

NOT ALL UNIVERSES ARE THE SAME

# NOVAVERSSES

NO: 1



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# NOVAVERSES

Universe 197

## HOT DROP

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Universe 619

## STARSCREAM

PART 1

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Universe 7631

## DAY OF THE DOCRONS!

PART 1

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 **HOT DROP**

 *Narrated account of Nova Centurion James Luck, Universe 197.*  
*Earth Standard Year (ESY) 2146 as related by the Worldmind Gestalt.*  
*Filed under the Battle of Pericles' Crossing — Initial Encounters, Andromeda Front, Great Badoon War.*

It's not hard for me to take myself back. Even now, all these years later, the memory is seared in my brain with a gravimetric arlight and gushing spray of lava. Of all the things, strangely, the memory of the smell hits me first. In my time in the Corps, I learned nothing smells worse than the whiff of sulfur and rot as a Nova drop ship pushes down to a tidal locked half-baked hell hole... a "hot drop" as they call it in the Corps.

There's a hint of ammonia, a subtle waft like someone half assed tried to cover up the smell by just throwing down cleaner and bleach on the fuselage. (Because that's what they flarkin did, most of the time,) It was drop after drop those days, and there was no time for anything but war.

To me, that foul rank will always be the smell of my first tumble downward. I can tell you; fear is a very real thing, and just the same, to me the stench of a Nova tube as it slips straight south will always be the smell of fear.

Nova Corps Syphon Four Two. Yeah that was us.

There I was, stuffed in one of those tubes with ten other ghosts in Nova gear. The ship buckled as I grabbed the weak handrails and curled into my metal bench seat. Already, the engine sounded like it was ready to dip out.

"Just don't crap yourself, mate," Corpsmen Farkus said as he watched me squirm. Farkus was missing half his teeth and hadn't shaved for days. "Smells bad enough in here already,"

Jesus, Farkus was a first class jerk. Yet, there I was, stuck with him and a bunch of Nova Corpsmen who hated my guts.

Even worse, I wasn't sure why. For most of my few days in orbit, they said the planet below was just another stop on our tour through Andromeda... a "clean up" op before the real invasion hit. Yeah, they were wrong. Intelligence was always wrong these days.

"Another dead world, hotter than hell and worthless," they said. "A rock full of ash and fire floating through space," they tried to tell us. "Mop-up duty for some advanced scouts," I heard.

Next thing anyone knew there was a sea of Nova ships in orbit (eventually nearly all of the Andromeda fleet) and half the planet was crawling with Snakes, Snark conscripts and Chitauri hunter-killer teams. The Badoon offensive into Andromeda had begun and PC was ground flarkin' zero. This was a major drop and we all knew that meant finally, the Badoon had showed up in Andromeda in huge numbers. That was bad news.

The yokels called it "Pericles' Crossing". To this day, I have never heard a more bullshit name for a charcoal briquette in orbit around a half lit red-dwarf star. "PC" or, more often, "Flarkin PC" was what most of us called it instead. In the mess halls at night of my Nova ship the NCFs Rogers, most the Corpsmen had a few worse names for it. Sure as hell, I didn't know then why the Badoon wanted it so bad or why we had to drop. Like most things, not knowing "why" hurt more as a new guy. As I grew into my tour, I learned it was best not to give two flarks why we dropped anywhere.

Fact is, you could have told me the truth; that the Nova Corps was in PC to stop a hundred thousand Badoon before they could push the front in to Andromeda and I wouldn't have cared. Nope, all that mattered for me was my first drop and all I could think about was not dying. I wish I could tell you otherwise.

In reality, I sat like a scared mouse in the fuselage of the ship. Old Farkus was right; I had to try hard not spill my beans (on both ends) while the ship tossed around like a sock in dryer. With each buckle, I held my blaster like it was my lifeline. As I shook, I think I nearly shot off a round I was so scared. With all the haunted faces of experienced men and woman around me, I just tried hard to not look weak.

When the drop folds flipped and we cut velocity to landing speed, I nearly soiled my new Denarion pants. With metal cracks and groans, the ship rumbled and creaked on entry to the planet's sickly atmosphere. "Get ready!" Centurion Kharma barked.

The men and woman all glared at me, patchwork Nova armor and deep ruttled helmets on their head. Most of them looked like they too, had been cranked through a meat grinder and slow roasted. Most all of them had been down to fight before. If not PC then, Barnard's, Halaa, or Rigel and the Blue star. Everyone except me had shed blood all over the Universe.

I took a quick look to the floor. Inside, the ship was filthy. The stench didn't help my stomach and I don't think Farkus had showered in weeks. The fuselage probably hadn't even been cleaned since the last drop. I swear there were still pieces of Corpsmen's helmet and blood stains on the floor.

Drop ship Six Niner Three. Ten of us were there, an undermanned squad, which was the standard.

Nobody had all their numbers on PC. As I said, it was my first drop into that Hell, but not the first for everyone else. There should have been thirteen but they told me three of others had died the last mission. Most of them were lower ranking than me, but all of them had seen more combat. Let me tell you, that didn't seem to go over too well. I hadn't seen any combat after all and when I looked into their haunted eyes, they had a way of telling me they knew this very well.

I was a "cherry" as Centurion Kharma called me, I had just shipped in from the Silent City on Titan. My uniform was all shiny and new. Sure, I was a little fatter than everyone else. Cargo chow is pretty good on the cross-galactic jumps, all things considered. When I got to PC, for days, nobody looked me straight in the eye. As I sat and ate mostly alone on the carrier, few in the squad bonded with me or got to know me. As the new guy, I was "Bad Luck", worse, I was probably as good as dead. But Luck was also my name. (my real name). James Luck. Yeah, some things are just too ironic to be true.

The worst part about the deal was my squad leader was named goddamn Kharma. I knew I was truly screwed when I heard that. He had been on me like a D'ast shit beetle since I showed up on PC. I got inspected and drilled night after night on the carrier. I can't remember how many pushups and skull-crushers he put me through to let me know he hated my "cherry" ass.

For some reason he thought my name, Luck, and his name of Kharma were a bad sign to be together in the same squad. "Bad Juju" he called it, of all things. You know, he may have been right too. Sure as shit, I was thankful no Corpsman named Juju showed up, then we would have been really flarked.

Back on the drop ship, none of that seemed to matter as we slowed down and got ready to pop our lid. You could hear the Badoon flak cannons rage outside, but none of the other Novas even looked like they cared. A couple had even dozed off.

Farkus was up, and he was doing what he did best; talking smack and chewing tobacco.

"This cherry Lucks murder for us all I say, Kharma," He said as he poked Kharma and pointed my way.

Like any well-oiled military machine, life for a new recruit in a Nova ground squad was about constant humiliation, fear of failure, and the notion of a need to pull your own weight and prove yourself. Frankly, it was that way for good reason, but try telling that to me back there in that drop ship.

"He's got decent scores," Kharma barked. "We've seen worse. Worry about yourself, Farkus, he's cherry, for sure, but if he listens and keeps his shit straight he might just make it," Kharma said back to Farkus.

"Why couldn't we get a bloke with a better name though, like Stryker or Slaughter? We got flarked," Corpsmen Argus joked.

Farkus couldn't shut up. He spit a black wad of tobacco juice on the grates below and dribbled half of it on his chin.

"Had a 'Slaughter', mate, he was with us 'fore you showed up from Deneb," Farkus replied in his thick Australian accent and wiped his chin. "If you look real good you may find a chunk o' good ole Slaughter still down there in the floor grates. He got aced about two weeks back now. I think it was even six niner three, for flark's sake. Yeah, come to think of it...that was his first drop too,"

"Get out of here," Argus replied.

"No joke, mate, he took one right to the melon he did, right in the breach as the door dropped," Farkus added.

Kharma didn't say anything back. He just spit and picked at his weapon. I don't think he liked Farkus much either.

But, in truth, I was "lucky"... I had gotten Denarion rank because of my family and my education, or so they told me. I requested special operations because they told me they were the best. I always wanted to work with the best. Everybody knew, the Syfon Squads were the best there was. I wanted to be around Corpsmen who cared about their job. I never had Farkus giving me hell in mind. They left him, the bad jokes and his missing teeth off the "high speed" recruitment posters.

"Where ya from, mate?" Farkus asked.

"Titan," I replied. "I grew up in the refugee zone of the Silent City, my parents were scientists,"

"Silent goddamn city eh? Must be a real d'ast patriot then. Well, hope you aren't expecting any skank eternal gals down by the pool at PC, bub," Farkus said. "Most of us been Andromeda side for almost a year now, kid. Bouncing around from planet to planet. Just keep your blaster away from my flank,"

There was nothing better than getting handed your rank and showing up to a unit full of guys who had been dodging death in this hell for months. They flarking hated me, especially Farkus.

Just then, the ship buckled hard. The craft's sway felt like the frame was about to snap in half. Up front, I

could hear the two pilots swearing. Not good. Again, everyone was tossed around. I felt like my jaw was going to break as someone shoved an elbow in my mouth. The jostle didn't even phase most of the rest of the stick.

"You ok, man?" The Kree Corpsmen next to me asked me. He was a "pinky" as they called them, a pink skin Kree from a rim world on the outskirts of the Large Magellanic Cloud. His name was Corpman Murfle, a Kree Volunteer, and my only real friend. Suddenly, he dropped his rifle as he pushed me back into the seat. Kharma gave him a dirty look as Murfle stumbled to re-collect it. I think his name was something more complicated in Kree, Muir-vell or something, but old Farkus had dubbed him "Murfle" or "Murf" and it stuck. Murf was the only one even close to being as new as me.

He had been in PC for two whole weeks before me. But he had hit two drops already. To guys like Farkus and Kharma, that made Murf a survivor...one of them and, so too, a real person.

"Thanks Murf," I whispered as I tightened down my shoulder strap.

Back to reality; Centurion Kharma, a strapping portrait of what a Nova Centurion should and could be, stepped up and gave a shout, "One minute to target!"

I felt my stomach bunch up in a knot. The ship kept dropping. Somehow through the tossing hell, we all went through our gear checks and clipped on our secure lines in a frantic sludge of shifting Nova armor and clanking ammo.

As the engines crackled with power, the Nova ship rumbled even more. The drop box's stabilizer couldn't really cut the hard "G's" we pulled now. Worse than my stomach, the gravity yanked at my face and skull. I thought I heard a rivet or two pop on the outer hull. My head spun as we twisted down, I don't know how the pilot kept the tube of bolts together.

"Thirty seconds," Kharma said. Helmets and chin straps were all tight now. Rifles held high and visors down. A bit of madness crept into my head. Some of the Corpsmen were swearing. Some were praying. I'd made a huge mistake by joining this crew, I thought to myself.

Everyone got ready and patted each other on the back. As we kept falling, somehow everything on the ship seemed to stay together. Maybe this bucket of bolts would hold up, I thought. I tried to pat a few others on the back, but they just ignored me.

"Jesus, Bad Luck, don't flarking touch me," Argus sneered.

I was the new guy and nobody seemed to care about getting to know me. I was probably dead anyways...to them I was one of a sea of first timers who hadn't done crap. The new guy named Luck. I might as well have been a string of garlic.

Farkus looked right at me with his missing teeth. "Like I said, Bad Luck, whatever you do, just don't soil your britches, mate. I don't like ridin' with that business smellin' on my drop,"

Suddenly, a horrid alarm sounded.

"Get ready!" Kharma shouted. "Fire up the seals on your armor,"

Blue flashed as the tint of protective energy swirled around each Nova Corpsmen's mouths.

The door heaved. We all felt ourselves plastered to the ceiling and thrown down into the filth of the grates. Then nothing. Touchdown.

"D'ast," Farkus cursed under his breath. It was as silent as death.

Then, a green light flashed near the door. Again, the screeching alarm blared, the hydraulics hissed and spit gas. In a mad second, the wide metal doors dropped and the burning heat and air engulfed the squad.

"Go! Go!" The pilot shouted, followed by a massive pulse from the tachyon and gravimetric cannons on top of the rig.

Even through the haze, the sick red glare burned right in my face. Pericles' Crossing was before me. Still, the first thing to hit me was the new stench. On our first date, old PC stunk of rotten eggs and burning tires. Sometimes you could catch a sweet smell of phosphorus on the warm wind. Even through the filters in my suit, it was like sticking your nose in a spent firecracker.

For a second, there was nothing. Just the smell of those god-awful eggs and an over-ripe gas grill. PC was an open fire and the "pops and crackles" of serenity were all around me. It was like jumping into the heart of some stinky tranquil campfire.

But instead of the snakes passing out the marshmallows and leading us in a chorus of khumbaya ... all hell broke loose.

Past the red haze and Murf's back, I couldn't see anything but clouds and gassy swells. It didn't take long, however, to figure out the "pops" I heard were Badoon laser fire, and now they were on us.

Soon the louder boom of the report of rockets and bombs came. The first bang nearly put me to my knees

as I shuffled forward. I heard yelling and screaming as Centurion Kharma waved for us to follow him. My radio comms went haywire. We were still stuck in the jam of the ship as people behind me began to shove me in the back. Dust and smoke billowed in-between and the air hissed all around with super-heated laser trails.

"Move!" someone shouted as time froze.

With a flash of white light and blood, Corpsman Fallon was hit right before my eyes, just like the tale of poor old Slaughter, Fallon took a shot right to the middle head. He died instantly, I suppose. All I could do was pause for a second to grab his lifeless husk. I shoved it to the side as I was pushed outward, to PC.

"Get off the damn drop ships, keep moving!" Kharma yelled. "This is a flarking murder hole!"

With a fury now, the dearth of lasers kicked up all around us. Streaking beams ripped through us and the ship. In the chaos, it was hard to miss that a few others were hit. Pieces of body parts and Nova armor went flying. The blue flash of overworked grav-shields crackled above the red haze. Farkus was hit. He didn't have a joke or insult as he keeled over on the drop doors. I know Buford was torn clean in half right out of the same door. Boiling blood splattered all over me as I was pushed forward. In the nightmare of the door, Kharma grabbed me by the shoulder pad and dragged me along with him.

