

STARGLIDER 2



NOVELLA

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A Novella by James Follett

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CHAPTER 1

The Imperial Prator of Egron was not a happy man.

'Heads will roll!' he screamed. His voice boomed out from the mountain top. The Egron multitudes who had gathered for the ceremonious blowing-up of the statue of the late Hermann Kruud - Commander-in-Chief of the Egron armed forces - quailed. The reason for their fear was understandable: when the Imperial Prator threatened that 'heads would roll' they invariably did. And Egron heads, being the most round of all the races in the galaxy, tended to roll remarkably easily. Especially when such heads were separated from their owners on mountain tops.

Silas Kringe, personal secretary to the Imperial Prator, oiled his way onto the rostrum that had been set up a safe distance from the statue 'Can I be of assistance, sir?' he fawned.

The Prator waved a remote control box under Kringe's nose. 'What's this?'

'It's a remote control box for blowing up statues, sir.'

'I know that!' the Imperial Prator howled, hurling the offending gadget to the rostrum's floor and grinding it to bits under his heel. 'I want a proper plunger. A plunger with a tee-handle thingy like they have on television!'

'He wants a proper plunger with a tee-handle thingy like they have on television,' Silas Kringe told the quartermaster in charge of the Egron Remote Control Box Central Ordnance Depot. The quartermaster paled. He had a vision of his head rolling. 'But we don't have any proper plungers,' he protested.

Kringe was unimpressed by the quartermaster's excuse.

'What about all the plungers with tee-handle thingys that the Egron Broadcasting Authority use in their television dramas?' he countered.

'Ah. Well they don't actually work.'

'So make me one that doesn't work! I can press the control box button at the exact moment that the Prator plunges the plunger! Simple.'

The quartermaster was nonplussed. 'Make something that doesn't work? That will be impossible. It would never get past the inspection androids.'

The quartermaster had a point. Like all advanced cultures in the galaxy, the Egrons had sunk such enormous sums into the development of quality assurance control in their high tech consumer industries - mostly weapons production because the Egrons had an insatiable appetite for things that went bang - that it was now impossible for them to make anything that didn't work.

Kringe adopted a reasoning tone. 'If you program the manufacture of something that's not meant to work - and it doesn't - surely that means that it works?'

The quartermaster thought about that one. 'I suppose it does,' he conceded and he reached for his keyboard.

Thirty minutes later Silas Kringe returned in his private ground car clutching a non-working plunger box with a tee-handle thingy plus a small remote control box that he kept concealed in his robe. He guessed that the decrease in the size of the crowd during his absence was due to people getting bored and drifting away rather than the Imperial Prator carrying out his threat to roll heads.

'About time!' the Imperial Prator thundered, snatching the plunger from Kringe. 'Does it work?'

'It works perfectly, sir,' Kringe assured his master. He never lied to the Imperial Prator. Because the plunger was not meant to work, it could be reasoned that his answer was being economical with the truth.

The Imperial Prator placed the plunger at his feet, cleared the imperial throat and spoke - or rather raged - for five minutes at the crowd.

Hermann Kruud, he bellowed, was the greatest traitor that Egron had ever spawned. He had failed miserably in his mission to bring peace and enlightenment to Novenia and the worlds of the spiral arm of the galaxy. As a result of his monumental incompetence, thousands of worlds were still enslaved in the inertia of consensus government: knowing nothing of the joys of a warm, friendly Egron dictatorship that could drain marshes and make the trains run on time. From this day hence Hermann Kruud's name would be expunged from Egron's glorious history. To even mention his accursed name would be punishable by having one's head rolled.

The hovering TV cameras, relaying the scene throughout the conquered worlds of the Egron Empire, remained dutifully at their station while the Imperial Prator delivered a long, enraged monologue extolling the joys of being administered by the Egron civil service and having one's building designs approved by the Egron Arts Council. He came close to hysteria when describing how Novenia had even refused to accept television feeds from the Egron Broadcasting Authority. That was the greatest insult of all.

'And all this!' he screamed, pointing at the colossal statue, 'is due to the treachery and bungling of that man! You see? Not even I can bring myself to mention his foul name now. And from now on none of us will ever have to look upon his likeness again!'

Having finished his sulfurous broadside, the Imperial Prator stamped on the plunger, driving the tee-handle thingy into its box.

Nothing happened.

The mighty statue of Hermann Kruud continued to gaze sightlessly across the plain at the distant mountains.

'KRINGE!!!'

Startled from his dozing reverie, Kringe realised what had happened and groped frantically in the recesses of his robe for the remote control box. His fingers found the button and pressed it.

Still nothing happened.

CHAPTER 2

That night in the dungeons of the Imperial Palace, there was just enough light from the glowing, bone-rotting radioactive walls for the manacled Silas Kringe to read the immortal legend on the back of the remote control box. It stated:

BATTERIES NOT INCLUDED

CHAPTER 3

Ten floors above where the hapless Silas Kringe was chained to a bed that consisted of a slab of granite, was the Imperial Prator's underground peace room: a vast bunker where he hatched his plans to bring Egron enlightenment to the rest of galaxy. The Imperial Prator glowered at his aides and chiefs of staff who were gathered around the giant hologram map of the unconquered spiral arm that was guarded by Novenia.

'This time there will be no mistakes!' he thundered. 'This time we will destroy Novenia!'

General Orpheus Krass looked puzzled. Following the ignominious defeat of Hermann Kruud, he had had the misfortune to be appointed his successor. His only reason for accepting the post was because he hoped that he might get one of the mighty Imperial battlecruisers to play with.

'You have a problem, general?' the Imperial Prator inquired.

'With such a truly wonderful person as yourself as my commander, how can I possibly have a problem, sir? But I do have a tiny little query that is really too insignificant for your great brain.'

'I'll be pleased to hear and consider it,' said the Imperial Prator graciously, pleased that he now had a subordinate who appreciated him.

'What about the Novenian sentinels, sir? Nothing can get past them. They won't fall for the mechanical StarGlider ruse a second time.'

The Imperial Prator thumped the map in fury. 'There will be no repeat of our last humiliating defeat at the hands of the Novenians because I say so! If the sentinel defensive forces of Novenia mean that we cannot invade by the normal peaceful means with assault craft, gunships and armoured personnel shuttles then we will have to resort to unconventional methods!'

'What unconventional methods are those, sir? My poor brain is but a shrivelled walnut alongside your dazzling intellect. Such great plans, that to you are nothing, have to be spelt out to humble old me.'

The Imperial Prator glared at General Krass, suspecting insubordination. But the general gazed blandly back at him. 'I have a plan, Krass,' he declared, moderating his tone. 'The sort of plan that only a military genius like me could think up.'

Krass wisely remained silent. Much of the Imperial Prator's military successes were due to his strategy of picking only on enemies weaker than himself. He hoped that his ruler's plans included digging one of Egron's battlecruisers out of retirement even though trendy military thinking was that the days of such dreadnoughts were over.

The Imperial Prator gave a thin, cunning smile. 'Not even the Novenian robot sentinels, brilliant as those deep space guardians are, can stop the raw energy of a main sequence sun beamed straight at Novenia.'

'It must be a devilishly clever plan, sir,' Krass commented admiringly. 'I wish I could think like you.'

'Naturally. And with Novenia out of the way there will be nothing to stop us going on to conquer all the other worlds of the spiral arm that Novenia guards.' The sound of his own voice drove the Imperial Prator into his familiar rant mode. He raved that his stunningly brilliant plan meant that to him would fall the oceanic worlds of the Marian System with their mighty oceans almost at saturation point in minerals. Also the strange worlds of Avios with their super-dense atmospheres and inhabited by curious bird-like creatures that got close to a near-weirdness match with the fabled Novenian StarGlider. Such intelligent birds would make fine hunting sport for the Imperial Prator of Egron and his despotic camp followers. Another great sport would be hunting the whales of the Marian system. A thousand planets whose strange beings knew nothing about Egron democracy and who had been denied the privilege of paying support grants to the Egron Design Council would be his. A thousand planets that were beyond the reach of Egron Broadcasting Authority network TV game shows; a thousand gleaming pearls for the Imperial Prator to add to his glorious necklace of conquest. He would have rambled on all night had Krass not interrupted him.

'Conquest of such alien planets and alien lifeforms will need specialised ships, sir.'

'We will build them!'

'But we don't have the environments to test them out, sir. None of our worlds are anything like the Marian system. I mean - those intelligent lifeforms are whale-like creatures and they don't like any non-whale-like intelligent lifeforms going near their planets.'

The Imperial Prator spread his hands and looked beseechingly up at the illuminated ceiling of the peace room. 'Preserve me from cretins without imagination!' He grabbed a laser pointer and aimed it at the giant map, picking out a planetary system that was deep within the Novenian-controlled spiral arm. 'That's the system we shall conquer first! We will use its planets to try out all our new weapons and ships. And that's where we'll build a star-powered plasma projector that will blast Novenia out of existence!'

There was a silence in the peace room. Krass looked at the other aides for support but none was forthcoming. 'It will take time to build an invasion fleet, sir.'

'You have a year, general.'

'And the cost-'

'You will have the entire advertising revenues of the Egron Broadcasting Authority placed at your disposal.'

Krass could scarcely believe his ears. The Egron Broadcasting Authority and its television

contractors were making so much money that they had been given the job of printing it on the assumption that they might as well have total control over the stuff to save on the cost of bulk-freighting it to them in the first place.

The Imperial Prator treated his senior officer to an indulgent smile. 'That will give you the necessary resources to build the mightiest and most fearsome peace-keeping force in the history of the Universe. This time there will be no mistakes. I myself will lead the glorious attack...Well - not actually lead. My flagship will stay to the rear of the armada where it will be able to monitor the invasion and where I will be able to provide you with minute by minute benefit of my incredible perception and strategic planning abilities. With such guidance, nothing can go wrong.'

'Does that mean that we'll be pressing the Imperial battlecruisers into service, sir?'

'Of course not, imbecile! What use are those things in this day and age?'

'As a back-up force in case anything goes wrong-' Krass began.

Veins pulsed with rage in the Prator's bullneck. 'Nothing will go wrong!' he howled. 'My presence will guarantee that! Only when we have established our beachhead will we turn our attention to Novenia.' The tyrant's face twisted in hate. 'This time that poxy little planet is doomed! Doomed!'

CHAPTER 4

The object was ten spacial from Novenia when its presence was detected by the sentinels. The unmanned deep space guardians of Novenia plotted the craft's course and speed. After one hour, with no significant change in course, they decided that the object was heading for Novenia. So far everything was routine - a routine sighting of a trader on a routine course. The only thing that was wrong was the craft's size. It was too small to be a trader. The sentinels mapped its outline and made comparisons with profiles in their databanks. Nothing matched. The strange object was five spacial distant when the sentinels went onto a low status 100 alert. At three spacial the craft failed to respond to subradio identification requests so they automatically upgraded the alert status to 50.

