

Fractal Peace

Fractal Space: Book 1

Preview

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Chapter 1 – War, Peace, and Murder

Everson Polk savoured the sea air, every breath validating his decision to come to the islands after his life fell apart. In the distance, the squawking of exotic birds greeted the new day as gentle waves foamed up the beach towards him. Relishing the grittiness of the sand between his toes, Polk turned to face the almost concealed lodge, its windows glinting through the palms.

It was idyllic to the point of cliché. It was invigorating. Nothing could spoil his mood – not even the alien body at his feet.

It wasn't the first murder at a reconciliation session, nor would it be the last. Wounds from the century-long conflict still festered. The reconciliation process was designed to blunt the impetus back to war, but too many were uncomfortable with peace while their desire for retribution festered. Now, blood had been spilt on Polk's watch for the first time.

There was plenty of it. A small wound on the Ungaleth's forehead oozed elegant red trails between its bony ridges, dribbling down his bald scalp and dripping onto the beach. The injury didn't explain the much larger pool seeping into the sand beneath the back of his head, nor would it have been enough to kill. Jaklorinki's lifeless eyes told a different story.

Polk had instantly recognised the Ungaleth when he'd encountered the body on his regular morning walk. Jaklorinki was one of the four members of his reconciliation group for this week. Two bloodstained rocks nearby and the flattened sand beside the body explained the tale of Jaklorinki's death so clearly.

If Polk closed his eyes, he could see it. The killer had lurked behind Jaklorinki and bludgeoned the back of his skull with a rock, now casually discarded. That was enough, but the Ungaleth had fallen forward, hitting his forehead on a small boulder nestled in the sand in a moment of serendipitous overkill. The assailant turned the body, needing to be certain their work was done, and then fled.

They'd covered their tracks well, erasing footprints to leave no obvious evidence for the security team to find. Everyone in this week's group was too professional to leave clues and were all capable of killing. They already had.

If any of them were to be murdered, Jaklorinki – Jak to his friends, not that he had any – was the obvious candidate. He was an Ungaleth, the bad guys who'd started the Fractal War. At least, that's how history was being written by the Olvin victors. Polk, of all people, knew that slant on the Ungaleth to be a gross simplification.

It wouldn't be long before the central security team arrived. He could see the shimmering outline of their headquarters on the horizon, the largest artificial island in the sovereign territory of the Reconciliation Commission, built over the remains of long-lost Tuvalu. Polk held all his week-long sessions in an enclave on a smaller island, just him and four others, one representative from each participant in the war where Earth had officially remained neutral.

Polk had reported the murder as soon as he'd stumbled across Jak's body on his early morning constitutional. It was his daily routine, a gentle wander around the boundary of the enclave to set him up for the day ahead, still leaving enough time to get back before the group emerged for breakfast. Jak had ruined that.

Finally, a shuttle became visible, gliding through the haze in the distance. With a bit of luck, they'd record the scene, take the body away, and let him get on with the rest of the day. Without the Ungaleth in the group, they might even be able to stick to the schedule. Admittedly, Jak's story had been compelling, but he wouldn't stop going on about it afterwards. His opinions on internal Ungaleth politics trumped anything anyone else wanted to say. Well, he was quiet now.

Polk knew one of the other facilitators who'd had a death in her group, and the security team had taken a light-touch approach, letting her handle questioning as part of the reconciliation sessions. Politically, it was better to downplay things at this stage of the process. Plenty on all sides looked for excuses to turn the fragile peace into nothing more than a brief interregnum.

Polk expected it to be the same here. He could provide all the evidence the security team needed at the end of the week and let them decide what to do. After all, teasing information out of strangers was part of his job description.

He watched the small shuttle approach, absent-mindedly rubbing his hand over his hairline. He was still getting used to having hair, although the stubble on his chin was proving to grow faster. Of all the things he'd expected to have trouble adjusting to in his post-war life, hair hadn't been one of them.

The pragmatically ugly grey cuboid of the vessel whined through the air, its leading force shield handling all the messy aerodynamics. Landing bars extruded from beneath as it lowered onto the beach no more than ten metres away. Without fuss, the side opened, a ramp rolled down to the sand, and three people emerged.

It was obvious who was in charge. Two grunts in generic beige security uniforms carried equipment in the wake of a tall woman dressed in civvy clothes with a small black leather bag slung over one shoulder. She was oddly familiar. Her skin was darker than Polk's, closer in hue to her jet-black outfit, a sharply cut lightweight suit with personality. Her scalp was shaved, other than three thick afro-twist rat-tails dangling down her back.

She moved like a ballet dancer in a corset. Her delicately confident stride and dispassionate glare were likely designed to intimidate, but Polk was too distracted by trying to figure out where he'd seen her before. It wouldn't come.

'Facilitator Everson Polk?' said the woman, her voice sounding warm while feeling cold.

'That's me. Just Polk will do.'

It was what both his friends and enemies called him – even friends who didn't know they were enemies.

'Polk,' she said as if testing the flavour. 'Valerity Novak. I'm responsible for this investigation.'

Even the name was familiar. Before he could respond, she barked her first order.

'Stand aside. Let me look at the corpse.'

His legs obeyed. Something about her tone spoke to his nervous system before his brain could get annoyed and intervene. Novak took two more strides and stared down at Jaklorinki's body. She was coiled like a spring aching for an excuse to snap.

'Ungaleth,' she muttered. 'Typical.'

'Jaklorinki,' said Polk.

She nodded.

'Got it. Jak of the Lorin clan. Are they important?'

Novak was going out of her way to show him at least a cursory knowledge of Ungaleth culture. He bet it didn't go any deeper.

'Not anymore,' said Polk. 'The Lorins were subservient to the ruling Riven clan. Now the Rivens have been decimated, they have little influence. Out of favour with the new regime.'

'That'll make it easier,' said Novak. 'What did he use to do?'

'He was in charge of security at the Ungaleth Citadel.'

Novak let out a prolonged whistle.

'The one that blew up?'

'That's the one.'

It was the event that triggered the end of the war, a massive explosion that took out the upper echelons of Ungaleth leadership. Its cause was officially blamed on internal clan strife, but Jak had the inside story.

'I'm amazed he's still alive,' said Novak. 'Was.'

Polk shrugged. The less concern he showed, the more likely she was to leave him to it.

'He was chasing a suspect when it blew up,' he said. 'Suffice it to say that he's out of a job.'

'Anyone associated with the Riven clan would hold him responsible,' said Novak. 'One of them would be the top suspect.'

'He's the only Ungaleth here. Anyway, the new regime is trying to calm things. They're one of the biggest supporters of this reconciliation effort.'

She looked down at the body again, then across to the bloodiest rock. She sized it up as quickly as Polk.

'Pity. Could have argued he was a high suicide risk, but not sure I could swing that. Death by bashing your own brains out with a boulder would be a bit of a stretch.'

'Nobody's going to worry,' said Polk. 'Sure I can work out who had the best motive by the end of the week. We only met for the first time halfway through yesterday. Not had time to get to know the other three properly yet.'

Novak's gaze locked onto Polk.

'I'm the detective. Your job is to listen to their war stories and get them talking to each other.' She glanced at the body. 'Can't say you're off to a great start.'

He was getting a bad feeling about this detective. He knew how to cope. He was a facilitator, after all.

A key part of his job was resisting the urge to shout at the idiots around the table at his sessions. Too many were self-important functionaries with little self-awareness, only here to try to justify their wartime atrocities. His role was to keep the peace and tease out the truth behind their stories. He'd use the same skills with Novak. Keep calm and ignore any provocation.

'Jaklorinki's as much to blame as anyone,' said Polk. 'They're all supposed to stay in the lodge overnight. I should have been alerted as soon as he tried to leave, but he overrode the alarm system to go for a midnight walk.'

'How could he?'

'He was a security expert. Clearly knew more than me. I wouldn't have known how to do it without the access codes, but I noticed the security system was disabled when I got up, so I checked the logs. It was him. If he'd turned it back on when he returned, I'd likely have been none the wiser. It was a reckless thing to do.'

'Well, I don't think he'll do it again.'

Before he could work out what to say, she flicked her wrist to shoo him further back, moved closer as he complied, and gestured to her two grunts.

'Put the scene in stasis. A metre clearance all around. Don't miss the rocks.'

They walked around the perimeter of the area of interest, putting thin spikes into the sand. All Polk cared about was getting this over as quickly as possible.

'Anything else you need? I should be getting back. The others will be up soon. I'll have to tell them what's happened, then get them focused on today's programme.'

Novak snorted a humourless laugh.

'You seriously going to carry on like nothing's happened?'

'Why not?' said Polk. 'That's what's happened when there have been murders before.'

'I know,' said Novak. 'It was stupid, and the commission's got some grief for it. That's why I'm here. I'll be sticking around.'

Polk's heart sank. He stared at the two men playing with their toys. The air shimmered around the scene, and then it began to move – not just the body, but the surrounding area down to about half a metre below ground. It floated upwards, drifting across to the shuttle.

'Take it back,' said Novak. 'Get it analysed. I'll call you when I'm ready to leave.'

'Yes sir,' said the two synchronised grunts as they followed the body away.

Polk had one weapon left in his arsenal.

'Look, you know how important these sessions are. It's why the commission exists. We've got to stop the war from happening again.'

'And how is it going to do that?'

'You know why we do it.'

'Enlighten me,' said Novak.

Polk glared at her, then relented. She must have some purpose to it.

'Get people to see each other as sentient beings rather than faceless enemies to be hated and feared. Understand each other's perspectives. Let them confess to things they've done, unburden their guilt, and move on.'

'And you're happy that those taking part get amnesties for their war crimes?'