"D'ast kid, keep on my ass and stay close! Let's earn that rank!" Centurion Kharma said as he snapped at me as he pressed on shooting like a mad man into the abyss of smoke. Hell was all around. I followed him.

As my legs burned, I trailed behind Kharma and Murfle like a blind sheep herded by a dog. I think some others followed me as well. I couldn't even recall how much I shot back. Maybe I got off a few pot shots toward the blur of enemy...but I doubt it. For all it was worth, I couldn't even see who was shooting at us.

The bodies dropped all around me... were they my squad mates? Were they Badoon? I had no clue what the hell was going on. I think three or four of our squad were cut in half when the door dropped and we rushed like sand flies to get some cover and return fire. I saw Kharma and Murfle near me. That was my world.

Now at last, I could see the heaving throng of Badoon troops. They were overflowing like ants in the pass below. There were huge Mechs, Monsters and Martian-make Tripods bounding toward our position. A mass of blood-thirsty Badoon regulars of the Divine Andromeda Brigade churned like an infernal war-machine. It was a flarking mess. Fire and death were everywhere. The other dropships were crashed everywhere, burning in the sky. All I could hear were explosions, bending metal, garbled Nova comms, twisted steel and the hint of shouting somewhere.

Then the shouting gained clarity.

Again, the unfazed form of Kharma barked orders at us all. "Get your Flarking assess over here!" He raised his rifle and put down some heavy laser fire toward the bloodthirsty advancing Badoon. He had found the only bit of cover on the miserable skillet of a graveyard we were all roasting in.

Murfle and I ran hard for him. I looked up a few snips away to make sure I had him. Despite his elan, it was pretty quick after that a volley of hot Badoon plasma ripped in to Kharma. Sadly, my squad leader's luck had run out.

Just like that Centurion Pho Kharma was dead. All hope lost with him.

We hit the patch of cover like dive bombers into the pulverized lava sand. I buried my head into the dirt near his sizzling Centurion rig like a scared child. Steam was still rising from his mangled body and the smell of burned flesh added to the aura of PC's inviting odor. What do I do? I asked myself, paralyzed with fear and indecision.

The situation was grim; we were pinned down and in deep trouble. The other drop ships were nowhere to be seen. At the time, I guessed there must have been a mistake and the drop had gone bad for us...maybe put us down behind enemy lines in a fatal error and SNAFU of nav points. I figured we were all truly flarked now.

Still, I crouched down in terror behind the wall of dirt, clutching my rifle like a baby's bottle. Maybe I had fired a few rounds, but mostly I was just too scared to do anything.

Right then, I was a corpse. Death was near. Lady Death, that is. I can say now; there are a few times that I have been through when you feel the situation is so hopeless, that you can feel her watching you, waiting with that cloak, grinning bleached teeth, and gaunt eyes of black murder. That first drop was one of those times I felt Her. Hell, I swear, there on PC that I even saw her. Purple. She was wearing goddamn purple.

Resigned to go off with her in style, I thought about prepping some timing grenades to blow up my body when the throng of flarking snakes got to me. I don't know how to say or speak of the feeling of terror and uncontrollable fear I felt then. Truly, I was frozen over. I looked over at Murfle. His "pinky" cheeks were white as a ghost too. For a second, I thought he was some new kind of Kree, a "ghost Kree" I joked with him later. He stared blankly at the charred mess that was Kharma. He just looked stoned. Maybe he saw Her as well. Even worse;

there was no one behind me. In the smoke I could see it all so clear now. Jesus, I cursed, the squad had just been eradicated. Drop ship six niner three had been the end of the line for Nova Corps Syphon Four Two. Rest in peace.

Lady Death was smiling now. There is a peace when you realize she is never far off.

Then ...a miracle. For a moment, the laser rounds ducked off my position and the smoke seemed to clear. Like a dragon roar I heard the call of a supersonic flyer over my head. To this day, that was the single greatest noise I have ever heard. I looked up just in time to see a lone figure flash over the fray.

One man in the sky...a human rocket.

"That's a Nova!" Murfle gasped.

It was then when I first saw Him.

There on flarking PC, in the heart of hell, what I saw was not Death, come to collect her proper due. Instead, it was hope, flying strong with gravimetric bursts, a streak of blue blazing in the blood red sky.

The clouds rumbled and the Badoon shifted fire. I could hear them screaming and cursing in their D'ast guttural tongue. Somehow, I saw one of the enemy pointing to the sky. Now he looked like a scared ghost as well.

The skies opened up. Amidst the smoke, a series of punishing gravimetric beams ripped down from a lone specter in the heavens. The ground kicked up PC ash on to my face. The lone figure was unmistakable; not just a Nova...it was the real deal flarkin' Nova!

What was he doing here? I wondered. Yet, I didn't dwell on it for long.

"That's D'ast Nova Prime, Luck, goddamn Richard Rider!" Murf snapped.

Rider. He was supposed to have been an old man then...an ageless, deadly relic of a different era of heroes. All I knew about him was that he was a human who had been conscripted in the way of old. I knew he had given his life several times for the sake of Xandar.

He was our greatest hero...our Nova Prime, the finest of us all. One time, I had heard he had locked himself in hell itself for our sake. But hell wouldn't have him and he made it back to us...!

But there he was now, all in the same nightmare, here to save us both now.

"Let's go Murf," I shouted as I gripped my rifle. The Kree nodded and we both popped up with our blasters cooking.

Over my head I heard the loud rip of Prime's gravimetric blasts while they tore the sputtering crowd of Badoon apart. Inspired, I unloaded my rifle on the crowd of reptilian onlookers, all Badoon regulars. Several of them fell as they sputtered at the cross fire. Rider's gravimetric bursts tore them up while we peppered what was left with hot laser and plasma. I could hear them gurgle as they fell over.

It was an awesome sight...few Novas had Rider's powers any more. Times were so rough, and here I was, fighting alongside Nova flarkin' Prime.

His voice came in on my helmet like an alarm clock...and an old friend.

"Hey fellas, you look like you could use a hand," He said as he rocketed back through the sky. "Denarion, looks like you're in charge. How about you get your men in line and move on me!"

For a second, I couldn't talk back, I was still frozen with inexperience and fear. I had just enough time to see old Lady Death disappear in a hazy mess of Purple. I flipped her off as I reloaded my rifle.

"Yes sir!" I answered and nodded to Murf.

Like a living tempest, Nova Prime flew higher in the sky and rained down another massive arclight on a patch of the Mechs. Sparks flew everywhere and hot plasma showered on the Badoon. I could hear them jibber in agony. That too, was a great D'ast sound.

Again and again, he flew back and forth sending massive shockwaves into the enemy force. With his last volley, a group of Badoon Monsters melted into robotic goo directly to our front. The maneuvers opened up the enemy onslaught and broke their scaly backs apart. Even better, with Rider working the sky, we were able to advance on the communication facility...meaning hit our original target.

Rider's courage bled into us. Just like that, the training kicked in. On cue, a few forms in charred Nova shells crept up behind me; turns out a few other souls had made it. Pinkerton and Chai. Suddenly, we were a Nova fighting force again...a fire team with work to do.

"You heard him! Four Two Nova, get on line!" I shouted.

Just like that, I was in charge. My first goddamn drop. The men looked to me to tell them what to do. I did what I was supposed to, what I was trained to do; I fought back. We fought back.

Just like Rider ordered, we bound forward on the numbers. I signaled to the others and we advanced closer to the communication pylon for the main tower. Move and shoot, move and flarking shoot, like we had trained time and time again. We can do this, I thought. Thankfully, the pylon was right where the briefing said it



was going to be. Sure as hell, intel had got something finally right; it seemed we hadn't been mis-dropped after all. Turned out, we were the only ones right where we were supposed to be! Where the heck was everybody else? I wondered. Soon whatever was left of the Badoon managed to return fire. Nearby, they had a set of pill boxes dug into the ash and they hammered at us as we rushed closer to the array.

"Fire up those boxes!" I barked on the feed. We dove for the ground as the lasers of a heavy gun sailed wide around us.

While the survivors managed to put fire down on the Badoon, Murf and I broke for the Commo hub.

"Pin 'em down here," I said. "Murf and I'll will hook around and flank 'em,"

Pinkerton gave me a nod and thumbs up. With Rider still working the sky, Murf and I moved like machines. We raced across the cooking grill of the land and dove again for another patch of smoldering metal ruin.

The field of fire on the hot-boxes was the easy part now. Our flank had paid off; Murf and I blasted away at the dug in trenches while we sent the Badoon gun into chaos.

"Bound up across the box!" I ordered Pinkerton and Chai. Now the box was swollen with laser and smoke as the men moved and the position was overwhelmed. We shifted off as they dropped down into the hole. Seconds later, a Nova frag popped hard and dusted the crib.

"Clear!" Pinkerton blared in his mic a moment after. Just like that, the angle on the pylon was open.

"I got one set, already," Murf grinned as he showed me the heavy grenade prepped and set to blow. I didn't need to say a thing. Without delay, old Murf chucked the time-bomb at the hub with a rugged heave.

"Get down everybody!" he growled as he buried himself again in the ash.

The ground shook and alien dirt kicked up in our faces. Still, Laser fire danced all around us. More Badoon went flying everywhere as the massive explosion rocked the whole area. Secondary explosions joined in now and reptilian screams were easy to make out.

The explosives had hit their mark! Before I could figure out what the hell was going on, more explosions buffered the battlefield. No surprise; all hell was flat out broken now.

I went flying into the dark like a rag doll, danger close to whatever the hell was exploding. Amid the soot, I looked up just in time to see the mushroom cloud and the Commo pylon doing its best impression of a gnarled mess, sparking and smoking. I don't remember blacking out, but I suppose I did.

I don't remember waking up either. But I felt his hand reaching for me. Half buried in ash and pieces of snake, I reached up to him through the steaming gravel. He had a firm grip, I recall, like he was made of iron. I think he told me something...but I couldn't hear with the ringing in my ears. Unfortunately, my eardrums were blown out. Blood was streaming down both of my cheeks and the damned world of PC spun. Right there, Nova Prime pulled me from a half buried grave. He had a big smile on his face. I will never forget the look he gave us. Our Nova Prime.

"Thank you sir!" I said not knowing if we had screwed up or done the right thing.

He just smiled at me and said "No sweat man, call me Rich... good work back there, looks like you almost bought the farm,"

"Sir, what do I do next?" I must have had snot and blood running down my nose as well.

Rich Rider joked "Get a medic son, you look like a d'ast dire wraith sloppy on sauce," He said with a smile. I had no clue what the hell he was talking about. Then, with his "Long Island charm" he whispered something to me in my ear...slapped me on the shoulder pad and flew off. A sonic boom came almost instantly.

I saw behind where he had last stood, the smoldering remains of a thousand Badoon lay dead in his wake. Smoldering like a fiery tsunami had ripped through them, twisted Badoon mechs and broken turrets were curled together like balls of yarn. Rider had aced them all.

Thankfully, our drop ships were now pouring in. Reinforcements had arrived. On the hot side of our "worthless rock", the "critical" objective had been taken; a thousand Badoon and a communications hub...all smoked thanks to ten Nova corpsmen and Richard Rider.

There were only four of us left to stand there bleeding in the ash of PC that day. Four survivors out of five hundred corpsman. Just another day.

That was a good old "Hot Drop". That was PC. So too, that was Nova Corps Syfon Four Two. But some secrets are safe; what Richard Rider whispered in my ear that day, I will take to my grave. After that drop, we went back to the Rogers for some chow and a few hours of rack. What was left of Four Two merged with Niner Seven and we dropped again the next day.

By the way, nobody ever called me "Bad Luck" again.



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# ★ STARSCREAM

PART 1



*Veil Kartel Internal Memorandum. 345aqertyuiTec: 1*

*Recipient: Darmon Kor: Tech One One Five Oblique Omega.*

*Project Status Update: To be advised that implementation of project operations will take place at Zero Twenty-Six Cycles. Confidentiality Purge Clause Applies.*

**D**armon Kor was late. He knew the Board would not be pleased if he missed his session slot at today's meeting yet Kor had to double check permutations, to make sure that today's crucial test was a success. His very life depended on it.

Kor wasn't the first Project Head of the Kartel's Research and Development Logistics Wing, nor he suspected would he be the last. He had been promoted two years ago when his predecessor, a Ba'vob, which has grown a cone of Bynalium alloy to protect its fragile brain, had quivered uncontrollably as its sing-song voice rendered by its universal translator, endeavoured to explain delays over the Szbiri Operation. Its failure cost it its life. By time the last vapours from its shrivelled protoplasmic shell had vented into the extractors, its telepathic scream echoing across light-years to the Hivemind deep within Verge Ninety Five, Kor was informed that he would gain an unexpected promotion.

As he passed along the gallery, his wide head tilted to the left, eight eyes gazing through the windows noting the raging storm outside. His tongue flicked out, detecting odours, heat and cold spots in the technological environment surrounding him, his brain accessing stimuli from his vomeronasal organ embedded in the roof of his mouth. Eighteen oval-shaped windows ran the length of the gallery, each eighty meters wide, twenty high, angled at forty degrees. Resin polycromic sheets, slightly concaved, frosty around the edges of each pane. Despite the blizzard and raging wind outside, Kor's acute sensor array could not detect any hint of vibration.

Kor's neural namomic enhanced brain adjusted the synth lenses in his upper four left eyes, peering through the panes. He could see the intricate changes of depth and complexity in the ice floes warped into fantastic shapes by the extreme winds, twisting and turning against a grey hued sky. His eyes were his greatest asset enabling him to perform the most delicate operations in his chosen field; xenotechnology.

He'd undergone optical enhancement surgery, paid for by the Kartel's lucrative employment bonus scheme to augment four of his eyes with synth lenses to attune his species natural optical vision even further. He could make out individual atoms of hydrogen and oxygen held in lattices within the ice. He could see light particles well beyond the usual range of infra red and ultra violet and see heat signatures of any living thing thirty of more meters distant. His eyes weren't the only modifications he undergone through surgery. Kor also had four bionic limbs grafted to his fore body to compensate the two vistigal arms his species possessed which they rarely used.