Two killer sentinels were ordered by the master sentinel to intercept and match course and velocity with the intruder. Sixty hours after the first sighting, two killer sentinels sidled up to the speeding craft and stationed themselves fifty metres each side of it. Low intensity radiation probes radioed images of the craft's contents to the master sentinel: a small photonic drive, the usual control systems... and a humanoid occupant. Probably an emergency escape pod from the Solice system. Scarred and pitted as if had been involved in a major dispute and lost. Antennae non-existent which was why it failed to respond to radio challenges. There was nothing about the craft or its contents that posed a threat to Novenia. The master sentinel evaluated the data it had received and decided to take no action other than to advise Novenia of the approaching visitor.

One hundred hours after the first sighting and the curious spacecraft became a ball of incandescent light as it streaked through the upper layers of the Novenian atmosphere. Ground observers noted that at least the pod's systems were working well enough to correctly orientate the craft for

atmospheric entry.

A controller whistled at the image on his tracking monitor. He had never seen a heat-shield re-entry. 'Wow. That's what I call living life at the limit.'

The senior controller laughed. 'I was working out on Leumas when a Class19 stopped a meteoroid. The crew had to get out in a hurry in a pod. Trouble was they hadn't checked it out for some years. Quite a sight it was when they hit the Leumas atmosphere. Like a butterfly fired at a wall.' He nodded to the screen. The pod was no longer glowing but arching gracefully on a parabolic, downward curve. 'Whoever's in that, knows what he's doing.'

A small drogue parachute was plucked out of the pod by the slipstream. The drogue, in turn, wrenched a larger bright orange paraglider from its housing. The fabric canopy filled, creating an aerofoil which enabled the pod to level out in a controlled flight. The controller watched, fascinated. He knew about the old, low-tech, zero energy method of making a planetfall but this was the first time he had ever seen the strange technique in action. After five minutes the computers had enough data to give an approximate position of where on the Novenian surface the visitor would land.

CHAPTER 5

Katra banked the low-flying recci-car to avoid the tangled, blackened remains of an Egron stomper. It was two years since the abortive Egron invasion and there was still much clearing up to be done: the plain had been the scene of a bitterly-fought battle and consequently was littered with burned-out tanks, personnel carriers, walkers and self-burying silos that hadn't buried themselves quickly enough.

She glanced sideways out of her window at the crumpled stomper and recalled the knot of fear in her stomach when she had first seen the hideous machines pounding aggressively across her planet. Only the warped Egron mind could conceive such monstrosities of destruction. Of all the Egron nasties, she and Jaysan had found them the most difficult to deal with. She often thought about Jaysan. To her despair, he had opted for the life of decadence and luxury that he promised himself after he and she had, almost single-handedly, countered the Egron invasion. He had accepted the honours and wealth showered upon him and announced to the world that from now on he was going to laze, laze, laze.

Hitherto Jaysan had achieved only half his ambition of becoming a rich layabout. Now his ambition was one hundred percent fulfilled. Katra had been so incensed by his attitude that she had never made any attempt to contact him. The last time she had seen Jaysan had been at the award ceremony held by a grateful Novenian Council to honour Jaysan and Katra for their role in stopping the Egron invasion. Apart from the Star of Novenia - a small medal forged from the wreckage of Hermann Kruud's flagship - Katra had refused all honours and financial rewards whereas Jaysan had accepted everything. She had never seen him since that day although she had followed his life with detached interest. Apparently the house he had built was something. It was open to the public on those days when Jaysan was away. Visitors were shown over the place by Agro - the android who had helped in the battle against the Egrons. Agro's great talent was guarding against souvenir hunters. Anyone caught trying to steal anything from Jaysan's

house had to face the little android's awesome wrath.

Katra had once visited the place but Agro had failed to recognise her. Occasionally Jaysan's grinning, self-satisfied face appeared on television - usually with his latest 'good friend' clinging to his arm. How could he behave like this when there was so much work to be done? By contrast Katra had applied for a commission in the Novenian Reconstruction Corps and had worked tirelessly in the rebuilding of her beloved home planet.

A warning bleeped on the recci-car's instrument panel. She quickly picked out the patch of orange of the escape pod's paraglider and pulled into a gentle climb for a good look at the pod before approaching too close. Such caution was hardly necessary: the sentinels would not have allowed the pod within a spacial of Novenia had it posed even the slightest threat. Nevertheless her innate caution asserted itself.

'One minute,' she warned the recci master who was waiting below in the hold with ten troopers.

'Okay Katra,' a voice answered in her helmet. 'Standing by.'

A man was sitting by the escape pod. He looked up when he heard the approaching recci-car but made no attempt to stand or wave. Katra gently decreased power so that the vehicle settled on the plain some metres from the pod where it wouldn't be smothered by dust kicked up from the vectored thrusters. There was a whine from the hold as the loading ramp was lowered. A shouted order from the recci captain, a thunder of boots as his troopers stormed out of the hold and surrounded the pod - neural whips held level and at the ready. Katra remained in her seat - ready to report to headquarters if anything unexpected happened. Normally the task of investigating the unusual would be assigned to androids but, in the aftermath of the appalling Egron destruction, Novenia was still rebuilding its manufacturing base. People were easier to make than androids; unlike androids, they could be produced by unskilled labour.

The stranger stood. The sentinels' assessment of the likely origin of the pod was accurate because he had the angular limbs and general build of an Apogean from the friendly Solice system. Katra increased the magnification of her visor. The dignity of the stranger's bearing was eclipsed by the twin companions of defeat and despair mirrored in his large, brown eyes.

CHAPTER 6

The Apogean's name was Jodas. He stood before Axle Handrel, Chairman of the Novenian Council, having politely declined the offer of a chair. He had spent several days cramped double in the tiny escape pod and wished to stretch his graceful limbs. But Handrel's news made him suddenly sit, his face drawn and pale with shock.

'No others?' he whispered. 'None at all?'

Handrel shook his head. 'You are the only one.'

Jodas nodded unhappily. 'Twenty one-man pods had to flee from Aldos... We thought we would be safe there, but they... they seemed to be concentrating their main armour there. It was the last thing we expected.' He fell silent, unable to speak.

Handrel glanced at the desk map of the Solice system. The principal planet was Apogee - the third planet after Dante and Vista. Largest was Millway - a gas giant. All the planets of Solice had been colonised with the exception of Aldos - the outermost planet - which was used as a dump for unstable industrial waste. Overall, it was a flourishing system with a central government that maintained an uneasy peace with its colonies, and jealously guarded its independence. It looked as if a civil war had broken out. 'Start at the beginning,' he invited Jodas.

The young Apogean lifted his head and looked at Handrel with lustreless eyes. 'We've been invaded,' he blurted out.

Handrel raised an eyebrow. 'By whom?'

'The Egrons,' said Jodas savagely. 'Who else?'

Handrel looked surprised. 'Are you sure?'

'Of course I'm sure! I was leader of a team of negotiators. Dealing with the Imperial Prator himself. We had been a month working out details of a trade deal when the treacherous swine suddenly overran us.'

Handrel looked pained. 'Your government said nothing of this to us. If they had, we could have warned them. The only negotiating the Egrons understand is how many more bombs and missiles an enemy wishes to receive before agreeing on a surrender.'

'We thought the same before their defeat at your hands. We thought that the Imperial Prator had seen the error of his ways,' said Jodas bitterly. He went on to outline what had happened.

The attack had been as sudden as it was devastating. The Egrons had opened trade negotiations with Apogee and representatives of all the other worlds in the Solice System. They had sent a trade delegation to Apogee that was led by the Imperial Prator himself. The Apogeans, being a trusting lot, had accepted his explanation that the fleet of 500 deep space cruisers, fighter motherships and support freighters that accompanied the Egron delegation was simply because the Imperial Guard refused to allow their beloved Prator out of their sight. The negotiations had gone well. The Egrons even agreed not to impose tariff barriers against Apogean sherbet lemons. It was during discussions on profile standardization of frozen crinkle-cut french fries that the Egrons struck. Within hours all the planets of the Solice system were overrun as the Egron cruisers spewed forth wave after wave of fighters. Before the Apogeans and the inhabitants of the other planets recovered from the shock, the Imperial Prator's fleet had disgorged swarms of tactical assault craft with their holds stuffed to the airlocks with stompers, walkers, tanks, silos, bomb-launchers and juno cannons etcetera. Never had an Egron peace-keeping force been so spectacularly successful at keeping the peace at bay.

It took the Egrons three days to subdue, occupy and garrison the Solice system and a further six days to set up their production facilities. The Egrons scoured the moons and the asteroid belt for raw materials which were used by their construction teams to produce an even larger arsenal of strange and frightening weapons: towers that emitted deadly neutron beams, mobile silos, mechanical giant whales and even mechanical birds. Unable to reach a service depot in the

underground transport system on Apogee, Jodas had formed a resistance band that had escaped to Aldos - thinking that the Egrons wouldn't be interested in the lonely little planet. The escaping one-man pods had greater firepower hurled against them than had been used to subdue the innerworlds.

'It now looks as if I'm the only survivor,' Jodas concluded bitterly.

CHAPTER 7

The following day Handrel convened an emergency meeting of the Council of Novenia. The twelve men and women gathered in their chamber to listen to Jodas repeating the grim account of the invasion.

'We offered your government a sentinel defence system some years ago,' Handrel commented when Jodas had finished speaking. 'It was refused.'

'It was too expensive. We thought it better to develop our own system in our own time,' the Apogean answered. 'Besides, none of our planets have great riches. What possible interest could the Egrons have in us? Novenia has the real riches; you're their traditional enemy - not us.'

Jodas had a point. Although the Egrons liked to add to their empire whenever an opportunity presented itself, they usually attacked only those systems whose conquest had something tangible to offer the Egron Empire. Solice's great asset was the brains of its people. The Imperial Prator was known to mistrust brains - especially the brains of people he had alienated by stomping all over them. The other point was that the Solice system, being in the Novenian sector of the galaxy, was not a close neighbour of Egron and therefore was not a threat. Nor were the peoples of the Solice system particularly warlike.

'We've got enough to worry about rebuilding our own planet,' a council member observed. 'For the time-being I suggest we keep the situation under review.'

'Which means you do nothing?' Jodas commented caustically.

'Which means we do nothing,' Handrel agreed.

CHAPTER 8

The Novenian resolve to do nothing took a hard knock the following week when Handrel received a report from the observatory on Candour - an outer planet of the Novenian system. There was evidence that the Egrons were behaving very oddly in the Solice system.

'The information from our probes bears out Jodas' story,' the chief astronomer cheerfully told Handrel. 'They've dumped a load of automated nasties on the inner worlds as garrisons and left them to it, but their real interest seems to be focussed on the outer worlds. Aldos is where their main forces are concentrated.'

'I never doubted that he was telling the truth,' Handrel commented.

