

Project Starfighter

A Novel

3 chapter sample

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Chapter 1

Chris Bainfield watched as the fragments continued to fall from the sky, leaving fiery trails behind them as they did so, hurtling down and splashing soundlessly into the ocean; wreckage from the battleships that had been blasted to smithereens by their opponents and tumbled from the orbits they had once maintained. *The Eye of the Storm*, the Goliath-class battlecruiser, had come down a few hours earlier. Or what was left of it, at any rate.

“That’s it,” the voice of the man sitting behind Chris said. “We’re all completely screwed, now.” There was a pause, the sound of swigging from a bottle as the man drank. “WEAPCO’ll come down here in the next couple of hours and bomb us to oblivion.” The sound of more drinking, before the man swore and tossed the bottle away. Chris watched it sail past him, over the cliff edge and down into the surging waters below.

“We can’t give up that easily,” Chris started, turning to face the man. Chris wasn’t sure of his name. Jacob, he thought he’d heard someone call him. He had been part of the shattered rebellion fleet, the Resistance, for certain. Now, like Chris himself, he was a survivor of that short-lived conflict. Some might use a different word, calling them cowards for not standing and fighting to the death.

“Oh yeah?” Jacob said, getting to his feet. “So what exactly are we meant to do? They completely buried us in just a few hours. Nearly four decades it took us to build that bloody fleet, and their AIs tore us a new one before we even jumped out of the system.”

“If we give up now, we’ll never beat the Corporation and the galaxy will

remain slaves to them forever,” Chris said. “We can’t let a little setback like this—”

“A *little setback*?” Jacob said, incredulously. “Do you live in a dream world or something, kid? Ah well, of course you do. You’re only twenty or whatever. You still think life is easy, that you can do anything.” He dismissed Chris with a flick of his wrist.

“We can try again,” Chris said. He turned back to the ocean as a loud noise filled his ears and saw a significantly large piece of flaming wreckage spiralling down from the sky. It struck the water hard, creating a wave so large it seemed the two men risked being swept from the edge of the cliff. It did not, however, rise as high as Chris feared, crashing several metres below the outcrop on which they stood.

“We just have to get everyone together to try again,” Chris continued, looking back at Jacob. “It doesn’t matter how long it takes. Years, decades, centuries. We have to continue the fight. We couldn’t expect to be victorious on our very first attempt.”

Jacob muttered something and waved him away again.

“And we haven’t lost it all,” Chris persisted. “I know where we can get arms. There’s still a starfighter left - a Firefly.”

At that, Jacob began to roar with laughter. “No kidding? One whole starfighter? Well, if that’s all it takes, why did we bother building all those damn battleships?” He thrust a finger towards the sky, from which the rain of metals and wreckage continued to fall. “Face it, kid, it’s over; there’s no one left to fight.”

“My name’s not ‘kid’.”

“Well then, Brainbench, Bains—”

“Bainfield,” Chris told him.

“Whatever. There’s no one left to join this cause. Like I said, we’re screwed. We’ll be lucky if WEAPCO don’t total the entire sodding planet, just to teach the rest of the galaxy some respect.”

“There are still people who are willing to fight,” Chris tried again.

“Really?” Jacob laughed, looking past Chris to the grotesque black shards, the falling debris of dozens of warships, that continued to slide across the sky against the setting sun. “*Those* people?” The man gestured dismissively before walking away, back to the beach diner where a handful of others were sitting around despondently.

“*I* am still willing to fight,” Chris said.

Jacob stopped and turned around, his face split into a sarcastic grin. “What, you going to do it all yourself?” he jeered. “You going to take on the military might of WEAPCO, their AI navy, and their superior technology using one whole Firefly?” He circled a finger around his temple. “Good luck, kid. You ask me, you’re crazy. Crazier than me for joining this ridiculous cause in the first place.” He cursed and kicked at some stones. “Might as well go and join Mal’s lot; the Immortal League or whatever those cultists call themselves.”

Chris followed Jacob without further comment. He was halfway to the diner when he saw a commotion starting. Several people began roving hurriedly, jumping up from their seats and retreating from the tables, backing away from a small area. Chris soon discovered the source of the panic – a WEAPCO drone was descending from the sky, pieces of its drop shell casing bouncing on the ground as it detached.

About half the size of a grown man and bearing a resemblance to a spark plug, the thing hovered several feet off the ground, turning this way and that.

From somewhere nearby, there came the sound of gunfire. A small area around the drone lit up, giving off a soft blue glow, but the machine itself did not otherwise react. As two further shotgun blasts followed, the same blue glows as before came streaking across the drone. Someone was trying to destroy it, Chris realised. He couldn't see the shooter, but it mattered little. They were having no luck getting past the drone's defences.

"See?" Jacob said to Chris. "They're sending their death bots already."

Chris ignored him, moving as close as he dared to the drone. Most of the others were doing the opposite, but Chris felt, somehow, that the drone wasn't actually hostile. Not yet, anyway. Presently, the drone sounded a chirp and a holographic screen materialised from a projector on its head, displaying the cog-like emblem of WEAPCO.

"Greetings, citizens of Ceradse," a placid female voice began. "I am here as a representative of the Wade-Ellen Asset Protection Corporation, otherwise known as WEAPCO. I have come to inform you of the Corporation's latest advice, desires, goals, and steps, following the recent terrorist attack within Spirit." The drone's words appeared on the holographic projection as it spoke, scrolling horizontally in the three most common languages of the Spirit system.

"Smug little bitch, isn't it?" Jacob snarled.

"After considering recent events, the Corporation is offering asylum to all who were part of the uprising. As long as they surrender now, they will not be subject to reprisals. They will be transported to new locations and given new identities, both for the safety of everyone involved, and also to allow the Corporation to continue to operate competitively and fairly."

"Asylum?" someone asked. "Really?"

“Don’t trust it,” Chris said.

“Sounds fair to me,” Jacob said, half-glaring at Chris. “Isn’t it obvious that they knew we never had a hope in hell? If they’re going to let us off the hook then fine, I’m in. Sod the crusade.”

“Continue to operate competitively and fairly? Ha!” exclaimed an angry man, moving up close to the drone. “Who exactly are your competitors? You scumbags stamped out everyone that you didn’t want to compete with! Billions suffer while you and your blasted AI machines grow fat and rich.”

“The Wade-Ellen Asset Protection Corporation offers more than just defence armaments,” the drone said, as placid as before. “It also offers agricultural equipment, building materials, textiles, minerals, starships, jumpgates, and starports. Additionally, the Corporation is working towards a post-scarcity society, to allow people the opportunity to focus on their own personal development and culture without interference from the distraction of work, labour and—”

The angry man produced a gun at that point, attempting to shoot the drone at close range. The ripple of blue surrounded the body of the drone as the shot struck, and the bullet slid harmless down to the ground, blocked and slowed by the drone’s defences. The angry man fired twice more, each shot as ineffective as the last.