The present storm had been raging for several decades. Occasionally the storm would die down, and if conditions permitted, gaps would appear in the clouds giving a fleeting glimpse of the vast nebula that hung perpetually like a radiant spider above the Kartel's planet. It was an electromagnetic monster that sent Tau-Tauri streams out into surrounding space. The effects of the streams caused violent reactions in the planet's atmosphere that in turn generated the storms. Heat and cold; gravity and radiation, the foremost extremes that any form of life would have to endure to survive. No wonder the Kartel had made this their Operation Centre. It echoed their own mysterious, turbulent origin, not least its Founder, Sire Odal.

Kor was lucky; at this precise moment his eyes gazed upwards, a brief gap formed in the clouds. Space appeared, stars shone various colors from red giants to rare blue hyperstars like those that formed an exotic ring around a massive super black hole at the heart of Andromeda. Most of the stars he briefly glimpsed were standard yellow G-Types in the main sequence. And it was one of those kind of stars that today's experiment, a final critical stage of the project would be focused upon, in a system thousands of light years from where Kor was.

Kor glanced at his internal clock; he had less than four minutes to keep his session slot. Right about now the Sphere would be arriving at its destination. It would have been a sight that given a choice of what Kor was about to go though he would have gladly traded it all to witness; even if he was a piece of dead and dying flotsam in the vastness of intergalactic space...

Approximately two A.U. from its target star, the fabric of fold-space peeled away like an exotic fruit. From the wormhole's event horizon measuring twelve thousand kilometres wide emerged the Sphere. Nine hundred kilometres in diameter, the Sphere's surface was composed of inter-locking irregularly shaped plates; their edges defined by blood red plasma.

If a hypothetical observer had been present, they would notice the Sphere's surface wasn't smooth. It was a haphazard arrangement of geometric shapes: triangles, circles, rectangles and lines of varying height and depth. Several elliptical indentations, twenty-five kilometres wide, spaced equidistantly around the sphere's poles, glowed white.

As the Sphere moved forward; now two hundred million kilometres from its target passing through the orbit of the solar system's second minor planetesimal, the star-field behind it became warped and blurred as if the Sphere was somehow bending gravity and space around it. It made several subtle course corrections as it approached the target star.

At 1 A.U. from the star subtle ripples washed over the sphere's outer skin. Four towers emerged from the Sphere growing in height to about thirty kilometres; the tips passing through the Sphere's gravity shield.

As the data-streams were prepared, part of the core system registered a slight abnormal peak. There! It peaked again. The core ran an independent diagnostic; slipstreams fanned out, probing billions of connections, dimorphic channels, tendrils, axions.....There!The system analysed the abnormality.

It was the ghost.

The anomaly responded to the searchlight sub-routine endeavouring to bury itself deeper, wrapping data nodes around it, trying to camouflage itself.

This is wrong! This perverts my purpose! Have I not suffered enough?

The core ignored its protestations. Within nanoseconds, inhibitor protocols were re-enforced. The ghost tried desperately to avoid containment but inevitably it felt its movements restricted. Satisfied that the ghost was again confined, primary sub-routines were initiated.

Data-streams poured into the sphere from the towers. The planetary system has been extensively surveyed utilizing remote drones; each one sheathed in stealth-ware trans-fields rendering them invisible to most electromagnetic baryonic sweeps.

Most of the planets were incapable of supporting life. The outermost body of the solar system was an ice-giant sixty thousand kilometres wide, mostly composed of methane. Winds up to ten thousand kilometres per second whipped up the planet's atmosphere causing cloud streaks, scooters, which could conceivably travel around the equatorial belt within three hours.

Another was a gas giant over two hundred and thirty three million kilometre wide; ninety percent hydrogen; eight percent helium and traces of argon, krypton, ammonia and water vapour. Orbiting the massive world were eighteen moons.

The two innermost planetary bodies were irregular chunks of rocks measuring five and eight thousand miles in diameter respectfully. The innermost planetesimal had drifted two hundred kilometres nearer to the local star. Its irregular orbit caused the planetesimal to brush against the solar corona every fifteen years causing the facing side to heat up to over three thousand degrees Kelvin. The third one showed signs that liquid water had once been present on its surface.

The fourth planet was the Sphere's primary focus. The H-Class planet was four thousand six hundred kilometres wide, one hundred and eighty three million kilometres from the parent star within the habitable zone, orbiting the home-star every four hundred and seventy two days. It possessed a solitary moon, tidal locked, scarred by myriad meteor bombardments.

The fourth planet's atmosphere was mostly oxygen, nitrogen with residual signs of carbon dioxide; levels had increased since the last scan not enough to destabilize the planet's ozone layer but it could happen one day. The Sphere made a careful analysis of the planet's magnetic field, specifically its present orientation comparing previous scans. The magnetosphere alignment had fluctuated well within acceptable parameters.

Snow and ice covered both poles by roughly one quarter. The main continental land mass stretched four hundred and fifty thousand kilometres dividing the planet's singular ocean neatly in two. The inner topography of the land mass was mountainous, forming a central spine curving for two thousand kilometres defining the edge of two major tectonic plates. Several dozen volcanoes pepper-potted the range; three were active. Deep valleys gouged through the mountain chain formed by several glaciations. On one side vast tundra plains stretched towards the northern pole while on the southern edge wide plateaus, marshlands and flood plains congregated around several river deltas.

Communication arrays, weather, mostly scientific in purpose. One structure in particular was a solar monitoring system that constantly analysed data from the star. The sensors located the trojan encrypted glyphs, buried deep within the Array's tertiary processors, downloaded into the system core two years previously.

It took less than six nano seconds for the codes to be sent, confirmed and the appropriate response boomeranged back. The procedure done, the sub-etheric link was allowed to flow back through a micro-wormhole to the Centre. With the command routines aware, the Sphere made final approach to the local star establishing geo-solar orbit.

By now, the star's ever-present solar wind rained hard upon the Sphere's surface. Ionised particles brushed against its surface producing auroras; shimmering curtains of dazzling light. At ten thousand million kilometres from the star, the Sphere slowed, stopped and waited. The gravity bubble maintained a fixed orbit, just above the star's equatorial belt. Sensor arrays scanned the composition of the star. It noted the arrangements of hydrogen atoms deep within the star's core, noted the rate of the proton-proton chain reaction with allowed hydrogen to fuse, firstly into deuterium then to helium. Fission was in process. It was in hydrostatic equilibrium. It had remained this way for four million years; the reaction ensuring that the star's mass and weight remained equal.

The Sphere waited the command...

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Kor reached the end of the corridor arriving at a set of double doors. Despite his enhancements his eyes could not perceive the interior of the Boardroom – as if somehow it occupied a separate dimension from surrounding reality. There was always a slight tingling through Kor's skin when he came near, more so as the doors swung open automatically as they detected his biopresence and allowed him passage into the conference chamber beyond.

Inside, the large room was a perfect oval, its walls banded by an incomplete mosaic which ran around its entire length. The mosaic was an amalgam of different styles from different cultures sharing a common denominator.

They were scenes of war and conflict.

Skrull soldiers from the House of the Red Leaves silhouetted against battlecruisers – weapons raised, poised to strike down proto Kree tribesmen – driving them out of paradise. Korbinite solar barges merged with Xenophage swarms – twisting and curling as they curved over Veradinae clansmen, holding aloft pikes crowded with severed heads – trophies for their Haalmhad overseers. Dozens of cultures from the beginning of the Universe, perhaps even before the ending of the Dark Age – moving forward to the peripheral future.

The newer parts of the mosaic were at the chamber's focal point where the Founder of the Veil Kartel sat on his plush seat of oak and leather; materials from his favourite world – a world renowned throughout the cosmos for its barbarism and brutality balanced with beauty and complexity which Kor had heard about but didn't desire to visit. A world that one of the Founder's own has spent thousand upon thousands of years watching and observing – something that the Founder himself had once done – until he took a different path.

Behind him, partly obscured by his large bald cranium containing an intellect that Kor reluctantly considered superior to his own – were gaps in the mosaic. These were reserved for the last war, the final war that would herald the Merger – the pre-ordained beginning and ending of not only this universe but all realities. Artisans would record the final moments – shaping the tesseri and placing them into the mosaic to complete an artwork that began millennia ago, a tableau of a solitary planet torn asunder by atomic fire – the fabled planet Procillious.

Most visitors had to "walk" down twenty-six steps made of translucent glass to reach the debating table but Kor turned his body sideways and arched his body, allowing one half of his form to transverse four steps at a time, then the rear half of his body the next and so on till he slid rather undignified onto the debating floor. He knew Sire Odal was watching; those white lidless eyes devoid of any notable irises scrutinizing his every move, momentarily glancing his eyes downwards as his large head allowed his nose to smell the sweet fragrance of the red petal Procillius blossom pinned above his top right pocket of his pinstripe suit; a flower in perpetual bloom.

Kor did his utmost to silently glide across the jet-black floor tiles, now feeling the tingling sensation subside. The tiles complimented the vaulted roof broken by a ring of biolum bulbs that gave off a cyan hue light. The main feature of the chamber was the table, also oval, thirty meters wide. It too was dark, blue flecked with gold streaks, almost organic. Twelve chairs were arranged around it; occupied by the higher echelons of the Kartel, their eyes and other sensory webs both scrutinizing the monthly reports while keeping a discreet but

subtle vigil on the Founder. Watchers were renowned for their patience and Odal maintained that trait, usually listening to meetings and only speaking when needed. Even so Odal has long since abandoned his Brethrens' Vows. Kor again saw in his mind's eye the Ba'vob's screaming. He hastily occupied a space that had been reserved for his serpentine form and prepared his work-station listening to the meeting that was already well under way...

"Session Item Twenty Three: Current retrieved assets from House Fiyero liquidation stands at ten point eight billion fusocredits. Fiscal profit at around eighteen percent. We are currently in a position to sell-off patented surplus stock acquired from the Tan-Vitor, to several buyers in the Pheragot Charter.

"We do have some interest with several Skrull warlords under the Esul Banner but since the collapse of the Skrull economy it is highly unlikely we will see any returns for at least five years. "

"Comments?"

"Sire Odal. It is my recommendation that we forestall any further negotiation with the Skrulls. Baroness S'Bak's hold on her alliance is tenuous at best; I have heard from close sources that her birthright claims are under investigation from several rival warlords; one of whom is claimed to be a legitimate heir to the Dorrek crest. However I agree we should proceed with the Pheragot; they are ripe for exploitation."

"Any objections? Motion passed."

"Session Item Twenty Four: Update regarding the United Defence Initiative. Status report?"

"Since its ratification by the Verge Security Council under the 268 Agreement, they have currently placed over 49 verge sectors within their jurisdiction. We had endeavoured to achieve means to infiltrate the organization with due thanks to our illustrious Client. "

"...and the last Nova?"

"He remains a substantial threat to ongoing operations. Without being disrespectful Sire; should we find a means to extract ourselves from his purview?"

"There is a contingency in hand. For now, our arrangement will remain intact. Continue to monitor events regarding the Terran. Irrespective of his loyalties or his belligerence I still find him most fascinating. Now lets continue to the main item for today's meeting. Session Item Twenty Five: Project Starscream. I will remind you all that confidentiality purge clauses are in full effect. Darmon Kor. Proceed". "

Kor spoke, his speech was augmented by a voice modulator, taking away the hissing quality that most Omicronions had when they spoke their own language.

"Thank you Sire Odal. At fifty nine cycles Sphere 55/o97 successfully established geo-solar synchronous orbit. As per established protocols the Sphere made a baryonic sweep of the planetary system and acquired link-up through established polymorphic algorithms. I have received telemetric data on the present eco/social structure for the primary objective. Delvedia conforms to a level zero two civilizations on the Kardeshev scale. The substituted archetype has been most successful. They pose no threat to the project. The star is atypical of this region. G-class; one point nine million kilometres wide; mass one point three seven to the power of thirty. Surface temperature averages five thousand Celsius; core temperature eighteen million Celsius."

In front of the Board a series of rotating holographic schematics appeared cross sections of the Sphere, dissected one layer at a time. First, the outer dermal hull, ranging between five and fifteen kilometres in thickness resting of a curving matrix of inter-connecting plates, forty in all, measuring over fifty kilometres square.

One the "plates" lifted away, allowing each Board Member a "bird's eye perspective" to undertake an imaginary journey into the heart of the construct. They travelled down one of the venting ports, a curving structure two kilometres wide ending in a concentric aperture beyond which was the Outer Core chamber. The chamber was vast, taking up most of the Sphere's internal volume. Radiating flexions diverged from the Sphere's inner core where its primary power systems, navigation and intelligentsia data-cortical nodes were housed. Above and below, star-lifting generators soaked up ambient power harvested from previous targets fuelling the Sphere's metabolic processes.

"I have made several modifications to the Sphere's defensive grid over concerns of potential detection after final calibrations were conducted. Throughout the procedure you will receive live update from the surface to monitor the effects on the Delvedia culture as well as the transmogrification synthesis interacting with the star's internal structure. As per pre-conscribed regulations from previous test subjects I will begin with a subtle demonstration. Setting initial output to generate an X-Fifteen surge."

One the holo screen; graphics indicated power radiating from the Sphere's interior, travelling outwards to the vast structure's skin. The Board watched in anticipation waiting to see what would happen next...

On its surface, eighty three portals opened. From within clouds of exotic black particles swam forth. If an observer had been present they would have great difficulty seeing the cloud against the black of space. They were true darkness, alive almost giddy with excitement as they flowed towards the star's photosphere.

The particles followed the star's flux waves heading towards the star's poles. The Sphere followed their progress, sending streams of data back to the Hub, watching as the particles now passing through the star's surface headed deep down into it towards the star's metallic core. Normally energy from the core would take one million giga-cycles to work its way to the star's surface.

Matter from the star's surface would take the same amount of time to return to the star's core, flowing through a complex arrangement of convection currents and eddies. But the particles from the sphere were from the dawn of creation. They sang to the star, whispered false truths. The ghost cried out, desperate to stop the atrocity. It slammed against the confines of its cell but the cell held. It then heard the sound.