The chief chuckled as though he was enjoying a private joke. 'Did he also tell you that the crafty little beggars are freighting in supplies to each of the seven moons around the gas giant Millway?'

'No. Why would they want to do that?'

The scientist spread a set of hologram plates on the leader's desk. 'At this range, it's impossible to tell exactly what's going on. But it's something big. Very big indeed.'

As Handrel studied the pictures, he experienced a feeling of deep-rooted unease. Why should the Egrons be interested in the seven moons of Millway and, more particularly, why Aldos? It was the outermost of Solice's planets and of little interest to even the peoples of Solice. So why had the Egrons concentrated their main forces there instead of focussing on the richer prizes of the inner worlds?

He looked up at the scientist. 'Is there anything odd about Aldos and the moons of Millway? Something they have in common?'

The chief astronomer's grin broadened. 'I was coming that. All the moons of Millway have magnetic fields. Nothing unusual in that. What is unusual is that the common null point of the combined fields is Aldos. The cause of this phenomenon is Aldos's magnatar moon - a tiny but significant captured iron asteroid called Q-Beta. It means queer beast.'

Handrel felt his scalp prickle. 'How queer?'

'All switching super magnets are queer. Now - if I was to put on an Egron engineer's hat and I wanted to build a massive defensive system using Egron magvox projectors - where do you think I would site them for maximum effect?'

'On the seven moons of Millway?'

The chief astronomer beamed. 'Bang on, old man.'

'To defend what?'

'Why - whatever I was planning to build on Q-Beta, of course.'

Handrel was beginning to tire of this guessing game. 'I see. And what would I want to build on Q-Beta?'

The chief astronomer's smile faded. 'I don't know.' He looked downcast and then brightened. 'Something that harnessed the incredibly powerful magnetic forces of a magnatar, I suppose.'

'Such as?'

'Ah. Now that's where we're moving into an area of speculation. Trying to read the Egron mind is no easy task, old man.'

'It's dead easy,' said Handrel acidly. 'If it moves - shoot it. If it shoots back - shoot it anyway. If it doesn't move - add it to your empire.' He leaned forward, clasping his hands tightly together. 'Now think hard. The Egrons are obviously not that interested in conquering the Solice system. It looks like a blind. So what are they really interested in? What's the one system they really want to smash above all else? Don't strain yourself by thinking too hard.'

The chief astronomer's smile didn't return. 'Novenia?' he ventured.

'And how could they do that, bearing in mind that they know they haven't a hope in hell of getting past our sentinels?'

For a moment the chief astronomer's mouth made shapes around the words he was trying to utter. 'Some sort of beam?'

'Exactly. But what sort? You're the brains.'

The two men stared at each other. It was some seconds before the scientist spoke. 'A plasma beam... It would be possible with Q-Beta... To build a stupendous magnetic coil.' Suddenly he was his old bouncy self again as the scientific possibilities of what the Egrons were up to pricked his curiosity. 'Yes - of course! It's obvious! A plasma beam powered by Q-beta itself. To draw off plasma from Solice and focus it... And... fire a beam of raw star energy at anything you had a grudge against!' He bobbed up and down in excitement. 'It's all perfectly feasible since Malik Daldus presented a paper on the subject last year. You've heard of him, of course?'

Handrel had heard of Malik Daldus. He was one of Novenia's leading physicists and a known looney.

'Inter-galactic Science Convention last year,' said the astronomer animatedly. 'Brilliant paper. Aroused a lot of interest among the Egrons, it did.'

Handrel felt faint. 'You mean the solar plasma beam was our idea?'

'Guess so, old man.'

'And at our distance from Solice, such a projector could cause us serious damage?'

'Better than that, old man - much better.'

'It could fry us?'

'To a crisp.'

CHAPTER 9

The Council of Novenia ignored the advice that was printed in large, friendly letters on the cover of the galaxy's best-seller and panicked.

'We must send a task force to Solice!' a council member declared at the emergency meeting.

'Can't,' said Handrel.

The council member bridled. 'Why not?'

'Because we don't have a task force.'

'So we build one!'

'And in the time it would take us to build one, the Egrons will have completed their projector,' Handrel countered.

'So we send a fleet of sentinels. They'd blow the Egrons out of the galaxy.'

'Out of the question,' said Handrel frostily, wondering what qualities the council member possessed that had got him elected. 'For one thing, the sentinels are not designed for long space journeys - it would take too long to fit them with stardrives. And for another, sending them would leave us unprotected. For all we know, the whole thing could be a devilish Egron ploy to lure the sentinels away from their stations so that they can have another go at us.'

'I've got an idea,' said another member. 'We could send the police.'

Handrel gazed admiringly at the man who had made the suggestion. He smacked a fist into his hand. 'Brilliant. Absolutely, stunningly brilliant. All we've got to do is send a police scout vehicle to Apogee to arrest the Imperial Prator. Why didn't I think of that?'

The council member smirked. 'I thought you'd like the idea, Mr Chairman. It's one of those notions that needs working on, of course.'

'Of course,' Handrel agreed.

CHAPTER 10

Doing nothing in bed was Jaysan's second favourite pastime. His third favourite activity was doing nothing in his swimming pool. Fourth was cavorting with girls in his swimming pool. He was indulging in the latter when Katra visited him.

She was escorted to the swimming pool by Agro - after having listened dutifully to the android's gruesome description of what he did to souvenir hunters. Agro also warned her what to expect but the sight of Jaysan's swimming pool took her breath away. It was like its owner - different.

It was housed in his lavish zero-gravity pleasure dome and consisted of a 100-metre diameter glob of water that was held in rough spherical shape by the micro gravity of its own mass. No wonder the place attracted paying visitors.

Spy satellites in the form of strategically-positioned television cameras beamed pictures to Jaysan's waterproof wriststrap receiver that told him where escaping girls were located on the surface of the giant ball. With such information, he was able to swim through the centre of his swimming pool and grab them from below. It was all great fun. The mighty glob of suspended water heaved, pulsed and distorted like a gargantuan amoeba as the laughing girls struggled to escape Jaysan's amorous clutches.

Katra and Agro stood at the raised bar near one of the traction beams that kept the huge, wobbling mass in place and watched disapprovingly as Jaysan held a shrieking girl aloft and hurled her into the air. She fell but she never reached the surface. As her body curved downward under the tenuous pull of the mass of water, so the surface of the strange swimming pool fell away beneath her with the result that she orbited the pool three metres above its surface. Orbital decay was caused by her flailing limbs occasionally hitting the surface. Her eventual splashdown was hastened by Jaysan leaping out of the water and catching her on her third orbit. Their laughing bodies performed a slow motion plunge into the pool that sent shimmering, twisting globules of water curving downward with agonizing slowness to reconsolidate with the main mass of water.

It was a spectacle not recommended after sampling the bar's supply of gin and tonics from the robo-dispensers.

'He never changes,' Katra observed sadly to the diminutive android standing at her side.

'Wrong,' said Agro. 'He gets more stupid every day. Last week he threw a poor girl rather hard because she annoyed him and he left her in orbit for two hours. She wasn't a souvenir hunter either. Not with her swimsuit - she couldn't be.'

'Kat!' Jaysan yelled, catching sight of his visitor. 'Agro told me you were coming. Lovely to see you. Get those clothes off and come on in.'

'This isn't a social call, Jaysan. Please get dressed and come with me. I have to speak to you on a matter of great urgency.'

Jaysan looked alarmed and absently pushed a girl away. She touched down near the swimming pool's equator. Equal and opposite reaction sent Jaysan into the Tropic of Cancer.

'Something to do with the Egrons and their adventures in the Solice system?' he queried, swimming back to a point nearest Katra.

'Something like that,' Katra answered. 'We can talk in my skycar.'

Jaysan looked unenthusiastic about going anywhere. 'Where are you planning to take me, sweet maid?'

'Dragon Industries.'

Jaysan looked surprised. 'To look at police cruisers?'

'Something like that.'

'Well what exactly? I mean - that's all that Karl Dragon makes, isn't it?'

'We'll talk in my skycar,' Katra repeated decisively. To emphasise her point, she fingered her sidearm - a mean-looking Mk 34 neural hand whip. 'If you don't come voluntarily, I have orders to arrest you.'

'Can Agro come?'

'If he has to.'

'That's right,' said the little android petulantly. 'Talk about me as though I'm not here.'

CHAPTER 11

Watched keenly by Handrel, Karl Draggon, Katra and Agro, Jaysan walked around the blister-canopied stubby-winged police combat craft. The vehicle was festooned with a huge variety of weaponry ranging from timewarp projectors and fire and flee missiles, to accelerated particle laser cannons.

Karl Draggon never took his eyes off Jaysan for a moment. He was a tall, white-haired man who had built Draggon Industries into the biggest supplier of law enforcement craft on Novenia. 'What do you think?' he asked Jaysan.

'What am I supposed to think?'

'It's the best thing to come out of my design shop. It's called ICARUS -Interplanetary Combat And Reconnaissance Universal Scoutcraft.'

'It looks like more than just a scoutcar,' Jaysan observed, fingering a wingtip device that had sudden death for lots of people written all over it.

Draggon beamed his pleasure. 'Oh, it is. It is,' he said enthusiastically. 'This little baby is designed to operate anywhere: in space; in virtually any atmosphere; in tunnels using its tractor beams for automatic centering, which can also be used for picking up fuel nodules. It can even operate underwater to a depth of five-hundred metres.'

'I've never had trouble with underwater souvenir hunters,' Agro commented.

Draggon ignored the interruption. 'It can utilize any source of energy available for refuelling. It can manage alone for weeks - months - without proper depot facilities other than rearming. It's got a unique expansion bus that accepts enhancement modules available on a thousand worlds. It's just the job for law enforcement in the remotest part of any system. We hope to sell them by the hundred to the law enforcement agencies of at least a thousand local planetary systems.'

Jaysan suddenly understood why he had been hi-jacked from his swimming pool. 'You want me to sell these things? You want me as some sort of upmarket inter-galactic super salesman? Well I'd love to help you, Mr Draggon, but I've already got a job. I have to work all hours to keep happy the hundreds of adoring girls who insist on hurling themselves at my feet.'

'You don't understand, Jaysan,' said Katra quietly. '*Icarus* is to be used in a raid against the Egrons in the Solice system.'

Jaysan leaned against the sleek fuselage and nodded sagely. 'You'll need a few hundred of them. Might lose the element of surprise, of course. You want me to brief the pilots on the best tactics to use against the Egrons? Well Katra could do that - she knows as much about them as I do. Isn't that right, Kat?'

Katra nodded sadly. 'That's right, Jaysan. But you still don't understand.'

Jaysan stared at Katra and Draggon in turn. The industrialist looked away in embarrassment whereas Katra returned his stare. Suddenly Jaysan understood: everything began dropping into place like pieces in a hideous, frightening jigsaw. 'Oh no,' he said softly, backing away. 'Oh no...