'Got to start somewhere,' said Polk. 'We have to admit the mistakes we all made, not keep refighting old battles. I know everyone likes to blame the Ungaleth, but there were atrocities carried out on all sides. This gives them a chance to atone for their sins.'

'All very worthy, I'm sure.'

Polk was getting annoyed by her attitude. He was missing something. It was time to show a degree of independence to find out what.

'It's what our job is supposed to be,' said Polk. 'You know that if you work for the commission.'

'I don't,' said Novak. 'Not officially. I'm here on secondment from the GFU. Shake things up a bit.'

If she were a civilian working for the Global Federal Union, that would explain her clothing, as well as her not buying into the Reconciliation Commission's *raison d'être*. The commission had been made a sovereign territory by the GFU. Novak must be part of the ongoing oversight, determined to be sceptical as a matter of principle.

It still didn't explain why she was so familiar. Polk opted to remain silent and see what Novak did. She stretched her arms, releasing the tension in her shoulders. Her gaze softened, a tentative smile cracking her authority for the first time.

'Look, let's compromise,' she said. 'You carry on your reconciliation sessions, but I'll sit in on them and ask questions whenever I fancy. I'd like to see how these work first-hand. As you say, I'm sure someone's story will reveal the motive for the murder if I prod hard enough. Fair?'

It wasn't ideal, but it was better than nothing. He needed to regain some control of events, which would involve compromise. That was part of his job. She'd soon get bored and leave.

'Let's give it a try,' said Polk. 'If I'm not happy with how it's going, we'll have to change things. I hope you'll meet me halfway.'

'We'll see,' said Novak. 'We'll meet somewhere, certainly. I'm happy for you to be in charge here, right until the moment when I decide to take over.'

Polk exhaled slowly. This wasn't the moment to push things. The best way of getting out of this mess was to cooperate.

'Let's go and meet the others. Fancy some breakfast?'

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The lodge was a simple affair. Five sets of quarters opened onto a utilitarian shared space. By the end of the week, the participants often socialised there, although tended to keep in their rooms out of hours at the start. On one wall of the wood-panelled room was the hatch through which the autochef delivered food and drink on request.

Although sounds of movement could be heard in the quarters, none of the guests had emerged by the time they reached the lodge. They both made themselves breakfast and went into the only other room, the meeting area.

Five chairs surrounded a small white table. Polk took his usual seat at one end. Two more nestled under each side, each reserved for a specific race: the Ungaleth and Enella diagonally opposite, as were the Olvin and Falki. That guaranteed that the races who'd fought on the

same side never sat adjacent. The Ungaleth and Olvin, the leaders in the conflict, were closest to Polk.

Although primarily a functional room, the seats were comfortable. They had to be, given the hours everyone would spend there discussing their stories and confessions from the Fractal War. Polk tried to keep them alert.

Every session was recorded. Polk always had to set the participants' minds at rest at the start of each week. They'd already given approval during the application process to allow the recordings to be kept within the commission, only used for writing the official history, but most had forgotten. At least it meant anyone could review the content later if they'd drifted off at a critical moment.

'Which seat was Jaklorinki's?' said Novak.

Polk pointed to the closest on his left. Novak pulled it to the opposite end of the table and sat facing him. He heard the low hum as the chair's contours adjusted to her posture.

'Did he upset anyone yesterday?' said Novak.

'Not obviously,' said Polk. 'Not sure anyone warmed to him though. He was a bit standoffish, full of himself.'

'A typical Ungaleth then.'

'Not from my experience,' said Polk. 'There's good and bad in all races. Including Terran.'

Before she could reply, Polk sipped his coffee and concentrated on his plate, breaking off a chunk of croissant, adding a touch of yak butter, and topping it with an Ungaleth preserve that tasted of raspberry dipped in honey and chocolate. He wasn't hungry but feared it would be a long day.

Novak didn't let him eat in peace.

'Who do you reckon did it? The Olvin?'

Polk wasn't going to rush his mouthful of flavours. As he chewed, he gave a tiny shake of his head, then followed it with a shrug. Once his mouth was free of croissant, he gave his considered reply.

'The Olvin's name is Cabeliac Onga. Honestly, she seems the least likely culprit from my brief exposure so far. Yes, I know the Olvin hate the Ungaleth more than anyone, but Onga doesn't seem the type.' He shrugged again. 'Then again, who knows? They've all killed people. There's been a war on.'

He tempered his sarcasm with what he hoped was a self-deprecating smile, but there was a serious point. The aliens were all here with the promise of immunity if they participated fully in the process, confessing to everything and telling any story that might uncover crimes

by others. If past sessions were anything to go by, Novak was hunting a murderer in a room full of killers.

'Why isn't she the type?' said Novak. 'In my experience, it's usually the least likely candidate who turns out to be guilty.'

'Everything I saw yesterday points to her still being severely affected by whatever trauma she experienced during the war. I didn't want to push it so early in the process, but it's something to explore later in the week once she's settled in. These people are in my care. I want to help them if I can while fulfilling my main duties.'

'Part-time counsellor, eh?' said Novak. 'Anyway, the trauma could mean she's suppressing some deep-seated grudges. Could explode into action when you least expect.'

Polk ignored the counsellor jibe. She knew nothing about his background, so he'd let her find out the hard way. That didn't stop him from showing off.

'Maybe. Why don't you see for yourself? She's about to come in.'

Polk casually slipped in his earpieces, ensuring a snug fit. They were almost unnoticeable once in place, adopting the skin tone and texture of the wearer – an indispensable piece of technology that had been a gift from the Olvin when humanity first encountered them. Each perfectly passed through every sound except for speech, which it automatically translated, even converting units and adopting suitable idioms in the same voice as the speaker. He was ready.

With perfect timing, the door opened, and Cabeliac Onga entered carrying a plate of red stipple, a traditional Olvin dish. Novak raised one eyebrow while fitting her own earpieces but said nothing. It was enough of a reaction to make him feel better.

He'd heard Onga outside getting breakfast. Her footsteps were audible, so it wasn't Amina Ya, the Enella, who moved like a ghost. Gori Ghul Flay, the Falki, would have been clattering about. He wasn't subtle. By process of elimination, it had to be Onga.

Cabeliac Onga stopped dead in the doorway when she saw Novak. Like most Olvin, she had wide, staring eyes, a broad jawbone, and severely sunken cheeks, making her face almost skeletal. Other than those accentuated features, plus the subtle chevron ridge in her forehead pointing down at her nose – a familial trait – she could have passed for human, at least in a bad light, just like all the other races they'd met.

Her shoulder-length light brown hair was immaculately straight, parted in the centre and pulled behind her ears. She wore a distinctive iridescent blue-green high-necked blouse that extended halfway down her thighs over tight cyan trousers. It was a flamboyant outfit that contrasted with her quiet intensity. Her glare shifted from Novak to the space where Jaklorinki's chair used to be.

'Where's Jak?' she said.

'Jak won't be joining us today,' said Polk. 'If you don't mind, I'll wait until everyone is here before explaining. Save repeating myself.'

Onga shrugged, went to take her seat, and mumbled almost to herself.

'Amina's just coming.'

Onga began to pick at her food, avoiding looking towards Novak. Polk held off making an introduction. That didn't stop Novak from studying her every movement, but she was unlikely to gain anything. Onga had retreated into her shell.

Novak pulled a slate from her pocket and sat there immersed in research. She'd have access to all of their bios by now, which was unlikely to reveal anything interesting unless her sources were better than Polk's.

The sound of jangling cutlery came from outside, accompanied by a plate clattering on the worktop.

'Gori's coming too,' said Polk.

He listened to the pattern of movement. Watching Amina Ya the day before had been fascinating, her military training guiding her every move. Like most Enella, she was short and slight in build, but it would be a mistake to underestimate her wiry strength and determination. She made the most of her surroundings to give herself an advantage, even while making breakfast.

'Here they come,' said Polk. 'Amina will be in front.'

The door opened. As predicted, Amina Ya was first, with the Falki, Gori Ghul Flay, towering above her behind. His neck started where Amina's head finished.

Amina didn't break stride as she headed to her seat, only a brief flick of her eyes towards Novak showing any sign that something was wrong. She wore the traditional deep maroon off-duty jumpsuit of the Enella military, with the dark shadow of her shaved hairline leaving no doubt this was merely a break from active service.

Her pinched elfin features, the straight line from the top of each ear down to her narrow chin making her face appear triangular, created an intensity that differed from Onga's. Amina's shone outwards, acting as a barrier to keep others at a distance, whereas Onga's focused within.

Gori Ghul Flay's reaction couldn't have been more different. He stopped in the doorway and put his free hand on his hip. For some people, it could have been a playful gesture. Gori's glower made it threatening.

'What's going on?' he demanded, his deep voice resonating.

'Sit down,' said Polk. 'Then you'll find out.'

Gori made no movement.

'You cannot spring changes on us like this,' he said. 'That's in the agreement we signed.'

'I'm just about to tell you,' said Polk. 'This is the first chance I've had.'

'Jak won't be happy.'

'He's not, I assure you. Now, will you sit down?'

Gori glared at Novak.

'You can't replace members in the group like this. Especially with a Terran.'

He almost spat out the last word.

'I haven't,' said Polk. 'Look, we're not going to get anywhere until you join us. Let's get this moving.'

Gori stood there for a few more seconds, holding his dish of whatever brown mush the Falki liked for breakfast. He was trying to look imposing, but that took more presence than just an enormous bulk and oddly blank glower. Finally, he relented, stalked across to his seat, and clattered his dish onto the table.

Polk gathered his irritation and studied it, his usual technique for controlling his emotions. It was too easy to misinterpret Gori's facial expressions and get annoyed. Like all Falki, Gori's skull was split into separate islands of bone floating on cartilage, and the two ridges above each eye, coupled with the flat forehead bone, gave the impression he was taking everything oh so seriously. It didn't help that Gori wore a reddish-brown cloak that made him look like a monk. At least his hood was lowered today.