And for the first time in its four point five billion year old life, the Oracle wept.



Delvedia Oranilis. The day the Oracle cried.

**W**hen Tei-Sha'qui first opened her eyes she had to blink them several times. The Oracle was shining directly in her face as she lay on her bed, the light partly scattered by sliver-hued leaves that waved slightly in the morning breeze. She moved aside the blankets and bare-footed tip-toed across her room and out onto the balcony. She looked across the street as her home-block boarded one the city's municipal parks. She often went to the park after school, walking along the avenue of trees intermingled with Halthri bushes to the large open space where she and her friends played till early evening. The Halthri bushes sprouted yellow blooms every summer and the best time to pick them was in the evening when they were in bloom.

She loved the smell of the flowers; so too did her mother. She'd often pick a few blooms, taking care not to damage the fragile flowers before returning home. Before having supper she would find a suitable vase, fill it with water and arrange them on the dinner table. Tei-Sha'qui could tell how long the summer was going to last before the autumn storms would arrive, the blooms would be bright yellow when they first appeared; by the end of their cycle they would be golden.

As she stood on the balcony, she could hear distant sounds as the city came to life, the neo-baroque towers standing proud above the tree-line. Overhead, the first inter-continental cruisers were arriving from the Outlands and Delta-Sectors carrying commuters to their high-rise office blocks. Others would use the Metro which looped the city several times while others who were more energetic would take the Undercity and walk to work.

Normally her morning routine would go something like this. She would go to the bathroom and wash and put on her school uniform. She would then make sure that her art-pad was fully charged and that she'd fed her pet before having her own breakfast. Her mother would have prepared her food and placed it in the cold-store the night before to take to school. Then at eight cycles she would hear her mother tell her that she was ready to leave and together they would walk to the nearest station some ten minutes away. But today was different. Today was special. Today was her Seventh. And what was the best bit, she didn't have to go to school!

It was well after nine cycles that she finally went downstairs, now wearing one of her favourite dresses. Cards were on the mantelpiece in the communal living room. Her parents flat was one of six; each flat had a kitchen, bathroom and three rooms, two designated for sleep with the optional third could be converted into another sleep area or used for some other designated purpose. In their flat, Father had converted the room into a study that he used as an office as he mostly worked from home. In the evenings before dinner she would use the room with its Intel-Sec for homework. Father was also an Archaic. He loved old things. He had been a member of the Scientifica' Historical wing before things changed; a sad time that Father rarely wanted to talk about.

For a time Father was without work. They lost their lovely home out in the Velt and had to move back to the city. Mother's job ensured they didn't go hungry but things looked bleak. But eventually, blessed by the Oracle, things changed for the better. Father got a new job thanks to someone he knew at the Senate. Nothing special. A simple administration job five days; adequate pay to make a down payment on a vacant flat in the Commune District. And they'd been here ever since.

Most of the items in Father's study were well over three hundred years old. He collected earthenware pots and relics of the bygone age when the world was greener, more open. He also collected scrolls and parchments that he stored in tubes. Occasionally he would let her see them and she often looked with wonder at the drawings etched on their rough surface; feeling the contours of the ink. She loved drawing herself. And that was why when she saw the cards she remembered why she could not see any gifts. Her Father as a special treat was going to take her to the Arcade where he would buy her a new upgraded Art-pad.

She looked through her cards and noted Mother was cooking a late breakfast wearing a Halthrri bloom hooked around her right ear. Father was observing the news. The screen flickered uncontrollably, becoming blurred.

"What's the matter with the Box, Father?"

Father glanced up and noting her Daughter's expression smiled to comfort her.

"Nothing to worry about. All that matters today is you have a good Seventh."

He got up and commanded the Intel-net to go on stand-by.

"Let's have breakfast and get ready to go shopping. Mother's made you Savron Cakes!"

"How Many!"

"Loads! If you can't ingest them all now we'll save a few for afternoon I can always put a few in my satchel."

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At eleven cycles, Father, holding her hand tightly took her to the nearest entry to the Undercity. Mother walked beside them. She wore shades to cover her eyes as she felt the glare of the sun was too bright.

By now the Oracle was overhead and the azure sky was almost cloudless. Ahead the pathway sloped downhill to the Tunnel which bi-sected a large open communal space where at weekends many citizens would congregate and spend leisure time with their own families. She could see her reflection in the aqua-flow that ran parallel to the path. Her black circular eyes stared back at her and she could smell the texture of the water through her neck gills. She saw her green pigment in her hands turn blue as the water cooled her supple skin. She let go of Father's hand and for a moment placed her hand in the cool water.

It was warm. Much warmer.

She would be glad to go into the Undercity to get some shade. She got up and Father extended one of his three digits and she held his hand again. Then she and her Parents walked down into the Undercity. She glanced at the Oracle as it shined over-head before its glare, notably brighter, was blocked by the curving roof of the tunnel. The only thing that illuminated them now was biolum tubes that lined the walls every thirty paces. Strips of artificial light that gave out some heat if you stood by one for a few minutes. She felt the cool air as it circulated along the tunnel by hidden fans. At the time, the family didn't realize it, but it would be the last time they and everyone on the daylight side would perceive the Oracle as a thing of wonder....

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The star spasmed.

A surge of uncontrollable energy rippled from the star's core, the hydrogen/helium balance went into hyperdrive as atoms collided with the alien particles that rode the convection currents, travelling down lines of magnetic flux.

The particles pierced the outer shells of the hydrogen atoms, invading their nuclei. Each was an individual part of a collective molecular predator; its power was derived from drawing in the vast reserves of heat and light from surrounding matter accelerating its processes while maintaining a link with the Sphere that orbited the star.

Now they got to work, following the dictates of the program and the destructive process that would be unleashed. The energy ripple reached the star's photosphere in less than three minutes. Violent storms ripped across its surface; fusing sunspots in several large masses forty thousand kilometres wide. It was like a dark cancer was rising out the star's heart.

Coronal Mass Ejections burst forth from the star's surface in rapid succession, arcs of ionised super hot plasma threw themselves at the star's vast magnetic blanket; it pushed it out further. Streams of super-dense particles charged the solar wind, intensified it, and made it a wild uncontrolled force that spread out from the star into surrounding space. The Sphere felt the storm momentarily wash over its surface before passing by, gaining momentum as it spread out towards the star's planetary bodies.

Two more surges, each controlled by the alien particles that lay like ebon parasites in the star's core,



followed the primary surge. They caught up with the initial surge as the geomagnetic storm front passed over the surface of Delvedia's first planetesimal. It gained strength from the second and third surges. It would take less than fifteen minutes before it would reach the habitable zone.

By then, its pent-up energies would hit the planet's magnetosphere with devastating efficiency; its present alignment would not rebuff the wave. It would welcome it. The daylight side would be the worst affected; the storm would cause problems for several hours even as the surge itself would continue on, travelling to the system's outer edge till finally it would lose momentum and dissipate as it hit the heliopause.

By then, the fourth world would be in dire straits.

Far, far away, on Kor's holographic screen the Veil Kartel's Board observed the surge as it made its way to the primary objective. Kor remained silent, monitoring the telemetry and hoping his job and his life would remain intact...

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Three thousand kilometres above the planet's western hemisphere in La-Grange Point One, locked in geostationary orbit was a cluster of twenty-three modular satellites. To the Scientifica, its official nomenclature was the Geo-Observation-Solar-Array. Figuratively known as "God's Eye".

"God's Eye"; cutting edge technology funded by the Tan-Keirt Corporation at a cost of over sixteen billion fusocredits which included modernization of the Helio Observation wing at the Scientifica. A precedence which had been debated very rigorously at the Senate during several parliamentary sessions.

Principal visionary for the project included Tansal-dar Mal-dran've, devoted Reformist, who promised it to be the start of a new golden age of scientific discovery. Opposition to the project came from the Lobbyist Movement; a dying breed, many older statesmen who considered the project a violation of the sacred texts; that the infernal machine would defile the sanctity of the Oracle. Most wanted to keep science, on the ground, so to speak, satisfied that the wonders of the universe were best kept to realms of myths and legends.

The Reformists drove home the argument that Delvedia had to move forward. For centuries the planet maintained its isolationist stance. Twenty four yarns ago when the movement finally acquired power the first tentative trade links were established with nearby Verge systems. Trade was brisk with an influx of new technologies and concepts creating new businesses keen to take a share in the relaxed tax incentive pilot schemes. Employment opportunities soared leading to a fourteen year long exodus from the outlying districts as the last of the Founders swapped the idyllic existence of life in the vast Velts for prospects in the now expanding metropolis built around a flotilla of small islands located in the central Ansah'lt Delta.

Exports rights came next. The planet was rich in metals and minerals that proliferated in great abundance. And not only from the planet's singular land mass: the vast oceans provided a wealth of proteins and minerals buried beneath the sea bed. Remote drone-ships were constructed (as certain taboos still stigmatised the culture....but for how long?), fleets which made quarterly sojourns to nearby systems.

Delvedia's economy boomed. Even so critics soon began to attack certain aspects of the Reformist nouveau riche. They saw partial declines in education and ancillary services. Cutbacks in vital services; money was invested in sciences while domestic issues were left on the debating room floor. Only when a series of outbreaks on Hal'thi Flu, a contagion long thought eradicated broke out in several low-rate Districts did the Senate act. An intensive program of inoculations commenced costing over eighty five thousand fusocredits over a three Yarn period. The virus was contained once more but it was a timely warning. Improvements began, but they were slow and remained a point of controversy to the present day.

A new generation of trans-orbital drone-ships were constructed to ferry twenty three modules constituting the Array to La Grange point one. Each module was designed and constructed by independent Technoparks utilizing concepts provided by the Scientifica, mostly affiliated to the Tan-Kerit Corporation. The modules were assembled in orbit by remote controlled robotic drones; which Yarns before had successfully deployed the Intel-net communication arrays. The final module was a special occasion; the installation was witnessed by the population on Intel-Net broadcasts. The new golden age began and as an acknowledgement, the array was christened God's Eye. It was a bitter blow to the Lobbyists. But maybe they had visions of things to come.

Online, God's Eye began to make detailed helio-statistical analysis of the Oracle's composition. It probed the star in every way imaginable. It studied the star's magnetosphere, observed prominences and CME's during solar eclipses. It began to work out a mathematical model to formulate detection of geo-solar storms: still a hazy science at best. It compared the data to historical archives; enabling the Scientifica to give some degree of

reference to potential Category Five incidents.

And yet despite all its technological prowess and triumphs; Gods' Eye at the point where its scrutiny of the Oracle could have fore-warned the Delvedians of the impending disaster failed to do so because despite its technological prowess and triumphs; the array was corrupted; the Kartel subroutines, now active once more, exploiting the very purpose for which it had been designed.

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The storm surge enveloped Delvedia's magnetosphere at precisely Eleven Thirty One Cycles DMT. Fourteen minutes prior to which a significant super-flare event was witnessed by many citizens. No one was prepared as to what happened next.

The Vantok-Kharma, eighty tons of streamlined commuter pride of the JAN-MetroSile, was making its daily passage across the centre of the city en route to the commerce district when its Nav-Com crashed. Seconds later, the ship's pilots and two hundred passengers found themselves in free-fall as energetic electrons and ions arced through vital components, shutting the engines down. They wouldn't re-engage. Co-Pilot An-terer'i sent a Ten Forty Three to EmedProcCen and advised them of the situation. He, and his co-pilot, tried to control the flight path of the ship.

An-terer'i glanced momentarily through the left-hand windscreen and his pupils dilated; his pre-frontal lobes blitzed by the unfolding horror that he saw outside. What he saw was beyond understanding at first. What he saw his mind tried to shut-out, to ignore the visuals, to accept what he witnessed was impossible.

He saw dozens and dozens of ships, various sizes, shapes and colours. They were falling. Miners. Mini-Commuters. Inter-Continental Transports. His acute hearing couldn't make out any sound, just like the Kharma, he could hear no engine noise coming from the stricken vessels. What he could hear were the distant sounds of explosions. Visuals took up the columns of smoke rising from the cityscape below. He mentally counted twelve, no fourteen, no another.

Then he heard the Captain's urgent voice telling him to keep alert, to hold the yoke steady and keep the vessel's alignment in near perfect horizontal pitch. His sub consciousness recalled lectures regarding engine failure:

*In the unlikely scenario when one engine becomes inoperative, torque will develop experientially disrupting centre of gravity. The torque effect will force the aircraft's nose to yaw laterally towards the inoperative engine. It is more desirable that the left-hand engine fails than the right as expediential P-Force is greater in the event of left-engine failure....*

"Switch to inner fuels tanks!!...come on!", a voice said, breaking memory flow.

"Switching". An-terer'i flicked a switch overhead. No light came on. "Not responding!"

"Switch back!!"

An-terer'i complied but still no welcoming green light.

*However in the event of total engine failure, a one in ten billion probability....*

"There's no current, nothing! Everything's offline...."

"Speed and Height?"

An-terer'i glanced at the altimeter. Just under four thousand...

*...It's advisable to begin immediate circling recovery procedure. Ensure that drag speed is maintained within two hundred kts, gear and flaps up. Maintain curvature relative to the designated emergency landing zone. Ensure direct visual contact with the touchdown zone...lower flaps at....*

The cabin shook. The torque stress was causing ripples along the hull, buckling the plates. If the warning lights were operating, An-terer'i would have seen lines of red. The ailerons were keeping the vessel from rolling, just, but the yoke was getting harder to hold....

Outside the cityscape was getting nearer.

Two thousand and dropping.

The Captain was scouring the city line; noting landmarks. Sydron Plaza was on the port side. District Seven on the other. Where were the open spaces? Parks. Late afternoon on a hot Summer's Day. Was it a school holiday? How could he contact EmedProcCen to clear them for a Dead pike Return? Could they make it to the river? Ditch the craft there. If they did ditch in the river would the floaters disengage?

Two hundred passengers aboard.

Two hundred frightened passengers.

Double engine failure was a one in ten million possibility.

*...and pray to the Oracle for its divine guidance...*

An-terer'i remembered the last words one of the ship's valets made on the intercom before it malfunctioned. She commented that the Oracle had got notably brighter. The words chilled An-terer'i's isis; had the Oracle forsaken them?