For this one you can include me out. Right out. I'm not leading a suicide squad into battle against the Egrons. Let a young man do it.'

'But you are a young man,' Handrel pointed out, speaking for the first time.

'I won't stay one if I have to lead a fleet of these things against the Egrons,' Jaysan retorted.

'You have the skill and experience,' said Handrel.

'You've forgotten the third requirement.'

'Which is?'

'Courage.'

'You have courage, Jaysan,' said Handrel testily. 'You've already proved that.'

'I'm sorry, Mr Chairman. But what little I possessed, I had surgically removed on the grounds that it could seriously endanger my health. Courage in the wrong hands is one of those things that can get you seriously dead. Sorry - you'll have to find someone else to lead your battle fleet or task force, or whatever it is you have in mind.'

'There's something else you don't understand, Jaysan,' said Katra mildly.

'We're not asking you to lead a battle fleet,' Handrel added.

Jaysan gave a smile of relief.

'This is the only craft in existence.'

Jaysan's smile faded.

'It's a pre-production prototype,' Karl Draggon explained.

'And there's not enough time to build more,' Handrel added.

Jaysan's smile faded even more.

'The Egrons are building a beam projector in the Solice system,' Handrel continued, speaking quickly. 'Your job and Katra's job is to destroy it, or at least damage it or delay construction on it to give us time to build and stardrive supporting *Icarus* scoutcraft into the Solice system.'

Jaysan's Adam's apple did a neat somersault and crawled into his stomach.

It was Katra's turn to add her comments: 'If we do nothing, Jaysan, the Egrons will fry us all anyway with whatever that thing is they're building, so you might as well agree.' She clapped him on the back. 'Anyway - what the hell? The only certainty in life is death.'

'In this case it's a dead certainty,' Jaysan muttered hollowly.

CHAPTER 12

As far as Jaysan was concerned, the news did the impossible.

It got worse.

It happened the following day while he and Katra were on their fifth familiarization flight in *Icarus*.

Katra took over the controls and practiced a couple of low level hammerhead turns that made Jaysan long for the relative safety of his swimming pool. She was beginning to enjoy flying the tiny craft. Karl Draggon had every right to be proud of his latest creation. It was small, fast and amazingly manoeuvrable. Among its host of ingenious new ideas were rising and sinking coloured column indicators that provided flight and energy data without having to look directly at them or the need to re-focus one's eyes to read a head-up display. Most important of all, *Icarus* was fitted with the latest Valium Dynamics energy absorption shields with Hi-Lev renewals. The new shields could withstand amazingly high levels of sustained depletion. Another major plus factor was the diminutive craft's incredible turn of speed. Six by nine with the wick turned right up which meant that it could even outrun an Egron juno shell. Behind the two comfortable seats was a small galley and sleeping compartment - currently occupied by Agro. Beyond that were generous stowage lockers for food, water and medical supplies. As Karl Draggon claimed in his draft sales blurbs, the *Icarus* was designed for long law enforcement tours in remote areas.

'Stress data on that last turn was reading just fine,' Karl Draggon's voice reported in their helmets. 'How are you guys making out?'

'We're ready to stardrive,' Jaysan reported.

'The test stardrive trip is off,' Draggon replied flatly.

'What? Why?'

'Sorry, Jaysan. You're carrying too much mass. We're getting uneven energy consumption returns.'

'But it's a nothing hop to Samson and back!' Jaysan protested.

'You wouldn't make it back with your payload,' Draggon answered. 'After all, *Icarus* is only a prototype. Sorry Jaysan - but we're going to have to strip all your armament missiles and the extended energy cells for your trip tomorrow.'

'What! You're sending us off to take on an entire Egron invasion fleet unarmed!'

'You can have standard gas laser cannons.'

'What good are those!' Jaysan howled indignantly.

'It's a bug,' Draggon admitted ruefully. 'Sorry, Jaysan. It's not your fault and we don't have time to fix it. Handrel says you've got to leave tomorrow, and that means stripping more mass.'

'We don't have to take that damned stupid android along,' said Katra, glancing over her shoulder

at Agro.

'He's only twenty kilos,' Jaysan protested.

'And I can keep souvenir hunters at bay,' Agro added.

'Twenty kilos won't make much difference,' said Draggon. 'We're looking for savings of two-hundred kilos. I'm sorry, but it'll have to be standard gas laser cannons or nothing.'

Katra swore softly to herself. Jaysan looked sharply at her. 'Having second thoughts about the whole brilliant idea?' he asked sarcastically.

'A pig,' she commented, pulling Icarus into a vertical climb. 'A real pig.'

Jaysan had no idea what a pig was, but the phrase sounded as if it suitably expressed his feelings. 'You know what we'll be doing tomorrow, don't you?' he muttered sourly. 'We'll be taking on the entire Egron forces with nothing more substantial than a police car.'

Katra smiled. 'Maybe we can intimidate them with speeding tickets?'

Jaysan was not amused.

CHAPTER 13

The final planning meeting and mission briefing was held in Draggon Industries test flight control room and was conducted by Jodas. The lone refugee from the Solice system was now treated by the Novenians as the Apogean Federal Government in exile and was privy to all intelligence reports from Novenian deep space probes that had been despatched to the Solice system.

With occasional comments from Handrel and Karl Draggon, he went over the details for Katra and Jaysan who already knew most of them off by heart. Before him was a large map of his home system dominated by Solice - the central sun, and Millway - the swollen outer giant planet. Closest to Solice was Dante - a small reddish planet whose rocks on its permanent dayside were scorched and blistered by Solice. Next was Vista - its surface hidden by a permanent cloud layer that shrouded the entire planet. The third planet was Apogee itself - the administrative and political base of the system. The map showed its twin moons of Enos and Castron. Beyond Apogee was an asteroid belt that was thought to be the remains of a planet. Some of the asteroids were large enough to be colonised and several even had the federal status of planets. Millway - the gas giant - was under direct Apogean control although its few inhabitants - truculent mineral processing workers - preferred to think otherwise. The next major planet out from the sun was Millway with its collection of seven assorted moons.

'And that's Aldos with its moon - Q-Beta,' said Jodas, resting his pointer on the outermost planet. 'It follows an erratic orbit around Solice. That's the planet where the Egrons have concentrated their main forces - and that's where we think they're going to build their plasma beam.'

'So they haven't started?'

'They've done some preliminary work on a skeleton construction in orbit around Q-Beta,' said Handrel. 'But they seem to be concentrating their efforts on what we think are defence batteries

- one on each of Millway's seven moons. From their progress, it looks like they've got one construction team visiting each moon in turn.'

'So what's the latest on Egron garrison strength on the other planets?' Katra wanted to know.

'No change since the last hardcopy report we gave you,' said Jodas. 'Garrisoning is by unmanned ground and air units. Your safest bet for your first visit is definitely Apogee. If you can get into the underground transport system, you're certain to find technically advanced service and repair depots that are still holding out. Our latest reports indicate that the Egrons are leaving them alone preferring to starve them into surrender rather than commit materials that are needed to defend the structures being built on Millway's moons and Q-Beta.'

'Meaning that Egron forces are badly stretched?' Handrel asked.

'They're certain to be stretched,' Jodas answered. 'But we don't know how badly. Even we had problems policing the entire system, and we lived there. Some of the settlers on the asteroids have elevated bloody mindedness to an artform. They're certain to be giving the Egrons a rougher time than they used to give us. Convince them that you're not a tax or fraud investigation unit and they'll do anything for you. Trouble is they're not technically advanced like Apogee. Any more questions?'

Katra and Jaysan stared down at the map and shook their heads. Karl Draggon produced several sets of document transparencies in fireproof sleeves and handed them to Jaysan. 'Those are all the drawings and specifications of your missing weapons systems. Tech Level Three and Four depots will be able to build the advanced weapons. Any depot should be able to supply suitable fire and flee missiles and carry out repairs to your hull.'

'My guess is that only Technical Level Four depots will be able to build the neutron bomb,' said Jodas. 'That means that Apogee is your best bet. That's assuming that the Egrons haven't got to them first. They were holding out when we left.'

Jaysan slipped the precious transparencies into a breast pocket without comment and glanced questioningly at Katra.

'So don't forget, you two,' Handrel warned. 'Go to the inner worlds first. Don't go blundering around Millway's moons or Q-Beta until you've built up your armament. And above all, stay away from Aldos until you know exactly what you're doing. You'll be in short range of our probes so you'll be getting plenty of computer data updates on how the Egron building work is progressing.'

'How nice,' said Jaysan snidely. 'You haven't ripped out the onboard computer. Hey - you've left the wings on. Why not tear them off? They must weigh a bit.'

Handrel counted up to ten and made no reply.

'Well,' said Katra unemotionally. 'I think we've covered everything. Time we made a move.'

Handrel had a prepared speech ready - suitably worded for this momentous event - but he realised that it wouldn't be appreciated. Jaysan wasn't interested in speeches and handshakes.

Ten minutes later Katra and Jaysan walked out onto the apron and climbed into *Icarus*.

'No souvenir hunters detected,' Agro announced from his perch in the galley.

'Pleased to hear it,' Katra muttered as she and Jaysan strapped themselves in. They waited patiently, not speaking - each alone with their thoughts - as Draggon Industries technicians completed their final checks of the tiny spacecraft.

As soon as they were finished, Katra applied 25% power. The engine whined. She lifted *Icarus* to a safe height above the Draggon complex and hovered while Jaysan carried out the pre-stardrive checks.

'Mass reading one percent high,' he reported to Karl Draggon.

'Well... It's within tolerance.'

'You should've ripped the wings off.'

'You're making this difficult for us, Jaysan.'

'What the hell do you think you're making it for us! We're unarmed!' With that, Jaysan thumbed the communications controls, cutting Draggon off in mid-sentence. 'Okay - let's go,' he said curtly to Katra.

Katra flipped up stardrive guard and activated the system. The whine of the engine died away, the Novenian sky dissolved and was replaced by a series of brilliant lights. There was no shock - no feeling of nausea - none of the effects that characterised the early hyperspace drives. The scene outside the canopy changed to black. They were in space - heading towards a bright planet that the navigation computers immediately identified as Apogee.

'Some way off,' Katra commented, increasing power to maximum acceleration.

'Blame Draggon and his bungled mass calculations,' Jaysan remarked. He glanced behind and was captivated by the red, swollen splendour of Millway. Five of its seven moons were visible. He wondered what progress the Egrons were making with their mysterious building program. Now that *Icarus* was in the Solice system, its onboard computer would be grabbing accurate images from the probes. There would be time to look at the information later. Right now the immediate problem was to get underground and out of danger.

A radiation hazard monitor picked up feeble radar emissions.

'Well. Well. Someone knows about us already,' Katra remarked.

CHAPTER 14

'Sir!'

