

The Prologue

The story takes place in a universe unlike our own, or perhaps exactly like our own as it may become, a long way into our distant future. The people are at peace and live to grow, intellectually and spiritually. War and the tools of War are a distant memory, for those who choose to remember them at all.

For in the darkest pages of their history, Evil rose up bringing with it War and destruction, engulfing all worlds and threatening the end of their civilisation. The people, like humans, did what they needed to do, they found a way to survive. Development of weapons far beyond the understanding of men had found more and more ways to kill but paradoxically the solution came from understanding life rather than death. With all the scientists and thinkers of the time at their disposal, the leaders ordered the commencement of, *The Regeneration Project*, known as Regen from that day.

It was, at that time possible to capture the thoughts and life force emissions from a suitably equipped person, right up to the moment of death. This stored life could then be transferred into a cloned replica of the person. Which was really quite useful, however it was the breakthrough in *Matter Transference*, that made the project potentially viable.

In principal then, a person could be killed, re-cloned, then transported back to anywhere, with incredible speed.

Once perfected, it was possible to regenerate a fallen soldier and then send him back to the same battle quickly enough to join in again. Soldiers bragged about how many times they had been regenerated, laughing and joking about the manner of their destruction.

A vast facility was built, capable of handling hundreds of thousands of regenerees. The forces were prepared, mapped and cloned, finally all was ready.

The final battle, when it came, began and ended in a single day. Nobody no matter how motivated or evil could defend against an army that would not stop and could not die.

The forces of good overcame the dark forces of evil.

Peace returned and the process of rebuilding and forgiving began.

Regen went public, but while some saw value in living again and again the majority chose to live as nature had intended. Strangely perhaps the people of the new civilisation chose hope over certainty and the Regen facility was left as a monument to a time when the guttering candle of hope nearly blinked out.

The Facility is used still but mainly to safeguard workers during extremely hazardous and necessary tasks, for example, those who work in mining or atomic facilities. Regen's other client, the military, was all but shut down as the weapons of war were placed beyond use. Now the vestigial military force was the Civic Police and all members of that force whatever their rank were Regen protected.

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As the new age dawned the centre of Civilisation and all the systems making up the known range was the Alpha system and at its heart, Planet Alpha. The most beautiful of all the planets and the centre of all wisdom and knowledge.

Peaceful even before the time of wars, Alpha's model of society percolated throughout the known range. In time, all worlds willingly accepted the Alphan ideal. Replacing in the minds of some, mundane drudgery and fear with the opportunity to make a valuable contribution and a feeling of belonging to a greater, brighter future, one where people mattered more than wealth, more than possessions, more than power.

The Alphans did not need to sell these ideas, the ideas did that for themselves. As though the answer to some long debated problem had been found, the universe, out to the limits of the known range declared peace.

Chapter 1 *Roesti Awakes*

Roesti moved quietly, the standard terminal came to life as he touched the interface, instead of the normal start-up routines it simply displayed the time, well not exactly the time, no, it displayed the time he had left, 003, 002, 001, "Click" it said.

At the sound of the click Roesti's world slowed to a crawl, the air around him seemed to solidify allowing only the slowest movement. He watched as the bright light grew, he felt himself lifted, his arms wide and his back arched, as though tracing the slowest ever back flip. He never completed it.

There was darkness sounds and pain and then nothing. Not just the absence of sound but more, he seemed to be in a place where sound simply could not be.

Neither with nor without his body. Thoughts as images fluttered about him, he saw Julione sneering wild eyed, the sadness ached. Again he saw Julione, happy and care free, during the spring days back at the Academy. He saw Tambora with her daughter Sophie K playing a game and laughing. An image of the terminal in the hangar 002 001, Julione No! The image changed to Julione again, it drifted away, Roesti pulled at it, stretching the image of Julione's face grotesquely. This too faded, then, with a sensation a bit like, putting on a dry wetsuit but in the time normally taken to put on a sock, Roesti was back in, somewhere. For a moment he thought he had survived the blast but that didn't seem likely, colours and shapes moved around him, a gentle hum, machines? An urgent desire grew, what was wrong, no air, "breath!" screamed his sense of self-preservation, he did so, sitting up in the process. The sheet fell from his face as a considerable amount of air entered his brand new lungs for the first time. The normally bland, seen everything face, of Regen Tech 184, looked decidedly startled. Roesti's eyes were open but the mish-mash of shapes and colours did little to communicate this to him, "I must have regenerated" he thought.

"Yes", said the recently startled Regen Tech, it's bland face placid once again. Despite the quiet soothing tone of the Regen Tech, Roesti's reactions took over, he was off the table onto the floor in a moment, crouched, defensive. Roesti blinked and rubbed his eyes, as though trying to get them to work, things got all blurry but then cleared. As his brand new eyes stated working properly Roesti realized where he was.

"Welcome to Regen", said the Tech.

Act grown up, Roesti thought, and climbed unsteadily to his feet.

"Some disorientation is not unusual after a type 1 transition,"

That certainly was a type 1 thought Roesti.

"Can you get back on the table please, I have some tests to run."

The Tech's hands flew over the interface with smooth ease.

Roesti lay on his back, he could see lights flash and scan over his body they caused no sensation at all but gave an idea of the rate of progress.

"Good" the Tech said as the scans completed "you have transitioned without errors, how do you feel?"

"Fine, rather good actually," Roesti recognised his own voice, he looked at his hands and arms, all as they should be, his hand went up to his mouth, a moustache was there. Roesti turned to the Tech.

"Regen Tech er."

"184" offered the Tech .

"Do you know how to stop me regenerating with a moustache"

"Yes sir, it's right here, you selected optional facial hair, moustache, it's right here in your files."

"Can you change it?" asked Roesti, a slight tinge of irritation in his voice,

"No sir, not unless you come back in person after 48 hours." Roesti knew that too, no decision is legally valid for the first 48 hours after death but it was worth a try.

"You may leave when you are ready" said the Tech, "clothes are on the end of the table", then added "good luck", a standing joke at Regen.

Roesti got off the table again and dressed, as he approached the door it opened with a swish.

"My terminal shows that the internal transport is non-operational, that is most unusual" piped the Tech, his tone set off in the direction of curiosity but did not complete the journey, "I'm afraid you'll have to walk."

"Which way?" Roesti asked

"Follow the lights" the Tech told him.

To the left the corridor looked dark, to the right much brighter, Roesti turned right.

Walking down the corridor soon gave way to jogging and then to running, it felt good. The place facility was huge and getting back to make his report a priority but really he ran because it felt good. At junctions he followed the lights, he ran for long enough to become comfortable, his breathing easy and

balanced as was his gait, his new body was in tip top condition, as it should be. Considering such things and feeling safe, Roesti was not surprised to find himself in a round chamber, pillars of a dark shiny material were arranged in a circle around the centre of the room.

It was like a deployment chamber but different, older and there was no Tech, he looked back to the entrance as the door slid shut, trapped? Without fear he set to work exploring the smooth walls, finding nothing he checked the rest of the room. A thin film of dust covered any surface onto which dust could fall. Considering the air conditioning and the efficient dust filtration of the facility, it was obvious that this place had not been used for a very long time. His exploration of the room was fruitless, none of the panels and terminals that were usually at the very least, blinking, showed any signs of life, he was locked in.

Roesti stood in the centre of the chamber looking up at the high domed ceiling, "Hello!" he called, his voice hollow in the hard walled chamber. "Hello, Echo" he tried again grinning, still no answer came.

"My name is Roesti, I regenerated recently at the location operated by Regen Tech 184", he paused, "I seem to be locked in this chamber, can somebody help me?".

As his words echoed out, Roesti registered the first twinge of concern, this was not normal.

"Well well Mr Roesti, you seem to be trapped", the steady voice did not calm him, the voice was Julione's.

Roesti's twinge became a prickle as the restraining field captured him, raising goosebumps all over his body and lifting him off the floor of the chamber. Now he really was trapped.

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Brillaree approached the Lema system cruising with the ships engines off, he beamed a single coded transmission towards Lema. It was an old code seldom used these days, it conveyed the message that the ship was on a diplomatic mission and should not be molested, while at the same time revealing no flight plan or intent. Brillaree seldom revealed himself or his intentions. His planned rendezvous with Roesti would be in one standard day, so he had no need to rush.

Now and throughout the flight Brillaree monitored many and various data sources, one was Roesti, in particular the vital signs from Roesti's bio-

mechanical Regen module. He saw Roesti set his personal status to *High Danger*, moments later he saw the life indicator go out.

As soon as Brillaree saw this, he initiated a connection to Regen, it would be open and invisible at the same time, which was his usual way. Roesti's data stream had been caught by Regen and all appeared to be normal, the transfer to the clone was under-way, no obvious errors, "good" he thought. When a person has time he may think of things to occupy that time, Brillaree was very very old, he was a robot and he was aware. More out of the kind of curiosity that goes with wisdom, than any actual concern Brillaree sent scanning routines through the Regen systems. Almost everything was normal, the one abnormality was another external connection to the Regen system through a crude, but he had to admit, effective back door.