Polk took a deep breath and waited for the right moment. As soon as Gori had stuffed a spoonful of mush into his mouth, he spoke.

'Jaklorinki's been murdered. I found his body on the beach during my morning walk.'

Onga's eyes widened, but she kept silent and stared down at her hands. Gori tried to speak, managed not to splutter, but said nothing coherent before accepting he had to swallow his mouthful first. Amina grabbed the chance, speaking softly. It was a statement of fact rather than a question.

'You think one of us killed him.'

'That's what Valerity Novak is here to determine,' said Polk. 'She has direct authority from the GFU to investigate.'

Novak went to speak, but Gori interrupted.

'Are you sure it was foul play?' said Gori.

'Definitely,' said Novak. 'And before you say anything else, I'm also sure the murderer is in this room. There's no way into this enclave by land and no indication of any approach over sea.'

'That doesn't mean someone else couldn't have done it,' said Gori. 'This is outrageous.'

'It's possible there's a stranger around, but unlikely,' said Novak. 'I'll only look further afield if I'm convinced the four of you are innocent. Which you aren't.'

Four. It wasn't a surprise to Polk that he'd be a suspect, but it was the first time Novak had explicitly stated it. At least the others all had more apparent motives.

Amina raised a sensible – if invalid – argument before Gori could apply more bluster. As always, she spoke calmly and without emotion.

'We've all got alibis. The lodge's security systems must prove we were in our rooms.'

'Unfortunately not,' said Polk. 'It was disabled. Jaklorinki did it so he could go out for a midnight walk. It was stupid, but it means any of us could have done it – especially anyone who realised the security system was down.'

'But why would we have killed him?' said Gori.

Novak snorted.

'Seriously? Two of you have just been at war with the Ungaleth. They subjugated the other during the war. Sounds like plenty of motive to me.'

At least Novak hadn't tried to pin a motive on Polk, which was something. Amina Ya was the first to object.

'You're wrong about the Ungaleth and the Enella. We weren't subjugated. They saved us.'

'You'll need to explain that one,' said Novak.

Amina's weary sigh betrayed her first flicker of irritation. Novak wasn't the first to make such a basic mistake.

'When they invaded, we were in a mess. We'd trashed our ecosystem. We were in danger of starving to death if we didn't die in a nuclear war first. Everything was falling apart. The Ungaleth saved us from ourselves. Yes, they conscripted us into the war, but it was a better life than most had at the time. That's still true. They treat us well. We are happy. Unlike others, I had no axe to grind with Jak.'

'That matches what other Enella have told me,' said Polk.

It was undoubtedly true that many younger Enella believed that. It was what they'd been taught. They knew no different. The reality for those who'd been around at the time was more nuanced, but there was a significant nugget of truth in the official narrative.

'Very well, I'll accept that, for now,' said Novak. 'Doesn't mean you didn't have a motive.'

'Don't waste your time on me,' said Amina. 'I didn't kill him.'

Novak stared at her for several seconds.

'One thing you should know about me, that you should all know. I have a knack for telling when people are concealing things. Or lying. So don't try it.'

Amina gave a tiny shrug. Polk maintained his poker face as Novak turned to Onga.

'The Olvin have more reason than any to hate the Ungaleth.'

Cabeliac Onga didn't respond for a few seconds, still staring down at her hands. Then she gave a slight jump as if only just realising someone was talking about her.

'I... I don't go around killing people. I couldn't. Yes, I hate what the Ungaleth did during the war, but it's over now.' She hesitated. 'Isn't it? Yes, of course it is. It's just... I had nothing against Jaklorinki. I didn't even know him. I'm not going to kill a stranger. Well, unless they do something to... no. That doesn't matter. I still wouldn't. Not now. Jaklorinki was nobody special. He'd done nothing to me. I—'

'Okay, okay,' interrupted Novak. 'I get the point.'

Novak tilted her head and turned to face Gori. She didn't need to ask.

'Don't look at me,' said Gori. 'I'm probably the only one here who'd met Jak before. I had a lot to thank him for. If there was one Ungaleth I didn't want to kill, it was Jak.'

That was news to Polk.

'You didn't mention that yesterday.'

'I don't think he recognised me,' said Gori. 'It was many, many years ago. I was going to surprise him with it when I told my story later. I was looking forward to that. Damn.'

Polk turned to Novak.

'You said we could continue our normal reconciliation sessions while you listened in. Why don't we start with Gori's story? Once you know how he met Jaklorinki, you might be able to rule him out.'

'Sure,' said Novak. 'Why not?'

'You really want me to speak now?' said Gori. 'Feels inappropriate.'

'Best way to clear your name,' said Polk. 'And if you've a story to tell about Jak that paints him in a good light, then it would be a fitting tribute.'

Someone speaking highly of Jak was the last thing Polk had expected. Gori took a few seconds to convince himself but then straightened in his seat.

'The general amnesty still covers this? Some of it is... sensitive.'

'The amnesty covers everything you confess in this room,' said Polk. 'No exceptions. It will all be recorded for posterity.'

'To be clear,' said Novak. 'That amnesty doesn't apply to crimes after the war, including this murder.'

'Very well,' said Gori. 'But not until I've finished my breakfast. I'll need a few minutes to gather my thoughts.'

'Acceptable,' said Novak. She turned to Polk. 'I need to speak with you alone. Let's go outside.'

'Sure,' said Polk. 'I could do with another coffee.'

It would be better than sitting around in silence waiting for Gori to down his mush. They left the room, sealed the door, and crossed to the autochef. Novak didn't speak until they'd both got fresh coffees.

'You saw how they reacted. Any thoughts?'

'No clue,' said Polk. 'Whatever they said about the relationship between their races, that doesn't mean the motive isn't there. The Olvin and the Falki fought the Ungaleth and the Enella for over a century. There's enough bad blood built up even between allies that could have affected any of them.'

'Go on.'

'All I'm saying is that you can't treat anyone as a typical representative of their race. There's no such thing. They're individuals shaped by their war experiences. You can see how much it's affected Onga, and I'm sure the same is true of the others in different ways.'

'Amina's the most interesting,' said Novak. 'She's portraying unwavering loyalty to the Ungaleth. Maybe she blamed Jak for his failure in protecting their leadership.'

'Possibly,' said Polk. 'It's not much of a motive, but better than nothing. Maybe we should get Amina to tell her story after Gori?'

'Maybe I will,' said Novak. 'Let's see what Gori's story reveals – if it's true. I'll soon tell.'

Polk didn't miss the repeated boast of being able to tell if they were lying. He'd have to test that at some point.

'Got to start somewhere,' said Polk. 'Once we understand how Gori knew Jak, it might provide a thread we can tug on. It's obvious Jak didn't recognise him yesterday, so that means any of them could have met him too and been forgotten. That could provide a motive.'

'You realise you're a suspect too?' said Novak.

She was finally getting around to the purpose of this chat.

'I assumed that,' said Polk. 'But if it had been me, I'd have left it to the end of the week and then hidden the body. This way raises too many questions.'

'Sounds like you had it all planned.'

'I'd just been wondering, why now? Why so obviously?' said Polk. 'Maybe someone just spotted the security system was down and made the most of the chance?'

'Maybe,' said Novak. 'That still doesn't rule you out.'

'Not sure what my motive could be. Jak was irritating, but I've had worse here from all sides, I assure you. I've no grudge against the Ungaleth – quite the opposite. My general opinion of them is more positive than most.'

'My main suspicion is over your bio,' said Novak. 'It's remarkably empty.'

It was always going to be a sticking point. Polk had no choice but to tread carefully.

'It would be,' said Polk. 'I've not been a facilitator long. Before that, well that's a different matter. Just because we were neutral during the war doesn't mean some of us didn't have roles to play. Unfortunately, the project I was involved in isn't public knowledge yet. It's highly classified. Sorry, I can't discuss it.'

Novak stared at him for several seconds. He could almost hear the wheels grinding as she realigned her perception of him away from a milquetoast facilitator.

'You said you could tell if we were lying,' said Polk. 'You must realise I've no choice. I took an oath.'

'I'll check with my boss,' said Novak, unimpressed. 'She'll get me access.'

She would need to go a long way up the chain for that.

'Good luck,' said Polk.

Novak tested her new-found perspective on him.

'You've told me the official reason for these reconciliation sessions. You must have worked out that there's more to what you do than that. Something else these sessions achieve.'

'Seems pretty obvious,' said Polk. 'It's why I write up every single detail I feel is important at the end of each week, and try to interpret the truth behind all the stories.'

'I can see from your record that your work has been well received,' said Novak. 'Go on then. What's it for?'

'With everything we hear, the commission can put together a more accurate history of what really happened during the war: all the secret missions, all the hidden plots. What's being told at the moment is a biased tale from the Olvin's perspective as the victors. From what I've heard here, they were often as bad as the Ungaleth. If Terra– If Earth is as neutral as we're supposed to be, we're the best-placed ones to tell the real story.'

A tiny nod of her head was the first glimmer of respect.

'That sounds a much better way of keeping the peace,' said Novak. 'Make everyone ashamed of their actions so they won't do it again.'

'Including us?' said Polk.

That got another cold laugh.

'Don't get too optimistic. We're the ones writing this history, after all.'

Novak's response was fascinating in itself. She was more than a simple detective. He couldn't underestimate her – nor get on her bad side. It might be worth dropping a helpful nugget to set her on the right track.

'Those are the motivations for the commission, not the participants. They've often got their own agendas. That's usually the cause of any murder.'

'The amnesties?' said Novak.