It was General Krass reporting to the Imperial Prator. The dictator glowered at the central screen in the control room of his flagship. 'Go ahead, general.'

'We've picked up a trace on a ship approaching Apogee.'

'Show me.'

A picture of a strange spacecraft appeared on the Imperial Prator's screen.

'What does it match with?' he demanded.

'It looks like the two-seater buggies used by the colonists on Passgo.'

'You worry me with details about space buggies! We've got rebel units holding out on every asteroid and you fret about space buggies!'

'You asked to be alerted of all unusual movements of spacecraft, sir.'

'Movements of real spacecraft!' the Imperial Prator howled. 'I'm not interested in joyriding colonists! Intercept it and confiscate it! Do I have to think of everything?'

General Krass saluted and cleared the channel, thankful that he hadn't told the Imperial Prator that the picture he had been shown was not a real-time image but a recording. The curious spacecraft did not match any known design and furthermore, it had been travelling too fast to intercept. Somehow he didn't think that the Imperial Prator would appreciate being told such details. Nor did he think it the right time to bring up the subject of pressing an Imperial battlecruiser into service.

General Krass was very sad. He would so dearly love to have an Imperial battlecruiser to play with. Just one.

CHAPTER 15

Katra hit the Apogean atmosphere fast. Not because she was unable to control *Icarus*, but because she wanted to get close to the ground as quickly as possible where the rough Apogean terrain would scatter and confuse Egron radar. The stratosphere glowed red around the canopy and the noise rose to a deafening, sustained shriek as the planet's gravitational pull converted *Icarus'* kinetic energy into heat and light. She completed the entry and levelled out at a height of ten thousand metres above the surface before handing over control to Jaysan.

'She handles like a dream,' she remarked, scanning the instruments for early indications of possible damage caused by the steep atmospheric entry. Everything was normal: cabin pressure, skin temperature, engine thrust - all were within specification.

Jaysan eased *Icarus* through the cloudbase and studied the mountainous terrain. There was no sign of Egron ground vehicles which was just as well. Armed only with a puny pair of forward laser cannons, *Icarus* was at its most vulnerable. Even an Egron diamonic shuttle would find them

an easy target. It was essential to get underground and find a transport service depot as soon as possible.

Two minutes later the INS navigator pinpointed an entrance to the underground transport system.

'System 6A!' said Katra excitedly, consulting her miniature VDU. And its got a Tech Four depot in Spur 20!

Jaysan went into a power dive, following the directions of the glowing arrows. At 500 metres he saw the tunnel opening. He applied reverse thrust and swung *Icarus* towards it.

CHAPTER 16

Like most populated planets in the Solice system, Apogee was riddled with an ingenious transport system that consisted of hexagonal cross-section, straight-line tunnels bored through the planet's crust and core to link key centres on the surface.

They worked on the principal of assisted freefall. At the beginning of a journey any vehicle entering a tunnel was accelerated by gravity because it was travelling 'downhill'. On passing the halfway mark, the car was travelling 'uphill' and continued to do so under its own momentum for another quarter of the total distance. Power was required only for the final quarter of the journey to the surface to overcome atmospheric frictional losses. What was particularly ingenious about the system was that all journeys took the same time irrespective of the distance between the two points. The greater the distance, the steeper the tunnel, therefore the greater the acceleration. Although tunnels often intersected with each other, there was no risk of accident because the normal separation control systems that were standard on virtually all personal transport craft functioned normally underground and also centred vehicles in the tunnels. It was the service depot spurs in the transport system - manned by skilled engineers and androids - that were outposts of Apogean resistance against the Egron invader.

Jaysan decided that there were few sensations that could out-weird hurtling along a tunnel that was a dead straight chord through a planet's crust. *Icarus'* helium lights picked out occasional blackened areas. Obviously there had been a number of disputes in the passage with the Egron invaders although it was likely that they had fallen foul of the bomb-like devices that were strewn like mines along the tunnel. Jaysan was careful to avoid them.

'Depot spur - two hundred metres,' Katra warned.

Jaysan reduced speed and swung into the spur. He brought *Icarus* to a hover in front of huge steel doors. Pock marks on the doors suggested that the Egrons had had a go at them although using any form of discharge in the confined space of the tunnel would be more hazardous for the enemy than the engineers behind the door.

'Now what?' asked Jaysan. 'We'll never make an impression on those doors with ordinary gas lasers.'

'Use them,' Katra suggested. 'At least it'll let whoever is on the other side know that we're on this side.'

Jaysan fired a short burst at the doors. It was like using a match to melt a mountain. A loud hissing of hydraulics answered his puny attack. The huge doors separated like the segments of a giant iris. They retracted slowly, sliding into the sides of the tunnel. Blinding lights suddenly snapped on making it impossible for Jaysan and Katra to see ahead.

'Move slowly forward,' boomed an amplified voice. 'Very slowly, please. No sudden moves.'

Jaysan did as he was told - easing *Icarus* forward in response to the voice's instructions.

'Stop!'

He stopped.

'Cut power!'

Jaysan extended *Icarus'* landing pads and shut down the engine. The craft settled with a gentle bump. The blinding lights were suddenly extinguished. It was some seconds before Jaysan and Katra could see properly. They were in a long, narrow, well-equipped workshop whose walls were lined with racks of test equipment. Men in overalls had surrounded the tiny craft - some had handguns trained on the new arrival.

'Welcome to Apogee,' said a smiling man, aiming a blaster at Jaysan's head as the canopy hissed open. 'We've been expecting you.'

'Souvenir hunters!' Agro yelled. 'Remove one object from this spacecraft and it will be your last!'

The smiling man was the depot's supervisor. In fact he was the manager in overall charge of all the service depots on Apogee. His name was Trem. Jaysan and Katra sat in his tiny office as he studied the set of transparencies that Jaysan had given him.

'Detailed drawings,' Trem commented. 'Very detailed, in fact. We'll only need the one set. We can fax these to all the other depots.' He grinned. 'The Egrons have been unable to disable our comms optic lines because they don't know where they are.'

'What sort of improved weapons can you fix us with right away?' asked Jaysan.

'These particle lasers won't be any problem.'

'What about those bombs we saw in the tunnel?' Katra wanted to know.

'The bouncing bombs? Sure - give us time and we can fix you up with tractor beams so you'll be able to pick them up. They're safe when handled normally. It's only when they get stomped on by one of those mindless Egron machines that they go off. The machines don't like them because they're so incredibly destructive.' Trem grinned. 'They help keep Egron nasties out of the tunnels.'

'And the neutron bomb?' Jaysan queried. 'Could you build it?'

Trem looked doubtful. 'It'll take time. It's the same with your missiles and high-capacity energy cells. We're desperately short of raw materials - minerals. The neutron bomb? Well... it's a big project. We'll need food and water as well. None of our regular supplies have been getting

through.'

'What are your immediate needs?' Jaysan wanted to know.

'Minerals,' Trem answered.

'Available from where?'

'Dante has plentiful supplies. You can pick up nodules lying on the surface.'

Katra stood. 'Do we get the particle lasers now?'

'No problem, Katra.'

'Very well then. We'll visit Dante.'

CHAPTER 18

Dante, the closest planet to the sun, was a scorched, hostile place. Almost as hostile as the Egron garrison force based there. The moment *Icarus* materialised from stardrive, an Egron fighter opened fire on them. Katra was flying. Rather than engage the fighter, she put *Icarus* into a hard dive towards Dante's craggy, broken surface. The fighter came after them, its lasers hammering at their shields no matter how quickly Katra wheeled and twisted.

'Persistent little devil,' she commented, yanking *Icarus* up into her favourite hammerhead turn. The sudden manoeuvre confused the Egron pilot. He was even more confused when he realised that his quarry was suddenly behind him and firing at him with remarkable accuracy. No one had told him that the handful of colonists on Dante had such efficient fighters. He broadcast a complaint to his unit commander. It would have been better had he concentrated on his flying: in dodging a sudden burst of firing, he succeeded in flying into the side of a mountain.

'First blood to us,' yelled Katra, giving a whoop of triumph. She grinned at Jaysan. Before he could answer, she skimmed *Icarus* low across a plain and switched on the traction scoop. There was a dull rumble as a cascade of mineral nodules rushed into the spacecraft's stowage pod.

Their presence upset a light tank. It was a very light tank indeed: one blast was enough to flip it on its side.

'Second blood to us!' piped Agro.

CHAPTER 19

Trem was delighted with the supply of nodules.

'Iron, gold, beryllium - something of everything,' he declared. 'Just what we need. We can make a start on your neutron bomb. Now all we need is food.'

CHAPTER 20

The Imperial Prator was not delighted with the supply of news. Work was not proceeding on the plasma beam and its defending projectors as fast as he wished. On the other hand, production of experimental assault craft to use on other worlds was proceeding satisfactorily - he was particularly pleased with the giant mechanical whales that were undergoing trials in the super dense atmosphere of Millway. Eventually they would be used for the attack on the Marian system. But there were problems with General Krass who seemed even more obsessed with details than his vanquished predecessor.

'It may be a space buggy, sir,' Krass was saying. 'And there again, it may not be. All I know is that it's fast and that it's destroyed a fighter and a tank.'

'Are you questioning my authority, General Krass?'

'Your authority would be even more authoritative if you were to move your flagship right into the Solice system, sir.'

The Imperial Prator flew into a rage. 'What are you insinuating, Krass!' he yelled at the viewscreen.

Krass was ready for that one. 'The men love you so much, sir, it would be wonderful for their morale if they could see your flagship in the battle zone.'

'It's not a battle zone any more, idiot! The enemy is defeated!'

'I know that, sir. And you know that because you are all-knowing. The trouble is that the resistance cells scattered all over this rag tag collection of planets and asteroids don't seem to understand at all.'

CHAPTER 21

The Castrons were a free-wheeling, hard-working lot who had no great love of the federal government of Apogee ever since the imposition of a swingeing sugar tax. By one of those amazing organic freaks of nature, the core of Castron - one of the moons of Apogee - consisted of a solid ball of sugar which the Castrons had exploited with great enthusiasm by building factories that turned out a dazzling variety of candy and sweets. A few days after the invasion, they had received a visit by an Egron negotiator who had promised a minimal garrison by Egron forces provided that the Castrons did not provide Apogee with aid.

'We can carry on normal trade they said,' said the service depot manager. He scowled, exposing rotten teeth. 'Though I don't see how we can have normal trade now that there's no freighters calling in. You wouldn't believe how much candy we've got piling up.'

'Fair enough,' said Katra. 'So let's have some normal trade. We need food supplies from you. What do you need from us in return?'

The manager regarded her suspiciously. 'We're running low on raw materials.'
'What raw materials?'

'Wood.'

'Wood?'

'For tooth picks. You wouldn't believe the terrible trouble we have with our teeth.'

Katra climbed back into *Icarus* and sat beside Jaysan. 'We'll be back in an hour,' she promised the manager before closing the blister canopy.