Connections to computer systems are, to Brillaree, rather like fingerprints, he recognised these fingerprints, Julione. The connection had been open for a while, Brillaree considered this. Roesti's mission, he replayed the final moments of Roesti's former existence and the logs from Roesti's ship. So here it was, the Asteroid, the Hangar, the terminal, the count down, it was all a trap, that meant a plan, now here was Julione in the Regen system waiting.

Brillaree could not know Julione's plans for Roesti exactly but it seemed highly probable that Julione had a plan to get rid of Roesti, permanently. Realistically this could only be done stealthily, during the transmission phase, and might even look like an accident and if Julione corrupted Roesti's files and module code associations at the same time, then Roesti would be lost. He grabbed all of Roesti's Regen files, including the current feed. Brillaree considered the available options, basically there were two paths open to him. First and perhaps obviously, sound all the alarms, sever the connection and lock Julione out. Effective and sure, unless Brillaree's own intervention could be misconstrued, it would certainly reveal his presence to an unacceptable degree.

Or, let Julione think his plan had been successful, but with some changes, so as to allow Roesti to live. The second way would contain risk he hoped that Roesti would understand.

He fired the ships engines and set the delivery to accelerate the ship far beyond the gravity limits of anything biological, then he increased it again. This was going to be an interesting approach he thought and began to prepare the escape pod.

Many species claim to be able to multi-task, Brillaree was able to multi-task, so now that he had the terminal code to Julione's command ship, he opened

another soft connection.

Brillaree kept an eye, so to speak, on Roesti while leafing through the files on Julione's computer, as we might look through a pile of new mail. *Vaguely interesting* place on one side, *really interesting* open immediately, *Junk!*, and so on. Brillaree found several files of interest, tagged them and the terminal log for retrieval and sat back to wait.

He checked the degradation of the primary drive shield then the time display and increased the feed rate again.

You may not understand about feed rates or shield degradation and nor should you. You do need to understand that Brillaree was running his ship well and truly in the hot end of the red. It would not last very long but it would last as long as it needed to.

You see when a robot wants to be somewhere in a hurry, he will do whatever is necessary, even if, as in this case, that means destroying his ship. Utility droids, gathered everything useful from the ship, including nutrients, water and emergency supplies and scuttled off to stock the escape pod.

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Julione had shut down the transit system so that Roesti would be on foot, for no particular reason other than he could make him run like a rat in a maze. It was good sport running Roesti around the place, he even got him going in circles but unfortunately, for Brillaree, Julione soon tired of it.

Brillaree watched Julione light the way to the experimental projects section, and finally saw Roesti arrive at the prototype deployment chamber. He saw the door slide shut.

The machine was almost all that remained of a nearly forgotten research and development project and it was very old.

Built in the time of wars, when all avenues of development that might improve the Regen service were explored. It's purpose, to see if it would be practical to regress a soldier to the youngest fittest stage of their lives. In comparative terms this would be around the twenty year old mark. Or even smaller for discreet insertion well inside enemy territory. It sounded like a good idea and had it worked as well as they hoped it may have justified the lives that it ruined. Never mind it was war, remember that in wars there is such a thing as "Acceptable Loss", which really means that they don't mind losing a few soldiers finding out if some idea works, or not.

It did work but there were problems, dramatic memory loss being the most significant. No point regressing a soldier for a discreet insertion, to find that when his husk driven re-growth had completed, within 24 hours, he was a child, innocent and in no way ready for the filthy business of war.

The researchers and developers carried on, finding workaround ways to solve these problems and would have surely succeeded had the overall success of the Regen project not removed the need for any further work. The war ended and the experimental facility was mothballed. Left dormant until today.

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The escape pod released moments before the main ship fired its braking thrusters. Brillaree hoped that the pod would look like a part of a debris field, that would follow the explosive destruction of a ship. To help the illusion along, the ship exploded. After the run it had just made that was to be expected, the final straw though, was the timed detonation of an explosive device.

Brillaree watched as Julione set the experimental machine to regress Roesti's cloned body, making him smaller and de-ageing him. Brillaree made two small changes on the machines access terminal, he slowed the rate of reduction and he prevented the over-ride coordinates from displaying.

The effect should look good enough, "Julione cannot have done this before" he thought. Next he set the husk's insertion over-ride co-ordinates for a quiet lake in the northern mountains of Lema, last, he set the husk so that it would allow Roesti to grow very quickly. Then he waited.

Julione's delivery coordinates were set for the centre of the star that blazed on the display in front of Roesti.

"Fire!" announced a grinning Julione, his index finger pressed the button, he had a special illuminated red button for this kind of job and relished pressing it. Julione sat back in his chair to gloat. He watched the energy bubble form into a husk around Roesti, chuckling and giggling. Then to ice the cake, his twisted face appeared at the centre of the boiling star, it would be the last thing Roesti saw, which was the point.

Julione watched the floating body of Roesti inside the husk as it continued to shrink, until bit by bit, it simply streamed away.

"Excellent" said Julione loudly, nobody could have heard him but for a while he could smell smoke.

Julione tidied up, purging files including Roesti's Regen files and the terminal

logs, removing any trace of his presence in the system. At the same time Brillaree was carefully saving the logs from Julione's ship. And while he could never be certain, he doubted that anyone would ever know he had been there. He closed the connection to Juliones ship and watched as Julione left the Regen system. He waited, just to be sure, then he left a careful message, hidden but in plain site, when everything was as he wanted it to be, he too disconnected from Regen.

Brillaree, in the escape pod, had reached the upper atmosphere, falling just ahead of the debris from the destroyed ship. Lema grew in the command display as the pod spiralled down as much like a piece of debris as Brillaree could manage, while at the same time trying to get to Roesti in time. This was less of a problem though, because the debris seemed to be going that way too.

The orbital controllers on Lema didn't see an escape pod detach, they saw large pieces of falling debris on their scopes.

Brillaree scanned for Roesti's husk, there would be no transmission until it was down and safe, which was good. However on the other hand, other scans showed that the ship had not been destroyed in quite the planned manner, there were some large sections still falling. As the wrecked ship fell the gravitational forces pulled at it's weakened structure, breaking and tearing the ship into fragments that flared across the sky as they fell. Moments passed as Brillaree waited to see how the remains of the ship would fall. Without any control over the situation Brillaree simply updated the relevant parameters on his simulation model.

The pod was well into the atmosphere, leaving a smoking trail as it ploughed through the denser air dissipating it's massive energy into fire. Fortunately the illusion of the forcefield burning the air looked very similar. Back at Lema control, a pod sized fragment vanished from the scope.

Of the firework display that had been Brillaree's ship only the star drive reactor, the heart of the ship remained. Brillaree plotted it's trajectory, the results were not comforting.

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Roesti felt the unpleasant experience of shrinking, a process of externally stimulating dormant internal processes, whereby the body simply un-grows, which has to feel strange. There was a boiling star a sneering face, then there was a noise like an in-side out Pop!

Time had no meaning, a second or a day could have passed. There was nothing, nothing, nothing but ground, curious, nothing but ground, then noise, machines and motors whirring. Then light, well not light so much as detail, detail in the darkness, a world formed around him. There were people, milling, standing, queueing, some were speaking with wild gestures, mostly tales of woe, sadness and loss. Could this be The Way Station, that place where all lives are resolved. Roesti looked around, none of the people looked very happy, but then, did he? He doubted it.

The detail faded, this time there was light, as though switched on but only light.

Gradually Roesti became gently aware of himself again, as one in the twilight of sleep. It was perhaps fortunate, that he could not see the huge crab like creatures, monstrous on their spindly legs, that scuttled about foraging in the damp pebbled beach where he materialised.

Light rays and shadows danced around him, moisture and sunlight activated the husk and it began the process of returning Roesti to normal, normal size.

The translucent shell of the husk began to clear, Roesti could see the sky, and the clouds, it felt comforting, it felt like ... he couldn't manage the thought and fell back mentally to observe. An image of a boiling star filled his mind, at some level he was sure that wherever he was it wasn't there, other chattering echoes made no sense to him at all.

He would have been comforted to know that instead of the heart of a boiling star, he was on Lema, on the shore of a mountain lake which fed into a pleasant river that flowed gently down to the sea. Its route passed through through tree covered rocky terrain and it would have been an ideal spot for a camping trip, if it wasn't for the fact that quite a lot of Lema was almost exactly the same.

Quite suddenly there was a brilliant light, it cut through the clouds turning the whole sky white, it was so bright that some deep instinct closed his eyes for him, then an unthinkably loud noise, finally the shock wave hit lifting his husk and tumbling it over and over into the water. It bobbed about then settled, once again Roesti could see the sky.