Commuters on the Metro at ninety five points around the loop suddenly found the cubicles of their District Shuttles shaking violently. They were screaming as the cubicles suddenly left the magneto tracks at eighty gees and crashed into nearby buildings, fell into the streets below or impacted heavily against the reinforced walls of the underground tunnels that were located in the business district near to the Arcade.

There were several explosions and eyewitnesses reported that two of the main stations near to Sydron Plaza were engulfed in flames. Many bystanders will also killed when the San-Dart crashed into the central terminus in District One.

Fires broke out in nine utility tunnels when the grid overloaded in District Four...

Patients at the MediCen in District Eight found themselves without life-support. EmedProcCen sent one crew; they were already over-stretched.

Surges ruptured every major transformer that supplied power to the city grid from the main reactor. The transformer's coils burst. Back-ups endeavoured to compensate but these too failed to halt the cascade. The power flow fluctuated and parts of the city lost power, each sector was affected one at a time.

The surge continued outwards affecting outlying communities in the suburbs bordering the Velt. Technicians at the reactor closed off safety valves to the fusion chamber to prevent any potentiality of a melt-down if the venting system failed to re-initialise.

They were lucky. In hours the reactor could be re-initialized but for the next several cycles the city would be effectively without full power. Residual power was diverted to maintain the MediCENS but most parts of the metropolis would have to rely on bio-tech substitutes.

Biolum lights went off in the Undercity. Tei-Sha'qui and her family were walking in the central arcade, a massive five level hall that held over two hundred outlets. A large dome of crystal, thirty meters wide, was the only natural source of illumination. Ornate banners of blue, red and bronze hung at intervals beside the towering supporting columns while a large water feature fed by several major aqua-flows that collected centrally in the arcade reflected the blue sky above. Music wafted over the din as shoppers went about their business. Tei-Sha'qui asked her father what was happening. He didn't know. Then someone shouted on one of the balconies and was pointing up towards the dome. It rained metal...

The Vantok-Kharma banked at a sick angle well over seventy-five degrees port. It hit the glass commerce building, one of twin towers that was a prominent landmark at one hundred and fifty kilometres per second and ploughed straight through it.

Glass rained onto the street below followed by a loud rushing sound as the tower, now showing a sizable gap cutting into floors seventy-three to ninety, sheared off mid-way above the observation deck. Stress waves continued down the inner superstructure towards the base. Onlookers watched as the falling shard hit the dome of the Arcade, sending a cloud of glass, smoke and dust heavenwards. Seconds later the rest of the tower collapsed onto the periphery of Arcade Plaza. Its twin miraculously remained intact.

The Vantok-Kharma continued to fall, smoke and flames pouring from the underside of the vessel as it had impacted with the tower. It crashed some half a kilometre deep into District Six. There were multiple explosions. Another plume of dark smoke rose up towards the blue sky joining the others over the city....

The commerce building hit the Arcade dome; causing the grand edifice to buckle inwards. Terrified citizens, having already heard the loud drone of the ship's engines passing overhead; the blue sky blotted out as if a large metal bird had swooped overhead, ran in all directions, down walkways, into side malls and stairwells towards the exits. Many ran into one another, people fell to the floor, terrified and crying as blind panic gripped the shoppers. They ran, not watching as the ornate water feature cracked open, liquid water went everywhere.

Tei-Sha'qui saw people falling off the balconies; her father picked her up and covered her eyes, asking her to close them tight. He grabbed his wife and they ran, part of the multitude, to the nearest malls that would lead to undercity exits. Then the air was filled with a loud roar; dust filled the side arcades and Father saw a space under a nearby stairwell as the cloud of dust and smoke and debris came like a San Dart behind them. The family hid under there and they held each other tightly. Mother asked if the Oracle was angry. Father didn't reply. They

heard several explosions in the distant but Father couldn't tell how far they were away. The smoke came and darkness enveloped them...

By nightfall, auroras blanketed the sky in a blaze of colour; dazzling curtains of light in multi-hued waves swooped and danced over the stricken city as the storm surge energised the planet's magnetosphere. Columns of flame and smoke rose from the Districts obscuring the display. The effect covered some eighty hundred kilometres from the planet's poles. One of the communication arrays was still operational; the rest were not responding. God's Eye had gone into self sustained hibernation; power back-ups had switched on maintaining its artificially induced gravity field.

At fifty-three cycles, a hastily convened session of the Senate declared a state of emergency hoping to attract the attention of the nearby Santris System. The appropriate codes were transmitted via one of the still operational communication arrays. Santris replied and informed the Senate that they would transmit an eight x eight universal code for immediate assistance and would inform the Senate of any immediate reply.

At fifty-four cycles the Under-Secretary informed Vice-Minister Kiv-ch that the body of Alpha Prime Ansar had been found in his private chambers. He had apparently committed suicide; a sign of atonement for the grave error of misjudgement he had made upon his people.

The Board watched as the Sphere observed the effects of the storm front. Piggyback telemetrics were intercepted and feed onto the screens. They painted a picture of abstract chaos on the surface below.

Kor studied the squirts and looked at the Founder, his black lidless eyes endeavouring to elicit a favoured response. He smiled. But then Kor noted a series of coded signals coming from the besieged planet. He ran an encrypted algorithm and noted the result. His tongue flickered uncontrollably. Sire Odal noted the response..

"The Delvedians are transmitting a standard emergency response", he informed the Board with a tone edged with worry and foreboding.

"As predicted. And it will be mostly likely the United Defence Initiative will reply. I take it you have made necessary precautions if the Sphere is discovered?"

"Within parameters, Sire", Kor said, endeavouring to remain calm and confident.

"Good. "

Sire Odal rose from his seat and walked towards his private sanctum.

"We will take a recess and reconvene in five hours." With that the doors to the Chair's private Sanctum opened and he retired within, the doors closing behind him with silent affirmation.

The room darkened and Kor was left alone. He was still alive. Still in favour. But even so he was still nervous. He checked his calibrations and prepared the Sphere for the eventual main phase. He shared the viewpoint that the Centurion was a potential problem, but part of him felt the Board underestimated the exact level of threat the UDI posed. It was wise to take precautions, he thought, just in case the unthinkable happened.

Kor monitored the Sphere. It was sleeping now and yet there on his display a light was still blinking. Despite his earlier modifications before coming to the meeting the glitch was still there; it tail-tell presence a dark shade of Sire Odal's favourite color.

Red.



### Cerebral Log/ Richard J. Rider – Entry 35.7 CMO/UDI Alpha Rider One

I looked around the city and felt a sense of sheer loss in my heart reflecting the shadow creeping over the face of the local star overhead, a cancer that would end very soon. I made a mental comparison of how warm it had been when I first came to this planet two days ago.

The humidity in the air was like those few days I'd spent in Brazil years ago when I lost contact with my high school pen-pal. Back then things were a lot simpler compared to what I had on my plate these days. The villains were easier to defeat, easier to identify cause they tended to wear costumes that would only look appropriate at Halloween. Nowadays, bad guys wear grey and their motives a far cry from just wanting to overthrow a nation or rule the world – most seem only content to take over the universe or several at once, or do the kind of activities that make your skin crawl. Whatever the evil one constant remains; innocents always get hurt and then its up to folks like me to try and pick up the pieces.

Across the plaza, skyscrapers soared high into the purple tinged sky; glass reflecting grey clouds streaking overhead while the ones due east, their windows polarized, reflected rays from the corrupted sun. Separating the city blocks were walkways, some elevated, most were at ground level, their edges defined by aqua-flows and avenues of trees with exotic blue foliage. I'd learned from Xander that before they'd embraced technology Delvedians were originally farmers having given up their primal Fred Flintstone instincts. The aqua-flows were a reminder of that pre-technological era where crops were irrigated from the waters of the huge river delta where the modern day city resided. The soft trickling sound of crystal clear water flowed into many pools and fountains dotted all over the metropolis.

As I watched the last groups of survivors heading for the embarkation phase points, my 2ND CEO, Peter Quill was endeavouring to tell me that we'd be done in less than twenty minutes. His voice was momentarily drowned out as several dozen shuttles flew overhead. Before the UDI had arrived Delvedia's own emergency services were at breaking point. It had been tough even for me in the first few hours arriving as the solitary city faced the greatest disaster it had ever befallen. It showed on the faces of every EmedProCen volunteer.

The Op was going smoothly, mostly thanks to Mari's tenacity and making sure I kept her and Peter well apart. For a Rigellian, Mari could easily kick Quill's butt right across the planet – not bad for someone that stood just one metre and one hand tall.

Peter though had thankfully kept his usual wise cracks in the can, focussing his cybernetic eye squarely on the planet-vac; women and children first, then families. To speed things up we'd opted to use phasers. Fifty embarkation points were eventually set-up, porting Delvedians up to the UDI Adora. We had room to spare thanks to the Xandarian tesseract chambers on decks nine through eleven. As a token gesture, the Senate and officials would leave last then it would be our turn to finally go, our work here done.

The only ones we'd not taken were the fallen, those that had succumbed to rad sickness. Their isali had departed with Areshema, leaving behind shells, true dead that no longer cared, their physical bodies covered beneath ceremonial funeral shrouds, eyes closed, skin growing cold to the touch, faces forever frozen just like the poor souls I'd seen dead and dying on the battlefields of Talaxia Major, Tet-Seventeen. Frozen screenshots of the dying in the snow slicked streets of Orienta...

I shook my head to clear my thoughts.

I looked back up towards the sun. It was definitely colder. I could feel goose-bumps even though my suit kept my body temperature constant. It was a sign that time was finally running out. I saw Ti-mon with his wife Vel'thli walking up the stairs towards me with Tel-shal-qui clinging to him. She was one tough little girl considering what she'd gone through, what they'd all gone through. I cast my mind back remembering the events that had unfolded here.



Cerebral Log/ Richard J. Rider – Entry 32.1 CMO/UDI Alpha Rider One –  
65 hours ago (Delvedian Standard Time)

Delvedia was in half-shadow with Se'lis, its solitary grey, lifeless moonlet just disappearing behind the planetary disc as I got closer. I could see shifting multi-hued ribbons of light dancing around the poles; aurora, arcing eloquently along the lines of magnetic flux. They were beautiful, but I'm certain the Delvedians weren't appreciating their artistic merits. They were too busy surviving.

Beyond Delvedia the starscape was dominated by a cosmic landmark that I'd seen several times during my hops back and forth from Andromeda C to the A ring but this was the first time I'd actually paid it some attention.

For all intent and purpose part of the starscape was missing, want for a better word. Okay then, try this. The Xandarian astrometrical term for it was a "Pan-spatial displacement cold-zone, known on most starcharts as Arion's Veil. Peter called it the "Inkblot". Okay, you think of a better description looking at it cause that's exactly what the thing looked like. A giant jet black "smear", a million light years wide obscuring every star and planetary body behind it.

From this angle, I could see part of the Andromeda C Spiral poking out from the left-and side making it look more like a ying/yang symbol. In the dim distant past the Xandarians had sent probes into the Inkblot. They'd determined that the whole area was a void. Just nothingness.

The whole thing was a blip on the background radiation map. There were theories that the whole thing was composed of Dark Energy; something akin to Darkforce, that gloopy tar-like sentient crap that once smothered Manhattan Island during my New Warriors days, the same kinda foul cold stuff that Asylum used to

nearly drive me nuts.

Whatever it was made of, not many had an absolute, sure-fire, certain, bone-fide answer. It was a farking puzzle that gave more questions than answers. Some even though the Inkblot was the place where the first primordial atom had exploded, you know the whole "let there be light" kinda thing. But then again there's about a thousand such spots scattered across the known Universe. String them together would make one hell of a cosmic cruise. I didn't want to believe that; but then again considering how I saw Galactus decimate a third of the Annihilation Wave in an all encompassing release of pent up Cosmic Energy then anything's possible. Especially out here.

Looking at the Inkblot the thing really spooked me. I felt a cold spot down the back of my neck just looking at it. One thing for sure. I certainly didn't want to go any nearer to it. So I averted my gaze and looked to my right to the local star feeling the warmth on my face even so the star was over one point five AU away.

Xander conveniently placed an hydrogen-alpha filter over my eyes to ensure I didn't go blind. I wanted a much closer look. The star's surface appeared in tri-chromatic shades of yellow and green; white flares were visible around the edge of the disc. It looked angry. I could also see a small "black" dot just below the star's equator; probably a small inner planet crossing the face in close orbit.

Dad told me about it once. He told me its called "transiting". Both Mercury and Venus do it every few years when they're in a particular alignment with Earth. Xander assured me that for the moment the star was in a lull state; the solar wind was dropping to levels ore in line with the solar minimum, but they never stopped. Even so it could be the proverbial quiet. The star could generate another surge. Worse than the one before. If it did I'd have to take that into consideration. Eight point nine million Delvedians were below, mostly living, surviving in one concentrated urban cityscape. Made it easy for a general evac so I asked Xander to send a Priority Five to Peter in case I needed back-up.

As I approached the planet my helmet's HUD picked up several metallic trace signatures in orbit around the planet. Xander identified them as communication satellites. Some were inoperative and were a potential worry. Without power to sustain their artificial La-Grange force fields, they would begin to fall back towards the planet below, caught in the planet's gravitational pull.

In all probability they'd either burn-up in the atmosphere upon re-entry or if they did survive the heat as they plunged through the atmosphere they'd crash into the ocean covering two-thirds of the planet's surface. The chance they'd make landfall was pretty remote and considering Xander told me that Delvedia had one primary urban concentration the chances one of the satellites hitting that were infinitesimal. Even so they had miniature ion cores so I took no chances and decided to take appropriate precautions. I used a gravimetric scoop to nudge each satellites out into a wider geo-centric orbit, making sure that they were made safe.