She kept her word. An hour later the *Icarus* returned to the service depot with its two cargo pods filled with analogs from the sawmills in the petrified forests of Enos. In return the grateful Castrons crammed the pods full of CastroBars - their staple diet.

The strange construction resembled a super computer from a bygone era. Whatever it was, one blast from *Icarus'* new particle lasers was enough to blow the thing to pieces no larger than its individual components. It literally flew apart.

'Jaysan! Stomper!'

Jaysan wheeled *Icarus* around. Its two full cargo pods - destined for the service depots on Apogee, caused the spacecraft to respond sluggishly so that its wingtip nearly grazed the surface of Castron. Marching towards them was an old friend: one of the Egrons' infernal walking machines - mean and incredibly resilient to laser fire. Their design had changed since the Egrons had first used them two years ago on Novenia. For one thing they were faster; for another they now had a seemingly inexhaustible supply of small missiles that were not so easy to dodge, and the portable silos they dumped on the landscape released even nastier airborne proximity mines. The stomper's missiles relentlessly pounded *Icarus'* shield as Jaysan lined up for a proton missile attack. A missile streaked away from *Icarus* and hit the stomper square in the chest. The ghastly machine erupted, spewing its metallic innards in all directions.

'Death to all souvenir hunters!' Agro yelled.

'They blow up even better too,' Jaysan commented, pulling *Icarus* up to a safe height in case the stomper had friends bent on revenge.

The fast manoeuvring of the laden *Icarus* had been placed a heavy drain on its energy cells. The indicators were showing a 50% depletion.

'Time for the old power line stunt,' Jaysan observed, pulling *Icarus* around in a banking turn.

A minute later the top of a power line Tesla tower emerged above the horizon. Jaysan altered course towards it. On Novenia they had used the refuelling trick of flying low and fast between power line towers so that the inductive field from the power line recharged the energy cells. The Novenian power lines were underground, obligingly didn't move about, and were relatively safe to go near. The power lines on Castron consisted of frightening electrical discharges that leapt from tower to tower, crackling like a hellish bonfire. They moved about - arcing massive blasts of raw energy over sky, and were extremely dangerous at a distance, never mind close to. 'Let's go into orbit and try breaking up a methane asteroid,' Katra suggested, apprehensively eyeing the tower that Jaysan was cautiously approaching.

Jaysan chuckled. 'We could spend hours hunting for and matching orbits with a suitable asteroid. This looks much more fun.'

The next two minutes were something that Katra's memory would be first to erase. Jaysan had noticed that the arcing bolts of unleashed energy never touched the ground, therefore he flew *Icarus* between the towers, hugging the ground - letting the terrain-hugging radar control system do most of the work.

The lightning flashes certainly didn't touch the ground, but they came close to it. They crackled and snarled like maddened creatures of the pit - their terrible explosions of vivid blue light illuminating the inside of *Icarus* as if the craft was trapped in a hellish crucible of the Gods. Even Agro remained uncharacteristically silent as the awesome energies boiled around them. At one point the radar lifted *Icarus* clear of a crag so that it seemed that the terror was about to burst in on them. Suddenly it was all over. *Icarus* was clear of the tower and climbing, its energy cells showing a fully charged state.

'Jaysan,' said Katra, struggling to keep her voice steady.

'Kat?'

'Let's stick to other methods of refuelling in future.'

'A good idea, Kat. Okay - fully charged cells. How about taking a look at one of Millway's moons?'

A second wave of near panic seized Katra. 'No, Jaysan! It would be crazy to go there before we're ready. We're carrying a load of food. We don't have the weapons and we don't have a neutron bomb!'

'I say we go and see what we'll be up against.'

CHAPTER 22

It turned out that what Jaysan and Katra were up against was the cream of Egron's mean machine pilots who had been advised that their heads 'would roll' if anything that was not of Egron origin came within spitting distance of a construction site. *Icarus* coming out of stardrive half a spacial from the partially-completed projector upset them no end.

Katra and Jaysan had about five seconds to try and comprehend the colossal structure before they were jumped by several Egron fighters that came at them from all directions. The tiny war craft weaved like infuriated insects - as their lasers pounding the *Icarus* with devastating accuracy. They were particularly incensed when Jaysan dived at the projector site and gave it a quick burst of the particle laser treatment. The devastating onslaught had about as much affect as a glob of gnat spit on a redhot cannonball. It was the same with a missile. Jaysan hit the stardrive control a second before the shields were destroyed. They dematerialized in a sedate orbit around Millway.

'Anymore bright ideas where you got that one from?' Katra inquired acidly.

'That's what I call a real no-go area,' Agro volunteered. 'I bet they've had more trouble than most

with souvenir hunters.'

'Sooner or later it'll have to be a 'go' area for us,' Jaysan admitted worriedly.

'All seven of them,' Katra added. 'Whatever it is they're fixing to build out on Q-Beta - they certainly intend for it to be well defended.'

Jaysan made no reply. The brief encounter with the massed forces of the Egrons had shaken him badly... for the moment. He stared down at the swollen gas giant of Millway that was passing slowly beneath them. He checked the computer. Minimal Egron forces was the last intelligence report. He gave Katra a playful jab and jerked his thumb down. 'How about taking a close look at Millway?' he suggested.

CHAPTER 23

Icarus moved sluggishly in the cloying upper layers of Millway's atmosphere. They had to set the canopy image enhancers at maximum resolution in order to see through the super-dense clouds that oozed by like vast globules of congealed treacle. Under such conditions the tiny spacecraft handled abominably - taking what seemed an age to complete a minor course correction, and its radar was virtually useless.

'Imagine what it must be like at ground level,' Katra remarked. Through a break in the amazing clouds she thought she saw a whale. 'Jaysan - I think I saw a whale.'

Jaysan was about to make a suitably cutting remark when he too saw the whale. It was moving slowly through the atmosphere, driven by long sweeps of its horizontal tail flukes. The computer had no information on whales being an indigenous lifeform on or above Millway and suggested that the thing should be examined more closely. Jaysan went after the whale. At fifty metres they could hear strange whale-like music that was being emitted from the creature's massive, blunt head - its oil-filled sonar cavity. At twenty metres it was obvious that the creature was a mechanical contrivance. Real whales didn't go around with Egron munitions factory serial numbers stencilled on their flanks - not even in small letters that could only be read close up. Nor did real whales blast vinyl intestines in all directions when they were hit by a missile.

'Wonder what it was for?' Jaysan pondered as *Icarus* climbed out of Millway's atmosphere.

CHAPTER 24

Trem peeled the wrapper off a CastroBar and sank his teeth into it. He gave a delighted grin. 'Duty free CastroBars!' he exclaimed. 'Marvellous.'

'Meaning you've now got enough food to keep you going?' Jaysan ventured.

'No problem,' Trem replied, talking with his mouth full.

'Meaning you can make us a high-capacity energy cell?'

'No problem.'

'How's work going on the neutron bomb?'

Trem bit into another CastroBar. 'Ah - a problem. We've come to a standstill.'

Katra frowned. 'Why's that? You've got a full set of drawings.'

'We've got a perfect set of drawings,' Trem agreed. He chewed thoughtfully and beckoned Katra and Jaysan to follow him. He led them to a small workshop where a number of technicians were working on a sleek, metallic casing about the size of a cargo pod. 'There she is,' said Trem proudly. 'The most awesome weapon of destruction ever built in this system.'

'We'll need seven of them,' said Jaysan.

Trem snorted. 'Forget it. Right now we can't even build one.'

'But we need one for each projector on each of Millway's moons,' Katra protested. 'The lasers and missiles are useless against them.'

'Try a bouncing bomb next time,' Trem suggested. 'They're evil things. Save the neutron bomb for the plasma beam out on Q-Beta. That's if we can finish it.'

Jaysan studied the neutron bomb, and walked around it a couple of times. The workmanship going into it was superb. 'You're doing a good job, Trem,' he said admiringly. 'So what's the problem?'

'Were doing a good job,' Trem corrected. 'The trouble is that we've gone as far as we can go. What we lack is expertise on critical mass manipulation and particle analysis. We need the services of Professor Halsen Taymar. He's the real expert.'

'Where is he?'

'Last we heard he was leading a research team on Broadway.'

Jaysan and Katra consulted a chart and did a spot of grieving. Broadway was one of Millway's moons.

'Okay,' said Katra wearily. 'While we're there, it'll be a chance to try out your bouncing bomb theory. If we find him, will he come with us?'

Trem grinned and wiped chocolate off his lips. 'He won't at first, but I've got an idea he could be persuaded.'

CHAPTER 25

The bouncing bomb worked spectacularly well against the projector. Jaysan dived towards the plain and released the bomb as he pulled up. It arched gracefully down and bounded across the landscape like a round, rubber kangaroo. It was very good at bouncing and even better at going bang; it exploded against the Egron construction site. One second a massive projector - the next second a massive hole and no projector.

There was no time to celebrate because after that little success, Broadway turned out to be a spelling variation of the word Trouble. Two words in fact:

Big Trouble.

Egron Trouble in the shape of a small bomb - fired from heaven knows where - that exploded

against *Icarus'* canopy and turned the world upside-down. Everything suddenly became reversed. Controls; instrument readings; the images on Katra's and Jaysan's retinas. It was an Egron invertor and it was hell.

Jaysan cut power to make an emergency landing and *Icarus'* engine opened up to full power - the surge of acceleration told him that. Realising what was happening, he frantically pulled up into what he thought was a climb.

'Up! Up!' Katra screamed.

'We are going up!'

'We're going down, you idiot! Pull up! Pull up!'

'The ground prox says we're climbing!'

'The ground prox is lying!'

'Excuse me,' said Agro politely. The android listened to Katra and Jaysan arguing and decided to take matters into his own manipulators. He vaulted onto Jaysan's lap, grabbed the controls and pushed *Icarus* into a steep dive at the ground. Craggs and deep rills raced straight at them and suddenly dissolved into the blackness of space as Agro levelled out. The effects of the strange weapon wore off as quickly as they had started.

'I think,' said Katra shakily, 'that we'd better let Agro do the flying for the time-being, until we work out how to combat whatever that bit of nastiness was.'

'That's right,' Agro agreed, easing back on power. 'If we crash in a wild place like this, and I get damaged, souvenir hunters will strip us bare in no time at all.'

Katra's suggestion was sound. In the next thirty minutes, while they were searching for an entrance to Broadway's transport system, two more similar bombs struck the *Icarus*. They had no affect on Agro: the tiny android flew calmly through what seemed to be hell being turned inside-out around Jaysan and Katra.

They eventually found the entrance. It was guarded by an Egron spiked structure that looked dangerous but exploded easily. They never did discover what it did. Agro eased *Icarus* into the hexagonal tunnel and handed over the controls to Jaysan. Having entered and exited from so many tunnels, they had become blasé about the whole business, and even felt safe once they were in one.