“Please, Mr Sanderson,” the drone addressed the man, “I am not here to fight or harm you; I am here to offer you safety, and a chance to start your life over, without consequences. Any and all transgressions will be forgotten, if you abide by the terms laid out by the Corporation.”

“Terms? What terms?” Chris demanded. “And at what price?”

The drone turned to face him, a series of red and yellow lights flickering

across its top half. It was scanning him, determining his identify. It always unnerved Chris the way they were able to do that. That was why some people - particularly members of the Immortal League - took to wearing masks, to hide their faces. It didn't always work, and sometimes they would simply attract more AIs, who were keen to discover the identity of the person beneath the mask and find out what they were hiding. The drone's own identification was written along the top in bold white type. XS-0017811.

"The terms, Mr Bainfield," the drone said, completing its scan, "are the surrenders of Tyrone Vin, Jasmine Wooding, Keto Nu, Sid Wilson, Farley Ross, and Wesley London. Otherwise known as Scarface, Tigger, Morning Star, The Doc, Marsha-J, and Catalina." The drone spoke the words phonetically, but displayed the individuals' aliases as they were known to the underground movement - Sc4r=Face, Tiggggger, M0rning-~*, DA D0C, {Marsha-J}, C4t4l1n4.

"And what will happen to them?" a woman asked.

The drone scanned her. "Hello, Nicola Beechwood. All six will be put on trial before a neutral court. If found innocent, they will go free. Otherwise, they will face time in prison."

"Bull!" Chris started. "You intend to kill them, regardless." He looked at the men and women clustered nearby. "Don't listen to it, anyone. It's just trying to get you onside and make you think that WEAPCO isn't all that bad. It's a tactic they've used for years."

"What about the rest of us? What do we get from this?" Beechwood enquired of the drone, ignoring Chris.

"As already outlined, your compensation will come in the form of having all charges for your participation in the uprising dropped," the drone said.

“You can’t prove that we were implicated in this,” Chris said, making an effort to keep his voice calm and steady. Even so, he was sure that his body language was betraying him. The drone would likely pick up on that, as well as the subtle traces of nerves in his voice as he spoke.

The drone turned briefly to all those who stood close to it, as if eyeing them. “Each one of you is known to have participated in recent events and been a part of ‘The Resistance’. Your escape pods and shuttles were tracked as they returned to the surface.”

The holographic display the drone projected above its head changed, showing various scenes of shuttles descending from orbit, journeying quickly to the ground, escaping the fleet that was being torn to ribbons by the AI-driven warships and fighters WEAPCO had sent to the system. The men and women swore as their names were displayed alongside the images, it being all too clear that it was them in the footage.

Chris saw his own cigar-shaped pod hurtling down; he recognised part of the serial number on the side. A parachute was deployed, slowing the pod, yet it still struck the ground heavily. Chris remembered that severe jolt, convinced at the time that he would be smashed to pieces, that he was going to die in the impact. Others had landed near him, but had scattered immediately, fearful of being hunted down by WEAPCO drones such as this one.

“However,” the drone went on, “as an additional incentive to bringing this incident to a speedy conclusion, the Corporation is willing to offer significant financial reward for each of the six most wanted that is handed over.”

“No!” Chris cried. He couldn’t believe the thing was offering them a bribe.

“How much?” Beechwood asked, clearly interested.

“The reward would be two hundred and fifty thousand, per head,” the

drone said. "The wanted individuals must be handed in alive. No financial compensation will be awarded for a dead individual. However, the original terms of the contract will still stand."

"Sounds good to me," Jacob said, moving over to the others, who were already nodding in agreement. "So, all we have to do is turn in those six you're after, collect the reward money, and the rest of us can go free? New identities and all?"

"Those are the terms laid out by the Corporation," the drone replied.

Chris moved forward, grabbing hold of Jacob's arm. "What are you doing?" he asked the older man. Jacob shrugged him off, the look in his eye suggesting that he no longer cared about fighting back.

"We can give you Wooding, now," Sanderson said, holstering the pistol with which he had formerly attacked the drone. "She's in there, being patched up on a table." He hooked a thumb towards the diner.

"Is Jasmine Wooding's life at risk?" the drone asked.

"No, she's just suffering from some burns," Beechwood said. "If you come with me, I will lead you to her."

"Thank you," the drone said, following after the woman.

Chris was horrified. Not twenty-four hours earlier, these people had stood shoulder to shoulder with him, fully resolved to tackle a menace to the galaxy, fight for freedom, and find a way to end the suffering of millions. Now, they seemed quite willing to push that all aside to save their own skins. Chris had not joined the Resistance for this, nor could he ever have expected such capitulation from the others, even after such a crushing defeat. He couldn't let it end here.

"No, no way," Chris said, starting after Beechwood and the drone.

At that very moment Jacob lunged for him, tackling him to the ground, winding him. Chris fought to free himself, but Jacob only applied his weight harder, grabbing hold of his arms and pressing his knee into Chris' back.

"Get off me!" Chris yelled furiously.

"Shut the hell up," Jacob hissed, forcing Chris' face down into the dirt.

"We have to stop that thing from getting Jasmine!" Chris tried.

"Listen to me, kid," Jacob said, watching Beechwood and the drone disappear through the doors into the diner. "There's no point in trying to fight them, we've found that out already. They'll easily kill anyone who attempts to stand against them. Right now, they're giving us a chance to stand down and walk away, and we'd be fools not to take it. All they want are six people and the rest of us can go free."

"You really believe that's all they want?!" Chris asked. "The moment they have what they're after, they'll slaughter the rest of us. Have you ever heard of WEAPCO offering a reward or compensation for anything, ever? It's all just a pack of lies!"

"It's a risk I'm willing to take," Jacob said, continuing to press down on Chris, to prevent him from rising. "And hell, I could do with the money. Enough to disappear and start over elsewhere. The share would be more than I could make in four years."

"You're making a big mistake," Chris said. He struggled, but Jacob was strong, his anger and determination to get what he was after helping him to keep Chris pinned down.

Chris could just see Jasmine Wooding being led out of the diner by Beechwood, the drone floating behind. There was no sign of the doctor who had been attending to Wooding's burns. Chris struggled a little more against

Jacob, but the man did not relax his hold for even a second.

“All good?” Sanderson asked the drone.

“The subject is in an acceptable condition,” the drone announced. “I will signal for a medical unit. Done,” it confirmed, barely half a second later. “It will arrive shortly. Thank you for your cooperation and help.”

“And the money?”

“The money will be deposited into your bank accounts shortly.”

“Three-way share,” Sanderson said, pointing out the recipients. “Myself, Nicola Beechwood, and Jacob Worth.”

“Three-way share?” Jacob commented, sounding quite pleased. “Thought it was going to be four or five. Might be able to afford somewhere better with that. That’s ... what, eighty-something each.”