'Yup,' said Polk. 'Any participant gets an amnesty, no matter how bad their actions, no matter how many people died because of their malevolence. It's considered the best way of flushing out the worst atrocities of the war. Not everyone likes that.'

'That sticks in my craw too,' said Novak. 'I hate letting people get away with murder. If a psychopath killed your loved ones, would you let it rest?'

'That's sort of the point,' said Polk. 'We can't keep refighting the battles of the past. We have to learn their lessons and try to find a way to move on. That's the theory, anyway.'

'All very laudable, I'm sure,' said Novak. 'Sounds to me that it's just as likely to exacerbate the need for revenge.'

'I'm afraid you're right. The war left a lot of grudges lingering. These sessions can be the best place to track down the perpetrators for those wanting revenge. That's why some people come – direct action is their only route to justice.'

'Aren't all the records anonymised? And the attendees before they arrive?'

'In theory,' said Polk. 'A lot of that is handled locally on each planet. If you know the right people, it doesn't take much to break things. It's not impossible to ensure you're in the same group as someone you suspect. Not easy, but it's happened.'

'You think that's what happened here?' said Novak.

Polk took a few more sips of coffee.

'No idea. Maybe. It's worth bearing in mind while we listen to their stories. Shall we go back in?'

'One more thing,' said Novak. Her face broke into a crooked smile, as humourless as her laugh. 'I can't decide whether you're playing it cool or you really don't recognise me.'

'Both,' said Polk. 'You seem vaguely familiar, but I can't figure out why.'

'Remember what happened to the last secretary of the GFU?'

'Only in passing,' said Polk. 'I wasn't on Earth around then. I did half-watch a documentary about it last year. Didn't he kill himself after— Shit, you're *her*. The detective that brought down Secretary Armand.'

'I know that documentary,' said Novak. 'Wasn't bad. The simulation got me to a tee. Pity so much else was wrong.'

'But you did bring down the secretary.'

'He did that on his own,' said Novak. 'Not my fault he tried to cover up for a murderer.'

'Weren't you sacked?'

'Yeah. Didn't stop me from getting revenge after they shafted me. Luckily, our new regime was glad to see the back of him. I do special investigations for the GFU now.'

'Hence, you're here,' said Polk.

'You're catching on,' said Novak. 'I've a roving brief. I can poke my nose in anywhere that looks interesting. I've no idea what I'm looking for, but once I've found it, I'm sure I can make up a story that shows I knew what I was doing all along.'

She was tempting him with joking honesty, expecting him to reciprocate. He'd used that trick himself on plenty of occasions. It would be worth giving the appearance of playing along.

'Just make sure I'm one of the good guys in your story.'

'If you've done nothing wrong, there won't be a problem, will there?' said Novak.

'Perfect,' said Polk. 'Shall we go back in?'

Gori was ready when they returned. He seemed in a better mood, happy to be the centre of attention now the surprise had subsided. The other two were quiet. Onga hadn't even noticed them enter. Amina stared intently at Gori, determined not to miss a thing.

'I met Jaklorinki not long after Terra opened their gateway,' said Gori. 'You youngsters won't know what it was like back then. Terra's arrival threw the conflict into turmoil.'

It was easy to underestimate how old Gori must be. Falki aged differently. They showed less visible change as they got older, with no more than minor skin blemishes. Gori's slightly hunched shoulders were a telltale sign if you knew what you were looking for. He continued.

'It forced a brief lull in the hostilities while everyone sought ways to entice the Terrans. Naturally, Ungal and Olva both wanted them on their side to swing the war in their favour. I volunteered for a mission intended to persuade the Terrans that the Olvin were the good guys, which of course, they were. That's when I met Jak.'

Amina's glare intensified. This might be a mistake if all Gori did was try to gloss over history and use it to score points, but first-hand knowledge of that critical period would be fascinating. It rarely came up in these sessions.

Polk's job would be to stop Amina from exploding while Gori spoke. Gori addressed him directly.

'Actually, no. I need to go back a bit further, or this won't make sense. Did you know I was there when the Olvin made first contact with you Terrans? I was the first person to enter your system.'

'No, really?' said Polk. It was a genuine surprise. 'Please, tell your story however you need.'

'It's two stories really,' said Gori. 'How we first met you, and then the mission to persuade you to back the Olvin. Without the first part, you won't understand why the mission happened or why I volunteered for it.'

'Please, go ahead,' said Polk.

It would be a fascinating story if Gori ever got started. He wasn't ready yet.

'You all familiar with how Fractal Space works?'

Polk sighed. Fractal Space was the mysterious, ancient, artificial realm that linked all the races and enabled the war. Polk had only crossed it once.

'I've been through it,' said Polk. 'Everyone else must have to get here.'

'What about how it's navigated?'

'Some of us might be rusty,' said Polk. 'If it's important to your story, fill in the details.'

Gori nodded. He pulled up his hood, lowered his head, and peered out from the shadow, avoiding eye contact. It was the first sign of uncertainty after his bluster so far. Perhaps the memories were difficult. If so, it was his way of coping.

'Right,' he said, his voice deepening. 'You'd better get comfortable. We'll be here for a while.'

✧ · Gori Ghul Flay's Tale · ✧

I was younger then, right back at the beginning of my long career. I was naive. I was inexperienced. But I was clever enough to grasp every opportunity to get noticed. At least, I thought I was being clever. It turns out that clutching a straw when you don't know what's on the other end is dangerous.

Let me set the context. I'd just completed my training as a Fractal Space navigator, passing with flying colours. It turns out I was a natural with the perfect mental aptitude needed to guide a craft through the warped dimensions of that weird realm.

If you've only experienced Fractal Space cloistered in the shielded passenger areas, seeing it as nothing more than a mottled grey background through the windows, you've missed out on its true majesty. It's small enough to cross in much less than a day, devoid of everything but atmosphere, yet infinite in complexity. Perfectly designed for life like us, yet little technology works there. The speed of transit is glacial, yet when we emerge back into our universe, we've travelled light-years into another system. It's incredible.

The shielding isn't there to protect passengers from Fractal Space. It's there to protect the skilled navigators from the passengers, or more correctly, to stop the passengers' chaotic thoughts from interfering with the navigator's job. Like most advanced technology, propulsion systems are non-functional within the realm. The essence of Fractal Space itself bends to the will of the navigator. All I need to do is visualise our route and destination, and the vessel follows my desires. It needs nothing more than mental discipline.

The level of technology that works in Fractal Space is minimal. Only exceptionally low-power devices work, typically of little value within a military spaceship, so they're hardly worth mentioning – other than the miracle of engineering that lets the translation earpieces function adequately. I'd have hated to learn Olvin.

Back then, we only knew of four ways into and out of Fractal Space: the gateways to the Olvin, Falki, Ungaleth, and Enella systems. Each of those entrances had originally been sealed away, concealed inside a celestial body within each system, right until the moment when the local technology had advanced enough to approach it with a crewed expedition. Automated vessels had no effect. Biological intelligence had to be near.

In our case, well before I was born, the first visit to the largest asteroid near Falkith was thrown into disarray. As we approached the irregularly shaped planetoid, its cratered body

sundered in two. The halves floated serenely away to reveal a shimmering purple haze floating in the vacuum of space. We had no idea what to make of it.

Months later, the Olvin emerged to explain everything. They showed us how to enter Fractal Space. Once we got to know them, we opted to support their war effort in exchange for more advanced technology. It was a partnership that transformed our world. We were happy to take their lead. Once I was of age, I was keen to play my part.

My first assignment after qualification was on a small surveillance craft, just three navigators taking turns on duty under the command of rookie Lieutenant Miskin. I was the only Falki amongst the otherwise Olvin crew. Our job was to fly as close to the edge of Fractal Space as possible and look for enemy movements or anything suspicious.

These missions had a reputation for being tedious, as you rarely ever saw anything, but their primary purpose was to give us experience, not excitement. That was even true for Miskin, the non-navigating officer getting an early taste of command.

I had no great passion for being a navigator, but as I had the talent, it was a way to get noticed at the start of my career. I had no intention of staying cocooned in a ship longer than necessary. I wanted to fight. I wanted to make a difference. Although not trained in the officer stream, I intended to grab every chance for advancement and volunteer for any opportunity that could give me the recognition I deserved.

This first mission started by taking the slow route around the edge of the space from the Olvin to the Ungaleth gateway. As we were all inexperienced, it was a chance to practise.

Day one had been routine, but I realised something was amiss when I entered the bridge to begin my stint the following day. Lieutenant Miskin was there with the on-duty navigator, staring out the window. That was interesting. Miskin usually remained in the shielded area. He turned to me as I approached and gestured out the front of the craft.

'Take a look. See if you agree with my conclusion.'

The window revealed an area of the infinitely-detailed fractal wall ahead. It was clear what had got their attention. Everything was as expected, gentle shades of grey between the occasional cliff-edges of white, except for a single spiralling fractal fold. Inside was deep black. Only one thing looked like that.

'It's a gateway,' I said. 'There's another system through there.'

'That's my opinion too,' said Miskin. 'Another intelligent race must await on the other side. They've found their gateway into Fractal Space.'

Miskin hummed to himself. It was almost musical.

'This could give us the edge. If we can get them on our side before the Ungaleth discover their existence, it could swing the war in our favour.' He hummed again. 'Damn, standing

orders preclude us from making first contact. That doesn't stop us from investigating. We must act.'

The on-duty navigator wasn't so sure.

'We can't be sure that's a gateway, sir. If we're wrong, we'll die.'

That got him a grunt and a glare, but there was nothing Miskin could say to dispute it. Lieutenant Miskin was my first field commander, and I was still getting used to him. His pronounced cheekbones made him look even more skeletal than most Olvin, and his wide-eyed intensity was intimidating. It wasn't just his looks. He intended to go places, and you didn't want to stand in his way. I chose to be dragged along in his wake.