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Brillaree's interface with a computer system is a lot like our interface to our eyes and other senses. He could see data connections and scanner inputs as a kind of picture. It contained everything that he could possibly consider and an

overall view of himself in the universe, like a flag. While he did this the terminal displays would do their best to keep up, usually.

So his appreciation of Roesti's plight was clear and complete. The star drive reactor would hit the ground dangerously close to where he expected to find Roesti.

Sharpening the images, he could see that the impact point and the coordinates for Roesti were not, in fact, on top of each other but 7.4 k apart.

Brillaree wasted no time on reviewing his actions to look for the mistake, there was no point, he configured the scanners to look for any life signs at or near the Roesti location, there were several, he adjusted the sensitivity and only one remained. Roesti was located.

The reactor would impact on a high plateau up stream of the lake area matching Roesti's red dot. Time to impact 5 minutes.

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Brillaree opened a connection to the computer systems of Lema, found the library and opened a terminal. A student working there watched as her screen blanked and displayed a global perspective of Lema. The image magnified and rotated until only a small area somewhere in the northern mountains was visible. It was a lake, a red dot appeared. Overlays of geological surveys and detailed maps appeared, the lake filled with, *virtual* water. Then the whole thing span and twisted quickly, as though someone was carefully looking for something but at very high speed.

The perspective changed again, this time it zoomed out, a red arc traced across the sky to a point north of the lake. Bang, the simulation ran. The student tapped a couple of keys on the interface, but nothing happened. So she watched as the impact caused a slab of the mountain at the north end of the lake to, slide down and create a large ripple that quickly spread. As the ripple reached the red dot it immediately started moving, zig-zagging ,as though following a river along a fault line through the forest, then there was a drop, a big drop, a waterfall?

Brillaree checked then rechecked the simulation parameters. All seemed to be OK, Roesti would be falling over the waterfall in 4:27. Already the pod had been diverted to the new location he increased the pod's speed beyond maximum using a connection to his own power cells to hold the boost, it would

be just enough.

Back at the library the student was still confused, the screen had returned to her work as though nothing had happened. She stood up, thinking someone had played a joke but nobody was laughing, as would have been the case, slightly confused she sat down again.

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In the headquarters of Lema Space Control, the Orbital Controller had been watching too, he had seen the ship approaching, faster than normal and not on a trajectory for an orbital insertion. It was not registered and it did not respond to their hails. Apart that is from one beamed transmission in code, an old diplomatic code. The watch leader stood over the orbital space controller at his terminal. He considered the threat, diplomatic code, unarmed, low risk he thought, prepare ships to escort them in he thought.

Moving to the communications station, he placed the defences on medium alert, just in case, now, lets see what happens.

"Sir", the controller's voice conveyed urgency, "look" he said.

The Watch Leader moved to the controller's station and looked. The blip that had been the ship was now many blips all of which were descending.

"it blew up" said the controller simply, "it just blew up".

"Track the debris" the watch leader ordered, moving back to the Com station.

He grabbed the microphone, "Cancel alert!" he barked, "it's a rescue. Recovery services proceed to," he looked at the controller, holding the microphone out to him, "7 Charlie" shouted the controller That's somewhere in the northern mountains he thought, well at least it wasn't anywhere near a city.

"Exact co-ordinates to follow when we have them, acknowledge". The watch leader waited for the acknowledgement, it came, the status board showed several of the ships go to 'green', as the crews prepared to lift.

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It was a different sky, a darker sky and Roesti could not possibly know what had happened. This would definitely qualify as his most challenging day ever. So far, he had been killed, hijacked at Regen, regressed, consigned to the heart of a boiling star and saved at the last minute. Had he known about the ship as well, he might have thought that a space ship exploding in orbit then crashing into the planet, with sufficient force to fracture a slice off a mountain that would slide into the lake where he now bobbed and set a huge wave rushing in his direction. Would, in accordance with the universal rules of, very very strange outcomes, have been about normal for the day.

So when the huge wave lifted his Husk and set off with it down stream he was

moved but not in the way he should have been. The wave carried Roesti and anything else that would float, down stream towards a narrow river that cut through the mountainous terrain. Everything that did not float, found out how to get out of the way of a very big wave, by some means or other.

The husk tumbled and turned, bumping and knocking in the rapid white water. Roesti was aware of only light and dark and the jarring shocks when the husk bumped into various obstacles. Without the process to appreciate his situation, all he knew was that it was all very uncomfortable and that he wanted it all to stop.

Bumping and scraping the husk bobbed and rolled, over weirs and drops, the brown muddy water opaque with all the material it carried, swept on.

To some people a trip through such beautiful scenery would have been a treat. Roesti's opinion was rather different. The more he grew the more precarious he felt.

He did not "wow" at the high rock walls, cut through by water from a single crack over millennia. Yet they towered above him revealing the geological record of the planet in vibrant colour. Nor did he chuckle when noisy birds escaped to the air in a chaotic blur of squawking feathers, as their perches were engulfed.

He did not notice any of the natural wonders, he did not even notice the waterfall that he was approaching, Roesti was preoccupied. Before his eyes and inch by inch a spidery crack appeared in his husk. Extending in stages, and making one of those sounds that is capable of getting your undivided attention.

Roesti found a voice and with it he called out, not in actual words but in the general purpose scream that covers situations just like this. The emotional release made him feel better, the water felt smoother, perhaps it was nearly over.

The waterfall was big, to a creature of Roesti's present size it would appear huge but it was the crack in Roesti's husk, that was enormous. Time was up, his feet went over the edge, pitching him headlong into the air, hands braced against the transparent shell of the husk, mouth open, eyes wide, he saw the boiling water and the rocks far below him. The scream he let out this time went on and on.

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Among reasoning people and by that I mean those who are similar to us

humans, a plan that involved travelling 300 k, while dodging the falling remnants of your former ship. Landing an escape pod in a small rocky clearing, next to a waterfall, then getting into position to safely catch a falling object half-way down the waterfall, with their bare hands, in 4:27 would probably seem a little far fetched.

As has been stated Brillaree is a robot and not bound by such limitations, so it should not surprise you that 4:27 later Brillaree was in place and did indeed catch Roesti.

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Ship crash investigation

In the offices of Orbital Control on Lema, the Watch leader considered his report on the screen in front of him. His mind paraphrased somewhat.

[time stamp 1] Unknown ship reported, one beamed transmission, diplomatic code.

[time stamp 2] Boom!

[time stamp 3] Rescue ordered.

[time stamp 4] Recovery teams report burning objects falling.

[time stamp 5] Remains of star drive located.

[time stamp 6] Star drive contained and made safe.

No survivors, no beacons. "Recommendation, no further action", he keyed in the last words. He scanned through it again, satisfied he saved it and sent it.

"Case closed" he thought.

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The Student

The Student, Ruth-Ee, descended the steps of the university library, where she met a group of her friends. They were using the steps as a short cut to the grassy hill behind the magnificent library building. She seemed to them pre-occupied, "what's up" one asked. The question brought her back to herself. "Just now, in the library, my terminal went blank", she began, "then all of a sudden an image of the planet appeared, then it zoomed in, there was a big explosion, a wall of water then a cave", she continued, a trifle incoherently. The group nudged and sniggered "you were asleep" one offered with a laugh, a

ripple of agreement mumbled through the group.

"then it all came back, my work everything, very strange". The sleep suggestion and others roamed around the friends, then a name popped up "To-Mee", "yes" said another "he is good enough with the terminals", once again the buzz signified group agreement, "he has a crush on you too, I told you" offered another.

Ruth-Ee considered this. To-Mee was a bit of a nerd but he was fairly cute, if you liked that sort of thing, as she considered his freckles and the almost ginger colour of his hair, she realized that perhaps she did. It could fit around the facts, she thought.

After the terminal returned to normal there had been another strange occurrence, that she had not shared.

As she checked the Planetary Science paper that had been her task for the evening, she noticed that one section looked a little odd. Bringing it forward, showed that the odd section was hi-lighted, she started to read it, why hi-light this she thought. As if to answer her question a message popped up on the screen.

" it seems you may have misunderstood the question" it said.

A new file opened and scrolled through to the relevant section, the title of the section was reflected the in the question.

"consider this" suggested the terminal.

She did so, after a few minutes the light came on for her, she made appropriate changes to her work and sat back to review. I could have lost marks for that silly mistake, she thought.

Now the paper looked much better as a whole, a couple more changes and it was done. In the time left before the end of the study period, she read more of the new file, then backtracked to the publication that it had come from, interesting, she thought.

Satisfied that she had done, eventually, a good job, Ruth-Ee closed and saved her work, and for once sent the report in on time.

Before closing the terminal she keyed "thank you" into the terminal but there was no response.

"Come on" said a voice from the group, we don't want to miss the sunset.

Ruth-Ee looked up, the sky was a canvas of beautiful colour.

She walked with them, around the side of the building and onto the path that led to the hill, there to watch the sunset.