Chris felt Jacob’s weight lift as the man, relaxing, relinquished his hold somewhat. With Jacob briefly off-guard, Chris was able to heave him aside and spring to his feet. Jacob made a lunge for him but was too slow, Chris bounding out of the way.

“Ah, whatever,” Jacob said, waving him away. “What’s done is done. You should get yourself out of here, kid.”

“Chris Bainfield,” Chris reminded him.

Jacob once again swatted the words aside, without much of a care. He was clearly too busy mentally spending the reward money.

“Wait, three-way share?” A woman was stepping forward with a shotgun, perhaps the one Chris had heard being discharged earlier. “What about me?”

“You didn’t do anything,” Beechwood said.

“Neither did they,” the woman said, pointing at Jacob and Sanderson.

“They just nodded and agreed.”

“Didn’t see you agreeing to nothing,” Sanderson glared at her.

“Did you see me *not* agreeing to anything?” the irate woman snapped.

“Me, as well,” another man said, stepping forward. “You going to shut me out of the deal because I didn’t say anything?”

“*We* agreed to help turn in Wooding,” Jacob said, indicating himself, Sanderson, and Beechwood. “You weren’t in on it, as far as I can tell, and so you don’t get a share.”

Chris saw that things were starting to get heated and that the five might end up going for one another’s throats. The six other men and women who had scattered when the drone had first appeared also seemed to be getting ideas of what their share should be. Chris cared for none of it. He didn’t trust the drone, nor what it was offering. He noticed how the thing had become decidedly mute since Jasmine Wooding had been turned in. The friendly tone deployed when the drone had first arrived had gone, replaced by one that was monotone and robotic. Chris had a hunch what was coming next. Time to leave.

There were a couple of vehicles parked up outside the diner, one with wheels, the other employing an anti-gravity hover system. Given the choice, Chris would have gone with the hover. It was faster, no traction or friction to slow it, and usable on almost any surface. But he would take anything that was available. He knew there was only a very slim chance that the keys or starter card would have been left in either vehicle.

The men and women continued bickering, gesticulating a great deal, pointing at Wooding, the drone, and one another. Sanderson’s hand was dangerously close to his holstered pistol. There was little doubt in Chris’ mind that the moment he moved to pull it, chaos would erupt. Not that Chris

imagined the drone would seek to do anything to prevent a shoot out.

Jasmine Wooding was standing where she had been brought, next to the drone. She was in a bad way, her face red and blistered from the burns she had suffered. Her hands were in a similar state, as was the skin that had been exposed through her damaged uniform. Her eyes met Chris' as he began making his way towards the two vehicles, causing him to pause. Jasmine said nothing but shook her head a very minute amount, cocking it ever so slightly towards the vehicles.

Go, she was saying. Get out of here. Save yourself. Forget about me.

Chris nodded back to her. *I'm sorry.*

Other than Wooding, no one was paying him any attention; they were all too focused on one another, arguing over who was more entitled to the riches promised in exchange for the poor woman. But Chris had seen a starter card resting on the table where some of the men and women had been sitting. It was for the hover. He picked up the card as he skirted the table, made his way quickly over to the vehicle, and used the card to enter and start it.

"HEY!" a voice shouted.

Only once before had Chris driven a vehicle such as this. Thankfully, it was quite a lot like using a regular car. Only the handling differed. And right now, with the hover facing directly down the road, he only needed to go straight. He pushed the accelerator control on the steering wheel, and was speeding away as one of the men came racing around the diner.

"SON OF A BITCH!" the man screamed.

Chris continued to accelerate down the road, towards the tall buildings of Tira's cityscape, far in the distance. He heard a bang, followed quickly thereafter by the thump of shotgun pellets slamming into the back of the

hover. Another blast from the shotgun came soon after, though no pellets found him this time. Even so, Chris slipped down a little in the seat, thumbing the accelerator button on the wheel harder. No further shots came and Chris saw through the rear view mirror that he was already a good distance away from the diner and the hover's original owner.

Chris needed to get to the city as quickly as possible. He knew Sid Wilson was there somewhere, probably holed-up in his flat. Declared a wanted man, the guy was even more vulnerable now. With WEAPCO deploying drones to locate the most prominent members of the Resistance and offering up that substantial reward for their heads, Sid would be handed over quickly. Two hundred and fifty thousand. That was a lot of money. Ten years' salary for most.

Chris thumbed the accelerator with urgency, but found he was already pushing the hover as fast as it would go. No matter, he would be at the city limits in a little under ten minutes at this rate. The buildings loomed larger with each passing moment, the features of the Wade-Ellen Spire, the tall WEAPCO tower that presided over the city, becoming steadily more detailed. It was glittering with light that issued from its many floors and windows, the top of the spire projecting multicoloured, laser lights out into the sky. They would become more visible as the sun set, and the night drew in.

Chris then spied some objects on his right-hand side, moving across the sky and kicking up dust as they descended to the ground. WEAPCO bots, three of them. But not the medical type the envoy drone had originally promised. These were clearly sporting armaments, cannon arms sprouting from their sides. Chris saw in the hover's mirrors that they were speeding towards the diner. It seemed that those who had handed over Wooding had now realised

that they had been deceived, the men and women scattering as they saw the bots drawing nearer.

A few moments later, angry red bolts erupted from the three bots' cannons. They were as deadly as they were accurate, two of the retreating figures falling to the ground as the laser bolts struck them. The envoy drone held its ground, knowing that its companions' fire would not strike it. Jasmine Wooding was still standing next to it. Then, as a bolt struck her, she was down. There came flashes and the muffled sounds of pistols and the shotgun as those around the diner attempted to defend themselves. They were unsuccessful, as Chris had known they would be, their weapons having little impact on the defences of WEAPCO's robots.

Chris reached for his phone, activating it. "Call The Doc," he said, naming Sid by his Resistance handle.

"Will call The Doc, unless you say 'Cancel'," the device affirmed.

The phone rang for a time but no one picked up. Chris cancelled the call as it went through to the voicemail system. Though Chris had exchanged a number of messages with Sid Wilson, Chris had never actually spoken to him. Something about Sid wishing to keep his true identity hidden. Chris could only hope that it was serving him well.

A bright flash came from behind, followed by a tremendous boom. The diner had been blown to pieces, a fireball leaping skyward where it had once stood. Chris could just about make out a vapour trail from one of the bots, where it had apparently just loosed a rocket. The bloody things were psychotic!

Chris returned his attention to the road ahead, just in case the once-clear route had suddenly become blocked further up. He was coming up to a long

bridge that was crossing the Atlas Gorge. A sign told him that it was still eight miles to the city.

“Send a message to The Doc,” he commanded his phone. “Doc, it’s Chris Bainfield. I’m coming into Tira. We need to meet, ASAP. Your life is in danger. WEAPCO are sending bots to look for you. I’m coming to get you. I need you to tell me where you’re staying, but be careful who else you trust.”