'Let me prove it,' I said. 'Let me go through.'

'How?' said Miskin.

'I can navigate through Fractal Space on my own. I'll need a spacesuit with a manoeuvring pack to survive when I cross out into the real universe, but not in here. It should be no different to flying a ship. If I don't come back, then you'll know it's not a gateway.'

Miskin stared at me for a few unnerving seconds.

'Do it. Take a comms setup. If there's anywhere safe to leave it over there, set it recording and then return. We'll need an expert team to make first contact, but the more data we can give them on the alien language, the quicker they'll train the translator.'

'Yes, sir!' I said, saluting eagerly.

'Good man.'

It didn't take long to get ready. I had no doubts that this was the right thing to do. If it were a gateway, my contribution would be recognised. I'd be the first to see this alien system. If not... well, I tried not to think about it.

That resolve lasted up to the moment I stood at the open hatch, fully encapsulated in my spacesuit. I had a backpack with attitude control jets and a comms unit strapped to my front. If we were wrong, this would be my last act.

Fractal Space itself isn't inhospitable; it has a temperate, breathable atmosphere. I could survive indefinitely outside the ship if I had access to food and drink. Once I crossed through the gateway though, I'd be in the vacuum of normal space, and that assumed I didn't die in the crossing. If we were wrong about this being a gateway, I'd vanish into the depths of the fractal walls, never to return.

That atmosphere throws some people when they initially encounter it. Most soldiers on the troop carriers would freak out at the first thing we do on arrival in Fractal Space – open all the hatches. The life support systems stop working along with everything else, but luckily, they're unnecessary. The first rule drummed into you at navigator training is the most critical

of all: don't forget to batten the hatches before emerging back into normal space. It's not a mistake you make more than once.

As hospitable as it is, Fractal Space sends some poor people mad, ranting about seeing colours everywhere, insisting they have to explore the fractal depths. We lock them up for their own safety – it would be instant death – but they're never quite the same afterwards. They're given an honourable discharge on their return.

It's a rare occurrence. Oddly, I've only ever heard of it happening to Falki, not Olvin, which must mean something. I've no idea what. The only thing I know for sure is that the two I've personally seen across the decades were both my people. It was unsettling.

'What are you waiting for?' said Miskin.

'Checking my suit, sir,' I said.

I wasn't. I was just trying to remember everything I could about Fractal Space before committing myself alone into its care for the first time. Once I left, there would be no way to talk to Miskin, to anyone on the ship, given our communication technology was non-functional. That was probably for the best.

I pushed off. It took a few seconds to focus my thoughts, but as soon as I did, my tumble slowed, and my trajectory curved. Off to the side were the complex grey patterns of the fractal walls, but I concentrated on the black depths ahead. My curve straightened. I accelerated towards the infinitely complex darkness.

It was odd. I could have been about to die, yet I was at peace. I felt safe in this benign environment. It may be why I'd taken so naturally to navigating through this realm.

There are more oddities about Fractal Space that non-navigators rarely understand that you'll need to know to make sense of it. If you're travelling in a straight line from A to B while someone else is travelling from B to A, then ninety-nine per cent of the time, you'll never see each other.

The exception is right near the edge, although *near* and *edge* are hard to quantify. Not only is the surface fractal in nature – the more you zoom in, the more detail you can see, forever – but the space itself is non-linear. As you approach the fractal surface, its curled-up nature visible only as shades of grey, the vessel shrinks as if sizing itself to fit within the infinitely regressing folds.

Just before you would sink into the first fold's embrace near a gateway, you can glimpse vessels coming and going from the outside universe. It's a way to monitor enemy movements through Fractal Space – one of the reasons for our mission – but it takes significant skill from the navigator. If you accidentally enter the fractal territory, there's no way to return. Many a vessel shrank into nothingness in the early days of exploration.

The working theory is that there are multiple overlapping realities out of phase with each other inside that coalesce towards the edge, curling into compact, folded dimensions. Or so I

read. I didn't understand the science, but it was obviously no more than guesswork. Without working technology in the space, there was no way to make sensible measurements to verify anything.

Similarly, the weirdness inside Fractal Space precludes any sensible attempt at engaging the enemy. If you did see another ship, there's no reasonable way to confront it. Weapons don't work. Nobody even tries.

None of which was encouraging as I headed toward the gateway. The darkness grew all around me, with the lighter grey parts of the wall restricted to my peripheral vision. Then everything turned black. Lilac flashes flickered like lazy lightning. That lasted for a few seconds; then, without any fanfare, I was through. My suit flickered to life.

The view before me was astounding. Ahead was a massive gas giant encircled by magnificent rings. The system's sun was distant, barely more than a point of light, but the cosmic debris closer to hand grabbed my attention.

Two halves of a moon floated away from each other as if separated by a celestial cleaver. Midway between them was the telltale purple haze that signified the entrance to Fractal Space, unlocked when the moon split open. That must have been quite a shock to the locals as they approached.

Technically, the haze wasn't the entrance but a manifestation of the probabilistic spread of possible transit points. It exhibited as motes of purple flickering in and out of existence. When exiting Fractal Space, you might pop out anywhere in an area stretching along its orbit for millions of kilometres. We still don't know how to control that; it's just more likely to happen near the centre. Similarly, you can enter it – with the appropriate deployment of mental will – anywhere along the area, but it's easier near the centre.

It was time to focus on my mission. I checked the comms unit. It was picking up transmissions between at least two ships nearby. Perfect. I scanned the vicinity and found a decent-sized remnant from the split moon, an ideal location to leave the comms unit, letting it record the data needed to learn to communicate with these aliens.

Using my backpack to jet across to the rock was a simple task. I tethered the comms unit and unrolled its solar array to keep it topped up in case our return was delayed, although given the distance from their sun, it wouldn't last indefinitely.

My task was done. I took one final look at the impressive ringed planet and severed moon – which I later learned they called Saturn and Iapetus – and kicked off the surface. A little distance from its bulk would make it easier to transition into Fractal Space. All I needed was to deploy my suitably trained intelligence in the right vicinity, and I'd slip back inside. These aliens would soon work out how to do it for themselves.

There was one thing everyone agreed upon, but nobody understood: Fractal Space was artificial – and ancient. Gateways had been hidden many millions of years ago in multiple

systems, unlocking when an intelligent species approached. All those who'd found their way in so far were variations on a theme, coming from compatible biospheres and breathing similar atmospheres – like the one inside the space itself.

The consensus was that there must have been a guiding hand, an ancient race that had built Fractal Space, linking systems with similar biospheres. They must be unimaginably advanced by now – or dead. No sign of them has been found. I shudder whenever I think about the implications, so I try not to. I prefer making the most of it and getting on with things.

My return journey was straightforward, finding our ship pleasingly close to my transit point. With the discovery of the gateway, the planned mission was abandoned, and we returned to Olva to arrange first contact.

One thing had changed. I'd felt an outsider when the mission started, the lone Falki among three Olvin. Now Lieutenant Miskin showed grudging respect for the first time. I'd been noticed.

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We returned to the new gateway with the first contact experts. I was essential to the mission as the only one who'd been into the system and knew where the comms unit had been left. I first returned to pick it up and install more comprehensive monitoring kit. It took a few attempts to emerge near enough to the first location to complete the task, but nothing too onerous. Shuttling through the gateway then became my job.

From my perspective, there was then a hiatus while their language was analysed and the translator prepared, although I was often out of the loop. Finally, we took our ship through the gateway and said hello.

They liked to call themselves so many names: Terran, human, Homo sapiens, Earthling, whatever. Like everyone but themselves, I'm sticking with Terran. Unfortunately, being of lowly rank back then, I could only watch the initial encounter on a viewscreen. Lieutenant Miskin was in the room, if at the back, while the generals took charge.

It went well at first. Unsurprisingly, their appearance was an amalgam of the known races: the smooth features of an Enella, the hair of an Olvin, the strong chin of a Falki, with the calculating smile of an Ungaleth – yet more evidence of commonality linked by Fractal Space.

We exchanged information openly, learned of each other's cultures, and informed them of the other races. Naturally, we focused on the conflict started by the Ungaleth when the Olvin first attempted friendly contact. They wanted to know more.

We took our time, answering concerns, explaining Fractal Space, training them to use it, and understanding their capabilities. The Terrans were technologically on a par with the Olvin and Ungaleth, more advanced than the Falki and significantly superior to the Enella.

Although behind in military capabilities, they were ahead in computing, medicine, and genetics. They would be worthy allies.

When we arrived, no world government existed on Terra, with several regional administrations calling the shots for most. That soon changed when the implications of an interstellar conflict on their doorstep dawned. They banded together into a loose federation to create a united front, something that would evolve and stabilise into their current central government.

That was when everything changed. A representative of the new government asked to meet with her Olvin counterpart in orbit around Saturn, near the gateway. She wanted to outline Terra's united policy. Fortuitously, I was still stationed in the system with Lieutenant Miskin, so I could observe the proceedings.

The Terran delegation was led by Kisi Danso, a tall, severe woman with darker features than mine and jet black short hair. She was an imposing presence, even if she hadn't been accompanied by two Terran admirals. Olvin was represented by the external affairs minister, Jerelan Nood, with two generals by his side.

After exchanging pleasantries across the meeting table, the Terrans got straight down to business.

'The new Terran administration is still finalising our policy towards your ongoing conflict,' said Danso. 'As you would expect of us, we intend to gather as much data as possible before committing to a final decision. Let me stress we are in your debt for your help in understanding Fractal Space, and that will not be forgotten. However, a chance first discovery cannot be the only criterion in our deliberations.'