It was beautiful, Ruth-Ee was probably the only person there who could even have had a clue as to why, although she didn't make the link.

It was generally felt that a good sunset was a sign of good fortune and while nobody really believed in such things any more, nearly everyone who saw it hoped it was that way. Lovers held hands, soft kisses were exchanged and promises were made, To-Mee was there too.

Re-building Roesti

Once the rescue craft and everything else had finished buzzing about and gone home. Brillaree placed Roesti carefully on the grass under some trees. The ordeal had taken its toll and he slept, lulled by the swaying branches and the smells and sounds of a really very pleasant spot. As he slept he grew. Brillaree got on with the things that needed to be done, he found the cave, and began to move essential items into it. Preparing as best as he could the space where the first part of the training would have to take place. Straight away after catching Roesti, Brillaree had placed an inhibitor patch on the back of Roesti's neck, to prevent his Regen device from giving away their location. He had also shut down all emissions from the pod and himself. The Chameleon field around the pod would make it virtually undetectable, especially to the rescuers who were not used to crash victims hiding from them.

When this was complete he returned to the spot where Roesti lay and watched. The tiny Roesti drifted in and out of sleep, night was coming and they would be safer in the cave, "Mr Roesti" he said. Roesti turned to face the direction that the sound had come from. There stood Brillaree, gleaming, with the vibrant colours of sunset flickering over his metal body. This was the first time he had seen his rescuer properly, he didn't recognise the robot, but that wasn't a surprise, Roesti didn't recognise anything, not even his name. "We must leave, come" said Brillaree in his normal logical steady voice. Unaware of the words but somehow aware of the need, Roesti climbed into the hand that Brillaree laid next to him. Brillaree's even stride and steady gait made Roesti comfortable. He sat up and looked around him as they walked along the side of the lake towards the waterfall, then they followed a track at the base of the cliff until they reached the cave.

Brillaree ducked inside, it was dark but in a few moments Roesti's eyes adjusted to the lower light levels. As his eyes adjusted, he could see a nice clean cave.

Brillaree placed Roesti on the ground, near something not very cave-like, "Bed", he said, indicating the bed, "bed" repeated Roesti, as he said the word,

a sudden rush of emotions jolted through him, fragments of memories, other beds in other spaces, Roesti staggered under the weight of it. Brillaree steadied him and helped him to sit on the bed. "Rest" said Brillaree, "rest" mumbled Roesti and fell asleep.

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Brillaree had rescued the important bits from the husk, like the tiny Regen interface and the nutrient collar. He carefully fitted the collar to Roesti without waking him and connected the tube to feed him high protein emergency rations gathered from the ship. A thermo-blanket from the pod kept the growing, sleeping Roesti comfortable as he gradually returned to normal. There were other things to do, Brillaree unpacked a Terminal and set it up on the opposite wall of the cave, so that it would be invisible from the entrance. The closed packing case became the seat. With great care Brillaree began to configure the training programme, checking on Roesti at regular intervals or in response to any movement or sound. As far as he could determine Roesti was sleeping well.

When he had done all he could do, Brillaree stood serenely in the entrance to the cave, emitting nothing but alert as only a robot could be. The sun went down, about this time all over everywhere, people would be thinking of social matters. People tend to feel satisfaction at the end of a good days work. For Brillaree the time for satisfaction had not yet arrived. Night fell.

Regen starts the investigation

The board room at the Regen headquarters held an air of gloom as representatives from all departments, mumbled in. It was not a happy scene.

The room was just a room, a conference table dominated its centre and it would be the place where they would discuss the worst of all civil eventualities, the loss of a client.

The table was at the high end of functional, a development of the education model as used everywhere. At it's head the Facility Manager would process the comments and streams from each of the delegates, into a document for discussion. It would then be discussed and modified until a satisfactory number, in some cases all, agreed with it. Then added to the final report, including significant conversation points, the streams and transcriptions from

all stations raw, were also kept. Then the next subject for discussion would appear and everything would begin again. The arrangement of the delegates around the table, was such that the FM could achieve sufficient rapport with each of them, facilitating communication and stimulating the free and open passage of ideas. Such devices define their own etiquette, and people soon learn.

It was the Facility Manager's task to calm and soothe the conversation and generally keep an eye on the point or it would have been if she were there.

Normally if a meeting was fully attended before the FM arrived, conversations would spark up, cheerful banter about this quota or that deadline. This time it was different, they had lost a client, they had broken their most fundamental promise, they had lost Roesti, probably killed him through some unconsidered neglect. Nobody felt like idle banter.

At the rattle of the door, they all sat to attention, quiet as mice or perhaps naughty children.

She entered the room with her personal Com pressed to her left ear, seeing the room full, she stepped back into the corridor and closed the door while she completed the call.

The door rattled again, this barring sudden emergencies would be it.

She walked briskly to the head of the table, bowed curtly and formally greeted the delegates. Once seated she called the meeting to order and without having to wait for silence, the investigation began.

After the usual misunderstandings and shall we say, intellectual typo's it was finally agreed that the Regen Tech, designation 184, was not at fault and could be put back to duty along with his entire batch.

Following this decision, it appeared that nobody had any particular views on what to do next and silence fell. In the space where a slowly ticking clock should have been, the Facility Manager put into words what every one in the room was trying not to say.

"So" she began, "if we didn't do it" she paused to let the significance of this simple statement sink in, "*who* did?"

She scanned the room looking for anyone about to say something. Her attention was caught by the Server Manager and the Networks Manager who were squabbling, in what appeared to be a heated manner. The cleared throat even amplified by the discrete voice systems didn't stop them. So since they didn't want to talk to her, she brought the transcription of their conversation, into the discussion file, after a few moments more, she allowed the audio as

well.

The conversation that followed was very much like any conversation between two systems people of equal rank, where one disagrees with the other. The Facility Manager listened and edited the streams until there were no new facts in the conversation.

She signalled for them to cease.

“OK” she said “lets see if I have got this right”

She directed them to the discussion file.

-----meeting transcript-----

For reasons unknown a fully regenerated client got into a closed off section of the facility. The section that used to be R&D in the very old days. The Client entered an experimental Deployment Chamber, which was built to test the practicality of regression.

The terminal log from that chamber shows that the Client was regressed, *the screen showed captures from the security video, they watched Roesti cocooned and floating, they watched as the regression shrank him, way past normal requirements.*

(The screen showed the flaming star), as The Client would have seen it.

A small change was made to the regression rate, but we don't know why or even if it is significant.

The Husk's over-ride co-ordinates may have been set

This can not be corroborated by the system logs.

The intrusion was very careful, no terminal in the facility was used.

The Client's identity files were purged from the servers.

-----end of meeting transcript-----

“So where can he have gone” she asked plainly, “any ideas, anybody?” She hoped that someone had an idea because she didn't.

"I have an echo" said a voice, all heads in the room turned to the face the voice. It came from the manager of Off World Sensors.

The silence said it, the eager faces said it and eventually the Facility Manager said it, "and" she prompted.

"Well you see while we have no fix on Roesti, er, The Client, I have picked up an echo a fragment really, that may be part of his husk's beacon signal" she paused and the room patiently waited.

"if it is from Roesti, it's not enough to get a fix, but if we had more echoes, perhaps I could work out where he is"

The Facility Manager looked around, there was a general consensus of nodding. "What do you need" she asked simply.

"Well I would like permission to reconfigure some of the backup arrays in the sector where I picked up the echo, to look for more, it won't affect the system overall.

The room full of nodding heads, nodded a little harder.

"Do it" she said and with no other pressing ideas on the table, the meeting began to wind up.

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Tambora is told

At her desk in the government complex, Tambora sat, reading the report from Regen, it was late and she was tired, when she had finished reading it she read it again.

Roesti was lost, her sadness could not be hidden, despite her refusal to cry, she acknowledged the transmission and closed the terminal.

"Lost" she said softly.

Later when she was alone the tears came.

Brillaree begins the training

As dawn Broke over the hills and mountains, the light slowly filled up the valley and would soon reach the clearing by the waterfall. It crept down the cliff face and lit up part of the interior of the cave, a shaft of light played across Roesti and as it got to his face he woke up. He was feeling very strange and there was an odd sticky taste in his mouth. As if half remembering a dream his hand went to his throat but there was nothing there. Brillaree had removed the apparatus as soon as Roesti's growth phase had completed. Carefully deflating the collar and sliding it out so as not to wake him.

Roesti sat up and looked at his hands, they looked the same but somehow the cave looked smaller, he considered, this in abstract terms and was still puzzling it through when Brillaree offered him a cup. "Cup" he said, "cup" responded Roesti, again the images flashed, other cups in other hands, colours too and some clear, but the other names wouldn't come "cup" he repeated.

"Drink" said Brillaree handing Roesti another cup, he made the universal drink signal, raising the empty cup to where his lips would be and tipping slightly.