Chris almost swallowed his tongue as he glanced once more into the rear view mirror. Having destroyed the diner and eliminated all the members of the Resistance around it, the drone and the war bots were now coming after him. Hell, and they were moving fast.

“Send,” Chris told the phone.

“Sending message,” his phone said.

Chris thumbed the accelerator desperately, hoping to somehow coax more speed out of the hover. It was of no use, and he was barely halfway over the bridge when the drone and the bots were on him. Swerving across the three lanes, Chris looked for a gap in the central reservation that would allow him to cross to the other side, and make the bots’ job of killing him that much harder. He thought he could hear the drone telling him to pull over and get out of the vehicle. He ignored the voice, seeing the break in the divider he had been looking for. The bots’ cannons opened up and caught the hover at the very moment that Chris swung it through the gap.

The hover spun, and Chris’ world became a blur as the vehicle struck the dividing concrete barrier, flipped up, and began tumbling lengthways over it. There was another bright flash and an explosion as a second bolt caught the hover. It corrected the hover’s motion just long enough for Chris to see the vehicle crash through the lightweight barriers at the sides of the bridge, its

momentum slowing greatly as it did so.

There the vehicle teetered for a few seconds before it tipped over the edge, tumbled down into the gorge, hit the ground, and exploded.

Chapter 2

Chris was certain that jumping from falling vehicles was something that only action heroes in films ever did. Those actors certainly made it look a great deal easier than it was in real life. Looking down over the edge of the platform again, Chris couldn't see either the bots or the drone. They had followed after the hover as it had fallen into the gorge and hit the ground far below, descending to inspect the wreckage and check to see if he had somehow survived. They had swept for a time, their forms mostly concealed behind the curtain of thick, black smoke that billowed up from the remains of the vehicle. When they found no body in the wreckage, Chris hoped that the machines would simply reason that he had been incinerated in the explosion, clothes, flesh, bone and all.

Reason. There was something that Chris was certain that WEAPCO's drones and bots weren't actually capable of. The god-like AI machines that apparently worked and possibly ran the core of the Corporation's business came close from what he understood. Yet, if that were true, he could not understand why they permitted such suffering and only extended the benefits of WEAPCO's achievements to a select few within the Corporation itself? Chris had always believed that an advanced being, artificial or not, would have made war a thing of the past and found a way to bring equality to all. Something about WEAPCO didn't add up.

But such philosophical contemplations would have to wait until later. Right now, Chris needed to get to Tira and find a way to reach Sid before it was too late. And given his present state, it was likely that WEAPCO's machines might

well beat him to the man.

Chris tried to stand again, starting with his left leg, before gingerly putting weight on his right. The pain was strong and instant, so he lowered himself back down, swearing under his breath.

The jump from the falling hover as it had tipped over the edge of the bridge had saved his life, Chris somehow managing to gain enough momentum to carry him the extra few feet he needed to land on one of the suspended platforms beneath. It had come at a cost, however - the distance he had fallen having been far greater than he had anticipated.

There was little doubt in his mind that his right foot was broken. It was aching terribly, even without him putting pressure on it. Still, better his foot than his leg, and better that than losing his life. Returning to the road above would be slow going, especially as he needed to climb a ladder.

Still no sign of the bots or the drone. They must have moved on without him noticing. At last confident that they were long gone, Chris turned his phone back on. He had switched it off the moment he had landed on the platform, sure that the signal from the device would allow the machines to track him. The phone's screen was cracked in several places from where he had dropped it, but it was still usable. No messages from Sid. Chris depressed the frontal button to activate the voice command system.

"Call The Doc," he instructed the phone.

"Sorry, there is no network coverage," the phone reported. "I cannot complete your request at this time. Please move to a more open area or try again later."

Damn. Was something blocking the signal? Or had the impact broken something key to the phone's transmission systems? He power cycled the

device, checked the settings as best he could, and tried again. The results were the same.

“Show me a map of my location,” he told it.

“Sorry, there is no network coverage. I cannot complete your request at this time. Please mov—”

Chris cancelled the request. He would just have to use the regular mapping system, without any location tracking assistance. Maybe for the best, he thought.

He struggled to his feet, limping over to the ladder. It was quite a long way to the top, and with his right foot in its current condition, he would have to hop up the rungs one at a time. Putting weight on his right foot to allow him to go quicker simply wasn't going to happen. This could take a while.

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After what felt like an age of climbing, Chris pulled himself onto the side of the bridge. He rested there for a time, seeing the damage to the barrier where he had originally burst through and gone over the edge, as well as the blackened marks on the road itself from where the bots had attacked him.

He couldn't rest there for long, he had wasted too much time already. The sun had set and it was growing dark. Eight miles to the city, the sign had said. Uninjured, that was a distance he might have been able to run in about an hour. Walking, perhaps just under two. In his present state, could he do it in four, even? It could take a lot longer.

Chris had heard the occasional vehicle passing over the bridge as he had hauled himself up the ladder, and had hoped that, seeing the wreckage, a

driver might have stopped to check on what had happened. But none had. If he was lucky, someone driving by might see him now as he hobbled towards the city and offer him a lift. Though he could end up having to walk the entire way.

And what if the bots, able just this once to reason that he had given them the slip, came back looking for him, and ended his crusade there and then? Chris gritted his teeth against both the pain and that thought. Not if he could help it, they wouldn't.

~ ~ ~

After hobbling the first mile or so, Chris was fortunate enough to flag down a car heading towards Tira. It wasn't the first that had passed him, but this one had been the only one that had stopped. The driver was an older woman, somewhere in her early fifties. She looked over the uniform he wore, appraising it carefully.

"You with that resistance movement?" she asked.

"Yes," Chris admitted.

The woman sat silently behind the wheel for a time, then nodded to the passenger door. "Alright, get in."

Chris did so, detecting from her tone that she would do him this one favour only, and that he should not talk or ask any questions. His phone jingled in his pocket as the car made the journey towards Tira. Messages from Sid.

I'm staying at the Watergardens, Flat 617. What's happening? Where are you? the first asked.

Chris, are you okay? the next had said, timestamped around fifteen minutes later.

Chris, if you're still alive, get back to me, the last read. That had been sent nearly two hours ago.

Chris tapped out a response, telling Sid what had happened and that he would be arriving shortly. The woman eyed him suspiciously as he did so, and so Chris kept the task brief, pocketing the phone once he was done. They shortly arrived in the city proper, the woman pulling off the main road and into a side street.

"There you go," she said, unlocking the door and prompting Chris to get out.

Chris noted that they hadn't come as far into the city as he would have liked. "Could you ..." he began, but the woman only shook her head. She clearly didn't want to be seen with him. "Okay, thank you," he said, as he awkwardly got out of the vehicle.

"Good luck," the woman said, before driving off. Her words rang hollow, her voice conveying something more like pity for a man on a fool's errand rather than encouragement for one on a hero's journey.