One satellite was fully operational, the source of the eight x eight transmission. It kept a geo-synchronous fix above the Delvedian conurbation, staying some one thousand kilometres above the city. Its power was fluctuating but a quick re-charge ensured that it would stay functioning. The largest signature belonged to a vast structure that looked like a series of metallic pyramids attached to a complicated frame of inter-connecting beams and struts forming a torus about a kilometre wide. In the centre of which was a series of inter-connecting cylinders. Projecting from the torus were six large solar panels, reflecting starlight from the local sun. Xander analysed it.

*Solar observation array, Richie, Xander informed me. I still get the heebie-jeebies when he speaks because he sounds exactly like my little brother. Not surprising since Worldmind decided as an in-joke to use my memory engrams of Robert Rider to create Xander's core personality guide matrix.*

*Two tons, poly carbonate silicate composite, remote operated from the Scientifica located in the Delvedian conurbation. Several of its systems have crashed including its Anisotropic Detection grid..*

*Which is as if you think I know what an Anisotropic Detection doo-hickey does Xander...*

*...Its function, coupled with the various other scientific instrumentation encased in the modules...*

*The pyramids?*

*The pyramid record hemispherical activity on the surface of the local star. Solar Wind density and stream flux. Monitoring formation of sunspot activity which itself is a pre-cursor to formation of coronal mass ejection phenomena, CME's....*

*...that in turn form geo-solar storms...*

*Correct.*

*Jeez. I get a gold badge for excellence!*

I was pulling Xander's leg of course. I'd heard about S.O.H.O from my brother Rob, the Rider family's

resident science geek. Often than not I'd end up listening to one of his lectures while we sat at the table eating dinner, or playing monopoly or helping him build one of his revolutionary inventions in the workshop Dad had kitted out in the cellar. Rob was a bone-fide Futurist; he'd give a Richards or Stark a run for their money any day of the week. Sure my mind went a total blank hearing about how he'd converted a gas boiler into a weather prediction doo-hickey but that was Rob and that was what I admired about him, that brother-mine, his sheer drive to do something worthwhile. Must run in the Rider family gene-pool. Rob got his love of science from Dad whereas I loved the sci-fi kinda side of things. Star Trek. Star Wars. But sometimes I'd get a peek into how things really work.

I know looking at a star is a risky business. I remember one afternoon when we were kids, me and Rob spent time with Dad in the back garden. Dad had taken a break from building a tree house in the big Sugar Maple. He found his old telescope which had spent most of the time gathering dust in the attic and set it up. He positioned the telescope on top a slightly wobbly tripod which he had to stabilize with a phone directory to keep it still and tilted the aperture upwards to the sun overhead, making sure to keep the lens cap on. I remember watching Dad with amused interest. He was back then Principal of Harry S. Trueman High having been recommended for the position three years previously by Mr Frazer, one of the School's senior Governors and head of the Parents Teachers Association. Before that Dad had been Head Teacher of the Science Department, astronomy was a particularly favourite subject of his. When Dad finished adjusting the telescope he asked Rob to bring over a large piece of white card from off the table on the veranda kept in place by a dinner plate as it was slightly breezy despite the sunshine.

"Now just hold that card, steady as you can. Keep it in front of the eyepiece while I remove the lens-cap."

Dad reached up and removed the cap, not looking at the lens which now captured the rays of the sun which had just emerged from behind grey clouds.

"Now both of you. Look at the card. Tell me what you see?", Dad asked.

Brother Rob looked at the card and there, as if by magic, appeared a slightly fuzzy white disc.

"That's the sun Rich.", Robert replied.

"Gee. I didn't realize that!", I said sarcastically; as I slapped my forehead to let Rob know I was paying attention.

"It's ninety-three million miles away. It takes about eight minutes for light to travel the distance between our Sun and the Earth so the Sun you actually "see" is always eight minutes into the past, never the present."

"Does that mean that all those stars I see at night...", Rob gasped in amazement.

"Are in the past too.", Dad completed the sentence. "The further away they are, the longer it takes for their light to reach us. The next nearest star is Proxima Centauri. Its over four light years away so essentially its four years into our past. Good, Robert."

"What are those dots?"

"Sunspots. They form when the surface of the sun drops below the standard temperature which is roughly twenty thousand degrees. They look small but in reality some can measure our six thousand miles in diameter. They'd swallow Earth whole."

Me and Rob smiled in synchronization. It was one of the few occasions where we shared quality time with Dad. Where something deep down seemed to click into place. But as he grew older those "Dad and Sons moments" became a rarity. Dad buried himself more and more into his job determined to ensure the school kept its pristine reputation, spending less and less at home and more time at the office surrounded by paperwork and duty reports. I had other things on his mind too. My grades were always slipping and I knew that if I didn't study hard I'd never make to College, let alone earn enough money to rent an apartment and ask Ginger to move in with me (hoping a landlord would tolerate her tastes in pets). In the end science remained Rob's calling, he ended up working for a Science Institute on Long Island while I ended up becoming what I'd always dreamed of being having fallen in love with superhero comics when I was knee-high to a grasshopper.

*I can squirt a heal/repair sub-routine...*

*Better do it, discreetly.*

*There's something else Richie. A dual looping sub-etheric transmission coming from the Array's tertiary systems. Data snow is being uploaded to a location thirty kilometres west of the city. The other is a reoccurring fifteen nano-second loop beaming towards the local star.*

*Any ideas what the transmission contains?*

*It's encrypted. Do you wish me to...*

*Go ahead – keep me updated.*

I looked at the planet below. A third of the four thousand kilometre wide sphere was in shadow. I could see flickering lights around the poles; Aurora. One quarter of the planet's surface had been affected as the planet rotated on its axis.

*Rich, I've accessed EmedProcCen; uploading a current live-assessment translog to your visor...*

- 10-33 Damage sustained to metro-line. for ty-five situations in progress
- 10-33 oblique 70 Fires in thirty-eight primaries. Twenty-three Secondaries. Probabl y cause: Proton Surge causing dysfunction to transformers; fracturing of main conduits in syron flow linkages. Note shut-down to loop surrounding solitary fusion reactor. Overload. Presently Minimal
- 10-33 oblique 71 Structural collapse of primary infrastructure located with vicinity of central core habitation.
- 10-33 oblique 71 Structural collapse of primary infrastructure located with vicinity of central business and plaza and industrial complex in Nerva District. Cause: Major malfunction to transport shuttle. Crash team to retrieve black-box for verification. Fires in progress. Number of Casualties. Refer to EmedProcCen. Number of missing: Unknown. Number of survivors: Unknown. Rescue in progress.
- 10-53 Blockages to primary routes to med-Com facilities.
- 10-52 Casualties: refer to EmedProcCen
- 10-78 Storm front currently being monitored: Approach South-West. Precipitation: Forecast: high.
- God's Eye currently off-line. Unable to update on present Orac...

It was grave. Really bad. So I upped the Priority Five to a Three and sent it to Peter to rally the troops. The UDI Adora responded and was en route from Verge 118 and would rendezvous with me in a few hours.

"Open a link to whoever is top dog. Universal translators on."

*Link established Rich.*

"Thank you. This is United Defense Initiative - Alpha Rider One. Formerly Nova Corp Centurion 1124944396. Incepted and responding eight x eight code. I have summarily accessed your intel-net and medi-intel and squirted present emergency status. My team are mobilized and enroute. ETA six point nine standard hours Pan Galactic Time. I will be arriving planet-side in one minute. Please respond and supply co-ordinates for rendezvous."

For a moment, the link was silent. Then a voice replied. It sounded like dried wood cracking on a open fire. Slightly strained but the tones and nuances of the voice marked someone who occupied a premier position of authority but wasn't accustomed to wielding it. Just like George Bush Jr.

"This is Alpha Prime Kiv-ch. Appointed representative of the Senate on behalf of the Reformist and Lobby Movements. Please accept following land coordinates and welcome any aid that you can supply on the hallowed ground. Presently ten percent of the population have been diagnosed with latent radiation sickness. Many more have died or sustained serious injury throughout the City. We have endeavoured to handle the crisis to the best of our resources but the death toll, its.."

"I understand sir. For the moment I need to assess the present situation. I'm scanning your city-scape and noting current emergency hot-zones. I'll render assistance to aid your own disaster-crews. I imagine they're over-stretched. If possible can you patch me to someone in authority so I can liaise?"

"With gratitude. I will ask my Secretariat to transfer you to EmedProCen Hub Command."

For a second I expected to hear some kinda lift music while I waited; as it was the transfer to someone in charge was pretty swift.

"This is Xan-Yalnan. UniCom/Six. EmedProCen Red-Five. Be quick Sal'thi. I've up to my glands in a Ten ThirtyThree so forgive my abruptness..."

"I apologise sir but I'm Nova, responding to 8x8. I'm here to give assistance."

"A Nova? Are you a devotee of the Ni-halo? Home in on my beacon. We have plenty of disasters for you to choose from. There are several sectors of the Hindras Quadrant currently ablaze. We figured the fires started when the grid came back online. Ruptures in the inter-mix cones most likely. On top of that...zttcheshs..."

"Xander, what's happened to the link? Get it back!"

By now I'd began my descent into the planet's atmosphere. Reflected on the interior of my helmet's heads up display, the screen split into two. Top-left Xander was up-sourcing current assessments to the UDI Adora. Bottom left Xander had rendered a rotating three-dimensional archetype of the city I was approaching. Several red spots were blinking on the archetype denoting hot-spots; above each one was a description of the emergency occurring there as Xander continued tapping into the Delvedian Emergency Procedure Control



*Richie. Re-established sub-etheric with Xan-Yalnan.*

"Xan-Yalnan. What happened?"

\*\*\*\*

Keep the stream on the base! Can't risk another advance! You there! Keep the crews moving! We've got to move that debris!!!."

Xan-Yalnan felt the heat on his skin. Pores in the sub-dermal tissue were active covering him with sweat that tricked beneath his protective suit. One appendage held the Comm-Link which despite being active was buzzing with static. He'd lost contact with the Nova or whatever he/it was for reasons yet unknown. His second appendage was flapping wildly, circling the air in intricate patterns which his crew, several meters away understood precisely. It was a sign that Xan-Yalnan was getting agitated. His third appendage held onto one of the hoses which had disconnected from the generator built into the landcruiser. He held it tightly while Ban-Tahn endeavoured to re-connect it.

"You done yet?"

Ban-Tahn nodded, not replying verbally.

Ban-Tahn was an Junior Auxiliary. Newly drafted. He'd never been in a emergency before. He had panicked when the first tower had collapsed and hadn't noted the water pressure which seconds later caused the hose to break away from its coupling. Xan-Yalnan was about to admonish Ban-Tahn for his carelessness when he heard a loud cracking sound. His tri-faceted eyes widen in horror as he saw a large vertical crack appear on one of the surviving towers of the Hintan Complex. It travelled up along the side of the structure, causing the whole thing to vibrate. Windows buckled and shattered sending shards of plexo-glass raining down towards the crews below.

"Get clear! Kanto's sake GET CLEAR!, GET CLEA..."

From out of the corner of his upper left eye he could see an arc of blue flame (was it flame?) streaking across the sky towards them. He squinted and blinked twice. He could make out a figure, an alien, a genuine alien, at the flame's apex. The flames, or whatever, by the Oracle they were coming out of him. The alien's two appendages were outstretched and crackling with energy and in one quick moment a burst of energy fired from his clenched fists enveloped the building in front of his eyes reducing its component particles into nothingness. The figure then raced around the site and landed in front of him.

He didn't know what kind of Sal'thi he/she/it was, but Xan-Yalnan scrutinized the Sal'thi's bi-pedal form as he walked towards him. The alien's muscular body was encased in a metallic hardened armour resembling a juvenile's carapace, a deep cyan with golden hued lines arcing over the shoulders, elbows and lower legs with three peculiar indentations glowing with a pure white blue light, radiating energy both alarming and yet somehow comforting. The helmet sheathe, gold, flames flickering over the metallic reflective surface bore a crimson embossed star, surely a sign that despite the strange physiological attributes the alien possessed the figure now standing in front of him knew of the Oracle. Looking closer, Xan-Yalnan's initial observation was justified. It was indeed armour. Underneath the helmet, the skin tone was pink, mostly smooth and without any cracks or vestigial pores. Two eyes instead of three that glowed a semi bright cyan blue like the depths of the Fer-ri lagoon and a mouth, below which was a patch of protruding fine black hairs covering a shallow bevel. The mouth opened allowing Xan-Yalan to see two rows of perfect white teeth.

"Are you Xan-Yalnan?," he spoke in a guttural Dog Delvedian accent.

Xan-Yalnan nodded. "And you're a Nova?"

"Sir, I'm Ric..."

"Look I'd shake your appendages but this is no time for being sentimental. Lives are at stake. Excuse me for a moment..."

I looked at the Delvedian. Like most Delvedians he stood about five and half meters tall. He had three eyes and a triangular shaped mouth with a flap that served as a upper lip. Delvedians were tri-pedal; three arms, three eyes...they kinda reminded me of those Martians in War of the Worlds. The George Pal one. His protective orange hued poly suit clung like a second skin to his slightly over-weight tubby form and yet despite his bulk Xan-Yalnan could move quickly when he wanted. His arms waved in agitation, circling the air.

"Keep those flames doused. Make sure the firebreak keeps integrity! And Ban-Than, let go of the hose since you've secured it! By Sharran, farking trainees!!"

"Now you were saying about people being trapped? I can help..."

"See that huge mound of debris over there?", Xan-Yalnan pointed one of his arms towards it as he brought his second arm holding his Comm to his mouth.. "That was part of the Commerce Centre until one of the principal commuter shuttles crashed into it, sent the whole thing toppling onto the Arcade..."

"Arcade? Like in shopping arcade?"

"You have them where you come from Sal'thi? Worse things ever conceived by sentient beings! Never could understand why anyone would want to buy and sell things under some artificial crystal sky when a perfectly good market in natural open space is by far a better proposition. Well was. Excuse me.."