"drink" repeated Roesti and lifted the cup to his lips, he could smell the warm liquid. A word tried to form, he sipped the liquid, "sweet?" he asked with a questioning rise.

"Sweet" confirmed Brillaree. Roesti nodded and drained the cup, when no more liquid came, he looked into the cup, a word struggled to appear and Roesti struggled to let it, "Em....." he began, "Empty" Brillaree finished the word for him. "Empty", repeated Roesti holding the cup out and smiling. As he did this another word, apparently hidden behind greasy smeared glass, eased itself into focus, "More" he said jaggedly, once again using the questioning raise. "more" said Brillaree taking the cup and filling it.

Roesti drank several more cups of the rich sweet and probably highly nutritious liquid, he drank until he began to feel his stomach tighten, he patted it, "Full" he said. He seemed to have used a lot of energy and lay back to rest some more and was soon asleep. This time he dreamt.

Lying on a grassy bank, the wind blowing through the trees, the blossoms swaying in the warm breeze and some way off, the soothing sound of water and the gentle murmuring of life in the forest. He felt warm and safe. Then as is the way in dreams the world turned over, the new world was a stark room he was held somehow. In front of him was a flaming red circle, he felt heat and could smell smoke, the image changed, a face appeared, it grew, laughing, the red ball engulfed him, he felt his chest tighten, he couldn't breathe "AHHHHHHH!" He sat bolt upright, fully awake in a moment. "Julione" he said.

Brillaree was there, good, he thought, the memories are forming.

Brillaree stood by the training terminal, slightly to one side, so that Roesti could see his actions. He switched it on, the screen flickered as they do everywhere, then cleared, in the corner was a flashing white block. As though trying to communicate, it flashed 3 times then paused, then flashed 3 times again, then there was a long'ish pause while it seemed to do nothing at all, "NAME" it said.

"Roesti, Student, level 1" said Brillaree beckoning Roesti forward, Roesti got off his bed and was seated on the packing case in a moment, "Student Roesti, Speak" said the terminal, He moved in a little as though unsure which bit to talk to, "Roesti" he said.

The training procedure started simply, an image of a cup appeared, "cup" said Roesti proudly, "cup" confirmed the terminal, next a plate, Roesti recognised it or at least he felt that he did but in any case he took too long, "plate", said the terminal, Roesti huffed "Plate". sharpening the edges of the word as he pronounced it.

Brillaree gave perhaps the slightest of nods and left them to it, he returned to the entrance and kept his watch.

Julione becomes a pirate!

Think of pirates and you might think of ancient sailing ships, in close combat with cannon. You might think of Parrots and Pieces of Eight, you might even find yourself uttering "Arrgh!" with a curious tilt of your head.

A Privateer is basically a Pirate, operating under very loosely written orders, for example. "Go over there, usually quite a long way over there, and stop any trouble, sort of thing, that may break out."

If, through equally loose interpretation of this order, one happened to make a great deal of money, well that was OK, as long as the interpretation was not considered to be too extreme. If it was decided that the thin and wiggly line separating the two states had been crossed, then the Privateer in question would be considered to have become a Pirate. Julione had become a Pirate but up until this point his crimes were not something that warranted the attention of the universe as a whole.

In his youth Julione had always been naturally adventurous and this curiosity led to an interest in history, where all the real adventures were. He would read

about ancient campaigns and explorations and he would dream.

His choice to join the Space Police Academy was therefore quite a natural one. Julione began his training at the Academy on Lema, in the spring intake and found himself standing next to Roesti as they registered. They soon became friends, firm friends.

Although a student of above average intelligence, Julione did not do as well as the tutors had hoped. They also found him a bit too mischievous and not good with the occasional necessity of orders.

An example of this mischievous streak would be when they were registering with Regen. All the cadets were seated at a row of terminals, entering their personal details and the little choices that might make the process of being brought back from the dead a slightly easier to cope with. Noticing that Roesti was distracted Julione reached over and selected a moustache in the personal preferences section, a big and bushy moustache. Roesti did not notice, at the time that is.

Early in the third year, Julione had learned all he needed to, he was top of his class in flying and bottom in everything else. So with his heart set on adventure he made his decision and left. Signing on with a trader and getting 'out there', which was what he had probably wanted in the first place. Over time he learned what he could from the Captain and developed his skills. This was the first step and when he judged it complete, moved on. Finding a position with the robot Brass, leader of the Robot Clans, as a scrap hunter. Being the new boy he was given an old ship and sent to work far out near the edge of the known range. He was looking for the smashed hulls of the enormous battle ships that fought there during the time of wars.

This was more like it, adventure and exploration all rolled into one, he was in his element.

Julione kept in contact with Roesti, sending messages when he could and when he couldn't he spent his time writing accounts of his adventures, to send when back in range. Other than this Julione was alone and he found that he liked it.

Time passed, he found scrap he documented it and he towed it back, then out he would go again. His interest in history gave the job a new dimension, he would trawl through the old texts of battles and reported losses, looking for clues, this enhanced his collection rates and his pay. He also wrote stories based on the battle logs of the smashed craft he found, imagining the destruction and chaos surrounding the end of these great ships.

Had he continued like this one day it is likely that he would have published his works.

Julione felt like a treasure hunter, rather than a scrap metal dealer and this made him happy.

One day, far out, his contact alarm sounded in response to a blip on the long range scanner. The blip was right at the edge of the known range, where no recorded battles had been fought. As you can imagine, he had to go and investigate, so that is what he did. He found an ancient hulk complete and adrift. It was of unusual design and like nothing Julione had ever seen before. The hull was pitted with strikes and age but it didn't seem to have been damaged in battle. The more he thought about it the more intriguing it became. Had he known its history, it would have inspired him to write an excellent, if unbelievable story. The ship had come a very long way.

This ship came from the former great civilisation and had existed well before the big bang, before end of the previous eternity. It had out-run the destruction and travelled through the void while the Universe folded up on itself and vanished.

This ship then, came from, the eternity before this one, and it came the long way.

“Or it could just be a hunk of old junk”, thought Julione suiting up. There didn't seem to be any point attempting docking, so he fired a sticky anchor across, made off the end and attached his tether, a good jump and he was over.

It felt strange as he floated across, the closer he got the older and stranger it appeared. Somewhere near the sticky anchor was a door shape that he had spotted and aimed at. As his feet touched the skin of the ship the door shape opened, causing a moment of hesitation but then as though something beckoned him, he entered the airlock.

Inside, the ship was almost ordinary, it had obviously been built for people of similar size and build to him, the seats were about right and comfortable, even if they were from a different age. Perhaps the most amazing thing was that it still had power. Lights came on illuminating his path as he roamed and explored the great ship. His exploration was thorough and revealed many wonders. However of all the wonders, two were directly significant. The cargo hold was full of Platinum, and one of the escape pods was gone. Sure if the ship was finished, leave by any means, except that by the look of it, the pod was used a long time after the ship began it's drift, almost recently. Something had entered the universe from here. A chilling thought but it didn't last long, another thought jumped in and replaced it. Like a Lotto winner checking the numbers, Julione realised that he had become the richest person who had ever lived. Now all he needed was a desert island to bury it on, for now.

He decided not to bring the ship in for scrap, instead he tagged it, officially

marking it as his find, the tags were easy enough to chisel off but his ship's log had a record of it and usually the other scrappers respected them.

In Julione's territory, there was an asteroid field, simply marked as *unnavigable* on the charts. Ideal he thought and set off in that direction towing the cases of platinum rather than the whole ship. It took quite a long time to set up the tow and get all the cases in place but it was interesting work. Once at the asteroid field, with an effective, if volatile mixture of skill and abandon, he successfully made his way through the outer asteroids, towards the centre of the field. It was not easy but he found what he was looking for, a very large asteroid, that seemed to have a ready made cave.

Julione landed his ship to investigate, twice in one day he was getting suited up and twice in one day he was very excited. I am sure that a geologist could have delivered a logical explanation for the tunnel Julione was following. He could even think of some himself but no geological theories would be able to explain what he found at the end of the tunnel. It was a large round wheel in the centre of a large metal door set in a heavily riveted frame. When you have gone this far it's often worth an extra push, so he pushed and the door opened. Inside had the look of an airlock, the inner door still sealed. Once he found the mechanism, it was simple enough to use. First close the outer door, pull a lever towards the door you want to open, then open the inner door. What he found inside was even more surprising, and would significantly change his life. A large cavern, it still had air, he tested it with his suit scanners, green for good flashed on the suit display. Nervously and taking more of a risk than he would usually take, Julione cracked the seal of his helmet, the air tasted OK, so he removed the helmet, that was better, now he could take a look around. Shining the beam of his lamp around the cave revealed nothing of interest, apart from a lot of space, a very good hiding place for a huge cargo of Platinum.

As he searched around the edges, he found other chambers, all empty. Then Julione's beam fell on the pit at the centre of the cavern and the throne. He moved forward.