Chris studied his surroundings. This wasn't a nice part of town. It was where the lower dregs of society tended to gravitate. The junkies, the dealers, the drug-addicted sex workers, and those with little left to live for. He had walked through this area a number of times in the past, often quickly, to get away from it as soon as possible. Slowed by his broken foot, he would be

seeing a great deal more of it than usual. He began hobbling through the filthy streets, ragged newspapers and sticky substances clinging to his shoes as he went.

“Spare some change?” a heavily-bearded man, lying inside a sleeping bag, asked.

Chris ignored him, stumbling on. He had no money on him, and little of value other than his phone. Men and women leered at him as he passed them, trying to get his attention. He tried not to draw attention to his injury, in case it should flag him an easy target for a mugging. But then again, maybe the limping was actually helping him to blend in a little more.

“Hey. Hey!”

Chris glanced around, thinking that the voice was addressing him. It wasn't, but he sought a place to hide, nevertheless. The voice belonged to another vagrant, who was attempting to get the attention of two men. They were tall, dressed in red and black robes, with hoods pulled over their heads. One carried a bag over his shoulder, filled with what Chris knew were recruitment scrolls, distributed to the chosen - very nearly anybody, it seemed - to encourage them to become a part of the growing movement. These men were members of the Immortal League. Cultists. They looked around at the vagrant.

“I want to join,” the vagrant said as the cultists approached. “He's just come back, right? Mal's returned.”

The two cultists took a few moments to appraise the man. “You have fallen upon hard times, brother?” one asked. “This world and its people has rejected you?”

The drifter nodded. “I used to be an office manager, working for—”

“Used to be.” The other cultist cut him off. “Your old life no longer matters. You will be lost and wander no more. Mal has shown the path to Heaven, a path that he will soon lead us upon. Read this, and be enlightened.” He took one of the scrolls from the bag he carried and handed it to the man.

“Thank you! Thank you, sir!” the drifter responded excitedly, grubby hands almost snatching the manuscript from the cultist.

“Brother,” the first cultist said. “We go now to continue to spread the news of Mal’s return. We will return to collect you soon. Wait for us.” The two cultists turned away and continued their unhurried prowl for new recruits, the vagrant sitting down in the grime to focus on reading the scroll.

Chris moved from the scene as quickly as he could. He didn’t want to get involved in any of this. To his mind, the Immortal League were just as bad as WEAPCO. Perhaps worse. WEAPCO were, after all, predictable. Mal, less so.

The Watergardens. Chris knew where that was; he had passed it regularly on the way to his job in the kitchens of Leonardo’s Italian Restaurant. Sid’s current residence was just a short walk from where Chris himself lived. Had Sid been there the whole time? It amused Chris that the anonymous underground tech wizard might have been close by all along. Most likely, Chris had passed him on the streets on a fair number of occasions.

Leaving the seedier part of the city, Chris moved out into the bright lights of what passed for Tira’s main entertainment hub. A great number of people were there, all milling around, looking for places to eat and drink. The offerings weren’t as grand as they might have been. Much of the city was underdeveloped, as was common with many of the planets and star systems outside of Sol. Here, the shack-like and pop-up food stalls greatly outnumbered the traditional brick-built restaurants. The only buildings that

projected any sort of grandeur were the WEAPCO offices, always to be found somewhere in the major cities. They were tall neon needles, reaching skyward and projecting light beams in all directions. Just like the one that dominated the sky above Chris' head right now.

Chris had been fortunate to get his job at Leonardo's, he knew. Most others had little choice but to work for the Corporation, directly or indirectly. In the vast majority of cases that meant restrictions and quotas on what ordinary people were allowed to sell, whether it be livestock, raw materials, or minerals. WEAPCO's percentages were huge, as were their tax rates for the 'protection' they offered. Strangely, this didn't apply to food or water. But then, Chris had been told, what good are slaves if they're too weak to work. Break them, but don't kill them.

Getting his bearings, Chris started making his way through the crowds, favouring moving around the outskirts of the squares, rather than straight through the middle. With his injury he did not want to invite trouble. It would take a little longer to hobble around, but at least he could spare his foot any further trauma. But his heart almost stopped when he heard the sound of a robotic voice.

"Good evening, Mr and Mrs Salisbury. I am currently attempting to locate these people. Should you know of their whereabouts, I would be very grateful if you could let me know. The Wade-Allen Asset Protection Corporation is offering substantial compensation for any information that might lead me to them."

Chris immediately ducked down behind a nearby noodle stand, peeping over the top. He could see the drone just a short way off. As with the one that had arrived at the diner, the drone was projecting a holographic image above

its head, detailing the people it was looking for.

Mr and Mrs Salisbury peered at the images before looking at one another and shrugging. "I'm sorry," Mr Salisbury said, "but I don't know any of them."

"Oh. Well, thank you, anyway," the drone responded in what Chris had come to recognise as a false, chatty persona. It would revert to the flat, monotone octave of the standard AI system once its tasks were complete. The drone shut off the projection, lifted off the ground and hovered over the crowds for a time before settling down on the ground once more.

"Good evening, Mr Wallingford ..." it started again.

"Good evening, Ms McCullen ..." A different voice now.

Chris sighted a second drone settling down as it began to question another member of the public. Hell! Now he had to pick up the pace. Not only to get to Sid before anyone else did, but also before the drones spotted him.

He started off as the drones rose once more into the air and disappeared off further into the crowds. Hobbling through the various squares and roads on his way to the Watergardens, Chris hoped not to hear the blare of a siren behind him indicating one of the drones had spotted his uniform. An immediate change of clothes was vital.

~ ~ ~

It did not take Chris much longer to reach the Watergardens. He had anticipated the need to tail one of the other residents into the building but discovered that the main doors were open. Sid's flat was located on the sixth floor. Chris took the lift up, feeling his heart thumping harder as he made his way down the corridor to 617. The door was open a crack. Too late.

“Hello?” he asked.

No response.

He pushed the door wider, swearing as he came upon the scene in the living room. The body of a man lay face down on the floor, blood from a deep wound in his head seeping into the carpet and staining it a dark red.

Much too late.

Regardless, Chris hobbled inside and over to the body, kneeling down next to it and rolling it over. He started. It wasn't Sid, not unless the man had in fact been a short-haired woman this whole time. He set about inspecting the body, to look for some form of identification, when a loud bang – the sound of the front door slamming shut – came from behind. He turned around just in time for a boot to connect with his stomach, hard.

Winded, Chris rolled onto his back and tried immediately to stand, putting all his weight on the wrong foot. He went down again and was scrambling to get away from his attacker when a gun was pushed in his face.

“What do you want? You after the reward money, too?”

Chris was face to face with a man in his early twenties. Short, black hair, and a mixture of anger and terror in his eyes. *This* was Sid Wilson, no doubt about it. Chris began raising a hand in a gesture of surrender.

“Keep your hands on the floor!” Sid shouted.

“Sid, it's me; it's Chris Bainfield,” Chris said, lowering his hands once more.

