‘You don’t have to tell me twice,’ Vila said. He took a few steps towards the exit, then spun round again. ‘Er... wait a minute. Port or starboard?’

Avon glared at him. ‘Does it matter?’

‘All right,’ admitted Vila, ‘you do have to tell me twice. It’s all very confusing.’

Avon was no longer in any mood to argue. ‘Port side,’ he snapped. ‘Go on!’

Jenna heard a further alarm ring out. Cally was already rushing to check the indicators. ‘It’s getting worse. System malfunction on blocks two and three.’

Avon stared at Vila, who was still hesitating by the exit. ‘Vila,’ he ordered coldly, ‘go and check the life-support capsules.’

Vila’s seemed to shake himself into action. ‘On my way.’ And then he was gone.

Avon didn’t even watch him leave. He was already looking at the main computer. ‘Zen, status report.’

‘DAMAGE TO THE NAVIGATION COMPUTERS IS BEYOND THE PRESENT CAPACITY OF THE AUTO-REPAIR SYSTEMS. THE TELEPORT MALFUNCTION IS NOW TOTAL. AUTOMATIC SHUTDOWN HAS BEEN IMPLEMENTED.’

‘Jenna, bring Orac.’

Jenna watched Avon slide Orac out from the side cabinet. It had protected the computer from the worst of the beating that *Liberator* had received. Her quizzical expression must have told him she didn’t understand why he was entrusting Orac to her.

‘I’ll go and fetch the protective case,’ he explained, and started for the exit.

There was something missing, thought Jenna. Something important. ‘Wait! Where’s Orac’s key?’

Avon waved the thin transparent block at her over his shoulder as he left the flight deck. ‘Where d’you think?’

Blake sat down heavily at a control console next to Jenna. ‘Did you suppose he’d trust anyone else with that?’ he grunted.

The grunt became a groan. Jenna saw that he was in a very bad way. His face was ashen, and sweat plastered his curly hair across his forehead. A bright red patch had seeped through the side of his tunic.

‘Your wound is bleeding again, Blake.’

He gestured to dismiss her ministrations, but she eased his hands aside. ‘Stop waving your arms around, and remain seated.’

Blake’s shoulders slumped in acquiescence. ‘We can’t just abandon *Liberator*,’ he protested. ‘Not after all this.’ He unwisely chose to gesticulate around the flight deck again, and winced in agony.

‘Here.’ Cally crouched down beside them. She held a flat blue box with a small indicator screen and attachment clips. ‘The portable medipack will stabilise the wound, until you reach the life capsule.’

‘No,’ coughed Blake.

Jenna was pleased to see that Cally accepted no nonsense from her patient. She placed the medipack across Blake’s injury and affixed it to his tunic with brisk efficiency. The device activated with a shrill warble, and Blake sighed deeply.

‘All right, it’s working.’ Jenna watched Blake’s face relax, the tension seeping away from him as the medipack took effect. She knew that it could give patients the illusion that they were less injured than they actually were. Blake would need to be supervised closely, or his over-exertion could kill him.

Jenna put her hand on Cally’s shoulder. ‘You take Orac. Please. I’ll make sure Blake gets off the ship.’

Cally hesitated for a moment, looking at her earnestly. Jenna hoped she wasn’t going to quibble.

‘We’ll see you soon,’ Jenna insisted.

‘Very well.’

Cally straightened, and went over to pick up Orac. She hefted the computer in her hands, getting

the balance right before she left. Jenna thought Cally might make one last attempt to argue with her. To persuade Jenna that she should stay.

Jenna shook her head. Cally smiled sadly, and walked quickly up the steps from the flight deck, on the way to her rendezvous at the life capsules.

She didn't look back. Jenna watched her disappear through the exit. She almost called after her, but then she heard Cally's soft voice in her mind.

*'Good luck, my friend.'*

A fresh explosion rocked the flight deck. Sparks rained down from the ceiling like a summer shower. Jenna leaned over Blake to protect him from the debris, which scattered over her shoulders and back.

'All right, Blake. We can't stay on the flight deck any longer.' She helped him carefully to his feet. 'And just for once, do as you're told!'

## Chapter 25

### The Way Back

Blake stumbled through the *Liberator* corridors, half supported by Jenna. He didn't want to lean on her too heavily. That would slow them both down. But the knifing pain in his side meant that he could barely stand. He hardly liked to think what it would be like without the medipack. It continued to trill its warbling, high-pitched note against his ribs.

Nor did he like to think what they were doing. Abandoning ship. It had been all he could do to let Jenna lead him from the flight deck. He'd fixed his eyes on the route ahead of them, determined not to look over his shoulder. Not to take a final glance. He would see it again, he was sure of that. Once the auto repairs had been given time to do their work.

And there would be plenty of work to do. The corridor lights around them flickered and failed. The sounds of explosions rumbled through them, distant echoes of the rumbling destruction wrought by the alien attack and the plasma wave.

The pain in his side stabbed again. Blake staggered to a halt, gasping.

'Not far now,' Jenna said.

He took his weight off her for a moment, and slumped against the wall. It felt hot through his tunic. They couldn't wait here much longer.