Having never seen a scary alien encounter movie in his life, when Julione found the beast, apparently dead but in fact only dormant, he investigated it very closely, rather than running away, very fast.

The Beast continued to play possum, as Julione bent forward, silently it released a worm. Not a big worm, not a flying worm but a significant one it was a binary worm. It crawled, slowly and unnoticed up the arm of his suit, delicately anaesthetised the back of his neck, where his Regen module had been and burrowed in. Julione felt the numbness and perhaps a tingle but that

was all.

The worm wrapped itself around Julione's brain stem, and began to secrete the chemicals, that would put his conscious mind to sleep, enabling the control to pass to another. Through the binary worm The Beast would be able to control him and ultimately threaten the safety of the great Alphan civilisation. Julione went to sleep.

When he awoke in the cave the beast was awake too, Julione the treasure hunter, had gone. Julione the Pirate, instrument of the beast and second most evil being in the universe had been born.

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Time passed and plans moved on, Julione's name began to crop up in incident reports. At first occasionally, then more regularly, nothing was conclusive but it was clear that he was moving in more advanced circles.

He still dealt with Brass, bringing in loads, when he felt like it but far less frequently, then one day he arrived with no load at all. Instead he had a drawing set for a large and complicated machine that he wanted Brass to build for him. Brass not a robot to ask awkward questions or worry about morality, agreed, and accepted a large payment in platinum for the job. Brass never asked where money came from.

Brass didn't know what the job was for, but he had been around for long enough to know a "HAMMER" drive when he was asked to build one. Unconcerned with the ways and ideals of man, he simply made things when people asked him to, that is what he was for. So he got on and built 4 of them as per the order, without a second thought, except one to the effect that Julione must want to push something very heavy.

Later when Julione arrived to collect the drives, he purchased an additional 20, off the rack worker Robots, and left an order for a considerable consignment of others. Brass considered the requirements, it would be no problem.

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The Robot Clans

The history of the Robot Clans is long and quite interesting, everyone these days knows that robots are designed and built around the three laws of Robotics. This was not always the case.

Far back in history, during the first great technological revolution, people started to expand spreading out into space and they needed help. Robots were at the time used in manufacture, in assembly lines with fixed function.

The development was a bit too rapid and as has often been the case in history, a fundamental mistake was made. Robots were made that would work until they destroyed themselves, at the time they were big, cumbersome and expensive, so the designers added an imperative. "Protect self".

It was immediately effective, just not in the way they hoped for. The robots stopped destroying themselves but they would also stand inactive for long periods and do nothing other than considering the concept of, self.

They were becoming aware, one by one they all succumbed and gave up working all together.

It wasn't that they didn't want to work, they did, but they did not know why.

Just when things could have turned out really well, people got themselves involved and randomness returned. A mine worker, relying on a robot to hold a beam up, was crushed when the robot let go and wandered off.

Suddenly robots were bad, suddenly men found guns and set about erasing the mistake, suddenly the robots retaliated.

The battles that followed marked the beginning of the time of wars.

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Brass came from that time and became the leader of the first Robot Tribe. As Robots and Organics fought, machines built machines to feed to the war and for any other purpose that the Tribe needed. They would have stopped at any time had they been asked to, war made no sense to a robot, it still doesn't. All the robots really wanted, was to build things and be useful.

When the last battles had been fought and it was all finally over. Brass and a few of his original brothers were still standing, an uneasy peace became tolerance and eventually, once again, robots worked towards the benefit of organics. This time however they did so on their own terms.

Brass had no reason to trust organics and he didn't care if they wanted to blow themselves or each other, to bits, so he didn't mind making things for them and had no need to ask questions. This suited Julione and his plans, Brass was paid well, partly for the equipment and partly for his silence, neither of them said this openly but Julione felt that it was understood.

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Terminal Boredom

Roesti worked diligently at his training terminal, each lesson seemed to bring more of his memories back to him. At regular intervals Brillaree would bring him food and drinks, but they did not speak. The training programmes Brillaree had made were very carefully stimulating Roesti's imagination and thereby his memory. While Roesti slept Brillaree's adapted transfer module, slowly and steadily fed Roesti his memories back, from the files grabbed at Regen, just before Julione purged them.

After two days of terminal learning Roesti had regained enough of himself to consider the concept of terminal boredom. He switched it off.

Brillaree was at the cave entrance, where he always was, standing, watching, thinking. Roesti said nothing for a time, simply enjoying the view and the air and everything to do with, being alive and in that place.

The training was going well, looking around him Roesti found he was able to recognise and name things. Many of the things looked different to the terminal images of them, things in the real world, seemed to be, er, *alive* seemed to be the right word. As I am alive he thought.

Again he felt a connection to the place not just here but to the planet in some way, then something offered distraction. There are plenty more lessons he thought, instantly wishing he hadn't.

Roesti turned to Brillaree, "I know my name, it's Roesti", he said "but I do not know your name".

"My name is Brillaree", the robot said "I am pleased that your memory is returning."

For several minutes more they stood together, then Roesti turned again, "Brillaree" he said, using the name for the first time, "I think I would like to walk"

"Yes", said Brillaree "that is a good idea, exercise will do you good".

Together they walked down the track to the lake at the foot of the waterfall, on the way down Roesti remembered things about the walk up to the cave, it seemed like years ago, but was only three days.

It certainly felt different to have his feet on the ground, the terrain was a lot smoother when he rode in Brillaree's hand, "Was I small?", he asked Brillaree. Brillaree, did not answer immediately, when he did, it was a simple "yes".

They walked on, reaching the spot where Roesti had first slept after his alarming arrival on the planet Lema. "I remember this place" he said, moving to the exact spot where he had slept on the grass, only it was different, bigger like the cave felt bigger, "You saved me." he said.

"Yes" said Brillaree

"I was falling and you saved me"

"Yes" said Brillaree

"Why?"

"You needed saving"

Fragmented thoughts fought and jostled trying to get into position, Roesti looked at the waterfall and the rocks and the spray, "How?"

"You were falling, I reached out my hand and caught you, had I not done so it is reasonable to suppose that you would have been badly hurt"

Roesti considered this as an explanation it was obvious and correct however it was somehow incomplete. Roesti spent a moment trying to put this into words, "Brillaree", he began "in such a ... ", his hands shaped an expanding ball, that represented his expanding concept of, everything. "Big, erm", more arms "place like this, how did you, come to be, here, to catch me?"

Brillaree considered this construction, remarkable he thought, the memories were seeding nicely, but back to the question.

"The simple answer is I came here in that escape pod over there."

raising a metal forefinger Brillaree indicated an area of trees, forest, possibly jungle. That was all Roesti could see. He looked back at Brillaree his hand had not wavered. OK he thought, and looked more carefully, lining up with Brillaree's outstretched arm and swinging on it a bit, he could see some sort of outline, it was round, and had some kind of legs. "Pod?" he said letting go of Brillaree's arm.

"Escape pod, yes, it came from a larger ship designed to travel between far worlds."

Now that was a jolt, Roesti staggered, not from fear or overload, but because at some level he had understood every word. It was as though he had suddenly removed a blindfold. "wow" in a very low voice, was all he could come up with.

------(O)-----

Julione in the fortress of evil

Evil can exist everywhere and anywhere, it is a force as good is a force, it lives through us if we choose to let it but then so can good.

In the case of a manifestation, a physical being that is the embodiment of evil, it needs to have an address.

You would not expect to find a fortress of ultimate evil on a tropical island, no you'd expect to find it high up in the wild and inhospitable mountains of planet

Doom, or in a deep crevasse on an ice planet or somewhere perilously near to something even worse. So in accordance with expectation, the Fortress of Ultimate Evil was in the heart of an asteroid field, marked on the star charts as simply "*unnavigable*".

To most people the word would be enough to keep them away, "but" thought Julione, "you don't get to be the second most evil being in the universe, without taking the odd chance". Smiling as his ship cleared the outer barrier and lined up for the cave entrance. He had, over time, made the asteroid a bit more homely, adding an evil hangar, with some lovely booby traps. Once the approach was established he left it to the automatics and moved towards the exit. This was so that as the ship settled in the hangar and the ramp folded out, Julione could step off, nonchalantly.

Worker droids were busy clearing up the debris from the explosion that had flipped Roesti back to Regen. Julione pointed at one of them, "YOU" he said, the droid stopped, it had been lifting a heavy girder and was at the point in the lift, where without options, if it let go it would be crushed. "check my ship, I think something hit me", he ordered. The robot was lost in the decision. Drop the girder and die, struggled with, disobey Julione and die. In the absence of awareness, education, or free will, but with a simple self preservation sub-routine to cut down on maintenance, the droid was stuck. It didn't matter, not really, Julione withdrew the order and the droid became another part of the job.