Nood nodded, smiling amiably, but his bulging jaw muscles told a different story. I knew the Olvin temperament well enough to tell he was pissed off.

'I do not believe we have done anything to dissuade you from siding with us?'

'No, not at all,' said Danso. 'However, it is prudent for us to be cautious at this stage. We wish to take the time to gather more information. To that end, with your permission, we would like to establish a permanent delegation in the Olvin capital city to facilitate ongoing communication. Ultimately, this could develop into a full-time embassy.'

Nood relaxed slightly, his smile looking less forced.

'I cannot see that being a problem. If it helps you reach a conclusion, we will be happy to accommodate your presence on Olva. I'm sure our partners on Falkith will do likewise.'

'Thank you,' said Danso. 'We do, of course, hope to do the same on Ungal and Enel. Our initial interactions with them have been positive.'

'You've met the Ungaleth behind our backs?' said Nood, the shock knocking his diplomacy off course.

'Not behind your backs, no. I'm telling you at the first possible opportunity after making contact with Ungal. Do not be concerned. We will not betray the confidence of either party during our negotiations.'

So much for all the effort we'd put into teaching them how to use Fractal Space. They'd immediately used it to fly straight to meet our enemies. Nood was livid.

'You cannot trust anything they say. They will do and say anything to get you on their side.'

Danso had been expecting his anger. She gave an infuriatingly condescending smile.

'Funnily enough, they say the same about you. As I say, do not be concerned. We will take into account your exemplary conduct and support until now. If that does not change, I'm sure the outcome will be acceptable to you.'

Nood paused to gather his composure.

'Very well. I can accept that for now.'

'Thank you,' said Danso. 'Now, let us proceed with discussing the practicalities. I have a report here outlining our requirements.'

Nood made no headway with Danso over the rest of the meeting, but the arrangements for the delegation were made. Terra insisted they would act studiously neutral during this evaluation process.

It wasn't good enough. It was frustrating. After everything we'd done to help them, we still had more work to do. We couldn't let them be tricked by the Ungaleth.

After the Terrans left, Lieutenant Miskin was summoned by the generals to an emergency meeting. When he emerged, he asked to speak to me alone in his office.

'Come in, Gori,' said Miskin. 'Take a seat.'

I immediately knew something was wrong. His forced informality and the first use of my given name were unexpected. He was smiling too, the thin-lipped horizontal line of his mouth curving up infinitesimally at the corners as if fighting supergravity. Even his hand was shaking.

He locked his wide eyes on mine but sat in silence for several seconds. That was back in the days before he adopted his trademark black eyeshadow for his political career. It was still unnerving.

'I have been ordered to lead a critical mission,' said Miskin. 'One that could swing the war in our favour.'

He stopped as if uncertain how to continue. If it were such a critical mission, it would be a great honour for him to lead it so young. So why did he seem so unhappy? Eventually, he continued.

'This mission will involve myself, plus one other. It will be unofficial, off the books – and dangerous. If it is discovered, we will be on our own, disowned by our government. Yet, if successful, everything will change. I will not order anyone else to participate, but I wanted to offer—'

'I volunteer, sir,' I said.

As if I would turn down the chance.

'No questions?' said Miskin. 'You have no idea what's involved.'

'Doesn't matter, sir,' I said. 'If it's critical, I'm the man for the job, sir.'

Miskin reverted to silence for a few seconds.

'Good man,' he said, almost a whisper under his breath. He gathered himself. 'We will convene for a briefing in one hour. Dismissed.'

I left the room with my heart pounding. Lieutenant Miskin had come to me first for a mission so important it could win the war. It was the biggest honour of my short career. Taking the chance of being first to go through the Terran gateway had paid off – he knew he could trust me. This would be the next rung up the ladder of success.

That's the story of how we made first contact with Terra. I was a vital part of the mission to bring Terra on our side. It was obvious this would be the most significant opportunity of my life, and I knew I was up for the challenge.

That was before I realised I'd volunteered for a suicide mission, and a stupid one at that.

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It took several months to prepare for the mission, but Miskin and I weren't on the critical path. We had to be delivered undetected to the surface of Ungal to carry it out – a scary and seemingly impossible prospect. Gathering the intelligence to find a viable route took most of the time. That wasn't our job. We spent the interim training.

You need to understand the state of the war back then. In many ways, it was similar to how things were before the recent ceasefire – a stalemate. Most of the conflict occurred in the outer systems, not the heavily secured homeworlds.

I can see now how that suited those on both sides who wanted the war to continue. Life on the central planets passed as normal. Unless you were part of the war effort, you'd be hard-pressed to notice other than in the news.

That extreme security around Ungal made it hard for us to sneak down, but the Olvin generals insisted there would be a way. There was always a loophole, especially when nobody considered it possible. Eventually, after many surveillance missions, they found it.

Lieutenant Miskin and I were ready when it came, having rehearsed every scenario imaginable. Our mission's success would depend upon the quality of the intelligence gathered to hone the plan. One mistake, and we'd have to improvise or die.

The face of a stranger stared back from the mirror. Not merely a stranger: an Ungaleth. We'd both undergone reversible, minor surgical procedures to allow us to pass as Ungaleth, at least to a casual inspection. I had two diagonal ridges implanted in my forehead, with vertical striations stretching over my bald scalp. My ears protruded more than usual. It was ugly but passable.

The changes to Lieutenant Miskin's Olvin features were more significant, with puffed-out cheeks and thickly-lidded eyes on top of similar changes to mine. Still, I'd learnt to read him better during our long training sessions, whatever his appearance. He was always professional and made no negative comments about our endeavour, but I was convinced I knew his opinion by the time we were ready. We weren't coming back.

By this time, Terran representatives had a small presence on the home planets of the four players in the war. Despite their frustrating insistence upon neutrality while they researched everything for themselves, their ongoing engagement with our side had been positive. All they needed was a personal reason to dislike the Ungaleth, and the Terrans would flip to support us. Our job was to provide it.

An Ungaleth terrorist attack on the Terran delegation to the Citadel should be enough. Ideally, it would be non-fatal, but making the assault appear to be by Ungaleth was more critical, as was not getting caught. Our intelligence services had provided a way in with a ninety per cent likelihood of success and a location for the attack with a similar success rate.

The escape route – basically retracing our steps – was bad enough that they wouldn't give a percentage. If we couldn't make it out, we were ordered to die in a way that destroyed our bodies. At least that part had been planned, our uniforms laced with strands of explosive thread. It would be a quick death.

There was no backing out now. Even someone with the contacts of Lieutenant Miskin – his father was a representative in the Olvin government – couldn't get out of it, not that his pride would have let him try. I was determined to make it work.

We were taken into the Ungaleth system in a small, three-person shuttle, kitted out in suits that could survive for days floating in space. After the usual probabilistic dance back and forth, we found a location far enough away from Ungaleth ships to begin the mission. Our target was a small, inhospitable moon around a gas giant in the outer system.

Our scouts had detected the first signs of a base being established on the moon. All that had happened so far was automated vessels delivering components, unloading them, and then returning to Ungal. There was no sign of life as yet. Even better, they docked at an automated facility near the Citadel when the craft returned home. We intended to hitch a ride. It was

safer than trying to slip through their defences on our own ship – at least for the journey there.

The first part was straightforward. A scan of the moon showed it to be deserted, as expected, and an incoming vessel was only eight hours away. Our pilot dropped us off in a crater near where all the prior containers of components had been deposited. We had plenty of time to hide. He then left, intending to lurk nearby for the next couple of weeks, waiting for our signal to be picked up – assuming we made it back. He didn't seem convinced either.

The intelligence for this phase of the mission was perfect, as was the training regime we'd endured. We executed everything perfectly. After the typically ugly Ungaleth automated delivery vessel landed mid-crater, we watched the containers as they were unloaded by what were little more than robot forklift trucks. Once the last item was on the surface, we made our move.

The Olvin spacesuits were a lightweight miracle, other than the large backpacks containing our life support and supplies for the mission. They were easy to carry on this moon but would require some effort on Ungal. That was unavoidable. We couldn't survive without them.

We rapidly reached the vessel using long loping strides in the low gravity, gliding up the ramp behind the last robot. Their systems didn't care about us. We waited until the robot secured itself against the wall, then started our own preparations for the flight. The ramp began to retract. We didn't have long.

I held my breath, disconnected the suit umbilicals, shrugged off the backpack, tethered it against a robot, and reconnected the umbilicals in flight configuration. After a couple of deep breaths, I lay flat on the floor in front of the backpack. Only then did I glance at Miskin. He was a couple of seconds behind me but barked his order.

'Do it.'

I nodded and engaged flight mode. Four securing bars emerged around me from the backpack. A fraction of a second later, my suit began to expand to fill the gap as the internal cushioning foam structure reconstituted itself. I smelled the stench of the sedative as it hissed into my air supply, although I was still partially awake when the suit injected the Olvin chemical cocktail to help protect me from the high-G acceleration. It was like fire running through my veins. I was glad to slip into unconsciousness as the pain intensified.

That was the last thing I remembered before we arrived. This automated vessel wasn't designed to carry crew, so it didn't have to worry about constraining its acceleration to keep passengers alive. That was what made this attempt viable – the Ungaleth would be complacent. They didn't know about the Olvin's new high-G protection technology, so wouldn't imagine anyone could stow away like this. So much for their belief that they were superior.

This protection mechanism hadn't been used significantly in anger before, but mercifully, it worked perfectly. My awakening was rapid as stimulants coursed through my veins, flushing the remnants of the fire juice. The suit and backpack were in the process of reconfiguring back into their usual compact mode.

I was alert enough to be aware of my surroundings. The vessel shuddered as it began its fiery entry into Ungal's atmosphere. We were there. I muttered a prayer of thanks to the Olvin's technology and sat up to find Miskin already standing, refitting his backpack. I followed suit.