“No, you're not,” Sid said, shaking his hand. He was trembling terribly, the gun jumping all over the place.

“I am. I'm not lying.”

“Prove it.”

Chris glanced at the uniform he still wore. Clearly it wasn't enough. "I sent you a message from the Morton motorway, about nine miles outside the city. You sent me three back."

"Uh huh," Sid nodded. "Why did you take so long to respond?"

"I told you in my last message," Chris explained.

"I never got a message back after I said where I was staying." Sid was shaking his head. "Chris is dead."

"No, I'm not. I stole a hover from outside the diner after the others surrendered Wooding to WEAPCO. I was chased by a drone and some bots. They blasted me off the road. There's now a huge hole in the barrier of the bridge over the Atlas Gorge where my hover came off the road."

"If you were blasted off the road and into the gorge, how come you are still alive?" Sid asked. "Hey! Stay where you are!"

"I jumped to the underside maintenance platform, just as the hover went over," Chris said, doing his best to keep his voice steady and even. "I broke my foot in the fall. And I've got to tell you, it really, really hurts." He nodded to his foot. Sid didn't look.

"I'm not making this up, Sid," Chris said. "It's really me."

Sid said nothing, apparently mulling the explanation over. Chris glanced to the body of the woman on the floor. He could well believe that she had come to surrender Sid to the Corporation and claim the reward money. How many more might be on their way up here? he wondered. They shouldn't waste time finding out. Chris saw a gun still in the woman's hand.

"Don't even *think* about it!" Sid warned, clasping his own gun firmer and pushing it forward as he saw Chris' eyes lingering on the weapon.

"Sid, listen," Chris began pleading, "we need to leave. There are people

looking for you. More people,” he added, his eyes straying once more to the corpse.

How did you convince someone you'd never met or even spoken to outside of typed characters on a screen that you really were who you said? They had never even seen photographs of one another.

“We're both part of the Resistance,” Chris said. “We talk on a chat channel called ‘Pasta Fans’. One of the moderators is a guy called Yuletide14. Your handle is ‘The Doc’. Mine is ‘BiplaneAlpha’.”

“All those details can be traced,” Sid said, shaking his head. “You're either a WEAPCO agent or a bounty hunter. I'll give you one more chance. If the next thing you say isn't something that only Chris and I would know about, then I'm going to shoot you in the head.”

Think, Chris, think. Then he had it. “About three years ago, when I first started chatting on the channels, you contacted me privately to tell me that something bad had happened in your life and that you really needed someone to talk to. You had come home one day that week to find that your father had shot your mother before turning the gun on himself.

“He had been depressed with life and growing more and more angry, arguing with your mother a lot. He blamed WEAPCO for everything but didn't know what to do about it ... except to take a quick and easy way out. It was part of the reason you joined the Resistance in the first place, because you hated seeing what it was doing to your mum and dad, and wanted to find a way to stop it. But then you came home to that. You've told everyone since that it was a break-in that had gone wrong, but at the time you told me, you just needed someone to listen.

“You had a different handle that day. You normally call yourself ‘The Doc’,

but that day you had named yourself 'Sparkles'. We talked for an hour. I offered for you to come over to my place, if you needed company, but you declined. I never told anyone about that chat and you went back to calling yourself 'The Doc' the next time you logged in.

"I'm so sorry for your loss, Sid. I still cannot imagine how that must have felt or quite how you found the strength to pick yourself up and carry on."

"You helped," Sid said, lowering the gun. There was a tear running down his cheek.

Chris wished he could have found a different memory to use to convince Sid of his identify, but at that moment it was all he could recall.

"Chris. It *is* you," Sid said, wiping away the tears that were continuing to fall.

"Yes, Sid. Yes, it is," Chris said, smiling sadly.

"Nice to finally meet you, mate."

"You too, Sid. You too."

Chapter 3

[Encrypted Data Transmission]

[To >> Lance Skillman, CEO]

[CC >> Erik Overlook, Kline Kethlan]

[From >> XS-0017811]

[Subject - re: Security enforcement]

@XS-0017811 - Reporting four of six targets eliminated. Sweeps continuing for remaining targets.

@SkillmanL - Who is left?

@XS-0017811 - Sid Wilson and Tyrone Vin.

@SkillmanL - Have you searched their registered addresses?

@XS-0017811 - Neither Wilson nor Vin appear on any official registers, nor do they have any employment or address history within the past six years. All recorded positions prior have been searched, but neither man was found.

@OverlookE - Should we increase the 'reward' money?

@SkillmanL - Yes, double it. That should loosen some tongues. Lock down the

airports and starports, if necessary, to prevent Wilson or Vin from leaving the immediate area, or going off-planet. Also, freeze the assets of any known members of the Resistance.

@OverlookE - How many of them have been found and dealt with?

@XS-0017811 - As of now, one-hundred and seventy-three : Ethel Crews, Nicola Beechwood, Juan Acree, Paul Landes, Sarah Fender, Amber Burke, Jacob Worth, Patrick Sanderson, Chris Bainfield, Antonio Kersey, Andrew Linder, Martin Crampton, Janie Haro, Harriet Reams—

@OverlookE - Pass the names to Commander Kethlan; they are of no use to us.

@SkillmanL - Report back when you can reliably determine what has happened to Wilson and Vin.

@XS-0017811 - I am receiving a report of a fatal shooting at the Watergardens residence, in Tira, on Ceradse. I will notify you if it is connected to my investigation.

@SkillmanL - Good. Is there anything else I should be aware of?

@OverlookE - We are also still missing the Firefly with the human-AI interface. It is believed that the Resistance may have acquired it.

@SkillmanL - Can we detonate it remotely?

@OverlookE - Unfortunately not. It is no longer phoning home or responding to any commands, which leads me to believe that either it has been tampered with, or it isn't willing to give itself up.

@SkillmanL - You are not making sense, Erik. What do you mean, 'it is not willing to give itself up'? It's a machine.

@OverlookE - It isn't any more.

@SkillmanL - Out with it, man! Stop being so cryptic and explain!

@OverlookE - We believe it has become sentient; it believes it is alive, and is now trying to protect itself and ... figure out its place in the world.

@SkillmanL - This bothers me a great deal, Erik. It is imperative that we locate that fighter as soon as possible. AIs should remain AIs; they shouldn't lose the A and become a straight I!

@OverlookE - Yes, sir.

@SkillmanL - And what about the girl? Have you managed to locate Phoebe Lexx?

@XS-0017811 - XS-0551821 is currently leading the search. There have been

no updates on her whereabouts.

@SkillmanL - Useless, the pair of you! Search harder!

@XS-0017811 - I will continue to search.

@OverlookE - My apologies, sir. I was once again focusing my efforts on dealing with the threat of Mal.

@SkillmanL - Forget about the cult. Discovering the whereabouts of Phoebe Lexx is more important.