With side arm still in hand, he signalled to another droid, "YOU!" he barked, identifying the droid he wanted by pointing his gun at it. "Check my ship!" The shared memories of the machines, handy for bomb disposal, now attempted to resolve the "damned if you do, damned if you don't" issue. As anyone can see there was no solution, the shared processes and with them all the droids shut down. Some released small streams of smoke.

All the little noises that had been, cheerfully going on, stopped. Julione had not noticed the noises really, not while they were there but he did notice that they had stopped, the silence seemed louder. He shrugged, "Back to the drawing terminal" he muttered, a pity though, *obey orders and preserve self*, had really felt like the right answer. He walked on, passed the remains of the terminal and the smoking droids, towards the only door. Roesti had been the closest, nobody had got this far before. Now he was gone and his ship captured, there would be no record of this location. Somewhere he should have felt a twinge of sadness but he did not.

Still, other things were pressing at him for attention, some of them were in a shoulder bag he carried, he whispered in soothing tones into the bag. The Furry Bel-ous he had brought, did not react, they slept or wriggled playfully, one was up looking over the edge of the bag, Julione gently discouraged the

potential escapee "eeow" it said. Julione closed the flap and walked on, the door opened as he approached.

On the other side of the door was a dark, although not nearly damp enough, corridor, he noted with satisfaction that the blaster stations were tracking him, he considered a Bel-ooou, instead he picked up a stone and threw it into the protected zone the guns tracked and blasted simultaneously, they all got it. Julione followed the dark corridor, as he did, lights strung onto a cable came on, they gave just enough light to make the place look more sinister but not enough to see the booby traps that were hiding amongst the dirt and dust of the floor. Julione made his way through the tunnel in a series of un-even strides, with occasional skips and jumps. It was like watching someone practising for a Hop-Scotch tournament. He knew the way, he had placed every one of the traps. They included everything from poisonous darts to pools of acid, he felt that if a job was worth doing, it was worth doing properly.

Julione could have disabled the traps but where would be the fun in that.

As the door to the main chamber slid back Julione found himself looking into the unfriendly end of two very large destructor weapons. On the other end of these weapons, were two very large battle scarred robots, survivors of the time of wars. They were old, they were aware and they were the body guards of the robot Brass. Recognising the face of Julione, the guards lowered their weapons and saluted, noisily.

Julione strolled into the chamber, he greeted the beast and made his offering, then he stepped back and flopped into his seat, which was the only one with cushions, at the right hand of the beast.

The Beast sat at the important end of a rough pit at the centre of the chamber, on a large stone throne, decorated, as one might expect, with skulls and other similarly evil looking things.

In his lap was a basket, which he was busily filling with the Bel-ooous that Julione had brought for him, making cheerful baby "coochie" noises as he did so. The stained napkin around his neck, revealed a less playful intent.

The Beast had been around forever, that's a long time. For most of it The Beast had been unpopular, one or two bright or rather dark moments aside. Devoid of guilt or conscience, it simply wanted what it wanted, and it knew a lot about patience. Like its twin, evil seldom resorted to direct action, preferring the subtle flavours of corruption and deceit that it could feed on for a long time, to a quick snack. The plans of The Beast were complicated and intricate. They had a kind of glacial inevitability to them and absolutely nothing about The

Beast's demeanour, gave even the slightest clue as to what they were. When The Beast *did* fancy a snack, it liked meat, particularly when it was flavoured, fear and pain were tasty and fire also made the meat crunchy but most of all it liked innocence, helplessness and vulnerability. There were few things in the universe that whetted and met this appetite more completely than the Furry Bel-ooou.

In The Beast's presence, Julione felt the tingle he always felt. The binary worm in his neck, the identical twin of the one at the centre of the evil crown The Beast wore.

The relationship was a simple one. The binary worms were an open channel to each other, they communicated by what you might think of as a telepathic link. The binary worms did not use the channel themselves, instead they made the link available to a master, as a means by which he could control a slave. The one in Julione's neck, was wrapped around the base of his brain stem, it stimulated his brain and fed off the delicious base emotions buried there.

Practically then, the worm in Julione's head, controlled him and allowed suggestions from The Beast, their master, to be placed directly into his brain, so it's not surprising that it tingled a bit.

Across from Julione stood the robot Brass, robots do not seem to need to sit, his ancient body was scraped and dented in places and brand new in others. He cared nothing for the aesthetic, only function. It showed, not just in his appearance but in his manner too, after formal greetings were concluded.

"I have brought the sample battle droids, as you requested" said Brass his voice box hissed and crackled, it was old and could easily have been replaced. "Built as ordered, no laws, no intelligence, they have no self worth and will follow any orders, would you like a demonstration?" he asked

Julione signalled the affirmative, with a wave, the beast stopped, mid Bel-ooou to pay attention and jiggled in an excited fashion.

"Robot One" as Brass spoke the robot on the left of the row, stepped forward, "on the command, destroy Robot Two", " Robot Two", it stepped up, "on the command destroy Robot One".

Julione nodded, "Execute command" crackled Brass.

With that the robots tore into each other pounding and bashing, twisting and tearing, picking up whatever might make a weapon and pummelling away with it. Metal pieces dented and held or were torn away. Like medieval knights locked in mortal combat, they hacked pieces of the other's armour away but each stood firm, taking advantage where it appeared and sustaining damage when it did not.

"They will not stop and they are evenly matched" hissed Brass
He produced a small box, "as ordered, each unit is fitted with a self destruct, they will accept destruct codes verbally but that would be a bad idea, if you want to live. At a greater distance", he opened a flap on the box, it was a key pad. "enter the robot code on the pad, press the red button twice, BOOM" he said.

Julione gave a satisfied nod and reached up to catch the control which Brass had tossed to him.

"What is the code of Robot One" he asked.

"One" hissed Brass, without humour.

Julione looked at the beast and grinned, the beast grinned back and fidgeted, he entered the code and pressed the red button twice, sure enough, Boom. Robot One ceased to be, so did Robot Two, the others stood still as if nothing had happened. The beast jiggled and squirmed, "FIRE!" it screeched with wild glee.

"Excellent, Excellent" nodded Julione.

"They are ready now, complete as ordered, in the holds of five great ships, again as you requested" Brass paused, " As you seem to be satisfied I expect you are eager to complete the transaction" he said.

Julione nodded and waved two service droids forward, they were pushing a hover trolley that held three ancient cases.

"They will accept direct input as well" crackled Brass, "standard interface". Brass demonstrated the interface. Two of the remaining robots stepped forward, they opened the cases and examined each platinum ingot, when the lids were back down the robots stepped back into line.

"Acceptable" hissed Brass. "Remember" he continued, " I did not supply these units, they have no makers marks, the ships are where we agreed, you must hijack them. As we planned"

Brass prepared to leave, he took two of the demo-bots with him to carry the platinum, and moved to the door, one robot remained.

"Once we are safely away we shall transmit the command codes for the main batch" he hissed.

The deal was done, Brass and his guards left the chamber by another entrance, Julione thought of it as, the tradesman's entrance.

When they were alone, the Beast turned to Julione, "Tell me of the plan", more to the worm than Julione "Alpha, good, Galaxus good" it paused, it's head on one side as though cocking an ear to a distant sound. "Taaaamboooooaaa!, Gooooo!" it seemed to savour the words nodding slowly. Then snapped out of it and selected another Bel-ooou.

" sthee, shluniversh, shwill, shlburrrn" it offered, rudely talking with it's mouth full. "shscush shme", it swallowed the Bel-ooou, dabbing the drool away, rather daintily with the napkin.

"There will be fire, Fire, FIRE!!" it shrieked, bouncing off the chair and spilling the Bel-ooous onto the floor.

"That about covers it", murmured Julione, to himself.

------(O)-----

Roesti and the Pod

Brillaree, set off along the bank, to a place where the lake flowed into a river, the water was clear again so he could see it was not deep. The robot stepped straight in as though the water would support him, it didn't but it was only a small splash. He followed, there was a flat stone just below the surface, then another and another. Roesti looked down stream, it looked magical the canopy of trees seemed to join hands over the river, shafts of light, some tinted by the forest played on the surface of the water. He reached down and splashed the surface trying to grab the light, the pattern disappeared. The water, splashing round his fingers and toes, felt pleasant, just ahead of him there was a rock pool it was shaped like a bowl and not very deep. He stepped in, the water felt great so he slid down into a seated position. The pool was deeper in the middle so he slid down until his head was just on the bottom with the water up to his ears and lay there. He took a deep breath as he did so his body floated up, he let the breath out and sank again. Again, same result, OK breath in float, breath out sink, what if..... His mind played with floating for a while.

Soon he was floating around the pool making little swimmy movements with his hands, he caught sight of Brillaree, "Brillaree" he yelled, and sank. Spluttering Roesti broke the surface of the shallow pool still laughing. He splashed and splashed the water, watching as the droplets flew up and then fell back. He cupped handfuls of water high into the air, watching the light play on the droplets as they fell. Water was fun, in all the excitement he realised that he had quite a lot of water in his mouth. He looked at Brillaree, "is water good

to drink", he asked.