Jenna smiled encouragingly, but her eyes suggested she had doubts. 'You can make it.'

'Or die trying,' he muttered.

'Where's that famous Blake optimism?' Jenna's scolding look made him smile.

Above their heads, the ship-wide intercom chimed, a distorted version of its usual cheerful sound. The speakers crackled, and Vila's voice was barely audible over the growling of *Liberator's* dying engines. 'Avon?'

'Speaking of optimists...' Jenna said.

'*The life capsules are operational!*' Vila was saying. '*Let's get out while we still can! Avon? Avon!*'

'There, you see?' Jenna positioned herself so that she could support Blake again. 'Your carriage awaits.'

They shuffled slowly down the corridor to the next junction. The floor had tipped at an awkward angle, so it was like walking uphill. Blake wondered if the artificial gravity was failing. If that went completely, they would be floating around helplessly with no easy way of getting to safety.

But it wasn't the artificial gravity. The corridor had been forced upwards because the far end had ruptured from its housing. He could feel heat singeing him as they approached.

'Stay back,' Jenna warned him. 'It's a sheer drop.' She peered tentatively over the ragged edge at the end of the corridor. A gust of scorching air shot upwards. Jenna ducked back down the corridor, pushing Blake fiercely out of the way. Behind her, a gout of flame roared up from the depths and spread like liquid across the ceiling. The walls began to char, and molten drops started to drip down onto the angled floor.

They scrambled backwards, staggering around the previous junction. The unforgiving slab of a thick fire door slammed into place beside them. Even then, Blake could hear the savage roar of the inferno beyond it.

Jenna coughed and hacked as she cleared the smoke from her throat. 'Are you all right?' she was able to gasp.

'I think so.' Blake gritted his teeth, determined not to let her see the intense pain he was in. 'There's no route through that way.'

Jenna looked across the junction. 'And that one's filling with smoke. We can't allow ourselves to

get trapped between fire doors.'

Blake considered their options. 'Back this way,' he suggested. 'We'll have to hope the starboard life capsules are working, too.'

The fire door opposite was beginning its determined descent. Jenna darted beneath it, pulling Blake after her before it slammed shut.

They continued to make steady progress, cautious enough to avoid plunging into any further abyss, but with enough pace to stay ahead of the chasing flames.

Blake lost track of time. All these *Liberator* corridors, so familiar over the years, now looked the same. Had they doubled back? Just as he was beginning to think they were going to arrive back on the flight deck, they tumbled into the starboard launch bay.

The area was small and utilitarian. An arched walkway with four access hatches to the life capsules on either side. The capsules themselves were long, silver-grey caskets aligned horizontally, awaiting their passengers. The far end of the bay was scorched, blackened and tarnished where a small fire had broken out some time earlier and been extinguished by the automatic safety systems. Nevertheless, the room stank of charred plastic, and there was an odd metallic tang in his mouth. He put a hand to his mouth, and found blood where he had bitten his tongue.

Blake looked down the bay. He wondered if any of the capsules would still be working, or whether this was where his and Jenna's journey would finally end.

The capsules were stacked in pairs, one above the other, with a short access ladder to reach the upper one. Like bunk beds, thought Blake. He felt tired enough to fall asleep right now. Or perhaps, he reflected, they reminded him of the boxes on Megiddo, holding their silent human operatives in a sleep of centuries. Well, he wasn't quite that exhausted.

Jenna lowered Blake to the floor, so that she could close the doorway to the corridor behind them. 'Rest there for a minute, Blake. I'll check the capsules.'

The public address system crackled and spat, echoing oddly around the small bay.

*'DAMAGE CONTROL ESTIMATES BREAKDOWN IS NOW BEYOND THE CAPACITY OF AUTO-REPAIR SYSTEMS IN ALL AREAS. SERIOUS MALFUNCTION IN LIFE SUPPORT WOULD INDICATE EVACUATION BY LIFE CAPSULE A PRIORITY ONE REQUIREMENT.'*

'I don't think we need persuading, Zen.' Blake grimaced as a spasm of pain shot across his midriff and up over his chest. He couldn't stop himself from shouting in pain.

Jenna was at his side in an instant, full of concern.

Blake noticed that the high-pitched hum had faded to nothing. 'Oh dear,' he winced. 'It's the medipack...'

'What's happened?' asked Jenna.

'It's packed in.'

No point in carrying it with him any longer, decided Blake. It was just another thing to carry, or that would get in the way. He tugged at the fastenings, and was satisfied to hear the clips ping open. He peeled the device away from his torso, and dropped it onto the floor.

'So much for that.'

'Never mind the medipack,' Jenna said brusquely, 'the life capsules have their own auto-medical systems.' She held out both hands to help him stand again. 'Two of these are undamaged. Get in that one. I'll prepare it for launch.'

The first was on the lower level. Jenna activated the power switch, and the access hatch slid slowly open. Blake saw rudimentary flight controls in front of a long, low impact seat. He ducked his head to avoid hitting it on the roof overhang, and rolled into the space.