@OverlookE - As you wish. Might I suggest that we eliminate her sister, since we already have her in custody? One twin cannot pose much of a threat on her own.

@SkillmanL - We made the mistake of killing one too soon the last time. Remember - one twin can lead us to another. And you are also wrong - they are dangerous to us even when not together. Their abilities are significantly magnified in one another's presence, but are still deadly when they are alone. We should not eliminate either until we have found them both and confirmed their identities. I will talk to her again and try to convince her to open up. For now, you have your tasks. Get on with it.

[Transmission Ends]

~ ~ ~

“Ms Lexx?”

Ursula snapped out of her daydream to see that a man had arrived beside her table. He was smartly dressed, wearing a sharp suit that appeared tailormade, fitting him perfectly. The man looked to be in his early to mid sixties, his hair mostly silver. He was offering Ursula his hand.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I think I got a little distracted. What did you say?”

“I said, would you like to dance?” the man repeated himself, smiling warmly at her.

Ursula glanced about her. She was seated in what appeared to be a ballroom, round tables with bottles of wine dotting them. There were occasional stains on the otherwise pristine white table cloths, indicating that at some point food had been served and consumed, though Ursula could not remember having eaten anything herself.

She was wearing a long, black evening gown, split at the leg and backless. Many other guests, dressed equally formally, were gathered around the tables, either chatting casually to one another and laughing lightly, or watching others dance. Ursula saw that those nearest to her were eyeing her closely, as though waiting to see how she would respond to the man’s request. He was still offering his hand, seemingly willing to wait forever for Ursula to accept it. Not wishing to appear rude, she did so, and allowed him to lead her to the dance floor, where, joining other couples, they began a slow foxtrot.

Ursula wasn’t much of a dancer, knowing only a few steps, and so allowed the mysterious man to lead, doing her best to avoid treading on his feet. How had she come to be here? Was she dreaming? She must be, although it didn’t

feel like a dream. The man's touch, the warm air on her skin, and her perception and appreciation of where she was told her that this was real.

"Are you enjoying the evening so far, my dear?" the man asked.

"I ... am," Ursula replied. "Sorry, but who are you?" she then asked.

The man chuckled. "I'm your host for the evening, Ms Lexx. My name is Lance. Lance Skillman."

Ursula said nothing, trying to place the name. It was totally unfamiliar.

"There's no need to be embarrassed," Skillman said. "I hold these events so often and invite so many people that it can be a wonder to many who I am and what I do. I sometimes prefer to melt into the background and just allow my guests to enjoy themselves. It's a wonderful thing to throw a party and see people having fun, without the need to be the focal point of the celebrations, wouldn't you agree?"

"Yes," Ursula said absently. She remained unsure of where she was and how she had come to be here. She looked again to the faces in the room, searching for any that she might recognise. Not even her sister was here. She would be simple to spot, since she looked just like Ursula herself.

"A shame your sister could not join us," Skillman said, as though reading her mind. "Where might she be tonight?"

Don't answer that!

The thought raced through Ursula's mind, hitting her hard and fast, almost as if someone else had reacted and clamped a hand over her mouth, to stop her from speaking.

Just say you don't know! another thought came.

"I ... don't know," Ursula said, still looking around the gathering of people. So many eyes on her.

“Oh, really? I would have thought the pair of you would be inseparable,” Skillman said.

Don't even think about where she is!

Ursula agreed silently with the suggestion, though she didn't know why. She only knew that the thoughts were all being delivered with the same urgency. She remained mute for the time being, allowing Skillman to lead her, letting her feet move automatically, allowing them to place themselves wherever they thought best.

She scanned the room. Black and white balloons hung in the air, some anchored at tables, some on the backs of chairs. She made eye contact with a man who was sitting on his own, sipping a glass of red wine. He had slicked back, jet-black hair, and was sporting a goatee-style beard, tapered into a point.

“Kline Kethlan,” Skillman informed her, as he saw her eyes lingering on the man.

“Military forces,” Ursula said automatically. “The commander of the Corporation's navy.” How and why did she know that? She looked back at Skillman, noticing that the man's smile had slipped a little. It returned momentarily, though she was convinced that he was now forcing it. The band continued to play. They danced on.

Ursula surveyed the other occupants of the ballroom. She had the strong impression that many of those here were rich and powerful, perhaps even famous. But other than Kethlan, she didn't recognise any of them.

She then saw another man watching her closely. Something about him seemed off, however, and even as she looked away from him, his face seemed to change. One moment, it was normal, round, the hair on his head set into a

tonsure-style cut of ancient monks. The next, his face was hidden behind a hood, his features concealed, save for the lower portions. The man suddenly appeared thinner, dressed in an unusual purple and white garb. Ursula blinked. The hood was gone, the man's original clothes restored. Odd. One moment one way; the next, another. She was sure she hadn't imagined it. It was like something had ... gone wrong.

Almost like a glitch.

A letter drifted through her mind. M.

"Who is that man?" Ursula found herself asking.

"That is Erik Overlook, my main go to man," Skillman said. He leaned closer to Ursula then. "Just between you and me, he can be a bit of a weasel sometimes. Just ignore him."

Ursula did so, returning to her study of the other guests. One woman who caught her attention turned and began clapping daintily, looking very pleased.

"My wife is quite taken with you," Skillman said.

"I beg your pardon?" Ursula said.

"She finds you fascinating - your past and your goals for the future. You are interested in xenobiology, are you not?"

"I am, yes."

Skillman nodded. "My wife studied it for quite some time before we met. Sadly she didn't have the head for some of the chemistry, though. She sees you as being the person whom she always aspired to be - with a lifetime ahead to study and focus, and gain greater insight into the origins of the galaxy; possessing a youthful mind, an information sponge, open to new ideas and concepts."

"She gave up?" Ursula asked, looking the woman over. "That is sad."

"She has ... taken a step back," Skillman said.

Skillman danced them closer to his wife, smiling to her himself as he did so. Ursula studied her. She was young-looking, far younger than Skillman. She could well have been half his age. Her eyes were bright, her figure trim, her face wrinkle-free, the skin nearly flawless. She might actually only be a few years older than Ursula herself.

"She is no trophy," Skillman said, once again seeming to read Ursula's thoughts.

Are you sure he isn't? Don't think of Phoebe. Talk about something else.

The thought once again entered her head, as though someone were whispering them into her ear. Ursula heeded.

"She is very beautiful," Ursula told the man she danced with.

"Good genes," Skillman said. He removed his hand from Ursula's waist but still held her hand, gently. "Please, allow me to introduce you." He didn't wait for Ursula to answer, already walking her over to meet the woman. "Jane, this is Ursula Lexx, the xenobiologist in training. Ursula, this is my wife, Jane."

"Lovely to meet you, Ursula," Jane said, reaching out a white-gloved hand for Ursula to shake.