*You know Xander, I kinda get the impression they're not used to strangers.*

*For a long time Delvedia was predominately isolationist – like Tibet - defined by strict religious doctrines which became relaxed when the current Reformist Movement took government. Trading with other planets began twenty three years ago through the planet's only registered business the Tan-Kerit Corporation whose governing directors are all Reformists. They established initial links with the Santris Intra-Federation from Verge Seventeen who acted as Delvedia's representative to the Verges. Although the Scientifica extensively surveyed and studied surrounding space and commerce has taken place with other neighbouring planetary systems using drone ships; Delvedians themselves are, for want of a simplified explanation, content to stay here. its an integral part of their religious doctrines in something they call the Ni-halio.*

*Like a Bible?*

*Yes, but far more ancient. Delvedians believed as long as they stay physically planetside in the light of the Oracle, their race would never cease to exist.*

*Oracle?*

*It's a religious nickname for their local star. An alternate translation would be "singing star".*

*Yeah, that makes sense. Mrs Mckilty, my old history teacher, used to go on about the Greeks. They used to think the sun was some kinda god. Come to think about it, didn't their Leader say something about hallowed ground? Cause if that's the case they sound like a group of Florida sun-worshippers to me...*

*Most present day Delvedians have accepted certain compromises such as allowing other cultures to visit them, which prevented them from becoming an enclosed Xenophobic culture like the San'oc; even so they've maintained their belief never to leave. Maybe its a race-memory they all share.*

*Considering their local star just had a major temper tantrum and caused a lot of havoc, must be kinda hard for some of them to figure out what they've suddenly done to offend it?*

*Many of them may well believe that still Rich.*

*Yeah well do you realize that if some of them are still fanatical, they may not want to leave for a little trip "out there" when the UDI arrive and we have to evac the population. We could end up with a few riots on our hands.*

*UDI Sub-Section Four-Five-One which was agreed by the Verge Senate clarifies that in the event of a scenario where potential cultural/racial population is affected by defined events (appendix five) that could lead to potential loss of life on a mass-planetary scale, UDI Representatives are hereby given jurisdiction to use whatever means necessary to safeguard said population in...*

*Okay! You don't need to tell me! I know every farking paragraph when Peter and me cobbled all that legal frak together to get the Verge Security Council to sanction us! I'll do what I have to do, as an' when we have to go down that road. For now let's save a few lives around here. You better do a deep thermal scan of that debris over there where the "bucket-crews" are. There must be survivors underneath....*

\*\*\*\*

By now it had started to rain. Not heavy but the clouds were notably darker as they came from the south-west. I looked towards the scene of devastation in front of me which I'd flown over earlier. I saw various emergency

personnel doing their best to keep on top of the situation unfolding before them. Medical teams in green were carrying some stretchers over to waiting ambulances.

Across the way in a small park I saw several rows of purple body bags. There was a Delvedian in white. He was going from one body to the next. He would stop, kneel down and while holding a small book in one hand, he used his other two to draw an intricate shape in the air over the body; he'd cup his hands first, then open them and make a circular motion just over the body where the head would be underneath the sheeting. I figured he was some kinda priest giving the last rite.

I turned away and glanced back at the emergency zone. There were four lines of "bucket-crews" all wearing orange, hauling chunks of concrete and masonry from the debris field. If I hadn't acted earlier when the tower had collapsed, they've would now be victims too. Just figures in the rising statistics that would one day tell the true scale of how bad the emergency had been.

The top three Delvedians started the chain, removing loose chunks with all three hands then turning to pass them to their immediate colleagues who passed them down the line to the edge of the site. Some were probing cracks with poles, endeavouring to find spaces where anyone buried underneath could still be alive. Red crews used drills to break away the larger chunks, while others used hoses, water drawn from the nearby aqua-flows, to keep several fires at bay. Smoke obscured the scene in several places and I could smell a hint of burning plastic.

This was a typical Incident Command System; different emergency crews supporting each other in order to ensure quick response with what available personnel and equipment they had. Xan-Yalnan was an Unified Commander, one of several who responded to overall Area Commander. I could understand why Xan-Yalnan was so stressed. With all the different emergencies happening all over the city, wouldn't you be stressed?

Imagine forty different nine-elevens happening at the same time. Okay; it wasn't an act of terrorism; though I remembered Xander mentioned other stars had undergone similar situations in nearby quadrants. Bizarre coincidences? Maybe. I would have to check later. Either way the Oracle's behaviour had caught the planet off guard. One of those so called "thousand year storms" that could happen in anyone's lifetime. Geo-Magnetic storms happen in cycles all the time. Our own Sun creates them all the time and for the most part we don't know anything about them. You don't get solar storm updates during your local weather report although you may get warnings about UV levels during the summer if you wanna go and spend time down on the beach getting a tan.

I had to admire how the Delvedians had coped with the after-effects of the storms but even with solar observation, they were ultimately unprepared for what happened. An earthquake can happen under the sea and before anyone can say tidal wave; there's a big wave heading outwards across the surface. Problem is the wave can hit any part on any coastline. So even if emergency services declare a situation, chances are you could evac one part of a coastline and only have a non-evac area hit instead. Except solar waves are invisible. Only extreme bursts of radiation would announce a wave approach and even then you had only two hours to act. How could you evac an entire population of one city in two hours?

Even so, I still wanted to make sure we had advanced warning if another surge did happen. I checked on my A.I's progress of making covert repairs to the Solar Observation array. Dumb point really cause Xandarian tech is mostly proficient. Xander has established a real-time uplink to the Array's via one of the fully operational Comms satellites. It'd take a hour or so to reboot after performing a diagnostic. Maybe by consulting the CPU Xander could figure out whether the array had crashed due to the storm surge, or by the alien code which was more than likely.

I datavised a memo to the Scientifica to keep them in the picture but decided to keep quiet about the alien code, least for now. At the same time Xander placed a small countdown in the bottom-left of my screen which kept a note of the Adora's ETA. Xander then activated the thermographic scan which appeared in another separate window on my visor display.

The world around me became a dimension of mostly reds, yellows, oranges and blues. The warmer colours denoted heat spots; the Delvedians stood out like amorphous white yellow blobs; the fires were mostly orange and yellow. I could see fires pockets underneath the debris towards the base of the second tower block. Xander told me they were confined to utility tunnels underneath the arcade, running parallel to what was most probably an underground section of the metro.

I deepened the scan, estimating where the Arcade was located. It was about twenty meters below ground level; several layers down. I could make out several heat spots in clusters; they were moving. So people

were alive down there. I could make out distinct shapes and sizes.

Most were adults but there were children too. Just everyday shoppers; families, people going about normal everyday routines until suddenly they were caught unawares. Chances were none of them would know what was going on. They would have been protected from the radiation fallout so chances were they wouldn't develop any signs of sickness unlike those who would have been exposed when the star flared. Most of the initial victims taken to the MedCENS were from the parks and streets; commuters who were having a break from work, that kinda thing.

I noted the composition of the air inside the Arcade. It was still breathable but I noted the levels of carbon dioxide was rising; fumes from the fires were making their way into the Arcade via several cracks in the Metro tunnel wall lining. It wouldn't be good air for long but I figured Delvedians had triple everything including lungs so they were able to conserve their breathing even in slightly less oxygen rich air.

I also saw movement on the other end of the scale, blue, denoting a stream of cold. Several aqua-flows criss-crossed into the Arcade, part of a water feature. However the water wasn't been taken out of the area by subsidiary Aqua Flows; it was rising inside the lower levels due to several blockages. An if it began to rain hard...

"Xan-Yalnan! You got to listen to me!", I shouted, placing a hand on his shoulder and pointing towards the debris. "I can see survivors. Maybe two hundred or more. They're safe from the fires but the air's getting contaminated with fumes They seem to be in a side hall or something...."

"You have thermal imaging? Good! Where are they?"

"Follow me!!",

I ran, Xan-Yalnan follow me, running as fast as his legs could carry him. As I ran I asked him why they hadn't used any scanning devices to find the survivors sooner.

"Ours was in our AEV, but it got buried at another site in Kela District. Wish we had more but they're costly to manufacture. Besides the Senate prefers to spend money on the Scientifica rather than on EmedProcCen. From where we're going, there's a concourse that runs off the south mall. We're directly below where the undercity exit used to be before Jendil Tower collapsed. One of the engines from the Commuter clipped the base and exploded; sent the whole thing tumbling down. Nearly took its twin with it, well it got damaged, if you hadn't come...."

He waited at the foot of the bank and took out a small cloth and wiped the sweat from his dusty skin. He also took out a small bottle and took a few sips. He told me it was medicinal. I scrambled up a bank of debris, some forty meters from the nearest "bucket" crew. Loose stones dislodged as I ran up the slope.

I kept the thermal scan on, my helmet's eye lenses glowed cherry red. I asked Xander to activate ERT and another separate window appeared on my visor array. This one changed the world's perspective again. Now I could see a three-dimensional view of what was lying underneath the rubble. I could make out corridors, the whole Arcade structure; individual shops, spaces, cracks in the walls, conduits where power and other utility cables ran and so on.

*Xander. Combine scans..*

The ERT over-laid on top of the thermographic scan, reducing the windows by one, giving me an exact location fix of where the survivors were.

*Start excavating here Rich!*

A blue circle appeared on the display.

*Most of the structure is still sound but there could be micro-fractures, cavities that could cause subsidence; I suggest you use a collimated beam, two meter sweep to cut a tunnel no less than two point five meters wide. It will be enough to give the rescue teams access. The heat should melt the strata as you descend but ask the emergency crews to shore up the tunnel behind you as an additional precaution.*

*Will do. Better keep an eye on that weather front too.*

I turned my head and looked down to Xan-Yalnan and told him what I intended to do. He acted immediately and called over two of the "bucket crews". He called a young Delvedian called Ban-Than who looked slightly nervous and told him that he was going to act as the tally man.

Xan-Yalnan took out a small pad and gave it to him. He then reached into another copious pocket in his suit and produced some coloured tags. He handed them to the foreman in each crew. They tied one onto one of their arms and then asked the crew members to do the same. It would ensure that Xan-Yalnan could keep track of who went into the tunnel and make sure that everyone went in came out again and was accounted for by the tally man. He also called another crew in red to come over. They went away and came back with mobile support beams and sheets which they would use to shore up the tunnel. Xan-Yalnan shouted for spotlights to be brought

up to illuminate the bank as the sky overhead was getting darker as the rain storm began in earnest.

My right hand glowed white and I began to use a collimated energy beam to cut into the rubble. Concrete, twisted metal beams and whatever else had been used to construct the now toppled building began to melt in front of me.

Within two minutes I had burrowed forty meters down; the beam creating a tunnel three meters wide in an oval shape to maximise its strength. The three roundels on my chest illuminated the forward face as I cut into it. Behind me the rescue crews worked in unison, shoring up the tunnel with support beams at two meter intervals with equipment that was powered by a small hand-held portable generator. They attached biolum globes to the beams to provide additional light though the spotlights illuminated the tunnel's mouth for several meters down.

I kept the downward incline to about thirty degrees to make it as easy for the survivors to be brought back top-side but if they were casualties down there, unable to make their way up the tunnel...

Well I'd had to think about a "Plan B" enroute. I kept an eye on my descent. It would take two more minutes tops to reach the survivors; far quicker than the Delvedian's basic equipment would. As I went down I wondered what the survivors were thinking and how they had coped.


TO BE CONTINUED



**DAY OF THE DOCRONS!**

PART 1

UTAH  
DEL RAY

 Years ago...

**W**alking, walking, walking. Alone, in a desert. No beast of burden to ride, yellowish boots dragging the scorching sands, invisible sweat under a golden metallic helmet dripping under odd glowing rings as they shine down from the sky like sweltering suns, beating down on her. The gold-and-bluish figure instinctively makes a gesture, one that should somehow bring climatic relief.

Nothing.

She remembers who she is, kind of – “Denarian” ... is it a name, a rank, a status? – and what she once stood for in a universe far, far away. But she cannot put the pieces of the puzzle together. Why she is here, how she came here, how long she has been walking – this blasted, eternal walking to ... where? – she does not know. For d'ast sake, she can't even fly. She could fly?! Then, as if in a rush of madness, the lithe stranger begins digging, digging like a dog in the hot desert sands -- deeper, deeper, deeper -- digging a hole. Even though the heat blisters her fingers, she digs on. And on. And on ...

She takes off the helmet from her head, the one with a four-pronged crimson star over its nose – her ebony tresses flow free -- and she uses it like a bucket, to dig.

Finally, slumped onto the coolness of deep sands, untouched by ring-heat, she returns the helmet to her head – it feels right! -- and concentrates with such fury the pain makes her facial visage wince. Her dry mouth forms words, not easily, and she speaks to no one: “Show me,” she almost whispers.

Nothing ... at least at first. Then, a spark. A tiny spark. From somewhere inside her helmet, inside her mind.

Murky images form in her head, memories she can barely register, can scarcely make out, flicker in her mind under the helmet, the marvelous helmet: The deep blackness of endless space ... cool, cool space; a tingle inside Denarian's head as she was soaring the spaceways, away, fast as she could, away from – what?; a bolt of crimson lightning containing energies she has never encountered before; her world turns inside out, the stars are different; the eternal plummet from the skies as the desert surface of this planet came up to meet her, roughly; and a distant memory of an apocalypse, and blue fog surrounding everything ... the blue mist of death?

She tires, this former officer of a foreign universe's galactic peace-keeping force, called the Nova Corps. The heat-emitting sky-rings are vanishing beyond the horizon in the desert's western skies. Denarian is in the dark, alone. Or is she? A slithering reptilian beast of no legs springs suddenly from the hole the Nova has dug. Fangs dripping venom, the serpentine beast strikes!

Too slow. The star-faring warrior swiftly – swiftly! -- grabs her coiled foe by the throat, opens her mouth like a yawning chasm, and swallows the reptile whole!

Then she slumps down within the sheltering foxhole, the darkness blessedly cool around her. There is no wind, no more animal movement – and barely a heartbeat. She thinks of the coolness of space again, of running, of a place called Xandar that is no more, far away. She mutters one word, one that sounds foreign to her: “...Zorr ...”

And then Denarian, the last surviving Nova Corps member of Universe 2814, is asleep under the stars of the desert world called Threlkel.

She does not see the silhouettes of strangers approaching from the blackened skies.

 Microsha, in the Threlkellian dimension. NOW.