From the data gathered by our short-lived spy satellites, the doors to the shuttle should open to allow the robots to get their next load within half an hour of landing. It happened after only five minutes, but we were ready. We ensured we were first out when the ramp was deployed.

We lumbered down the ramp – the backpacks were backbreaking in this gravity – and headed away from the nearest buildings as fast as we could. It was night-time. Given that the timing was driven by the Ungaleth vessel, that was a lucky happenstance that helped hide our flight.

There was no sign of anyone around. On the far side of the automated spaceport was a forest which would provide the cover needed to prepare for the main operation. That was where we headed.

The spaceport showed all the signs of being a makeshift operation, a newly established base that wasn't fully operational. It was another piece of the jigsaw of minor security flaws that made this mission viable. I could see why it took so long for the full strategy to be devised.

All that stood between us and our immediate goal was the tall, barbed boundary fence looming above us. We'd prepared for this too. The backpack's manoeuvring thrusters may have been designed for guidance in space but were easily repurposed to jet us over the top. It was exhilarating. I'd almost classify it as fun, right up to the moment I hit the ground with a grunt and collapsed onto my hands and knees. At least I was on the other side of the fence, even if I did receive a glare from Miskin, who'd landed elegantly.

I looked back when I heard a whining sound coming from the direction of the ship, rising in volume. A cone of light shone down from the sky onto the vessel's ramp. It must be a drone. Had we been spotted?

'Don't dawdle, man,' snapped Miskin. 'Get under cover.'

I'd never have thought of that on my own. I picked myself up and hustled across to the nearby tree line. We hunched under cover and watched the spotlight as the drone investigated the field, meandering from the ship towards the fence about a hundred metres away. They must have spotted our movement but not seen where we went.

The drone then turned to follow the fence line, heading towards us, shining its light as far as it could into the forest. We retreated further into the trees until the whine receded. We were safe.

I could have done with a break then. Running with the backpack was exhausting, and we'd had no time to recover from the lingering after-effects of the chemical cocktail, but Miskin would have none of it. It was alright for him. The muck they'd injected into me had only been fully optimised for Olvin physiology.

'Get the stuff stowed away,' said Miskin. 'The quicker we get this done, the quicker we can head home.'

I don't know who he was trying to convince. Everything was starker now. Assuming all went perfectly with the mission, we planned to retrace our steps here to recover our stowed backpacks and spacesuits. Then we'd hop over the fence and hitch a ride back on a nearby ship.

It wouldn't work. How could we tell which ship was going where? The intelligence suggested that if we took a vessel from the exact location where we arrived, it would likely return to the same moon. Even if that wasn't wishful thinking – the evidence was sketchy at best – it looked impossible. There were about twenty ships on the field, and I'd already lost track of where we'd started. We'd have to pick one and hope, with the backup plan of sending a signal from wherever we ended up, hoping someone on our side heard before we were captured. That assumed we got that far.

I'd been putting a brave face on it, but at this point, I admitted to myself that I'd made a terrible mistake in volunteering, no matter the career advancement that might follow if we survived. It wasn't just the likelihood of survival that was the problem. It was Lieutenant Miskin himself.

I thought Miskin had picked me because he recognised my potential. Far from it. It was because I was a Falki. I was expendable. He was pissed off to be forced to lead the mission and would rather take me down with him than any of his other subordinates. He'd shown little respect since.

I'd tried to ignore it, hoping it would change as we worked together, but no. To be honest, I don't think he deliberately went out of his way to irritate me. His disrespect was merely a casual expression of disinterest in anything other than his own grievances.

It all stemmed back to Miskin's father. He may have been a member of the Olvin ruling party, but politically, he'd fallen out of favour with the president. The rumour was that the order to send the Lieutenant on such a risky mission had come from the top, an unstated punishment of his father for disloyalty. Even if that were true, there was no need to take it out on me.

'Get on with it,' said Miskin, angry at how slowly I was removing my suit.

Annoyingly, he was right. I needed to get my head straight to maximise our chance of survival. Before long, our suits were off, and we were dressed in casual Ungaleth clothing. It was easy to forget they were laced with explosives, although I took care to remember the locations of the trigger switches. We each had a small, inconspicuous bag containing equipment and provisions, including a blaster, a telescopic rifle, and a remote-controlled bomb. That gave us options for both attack and escape.

There was no point in trying to attack the Terran delegation inside the Citadel itself. Security there was reputed to be impenetrable. That's why most of the ruling Riven clan lived there, and their elderly suzerain rarely left. Luckily, between visits to meet Ungaleth officials, the Terrans resided in their vessel on the edge of the main spaceport. The ship would still be too secure to attack, but they had to get between there and the Citadel for their meetings. That would be our chance.

First, we had to get there. Our route avoided built-up areas most of the way, although it involved slogging through the undergrowth in the forest and then out into the countryside. The reality was a good match for the satellite imagery used to plan the trip, even if the simulations hadn't included the constant buzzing of insects. Our flashlights provided enough illumination on the lowest setting to keep us moving until the first light of dawn began to glow in the distance.

By this point, we were approaching the outskirts of the industrial area where we'd make our attack. It couldn't have been more perfectly timed. It was light, but the streets were largely empty, and I recognised where we were from the training simulations. We stopped at a T-junction.

'Know where you're going?' said Miskin.

'Of course,' I said. 'Sir.'

'Get to it, then. Signal me when in position.'

Like we trained about one hundred times, sir.

'Yes, sir,' was all I was brave enough to say aloud.

I turned left and walked away from him. My job was to head to what looked like a disused factory near the main exit from the spaceport. I'd be able to see anyone coming from the Terran ship and leaving through the gate, contacting Miskin when I spotted an opportunity. He'd be concealed atop another deserted building down the road with his sniper rifle, in the perfect location to strike. If suitable cover were nearby, he'd deposit a bomb as a backup.

I'd be too exposed to attack from my location, but I planned to loiter without looking suspicious. I was to stay in place until the attack had been made, then flee as visibly as possible, ensuring my Ungaleth face was caught on security cameras. Once that was achieved, I could lurk into the background and try to rendezvous with Miskin back out in the

countryside. Of course, creating a distraction like that reduced my chance of escape while increasing Miskin's. That was likely the point. They didn't care – as long as I blew myself up before being caught.

As I wandered down the road with forced nonchalance, it was hard not to compare this rundown industrial area with my native Falkith. It wouldn't have looked out of place if it had been transplanted and plonked down on the outskirts of our capital. The factories were a little lower on average with a broader floorplan, but the aura of decay covered by a fresh coat of paint was identical.

The spaceport was directly ahead, and my disused target factory was exactly as we'd hoped. With a glance down the road to ensure nobody was looking, I snuck around its rear. It was a nondescript, low, rectangular, whitewashed building, perfect for my needs, with a decrepit fire escape leading up to the flat roof.

It didn't take long to conceal myself on top. They'd only supplied me with an old-fashioned pair of manual binoculars, but it was enough. I hunched down behind the surrounding wall, peered through a gap, and pressed the button on my communicator.

'In position, sir,' I said.

'About time,' said Miskin. 'Now maintain radio silence until you've something to tell me.'

I disconnected.

'Yes, sir,' I muttered. 'Thank you, sir. Try not to press your suicide button, sir.'

The Terran vessel was clear in my binoculars. It was still early in the morning, and it would likely be several hours before anyone emerged. I'd keep my eyes peeled, stay alert, and try to ignore the continual buzzing of insects that seemed to plague this planet.

Everything made me angry. My bitterness sharpened as I waited for something to happen.

I was irritated by Miskin's self-absorbed arrogance. I was annoyed at the Terrans for not picking a side. I was exasperated at the Olvin politics that had sent us here. I was angry at the Ungaleth for starting this damned war. Most of all, I was furious at myself. I'd let my ambition override common sense.

No matter. I was here. If my likely death were to mean something, then turning the war in Falkith's favour was the best I could do. This was for my people.

To my surprise, a vehicle appeared in less than half an hour, floating down the road from the direction of the Citadel and heading toward the Terran vessel. It was a sleek, antigrav transport, not one of the typical domestic electric wheeled vehicles most used here. This was official. It was open-topped too, perfect for the balmy weather – and for assassination. It was time to send a message to Miskin.

'Official vehicle here. They're picking up the Terrans.'

'I saw it go past,' said Miskin. 'A four-seater. Tell me where the Terrans are sitting when it returns.'

Another instruction from him that was exactly what we'd spent days rehearsing. I guess he had to justify being a Lieutenant.

The transport began its return journey only ten minutes later. That was a rapid turnaround. Two Ungaleth were still in the front seats, as they had been on the way there, with two Terrans sat in the rear. I waited until they were about to pass me for a closer look to ensure I didn't miss anything, then let Miskin know.

'Two Terrans in the rear, two Ungaleth in front.'

'Got it,' said Miskin. His voice dropped to a whisper. 'Might not be our only chance. There's another transport heading your way. Wait, it's sto— Gnh—'

Miskin fell silent.

'Lieutenant?' I said.

My heart beat faster when no reply came. What was I to do?

'Lieutenant?'

I was so distracted by the silence that I missed the transport below stopping. Without warning, the cacophony of insects above me increased. The world turned yellow.

'Mnh—' was all I could say.

I couldn't move. A cone of golden light shone down from above. That sound hadn't been insects. I'd missed – we'd both missed – a swarm of tiny drones following us. Damn.

There was nothing I could do. I couldn't even move a finger to stretch towards the suicide trigger. In front of me, the antigrav transport floated up to roof level, and the four occupants studied me like a zoo animal. We'd walked into a trap.

'What have you done to him?' said the lead Terran.