His body sank into the cushioning of the impact seat, and the material began to mould itself around his back as the chair fashioned itself into the perfect fit for its new occupant. The flight control pedals

moved up to meet his feet. The life-support system flicked into life, scanning his wounded body and providing him with a heads-up projection that told him in alarming detail about the current state of his various injuries. It was supposed to be helpful, Blake supposed, but it was all a bit disquieting. Nonetheless, even at this point, he was still amazed at the simple efficiency of the ship's systems.

'Do you remember first boarding *Liberator*, Jenna?'

'How could I forget?' She was busying herself with the external controls, fine-tuning the settings in anticipation of the launch. 'I'd never seen anything like it. I didn't know if we were looking at a racing ship, or a transport, or an exploration vessel...'

'Or a warship,' added Blake. He wriggled slightly in his seat, and found that the material had now shaped itself perfectly to cushion his whole body. He looked out into the launch bay, beyond where Jenna stood, and could see the scars and marks of the earlier fire. 'She's fought bravely today.'

Jenna smiled in at him. 'We all have.'

He thought he saw something in her expression. Acceptance, now, rather than defiance. 'I didn't expect to be leaving like this,' he admitted.

'Today's full of surprises.' She refocused her attention on the control panel outside the capsule. 'I didn't expect Avon to stay and fight.'

'Why's that?'

'He's always taken some persuading,' she said. 'Right back to that time on the prison transport.'

'I can be very persuasive.' For some reason, this seemed to greatly amuse Jenna. He was pleased to see her laugh, nevertheless. 'What?'

'He said the same about himself.' She peered in through the hatch again, as though scrutinising Blake for a reaction. 'But you had to promise him the *Liberator* to change his mind. Is that why he was such a willing ally?'

Blake took a pensive breath, and exhaled it slowly as he mused on his response. 'Someone once told me that the people you choose as allies don't have to be your friends. They just have to be the enemy of your enemy.'

He studied Jenna's face. She didn't look convinced. 'You don't really believe it's that cynical, do you Blake?'

'No,' said Blake. He didn't even have to think about it. 'No, I don't.' He tapped at the fingertip controls on the dashboard in front of him. 'And I don't think he does, either.'

The safety harness fastened around Blake – tightly enough to hold him in position, but not so rigidly that it pressed against the abrasions on his body.

'Right, you're all set.' Jenna closed the cover on the external controls. 'Can't tell where you'll make planetfall. The console suggests... let's see...' She paused briefly to review the navigation data. 'OK, the nearby inhabitable planets include Sarran and Morphenniel. Or further out is Epheron in the Lauritol system.' She tapped him lightly on the back of his hand. 'Move your arm inside, so I can close the hatch.'

Blake placed both his hands on the navigation console in front of him.

'Once the door's sealed,' Jenna continued, 'hit the launch toggle.' Her voice was already fading as the hatch slid across into place. She'd said 'Good luck.' Or perhaps it had been 'Good luck, my friend.'

The hatch clunked shut, and sealed him inside. He was cut off completely from the distant crashes and explosions aboard *Liberator*.

'Thank you, Jenna,' he said quietly. 'Good luck yourself.'

There was a muffled rapping sound from beside him, and he saw Jenna's puzzled face through the transparent hatch. She was mouthing a question at him.

'I was just saying...' he shouted. And laughed at the absurdity of this as his voice echoed around inside the capsule. She couldn't hear him either. 'Never mind,' he said quietly, slowly and exaggerated



so that she could lip read. 'Get in your own capsule.' He pointed in the direction of the upper level on the opposite side.

Jenna gave him a thumbs-up and, after a moment's hesitation, blew him a kiss. Then she was off and up the ladder, starting on the calibrations for her own escape capsule.

'See you again soon,' Blake said softly, and chuckled. Now he was just talking to himself. He considered the controls in front of him. 'Hit the launch toggle,' she'd said. Well, that would be this one at the centre.

The external hatch blew out explosively, and the launch hydraulics kicked the capsule out into space. Despite the cushioning all around him, it felt to Blake like he'd been punched in the side.

And then the capsule was free-falling away from the ship. Blake could feel the giddy sense of zero gravity throughout his whole body, and the gentle pressure of the restraints holding him in his flight seat.

Ahead, through the front view screen, he saw a glimmer of distant, glittering lights. Some of them were the final moments of spacecraft at the conclusion of the war – civilian, Federation, alien, he couldn't discern from here. Some of the points of light were stars, around which planets orbited. Inhabited, uninhabited. There were worlds out there ready to welcome him wherever he made landfall. He hadn't felt that way for quite a while. Not since long before he'd had to leave Earth. When he'd last left home.

He craned his neck to peer straight up through the canopy of the life capsule. Diminishing through the glass was the extraordinary sight of the four-pronged space ship he had just left. A scattering of iridescent lights sparkled across the bows as her systems fought valiantly against the ravages of the conflict.

He almost said 'Goodbye.' But the word stuck in his throat.

No, Blake decided. I'm coming back.

## Acknowledgements

David Richardson, who brought *Blake's 7* back to audio, and invited me to join in.

Xanna Eve Chown, who chaperoned my script into this novelisation.

The cast, whose performance in my audio and in the original series inspired me.

Anne Summerfield, for support and love.

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