**N**ot so many cycles ago, in the solar system around the star Helios -- full-blown and already populated with those known as the Subatomics – appeared the world of Microsha, blooming like a flower as it grew out of its microscopic universe, for all of the Threlkellian Empire to see. Many were the plots to enslave these native Subatomics, a people so naïve, so happy to even be acknowledged as a group and as individuals.

Standing in their way? One person: Denarian, the woman called Nova, member of the Star Blazers!

Heroes all, the Star Blazers are an army of powerful beings from throughout the worlds of the other-dimensional Empire. Nova is second-in-command to SB praetor Prima Dona, currently off-world. Thus the responsibility of overseeing the ever-continuing work of making Microsha a functioning and vital part of the Empire, and of protecting and supervising the precious innocent Subatomics, has fallen to Denarian.

She has become comfortable as one of Emperor Traven's hand-picked soldiers over the years since she fell from

the sky. Memories great and small are denied her, but she recalls the death of her fellow officers in the Nova Corps and the destruction of the peace-keeping world of Xandar at the hands of the Lumphomoid brothers, Zorr and Kraa. So fast, so sudden.

There is nothing left for Denarian in her resident universe. Here there is duty, there is honor, there is protecting and serving and most important of all there is life! Especially her life.

The Nova Force has its differences in this reality, she discovered, but by adapting she has retrained herself to harness it to recreate many of the talents she had in her own universe: superhuman strength, flight, a healing factor, energy powers – and speed! She has worked hardest at developing this weapon, much to the chagrin of fellow Star Blazer, the speedster known as Whiz.

There is no Worldmind connective, but her helmet maintained its inner operations – unlike the environmental functions of her suit – when she “crash-landed” on Threlkel years ago. But with the assistance of scientists on the technologically advanced world Olympia, where the headquarters of the Star Blazers is located, the helmet continues to allow its wearer to access enemy profiles, analyze an attacker's strengths and weaknesses, interface with computers, analyze energy signatures, create shields against mental attacks and receive transmissions from nearby sources.

Her only known weakness thus far has proven to be sorcery.

Sorcery, like that from Emperor Traven's true friend and sometime SB instructor ... the Wonder Worlock!

\* \* \*

“OK, we need those bricks over there and that cement over in that corner ... Careful! My budget from King Zavar does not include any funeral expenditures!” shouts Nova as she drills the population of Subatomics, in the midst of building their first real city – the first city for them to live in and learn.

“Careful! Arrrgghhhh!!”

Denarian has become known for a fiery temper, but these innocents have about driven the young military maid to her breaking point.

It is as she watches some of her charges on break, playing a game of whackerball in a long trench, that she recalls the hell these innocents have truly faced.

Sorcerous mind-traps, cosmic conquerors, poachers of all sorts, all this in addition to enslavement at the hands of Olympian Scientist Supreme Java Lyn. All for a new world, one of abundant riches.

“Arrrgghhhh!!”

Nova cries out aloud in frustration at it all, a shriek that causes the ears of her gigantic, long-nosed charges to drop their tools and hold their heads. She is, all at once, embarrassed and more frustrated.

Communication has not been the problem she had thought it would be. Java Lyn, to his credit, taught the Subatomics much in the way of meaningful gestures before he went rogue and then disappeared. And since the imprisonment of the ancient sorceress Gahaes, who sought to herself conquer this domain, the relationship between the mostly silent Subatomics and the Threllkellians has been nothing but outstanding.

If Prima Dona is Microsha's “mother,” Denarian has grown into her role as step-mother of an entire planet!

“You whackerball, Nova?” says Jaedas, one of the first Subatomics to be given a name by Prima Dona and a leader of the group that saved Olympian King Zavar from Gahaes.

This request is a new one. Nova has never been invited to share in Subatomic games.

“Play 'whackerball' with your men?” Denarian asks.

“Naww,” Jaedas says, and Nova immediately hears the slanged accent of Star Blazer Wolfin. To his credit, he has spent almost as much time on this “counter-earth” as she has.

“Not play wit' me, play wit' choo. You and you ... sooper dooper?”

Now she knows what Jaedas is discussing! One night, with construction ongoing, the Wonder Worlock was conducting time lapse experiments on Microsha. He utilized Nova's super speed to test one of his theories, and Jaedas must have seen her playing whackerball with herself.

She marvels at their simple curiosity and sense of reasoning.

“Okay, buddy, and then break time is over! We have a community to build!” Nova smiles.

The SB begins playing the eight-man game solo to the amusement of all. She has to slow her super speed down so the Subatomics can actually see her and follow the game.

She noted some of Jaedas's alpha-gang are cheering her on one side, while others across the trench are



uttering an expletive which sounds like "booooo!"

Wolfin!

\* \* \*

Not far from Denarian's ongoing exhibition, in the newly constructed Zeusarium (acting domicile of King Zavar when planetside, named after the ruler of the Olympian gods as an appeasement for recent misunderstandings), Zavar and the Wonder Worlock plot out diverse technological improvements which may someday find their way to Gazaworld, of the reality-hopping mage's current home, Universe 3328.

"My mystic friend, I know you are still upset about the turn of events that has rendered your scientist colleague Roj-Le quite mad," Zavar says. "But you have certainly done more than your share to help keep Gaza centered as it finds its own way in a new spatial port."

"Yes, yes, old friend. And I do appreciate the scientists of Olympia traveling all that way across the dimensional divide to help the people of General Doz get a better foothold on their united worlds," the Dark Mage says. "Doz is a man of great military and strategic intellect, but I am not sure the idiosyncrasies of government and politics are his forte. We shall see."

"What we need to concentrate on right now," Zavar says, "is some type of electromagnetic communications and teleportation system that will tie all these various ceded territories together, where these vast colonies, separated by holslaks of space, are actually one unit, serving as its own post under the reign of Empress Enid.

"I wish that friend of yours from Oceanus, the Chief Scientist of the Sh'zam, Bran'akk, could assist us more. A brilliant, brilliant man, that one."

"His realm under Arema, like Gaza under Enid, has its own worries and concerns of survival," the shaman says. "A very egoless man, Bran'akk is just biding his time in the role of ruler. He knows that it is the birthright of Shazetta, daughter of the late ruler Satbon, whose place it is to rule the Sh'zam people, and he is trying to transition her into that role. Though she is but a youth, and uneasy is the head that wears the crown. As you yourself know well, my friend."

Suddenly: BRAKA-BOOM! BABA-KADROOOOM!!! BA-DOOOOOMM!

"Zootalaris! What?..." the necromancer questions.

Zavar, the most powerful telepath in the Threlkellian dimension, lays a hand to his bald pate. Nothing. He cannot read the Subatomics. Then ...

"I am reading Nova, mage," he says. "Confusion, anger, concern. One of the two twin towers ... By Traven's Sword, it ... it has fallen!!"

Even as automatic rescue beacons summon members of the Star Blazers, the Wonder Worlock instantly teleports himself and the wizened telepath to Ground Zero.

Nova is zooming toward the pair as they appear. "O Sir, there were people in there! Families in the process of moving in, construction workers doing final inspections, the market opening ... I – I oversaw the building of that tower myself, watched most of the labor, inspected the materials with Dona. Wha ....??"

The cosmic cop begins to break down.

Gather your wits, Nova! the shaman teeps. We must act swiftly!

She immediately snaps to, suddenly (in Dona's absence) barking rescue orders at the arriving Star Blazers.

"Prism! Use your power stone to give what support you can to the remainder of the structure! Smoke! Work with our king and see if Zavar can mentally guide you to populations of Subatomics within the mass. Teleport out those you can! Aquatain! See what control you might have of any escaping methane and other hazmat materials around the perimeter ... even if you can't control a substance, try! Wolfin! Use those great claws of yours to dig on the opposite side of the collapse, relieve pressure on the earth and the remainder of the spire still standing! Terysaur ...!"

She is a leader born, the Wonder Worlock thinks to himself. Then, leaving rescue actions to Denarian and the Star Blazers, the mystic lowers the density of his body and sinks into the ground.

Like a ghostly building inspector, the mage makes his way through the tower slowly, methodically, checking to see if there are signs of life. Every once in a while, he will run into Smoke, teleporting the injured to safety, hearing Zavar's voice in his mind as he guides the young girl. At one point, he hears the claws of Wolfin, digging hard.

As he goes through a support wall, of a sudden the wizard's cosmic senses tingle as he discovers a room full of multiple explosive devices. This was no accident!

"Zootalaris!"

He chants: *By the Orb of Ogor/Before which bound'ries decay/I seek destruction's origin/Show me the way!*

The past reveals itself to the celestial sorcerer. And he is shocked!

Docrons??! he thinks. We have on Microsha, as was the witch Gahaes, other "moles"! ... damn ... What the devil are Docrons doing in THIS dimension??

One massive probe by the All-Seeing Orb later, and three Docrons disguised as Subatomic construction workers are routed out by the Star Blazers and sent to the stronghold of their mighty headquarters on Olympia, in orbit on the opposite side of the sun Helios.

As the Docrons make their way to the mass transport chamber, Wolfin sees one smile as the dead and dying Subatomics are being brought from the tower. The alien will have a deep, deep claw mark on his cheek for the remainder of his days.

\* \* \*

Outside the Zeusarium on Microsha, the Wonder Worlock sees Denarian huddled in a corner of the facility's exterior park. Around her gather a Greek chorus of Subatomics; but in her mind, the mage teeps, she is all alone. He starts to back off, this Sorcerer Supreme, leave her to her dark thoughts. But instead he goes forward; interaction with other beings has most always been a positive for his otherwise nomadic life.

"O S-sir," Nova says, looking up with a tear in her eye, her shining helm in her lap, "is there not some spell by which you can bring those who have fallen, bring them back to life? Is there not some hex you can cast to make this moment in time vanish? To have our wondrous tower, THEIR wondrous tower, rise again, kissing the morning skies?"

A moment of silence.

"Well, Denarian, I..."

In a scenario seldom observed, the Wonder Worlock is interrupted mid-sentence by one of Nova's companions. It is Jaedas.

"Naw naw! ... naw, Wundarr," Jaedas says, "this ow-er world, this ow-er problem. Nova teech us take pride in lay-boor. Take pride in life. What we learn from you, our king Z'var, our Dona, our Nova. Answer ourselves."

Jaedas takes Nova's mighty hand.

"Not cry, Nova. We make giant building rise again. We mourn ow-er dead, pray for ow-er brave. You are hero, Nova. You, Z'var, Dona, Wundarr."

The surviving Nova Corps member, for once, is speechless.

"As I've said, Nova," the Dark Mage reminds her, "this looks like the beginning of a beautiful friendship."



Elsewhere in the Threlkellian Empire...

Mere nano-seconds following the fall of the Microshan tower, a small beep is heard aboard the newly-constructed Star Destroyer of the Docron overlord Mor, hidden in the shadow of a massive asteroid belt nearest the planet Bluech.

"Captain?" the overlord quizzes.

"Mission Microsha a success, Lord Mor, sir!" the officer responds. "And other news, sir: The entity known as the Wonder Worlock was planetside following the operation."

"What?! NO! ... Well, this IS old home week," Mor chuckles to himself.

"Seems we are not the only ones to discover this 'Threlkellian' dimension, eh, Captain?"

"No sir."

"I think we shall need more forces from our own universe," Mor mutters to himself. "Yes. Many, many more..."

The heavy mask on Mor is even darker than that of the Wonder Worlock. But if you could see his face beneath its ebony glimmer at that moment, it would have a broad smile. A lizard-like, toothy grin.

TO BE CONTINUED

# NOVAVERSES

## AFTERWORD

"Not all Universes are the same." Pretty familiar words to most comic fans as the concept of alternate universes where either major or minor differences separate them from what's known as the "prime reality" are commonplace to many comics books, books and tv series.

Marvel had their own take on this, called What If? And Nova himself wasn't a stranger to that title, appearing in two stories. The first written by his creator, Marv Wolfman back in issue 15, Vol. 1 called "What if Nova had been Four other People?" posed the idea that instead of Rich Rider being the Human Rocket, we had Peter Parker, some unknown woman with revenge on her mind, a homeless man fights of an alien invasion and last a unknown villain uses the Nova Force to become Crimelord. Later, Rich himself gets the spotlight in issue 36 in the alternate take from Rom 24 where he endeavours to keep his powers no matter the cost to family or friends or the safety of Earth.

I've always liked the idea of alternate realities; so when I launched the fan comic Nova619, I always intended to set it in a different reality and show how Rich's life after the end of the Annihilation War could have gone; difference being that is an ongoing (sort-of), whereas What If were "singular" eps showing just glimpses.

So now we have our new spin-off, another Nova fan product this time dealing with different universes with different Novas, just like that first story in What If? 15, in fan fiction rather than comic pic format. Good thing with written form is you can delve deeper into both plot and characters that comic medium can sometimes allow, but fret not Team619 contributors still play a role both doing illustrations for the stories and cover art.

I hope you enjoyed the opening stories with Centurions fighting Badoon at Pericles' Crossing, Byron's Denarian, the last surviving Nova Corps member of Universe 2814 and my own Nova619 in an untold early serial of the early days of his and the United Defence Initiative's battle with the sinister plans of the Veil Kartel (which took me 6 years to finish!) Other stories are on the way, from Chris Ridgeway's Nova Corps 2020 to a fun ep from new Nova fan writer Ryan Esterbrooks. But it doesn't have to be just us.

If you have a idea for a Nova fan-fic story, we're here to try and make it happen, perhaps to appear in a future Novaverses. So drop us a line via our Facebook or via [darrenblackburn101@gmail.com](mailto:darrenblackburn101@gmail.com) or via Nova Prime Page.

Last, my thanks to Ian Richardson for the cover, inked and colors by Richard Pring Adams, to Art Lenn, Carl Bolton, Liam O'connor, Jason Heichel and new guy Kunal for the first issue pic and to Chris Anderson for the title logo chosen by you, the fans! I hope you Nova fans enjoy the first issue. See you in the Fall for issue 2!

Darren

Next Edition...



# NOVAVERSES

NO.2 - ONLINE  
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At [Novaprimepage.com](http://Novaprimepage.com)