I recognised her. It was Kisi Danso, the woman from the delegation who'd caused all this trouble.

'They're in a light stasis field,' said the Ungaleth in the passenger seat. 'We wanted you to see their attempt on your life first-hand. We told you that you couldn't trust the Olvin.'

'Looks like an Ungaleth to me,' said Danso.

'It's just a crude charade,' said the Ungaleth. 'You'd never see that bone pattern on a native Ungaleth, I assure you. This one's a Falki. You'll see for yourself once we remove the subterfuge. We've got his commander too, an Olvin. Look.'

He handed a slate to Danso. She frowned, looked closer, and then nodded.

'I think I recognise him. Hard to be sure. I'll take your word for it for now, but I want to see him once he's restored. Speak to him too.'

'Of course,' said the Ungaleth. 'At least you know who you can trust now.'

Seeing our sworn enemy casually discussing my fate with someone who should be our ally was hard to watch. Danso glanced at the Ungaleth and gave a wry smile.

'Unless you set this up. I find it's safer to trust no one.'

The Ungaleth gave a surprisingly good-natured chuckle. These two seemed so relaxed together. It was a bad sign if they'd already built a decent working relationship.

'We'd have done a better job than this,' said the Ungaleth. 'You can review our footage. We spotted them coming way before they landed. You can see the security footage right from when they stowed away on our vessel, all the way until they took up position to kill you. You can hear them talking about it. We've no need to fake anything.'

'Why didn't you stop it before now?'

'We wanted to see what they were planning. They'd only try again if we stopped them, so identifying the target was critical. It was patently obvious what they were here for as soon as they took up their positions.'

'So you brought us out here as bait?'

'No need,' said the Ungaleth. 'We had everything under control, but we thought you'd want to see what the Olvin were up to in person. They wanted to frame us for your murder. You can't trust them.'

'It's certainly one interpretation,' said Danso. 'Very well. What do you intend to do with them?'

'Not up to me. They'll be interrogated, obviously. It will be up to the suzerain to decide their fate.'

'You know we expect prisoners of war to be treated fairly,' she said. 'Even failed assassins.'

The Ungaleth didn't look annoyed at the demand.

'Yeah, we know. The suzerain knows too. Don't worry.'

'I'd appreciate it if I could check up on them occasionally. Maybe question them. I'll take their treatment into account in my final decision.'

'I'd expect nothing less,' said the Ungaleth. 'Come. Let's leave these miscreants to the security team.'

The buzzing above me became a low hum. My vision began to blur. In the moments before I fell unconscious, the full depth of our failure struck home. The Terrans might side with the Ungaleth now, the Olvin would lose the war, and the two of us would be blamed.

It wasn't our fault. It had been a stupid plan from the start.

*

Honestly, I thought that would be the end of my story. The Ungaleth had a reputation for ruthlessness, whatever they may have promised the naive Terrans, but you know there's more to come. I haven't met Jaklorinki yet.

At first, our captors were unexpectedly true to their word. We were kept in separate, small, but not uncomfortable cells, questioned for hours on end, but not mistreated. We were fed adequately. Even the surgery to remove our modifications was painless. The reversal wasn't perfect, but I felt comfortable with the man in the mirror.

I didn't see Miskin at all during this period. I was assured he was well. Unlike the Lieutenant, I had no secrets to hide that the Ungaleth hadn't already worked out for themselves, so I decided to be open and honest, especially when the Terrans asked for my side of the story. They were inquisitive yet polite, so I opted to be contrite. It appeared to be well received.

I lost track of time, stuck in limbo without any idea of what lay beyond. Several months must have passed. The frequency of interrogation decreased, and the Terrans stopped visiting. Then, without warning, everything changed. An Ungaleth I didn't recognise walked through the door, his humourless smile unnerving.

'Good morning,' he said, his voice stuffed with false levity. 'My name's Skri. I bring important news.'

I never knew him as anything other than Skri in the time we spent together after that, but I could instantly tell I didn't want to know him at all. I waited for him to continue.

'Your mission has failed. The Terrans have opted to stay neutral in the war. It was all for nothing.'

I already knew my mission had failed, but that outcome wasn't as bad as I'd feared. I'd gone out of my way to cooperate with the Terrans and had shown contrition for the bad decisions of my bosses. Maybe I'd made a difference, maybe not, but it was better than the Terrans siding with the Ungaleth.

My relief must have shown.

'I wouldn't be so smug if I were you,' said Skri. 'The Terran delegation is still here, busy setting up a permanent embassy, but they no longer have any interest in you now their decision has been made. The gloves are off. The suzerain has issued a decree on your future.'

I wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of a response, but couldn't help holding my breath.

'You are to die,' said Skri, relishing each word, 'but not until we've wrung every last iota of information from you. That's my job. I'll make sure your execution is a welcome relief – once I let it happen.'

I forced myself not to react. I'd begun to relax over the weeks of incarceration. Now, I knew my fate. It was a punch to the gut, but at the same time, not a surprise. It was what I expected at the start. Yet, the ordeal wasn't over.

I can't live my life focusing on what that bastard did to me over the following week. Suffice it to say that for the remainder of the war, whenever I was ordered to do something unpalatable, whenever I had to make a ruthless decision, all I had to do was remember the joy on Skri's face as he tortured me. I wouldn't let the Ungaleth or their allies get away with anything.

I learnt to handle the pain, to drift into semi-consciousness and study it as if it belonged to someone else. I learnt to yearn for death but never ask. I learnt to hate.

I had nothing to tell him. They'd known everything of importance even before we'd been captured. Skri knew that. This was no more than performance cruelty.

The end was near. Skri had secured my head and pinned my eyes open so I couldn't look away from him. He smirked as he held a long glinting needle a few millimetres from my eyeball.

'Just think,' said Skri conversationally. 'For as long as you live, you'll remember my face as the last thing you saw. Don't worry. You won't live much longer.'

This was it. I steeled myself for the pain, wishing it were over while knowing that Skri would wring every moment of pleasure out of my degradation before he granted me the release of death.

He moved the needle slowly and gently pricked my lower eyelid with its tip. I made no reaction. I didn't want to give him the satisfaction.

'Stop that!' came a fresh voice from the doorway.

Skri wheeled around to face the newcomer, the needle drawing blood as it scratched along the lid before pulling away.

'What's the meaning of this?'

Skri moved out of my field of vision, but I could still hear the conversation.

'New orders. Their sentence has been commuted. They are not to be harmed.'

'Is this a joke?' said Skri.

'You can take it up with the suzerain if you like.'

'Show me.'

I heard a rustle of papers and a curse from Skri as he charged out the door. Footsteps approached. A new face appeared above me, its distress and concern seeming genuine.

'I'm so sorry about this,' said the new Ungaleth. 'This is... regrettable. Distasteful. We are better than this.'

I didn't reply. It sounded more like he was trying to convince himself. He looked at the paraphernalia holding me in place and then down at my injuries.

'One moment,' he said. 'I'll fetch a doctor to... to get you comfortable. I fear I'd do more harm than good.'

He was true to his word. It took a few hours to get me anywhere near ready to speak to him, but it helped that he laid on food and drink too. That wasn't something Skri had worried about. When he returned, I was sitting in a new comfortable chair in my cell.

'Feeling better?' he said.

I shrugged. I was still suspicious. This might be another way to trick me into revealing something, an unexpected switch from evil to good, before sticking the knife in.

'I'm Jaklorinki,' he said. 'Call me Jak. I'll be responsible for your care until this is over. Yes, I'm your jailer, but I intend to make up for this. No one deserves that. It's not like you knew anything more.'

That's what I'd been telling Skri.

'What—' I coughed, then tried again. 'What's happening?'

'The Terrans are liaising between the Olvin and us,' said Jak. 'They're trying to find a role for themselves to feel better for not picking a side. There's talk of prisoner exchanges. You're high on the list.'

That was a surprise. It wasn't until I was back home later that I discovered the real reason behind it. I was only high on the list because I came as a package with Lieutenant Miskin. There'd been a change of regime back on Olva. Our failed mission had become public knowledge, likely thanks to his politician father, and the government had been blamed for staging such a stupid attempt in the first place that risked the Terrans supporting the Ungaleth.

The government had fallen, and Miskin's father was back in favour with the new leaders. He used his influence to ensure his son was saved. It helped that the Olvin had recently captured three young soldiers from the Ungaleth ruling Riven clan as the other side of the exchange.

'How's the Lieutenant?' I said.

Jak winced.

'Not good. They were... eager to find out what he knew. He'll survive, but it will take a while. I'm sorry. We all know torture rarely works, but some are keen on it as a matter of principle. We're not all like that, believe me. I wish...'

He trailed off. I got to know Jak reasonably well over that week before we were released. Even though he forgot about me over the years, I always remembered him. Just like I used Skri to remind me why the Ungaleth had to be defeated in any way necessary, I used Jak to remind me that there are good people everywhere. You can hate the system but admire the individuals.

They kept Lieutenant Miskin in a coma on our journey home. He'd been through significantly more than me. His eyes were covered in bandages. He was blind and badly scarred everywhere. It took an eye transplant to restore his sight, but the scars never went away. That was why he adopted his trademark all-around dark eye shadow – to conceal his shame.

I never spoke to Miskin again, and he never sought me out to see how I was. He was too focused on his all-consuming hatred of the Ungaleth. As soon as he recovered, Miskin resigned his military commission and set out on his political career, which is how most people know him now.

And that's the full story, right back at the beginning of my career. I was the first to enter the Terran system, was there when first contact was made, volunteered for a fool's errand, and helped influence the Terran's choice of neutrality. It may have taught me to hate the enemy with a passion, but of all of the Ungaleth, Jaklorinki was the last one I'd want to gain revenge upon. I had no reason to kill him. I liked the man.