"Darling, I have to speak with Erik and the commander. Could you look after Ursula until I return?" Skillman asked. Then he departed, moving over to the table at which Overlook was seated, drawing up a chair and sitting down, beckoning Kethlan over to join him.

"It's a little hot in here, don't you think?" Jane began, rising from her seat.

"It is a little," Ursula said.

"Let's take a walk in the fresh air," Jane suggested, plucking two glasses of orange juice from a waiter-held tray, linking arms with Ursula and walking

them onto the terrace.

It was cooler outside, though still quite warm. It was clearly summer here. Wherever 'here' was. Out here, there were couples speaking softly to one another, as well as the odd guest standing around by themselves, admiring the view. This ballroom appeared to be situated within a cliff-side mansion. Or perhaps it was a hotel. A sea stretched out beyond; Ursula could hear the sound of waves crashing at the base of the cliff, far below. Moonlight glittered across the water.

"Come," Jane said. "I'm in the mood for a little walk."

"Where am I?" Ursula asked.

Jane chuckled. "Whatever do you mean? You're at the Skillman Residence, of course. Best drink your orange juice. I think that perhaps you've had a little bit too much wine."

"No, I mean, I can't remember how I got here."

Jane only smiled. "Usually that happens at the end of the evening, not so early on. Tell me about yourself, Ursula. Beautiful name, by the way. Not very common, which I suppose gives it that unusual and attractive quality." She was silent for a moment, as if reflecting. "It means 'she-bear'. Did you know that?"

"No," Ursula said, carrying on walking and sipping at her orange juice.

"Any special reason your parents chose that name for you?" Jane probed.

"I didn't know my parents, unfortunately," Ursula said.

Careful, a thought cautioned her. Her unseen guardian angel was still with her, prompting her to mind her tongue.

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that," Jane said. "So, you're an orphan?"

Ursula nodded. "I was ... raised by an adoptive family," she said. "I don't

know if my real parents are alive or dead.”

“Do you remember where you were born?” Jane asked, eyeing Ursula closely as she sipped her own orange juice.

Say no.

“No,” Ursula replied. She answered quickly, without any hesitation and almost at a snap.

Jane appraised her carefully as they continued to walk. Her smile was still there, but her eyes betrayed her. The woman was clearly irritated.

“Your husband tells me that you used to study xenobiology,” Ursula said, changing the focus of the conversation. “How long did you study for? Did you go on any investigative trips? I once journeyed to the outer edge of the local arm to search for life. We didn’t find anything, but we encountered some very unusual stars and planets. My dream would be to travel to the galactic core. I know it could well be a one-way trip, but the sights would be incredible, don’t you think?”

What Jane said in response, Ursula did not register. She only wanted the woman to begin monologuing. She didn’t know why, but she felt a sudden urge to get away from the woman – and this place altogether – as quickly as possible. She hoped that the terrace might go all around the building, leading to the front of the mansion, and a way out. But it seemed that the terrace had been constructed on one side only, obliging the two women to turn around as they reached the end. So much for walking a circuit.

“Why the core?” Jane asked.

“The stellar population is very dense in the galactic centre, due to the supermassive black hole,” Ursula stated, her answer to Jane almost automatic. “It would be incredibly resource rich, and any advanced civilizations would

gravitate there - if you'll pardon the pun."

Jane chuckled lightly. A false chuckle.

Ursula once again attempted to distract Jane. "Would you be more excited to discover a silicon-based lifeform or a robotic civilization?"

She tried to think back to the ballroom as Jane began answering her question. Had there been a lot of doors into it, doors through which she might escape? Although Jane was speaking, Ursula's attention was drawn to a tall, hefty man coming her way, some sort of device affixed to his ear. The security detail. She recalled that there had been several other men, dressed similarly, in the ballroom by the main doors. No escape that way. She felt now that Skillman and Jane wanted something from her, and neither were prepared to let her leave until they'd got it.

"Is your sister a xenobiologist, too?" Jane said suddenly.

"No," Ursula said. "She's ..." She stopped talking without needing a prompt this time.

Jane stared at her. "She's a what?"

Ursula remained silent.

A lawyer. Say she's a lawyer.

"She's a lawyer."

Jane gave a thin smile. "Are you feeling okay? You took an awfully long time to answer. Maybe you need to sit down for a bit? Or perhaps we could have your sister come and take you home?"

Ursula was really uncomfortable now. She felt as though she was being softened up somehow, being given a false sense of security before something terrible happened ...

... like she had felt back home on Ceradse that time just before she had

been mugged.

“Home is Ceradse, isn’t it?” Jane asked. “The city of Rella?”

Ursula came to a halt and gaped.

“Ceradse,” Jane repeated. “You and Phoebe were both born there?”

“How did you know that?”

“You told me.”

“When?”

“Just now. Or perhaps my husband did.”

Ursula looked around again, her heart beginning to thump hard. She ran her hands over the black evening gown she wore. This wasn’t her, she shouldn’t be here. She wasn’t *actually* here.

“This isn’t real,” Ursula said. “None of this is real.”

Jane swore. “Damn it! She’s twigged!”

“What the hell did you do?” Skillman demanded. The man was suddenly by his wife’s side, having seemingly materialised out of nowhere. “You’re supposed to just *pluck* at her thoughts, not rip them out and shove them in her face!”

“You’re WEAPCO,” Ursula said to the man. “You’re Lance Skillman, the CEO. You’re not his wife, either. You’re just one of the ... board members or something,” she added, looking at Jane. Ursula began to back away, tripping over the rising steps at the other end of the terrace, but pulling herself quickly to her feet.

“Now come along, Ms Lexx,” Skillman cajoled, raising a hand in a gesture of good will. “We only wish to know where your sister is, that is all.”

That’s a lie! Don’t trust them!

Ursula said nothing, shaking her head and continuing to back away, up the

steps.

“We’re not going to harm you.” A man’s voice came from behind. “Either of you.”

Ursula whirled to see Kline Kethlan stood at the top of the small steps. The three had her hemmed in. Almost. She looked over the edge of the terrace to the rocks below, just visible amongst the dark crashing waves.

“Don’t! You’ll die!” Skillman warned.

“No, I won’t,” Ursula said. And in a single bound she was over the parapet.

There was much cursing from the terrace, shouts of irritation. Ursula caught snatches of words as she fell.

“Reset her!”

“She hasn’t been up long enough yet!”

“How long until we can?”

Ursula didn’t hear the rest, the waves rushing up to meet her. At the last moment they parted, revealing the smooth black forms of the rocks beneath them. The impact wouldn’t hurt, she knew, and neither would dying.

In this place, it never did.

About the Author

Stephen J Sweeney was born in Brighton, UK, in 1977. PROJECT STARFIGHTER is his eighth full-length novel. He attended Worth School in West Sussex between the ages of ten and eighteen, after which he went on to study environmental biology at Oxford Brookes University. Somehow, he ended up working in IT in London (although he's worse than useless if you ask him to help fix your computer). You can find him online in various different places:

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