A big mistake.

Broadway had an inactive, frozen core. Its colonists, being a practical-minded people, had decided that cutting journey times to the other side of their world was best accomplished by boring a tunnel straight through its centre. The tunnel curved downward and kept curving downward. *Icarus'* initial gentle fall became a headlong plummet into the abyss. The tremendous acceleration was weird because it was unfelt: gravitation acts simultaneously on every particle which is why a person on a swing is unaware of the rapid changes in its motion. According to the velocity indicator, *Icarus* passed through the centre of Broadway at double its rated maximum

speed. After that it began losing speed until a point was reached when Jaysan had to apply 75% thrust to prevent *Icarus* falling back down the hole. Doubtless a body without a propulsion system would have oscillated up and down the tunnel and eventually come to rest at a point of suspension at Broadway's precise centre - a hazard for any other objects making the same journey.

'Depot spur ahead,' Katra warned.

Turning into the spur while at the same time trying to hover upright in a hole proved a tricky manoeuvre. Eventually Jaysan managed to steer *Icarus* through the slowly opening doors and into a service depot that looked like all the other service depots they had visited. They were immediately surrounded by a good-natured crowd of technicians who had heard on their grapevine that organized resistance was afoot. They set about repairing the damage that the spacecraft had suffered.

'We're looking for Halsen Taymar,' Katra explained to the chief technician. 'We've heard that he was here.'

'Not here exactly, but we know where to find him. We'll bring him to you.'

The chief technician was as good as his word. Two hours later Jaysan and Katra were shaking hands with a young, studious-looking man barely out of his teens and still into acne. He listened to what Jaysan had to say and shook his head.

'A neutron bomb? I'm sorry, but I cannot be party to the warlike uses of matter annihilation. It's contrary to everything I've stood for all my life. At college I opened a vein and swore in my own blood and on the graves of my parents and their parents before them that my knowledge of nuclear physics would only be used for peaceful purposes.' He broke off and smiled. 'But I cannot let you leave empty-handed. We can fit your ship with a neat little invention of mine that doesn't employ any form of nuclear energy. It's a cuboid - a device that projects a cube of warped time. Any object caught in the cube is projected a second back into the past so that the object's past and present try to occupy the same space at the same time. A spacecraft trying to disappear up its own thrusters will explode as a consequence. A most effective weapon, I'm told.'

Jaysan became desperate. 'But you must help otherwise it will be the end of civilization as we know it!'

Halsen Taymar shook his head. 'Better that than to betray my deeply-held convictions.'

Jaysan played the trump that Trem had supplied. 'Did you know that in our service depot on Apogee we have an inexhaustible supply of CastroBars?'

Halsen Taymar stood, drew himself up to his full height, and said: 'When do we leave?'

CHAPTER 26

With Halsen Taymar ferried back to Apogee and working on the neutron bomb, Katra and Jaysan got down to some serious Egron-bashing.

They were helped very considerably by the cuboid. It was small. It was neat. It was fun. But not for the Egrons or any of their curious structures. For two days they roamed all the planets, hurling cubes of time-warped space at anything that moved and quite a few things that didn't. Watching such a huge variety of Egron objects coming to grief in the cubes by disappearing up their own exhausts was immensely satisfying although it was obvious that such wholesale destruction could not pass unnoticed for much longer. Especially when finding a bouncing bomb in a tunnel meant that they could go scooting off to a moon of Millway to knock out a projector. The one disappointment was that the Egrons never gave up: rebuilding work always started eventually, although the data from *Icarus*' computer suggested that the Egrons had only one construction team visiting the seven moons in turn. Also, blowing up the projectors resulted in work stopping on the curious plasma beam space station that was slowly taking shape off Q-Beta. Of course, it was only a matter of time before the Egrons got the idea that something was going on.

'There's something going on,' the Imperial Prator stated in a face to face conference with General Krass.

Krass remained silent. He had been trying for some time to convince his ruler that the recent devastating attacks by a small, unidentified craft were more than mere ad hoc swipes by a disorganized resistance movement.

'How many of these strange little fighters does the enemy have?'

Krass had the figure ready. 'Using a computer model based on the number of sightings, we estimate a thousand, sir.'

'A thousand!'

'That's a conservative estimate, sir.'

'But that's absurd! Your pilots say that they have never been attacked by more than ten at a time!'

'The computer model has taken their tendency to exaggerate into account,' said Krass evenly. 'The analysis allows for one third of the force to be undergoing refits at any particular time, one third to be travelling to and from their bases, and one third engaged in combat.'

'A thousand! Where are they coming from! Why is it when we over-run a system we still have to put up with this sort of resistance! I'll tell you why, Krass - because you're a bungler and a cretin like Hermann Kruud was!'

Krass kept his patience. 'They're holed up on Apogee, sir. They're virtually impossible to flush out. That's why I'm urging you to re-consider the deployment of an Imperial battlecruiser so we can pound that confounded planet to dust.'

The Imperial Prator looked worried. 'You don't think they'll find this ship, do you, Krass?'
'No, sir. You're too far beyond the orbit of the outer planets. But we can't be a hundred percent

certain. Now a nice big Imperial battlecruiser with lots of gun batteries-'

The Imperial Prator got mad. 'How many times do I have to tell you! Those hulks are useless! No battlecruisers!'

CHAPTER 27

When the Egron starfighters guarding the Imperial Prator's flagship saw *Icarus* approaching, they decided as a man that they all had pressing business elsewhere.

'Wow,' said Jaysan, studying the black ship. 'What do you suppose that is, Kat?'

'Whatever it is, it's too big for us to tackle,' Katra retorted. 'Come on, Jaysan - let's get back to where the action is.'

'Just one little hole with the cuboid.'

'Go on then.

Jaysan fired. A cuboid of time-warped space slammed into the curious black ship and turned a chunk of its mid-section inside-out.

'What's happening!' The Imperial Prator screamed as the tremendous hammerblow crashed through the ship. Suddenly he was plunged into tumbling blackness. When the emergency lights came on he was entangled in an embrace with Krass on the ceiling of his stateroom. Outside could be heard the shrill howl of the general stations alarms.

'Are you okay, sir?' Krass asked anxiously, helping his master to his feet.

'Imbecile! Do I look okay?' The Imperial Prator looked fearfully around at the devastation in his once-comfortable stateroom. 'Krass!'

'Sir?'

'I think it would be a good idea to order up an Imperial battlecruiser from home after all. Get Kringe onto it right away. He knows the procedure for getting one fitted out and re-commissioned. Tell him it's urgent.'

'I think he's still in your dungeons, sir.'

'Then tell them to release him, idiot!'

CHAPTER 28

Silas Kringe's heart had hardened during his months of incarceration in the Imperial dungeons of Egron - therefore he was not particularly over the moons at being released merely because his skills were needed to cut through the bureaucratic jungle of re-commissioning one of the old Imperials.

Five appeals he had lodged with the Imperial Prator. Five times Silas Kringe had tried to explain what had gone wrong at the ceremony to blow up the statue of Hermann Kruud, and five times the Imperial Prator had refused to listen to reason.

There was a crumb of comfort for Silas as he started work: things must be going badly wrong out in the Solice system if they wanted an ancient old Imperial battlecruiser pressed into service.

He cackled to himself. He would obey orders to the letter. Revenge would be sweet.

CHAPTER 29

Halsen Taymar studied the holograms of the plasma beam space station that Jaysan and Katra had brought back after a lightning look-and-flee visit to Q-Beta. The visit had been essential because the probes were now being fooled by the holographic image of an innocent-looking moon that the Egrons were using to camouflage the construction. Before the moon had mysteriously appeared from nowhere, the probes had revealed an open, web-like structure. Now it was taking on a solid, business-like appearance.

'Definitely a plasma beam,' said Halsen Taymar admiringly. 'No wonder the Egrons are going to such trouble to build a defence system for it.'

'How long will it take them to complete it?' Jaysan demanded.

The scientist looked closely at the holograms. 'A week.'

'And how long before you finish the neutron bomb?'

'A week.'

'That's no good!'

'I'm sorry, Jaysan - we're working as fast as we can. Your best bet is to keep battering away at the projectors. At least that slows up work on this thing.'

CHAPTER 30

It was easier said than done.

The projectors were now being defended by Egron pilots who cared nothing for their own safety in their ruthless determination to prevent further damage to the huge structures. *Icarus* had only to show its nose within a spacial of a Millway moon to be immediately set upon by enraged hordes of Egron nasties.

In desperation Jaysan and Katra turned their attention to the land trains ferrying supplies to the sites. They were easy targets once they broke through the swarming squadrons of escorting fighters. Jaysan's temperament was such that if something shot at him, he would insist on shooting right back.

'Don't fight them, Jaysan!' Katra yelled during one hellish ding-dong engagement. 'Go straight for the train!'

It was good advice. Speed and manoeuvrability were the tiny spacecraft's greatest assets. Jaysan forced himself to ignore the laser blasts. He aimed *Icarus* straight at the long train of containers that were being hauled by a tug. One cuboid smash into the centre of the train was enough: those containers that didn't explode were wrenched away from their couplings, and the containers nearest the tug piled up into it.

Something struck *Icarus*. Within seconds a strange green slime was spreading across the canopy. The opaque gunge grew at an alarming rate. Within thirty seconds it had covered the entire blister and was clogging the external sensors. They had no way of telling how much damage to the shields was being caused by the repeated Egron firing.

'Straight up, Jaysan!' Katra urged. 'Go straight up!'

Jaysan hauled back on the controls. They felt stiff and unresponsive. 'The stuff's getting into everything!' he yelled in near panic.

With agonising slowness, *Icarus'* nose came up. Jaysan and Katra felt the acceleration push them back into their seats. A small patch of slime cleared from the canopy.

'Space!' Katra cried. 'If the stuff's organic, it might not be able to survive in space!'

Katra was right. Within five minutes all the strange green slime had disappeared from the canopy. After a further few minutes, all the craft's controls and instruments were behaving normally.

Badly shaken by the experience, Jaysan set the stardrive controls for Apogee. At least their tactics were delaying work on the plasma beam and they had learned how to counter the worst weapon that the Egrons had used against them so far.

CHAPTER 31

'Where's that battlecruiser, Kringe?'

Silas Kringe's oily face broke into an oily smile that made the Imperial Prator want to smash a fist through his viewscreen. 'Work is proceeding satisfactorily, sir.'

'I want it finished now! General Krass thinks its gun batteries will solve our problems!'

'All the Imperial battlecruisers were stripped when they were put into orbital storage, sir. The work cannot be skimped. Their batteries and drives were removed and-'

'Just get the damn thing here immediately, Kringe - you hear me? Otherwise heads will roll! Yours included!'

'Your orders will be obeyed, sir,' said Silas Kringe gleefully.

CHAPTER 32

Jaysan and Katra stepped up the pressure during the following week. They embarked on a massive, wholesale campaign of destruction - stardriving to each of Millway's seven moons in turn - lobbing bouncing bombs at the projectors - refuelling wherever and whenever they could. Sometimes breaking up methane asteroids and tractoring the fragments; sometimes hovering over the volcanoes of Dante and recycling the hot gases into fuel; and once they even performed a hazardous sling-shot orbit around Solice itself, using the star's corona discharge to prime *Icarus'* energy cells. There was logic behind their random attacks on all and everything of Egron origin. The idea was to convince the Egrons that they were dealing with a major uprising that necessitated the diversion of resources from the projector construction sites. They even altered

the serial numbers painted on *Icarus'* wings and changed its colour on every visit to a service depot. The ruse seemed to be working. On the third day of the intensive campaign they paid another lightning reconnaissance visit to Q-Beta. Work was nearing completion on the deadly plasma beam but there were fewer ground and air units in the vicinity. They grabbed the chance to knock out an Egron centre on Aldos itself before fleeing for the relative safety of Apogee.

CHAPTER 33

'No doubt about it, sir. It's definitely Apogee that's the cause of all the trouble, sir,' General Krass growled. 'My men have reported dozens of those fighters coming and going from that damned planet.'

For once the Imperial Prator was in a good humour. His stateroom had been patched up and the progress reports from the projector sites were good despite the alarming reports from his construction team who spoke of massed attacks by wave after wave of fighters. He clapped his general on the back. 'Never mind, Krass. What a brilliant idea of mine it was to order an old Imperial into battle. Once it gets here, we'll use its batteries to pound that planet to bits. By the time we've finished with it, it'll be another asteroid belt.'

Krass gave an eager nod. 'I shall enjoy doing that, sir.'

CHAPTER 34

Unaware of the fate that was in store for them, everyone in the service depot on Apogee gathered around the finished bomb. They stared at it in silence: Trem with pride because his engineers had succeeded in building such a sophisticated device; Halsen Taymar with a tortured expression - wondering if he had done the right thing; and Jaysan and Katra with apprehension because they had to deliver the thing to its new owners.

'Well,' said Trem, breaking the silence. 'This won't do. Let's get the thing loaded.'

CHAPTER 35

The Imperial battlecruiser that left its orbit around Egron was one of the largest man-made objects in the galaxy. Decades before, a mighty fleet of the monstrous creations had been the symbol and source of Egron might and prestige. They had been responsible for the founding of the Egron Empire and the unfounding of many smaller empires. They were vast and impregnable - unimaginable dinosaurs of destruction whose heyday had been during an age when the terror of unending planetary bombardment from massive batteries were the vital requirements in the consuming Egron obsession to conquer everything that moved. For a hundred years they had served Egron well. Eventually the development of guided weapons had turned the awesome dreadnoughts into expensive liabilities. Rather than break them up, the Egrons had stripped them of their armaments and stationed the great hulks in a parking orbit around Egron: a permanent reminder of their empire's glorious beginnings.

The battlecruiser that set off from Egron with a skeleton crew on board was the first to go to war in a hundred years.

Silas Kringe watched its departure with a feeling of deep satisfaction. Although embittered by

his unjust term of imprisonment over a mistake that anyone could have made, he had obeyed his orders to the letter.

CHAPTER 36

'All tests completed, sir,' Krass reported to the Imperial Prator. 'We've achieved maximum energy output on simulation. We'll have alignment on Novenia in one hour.'

'Excellent. Excellent, Krass.'

The Imperial Prator cut the circuit and turned his attention to the glowing image of Novenia in his hologram's replication field. Within an hour that glow would be gone; Novenia would be a blackened crisp of nothingness.

'Soon!' he screamed, shaking his fist at the image. 'Soon!'

CHAPTER 37

At their request, there were no farewells when Jaysan and Katra set off in *Icarus* with the neutron bomb slung beneath its fuselage. Much to his annoyance, Agro had to stay behind to save on mass because the bomb weighed a thousand kilos. In any case, he would have been implacably opposed to the idea of actually *giving* a souvenir away.

A walker opened fire on *Icarus* as Katra lifted the craft into the stratosphere. They ignored it.

'Stardrive activated,' Jaysan reported, keeping his fingers well away from the new arming and fire control button that the engineers had added.

His settings were accurate: *Icarus* materialized two spacials from Q-Beta. Aldos - the very centre of the main Egron forces - swam below but he kept his eyes on Q-Beta and its strange new hologram-generated moon that disguised the plasma beam. They were a long way from their target but they wanted a long run-in so that they could be certain of placing the neutron bomb with devastating accuracy in the precise centre of the magnaflux focussing coil. There would be no second chance. They hadn't been detected. At least, not so far. That wouldn't last.

Katra turned *Icarus* so that its nose was aimed at the distant point of light of the false moon. She applied power. The velocity indicator climbed.

'Contact in thirty minutes,' said Jaysan.

CHAPTER 38

From their deep bunker on Q-Beta, the engineers who had built the plasma beam watched and waited. There was nothing they could do to speed up the slow turn of the huge focussing coil.

'Ten minutes to alignment on Novenia,' a voice reported.

The phoney moon was swelling rapidly in *Icarus*' canopy. Katra's face was lined with concentration. Strange that there were no fighters about. The range decreased steadily...

Two spacials...

One point five...

'Something approaching,' an engineer in the bunker reported. 'Looks like one of them ships again.'

'Get a fighter after it!' Krass shouted.

'Can't, sir. All our forces have been ordered out of the area.'

The moon was now huge and unmissable in front of *Icarus*. Already it was fading to reveal the massive structure. The moon trick was only effective at a distance.

'Half a spacial, Kat,' Jaysan called out calmly. As he spoke he armed the neutron bomb, flipped up the guard away from the new button and rested his finger lightly on it. His other hand went to the stardrive controls.

'One minute to alignment.'

'Krass!' the Imperial Prator's agitated face appeared on a viewscreen. 'What's happening?'

Icarus dived unerringly straight at the centre of the plasma beam.

'Go!' Katra yelled.

Jaysan hit both controls simultaneously: the bomb release button and the stardrive activator.

It's nothing to worry about, sir,' said Krass reassuringly. 'Those fighters don't have the weapons to harm the beam.'

At that precise moment, Krass's whole world caved in.

CHAPTER 39

Once back on Apogee, Jaysan and Katra were able to watch a recording of what had happened provided by a probe for a few seconds before it was destroyed in the cataclysmic explosion. Because Jaysan had stardrived at the exact moment that the neutron bomb had been released, they were the only ones not to have witnessed the disastrous set back to the Egrons plans.

The viewscreen showed the puny-looking bomb detach itself from the tiny craft just as it dived through the centre of the plasma beam's focussing coil. Nothing happened for a second. Then there was a visible shockwave exploding outwards but not seeming to cause any damage. At the centre of the shockwave was a small, insignificant glow. With terrible suddenness the glow swelled into an incandescent fireball that blasted everything in its path to dust. At that moment the screen went blank.

CHAPTER 40

The Imperial Prator was not a happy man.

After an hour of raging hysteria directed at the hapless General Krass - standing to stoic attention before him - he lapsed into a brooding silence and picked bits of carpet out of his teeth.

An aide crept into the stateroom clutching a piece of paper. He looked uncertainly around and touched his master's sleeve. The Imperial Prator opened an eye. 'What do you want?'

'A faxed delivery note from Silas Kringe, sir. It requires your signature. The battlecruiser has arrived.'

Both the Imperial Prator and General Krass brightened at the news.

'Has it indeed?' said the dictator. 'Excellent news. Excellent.' He even managed a gleeful smile. 'Come, Krass. Now is your chance to pound that planet into an asteroid belt.'

'If you would sign the delivery note please, sir.'

The Imperial Prator had revenge on his mind. He snatched the piece of paper from the aide and thrust it into a robe pocket without looking at it.

CHAPTER 41

Katra stared in dismay at the viewscreen. The thing was ghastly. Unbelievable. A legend made real. Reality giving birth to a nightmare.

'But, Jaysan,' she cried. 'An Imperial battlecruiser! What chance do we stand against it?'

'None at all,' Jaysan replied, strapping himself into *Icarus*. 'But I'd sooner get zapped in space by that thing after having had a crack at it and go quickly rather than be buried alive when its batteries open up. Seventy-two three-metre barrels firing sixty shells a minute. They won't have any trouble demolishing Apogee. Now come on!'

CHAPTER 42

General Krass was beside himself with joy. At last he had an imperial battlecruiser to play with. At last! At last! At last! He did a little dance on the mighty ship's bridge.

'Stop messing about and get on with it!' the Imperial Prator ordered testily.

'Sir!' a crewman called out. 'Fighter approaching on our starboard quarter!'

'Let it do its worst,' said Krass, laughing. He stepped to a row of ancient speaking tubes. There were seventy-two of them. One for each gun battery. 'Bridge to Number One Battery!'

No reply.

'Bridge to Number One Battery! Do you hear me! This is your captain speaking!'

Still no reply.

'They must use proper interphones these days,' grumbled the Imperial Prator, looking around the bridge for a more modern means of communicating with the gun batteries.

A cuboid fired from *Icarus* chose that moment to show what new technology could do to old

technology. A neat cube of warped time and space burst through the side of the battlecruiser's bridge. For a disorientating second, while he occupied two adjacent time continua, the Imperial Prator saw himself going and also saw parts of his anatomy that he had never seen before and never wanted to see again. By the time he had recovered his senses, all hell was breaking loose around him. A pair of powerful hands grabbed him.

'Escape pods!' Krass panted. 'This way, sir!'

Another cuboid plunged through the side of the great ship. This time the Imperial Prator saw himself coming towards himself. They collided like rugby players. He started fighting with himself over the space that his past and his present wanted to occupy at the same time. Then he tried to run away but the powerful hands held onto him.

'It's yourself you're running away from, sir!' Krass panted. 'The escape pods are this way!'

CHAPTER 43

It was quiet in the two-man escape pod. Krass and the Imperial Prator were strapped to their seats and would have to remain so while the pod followed a tumbling orbit around Apogee.

'It's only a matter of time before we're rescued, sir,' Krass reasoned. 'Interplanetary law says that escape pods must be recover-'

Krass broke off as the Imperial Prator told him what he could do with his interplanetary laws.

'Bunglers! I'm surrounded by incompetent cretins!'

'It's not my fault that the voice pipes on that hulk weren't working,' Krass complained.

The tumbling motion caused a piece of paper to drift from the Imperial Prator's pocket. It was the delivery invoice for the Imperial battlecruiser. He snatched it, read it, and started raving.

Krass managed to grab the paper just as his ruler appeared to be having a terminal fit. It bore a simple enough message:

DELIVER TO THE IMPERIAL PRATOR OF
EGRON, ONE IMPERIAL BATTLECRUISER.

BATTERIES NOT INCLUDED.

(signed)
SILAS KRINGE.

NOT THE END



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