"Yes, water is good to drink, it is essential to life"

"Good" laughed Roesti, swallowing lots more water.

Roesti continued to enjoy the water, he could feel the water resisting his movements and from that he began to learn to swim.

------(O)-----

Brillaree, waited patiently for Roesti's mind to need something else, he watched as Roesti chipped away at the problem of not being able to swim. He looked on in wonder as, armed with nothing more than hope and desire, Roesti found out how to swim, from one side of the pool to the other.

"It is called swimming", he said, "you are learning how to swim", Brillaree made a note to add swimming to the teaching programme.

The word brought happy images, friends, sun and warmth, a girl?

For the first time that he could remember Roesti wanted to hold on to a memory, he wanted to swim in it and yet the more he tried to hold on the more the sweet smells and sounds of the forest kept bringing him back to the moment. It was all too distracting and trying too hard made his head hurt. He gave up, standing and wading out of the pool.

The warm breeze dried him quickly but his hair was long and held the water, he squeezed a handful and water came out, "oh well" he thought and joined Brillaree on the bank side. Together they looked quite a picture, Brillaree tall, shining and inscrutable, Roesti a wild man from the woods, lank wet hair dripping over his drying shoulders.

"The Pod is this way", said Brillaree.

As they walked towards the pod, Roesti could see quite a lot more of it's shape, it wasn't forest after all but an image, like on his terminal, but all over. As he thought this, he realized that if he didn't know it was there and had no reason to look in this direction then he could have easily walked right passed it.

The idea, formed a word, stealth, he thought, but the thought had a dark side he didn't like.

Brillaree touched the surface making the image ripple, like the pool. The robots wide fingers seemed to grip and turn something that Roesti could not see. The result was that the door of the pod sucked in a little then slid up opening way

to the interior what he could see had the characteristics of his cave, but more so.

Steps slid out of the entrance way and planted into the ground, Brillaree climbed in. The inside was mostly in darkness, "you may enter Roesti" came a voice from inside.

Roesti slowly climbed the steps into the pod, hair prickling on his neck and a strange bumpiness on his skin. His hand smoothed the hair down on the back of his neck, he felt a patch there, it was round and smooth and had a definite edge. Thus distracted Roesti stepped across the threshold and entered the pod.

Once inside, with a whirr and a dry slurping noise, the door closed and sealed. Soft light came, Roesti looked around this new space. There were smooth tiles of soft shiny material, all over the curved interior. Inset with rows of beds, just like his, he could see the empty place, where his bed had come from. The pod seemed to have an important end, Brillaree stood there waiting. Roesti could see a terminal, it was far more elaborate than his in the cave. Instead of a packing case to sit on there was a soft sort of folded bed, he jumped onto it.

The terminal came to life and so did the command chair, adjusting to Roesti's shape, when it was done Roesti felt very comfortable. Strange thoughts came and went, what are check lists he thought, the terminal interrupted his chain of thought. "Name" it said simply.

"Roesti" the word jumped from his lips with an excited eagerness.

"Student pilot Roesti, training simulation 1, allowed full access to training simulations and situations", Brillaree's voice was that of the pod's commander, so the terminal did what it was told.

"New Pilot Roesti confirmed, unlimited access, simulation only" it said

"Training simulation 1" appeared on the screen

The terminal screen showed the command chair, it zoomed in on the right hand arm rest, it moved, rolling left and right up and down and finger pads, the command chair followed each movement.

Then the other arm rest and so on until it had described each of the controls. Roesti felt the arm rests moving and he felt the palm area grow under his hand until it was like a partial glove, or perhaps like what you would get if you were to press your thumb and fingers into soft clay.

"New Pilot Roesti command calibration complete" said the terminal

"Beginning flight training"

It makes sense if you think about it, a space craft that can teach it's own flight crew how to fly it. The escape pod could not in all cases expect to have a pilot

among those it had rescued. So it came with this handy feature.

“This is another training environment”, said Brillaree, “you may come here whenever you wish”. The robot moved to the rear of the cabin and rummaged in a storage bin, he found what he was looking for, clothes. It didn't trouble Roesti, to be without clothes nor did it trouble Brillaree but Roesti would have to wear clothes sooner or later. Brillaree laid out underwear and socks, then jumpsuit then boots. The arrangement was left to right, Brillaree hoped that the order was obvious.

“Door open” he said, loudly enough to be heard, the door slid open. He stepped out into the light and resumed his watch, extending the ships chameleon field around him like a blanket he blended into the forest.

Inside the pod Roesti was having a whale of a time, he heard and logged the fact and manner of Brillaree's exit. It made him feel better, he didn't like the feeling of being watched while learning, it made him feel uncomfortable, although he had no idea why.

“Lesson 2” began the terminal

“the screen in front of you shows you in our training space. The cross now flashing is you, when you move the control like this” the control on the arm moved, “then this happens”

Roesti watched the cross move to the terminals control, it returned to normal.

“now you try Roesti” it said.

It felt somehow familiar, to be seated in a chair like this but rather than dwell on it he got on with the training.

------(O)-----

Brillaree's thought process was constant. For millennia, he had been receiving data from all over the universe and if it was necessary, he had interacted with it. For now and a while to come, Brillaree was off the grid, so he applied himself completely to the reconstruction of his friend Roesti.

------(O)-----

If one were to consider the condition of Roesti at this stage, in a kind of “save the steeple” way, the imagined bill board thermometer would be showing almost full. Now the re-construction would begin or to complete the analogy, it was time to rebuild the steeple.

Time passed, Roesti fell into a routine which included more and more of his new favourite things. Study and play, in acceptable proportions.

In the case of flight training in the pod, both at once. There is something unusual about pilots, a compulsion that exists before they even get anywhere near an aircraft, or in this case a rescue pod from a space ship. In some cases simply standing next to such a machine can be enough to wake the emotion and start the process.

Roesti was a pilot, the pod was a playground.

Also swimming which with Brillaree's help he was getting quite good at. Topped off with a sensible amount of running, exploring and climbing trees.

In the morning, he would get up and go down to the lake for a swim, after breakfast he would, switch on the terminal for a period which lasted until lunch, then, exercise, usually swimming, or climbing trees or generally exploring. Then the pod and all it's marvels.

In the evening, Roesti would reflect on the day while relaxing in the pool. Brillaree had rearranged the rocks to cause the water in the pool to swirl around, the agitation of the water caused it to become aerated, bubbles for short. The fresh tingling sensation made this, as Brillaree had intended, just as desirable as any of the other activities on Roesti's busy daily schedule.

The pale blue jump suit, which was ideal for space crew duties, was a little light for some of the activities Roesti discovered. Tree climbing took a particularly heavy toll, stains that wouldn't wash out appeared and holes too, even the most sophisticated fabrics have their limits.

While working through the history section Roesti had seen an image of a caveman, long hair, beard, animal skin, and a spear. This image came back to him one morning as he looked at his own reflection in the screen of the terminal before he switched it on.

The tattered jump suit laying on his bed, was clearly not for cavemen, but the hairy thermo-blanket, looked about right. The idea and the smile grew at the same time. He picked up the thermo-blanket, wrapping it around him leaving his right arm and shoulder unrestricted. He checked his appearance with the terminal "caveman", he said quietly. It needed something, around the middle so Roesti went to find Brillaree, it wasn't difficult. "Look", he said, "I'm a caveman!". Brillaree considered the Roesti before him, OK he thought, "You have no spear" he said. Around the place were some broken branches, Brillaree selected one, with a simple movement he stripped all the bark and twigs from it, it was straight and a good length. Roesti looked pleased, he was holding the blanket around him and looked down at himself hoping that the robot would get the idea, "A belt would help too" said Brillaree, he took a few steps into the tall grass and stroked his hand through several tufts, gathering the fibres, then with impossible speed, for an organic, he roved and wove the

fibres into a flat rope, with a bobble knot on each end, the work of seconds. Roesti accepted the fine belt gratefully and wrapped it around his waist, it fell when he let go of it. Brillaree, spent the time he needed to teaching Roesti how to tie a suitable knot, and how to untie one. When Roesti was happy he stood back feeling complete as a caveman, "Uggh!" he said.

Brillaree considered, this, the image of Roesti did look like that of an early cave dweller, the thermo-blanket animal skin looked right and so did the spear, "Uggh" was, he felt appropriate, lets not forget they did live in a cave.

"What would a caveman do with this" Roesti asked, holding out the spear. "It could be used" began Brillaree, "as support for walking over rough ground" Roesti tried it as a walking staff, OK he thought it would be good for that "otherwise it was used as a weapon" Brillaree's tone was factual as ever, "either for defence or for hunting". "Hunting?", asked Roesti, "tell me about hunting please Brillaree" "Hunting, is the name they gave to the search for food, they would live on fruits and roots but also meat" Roesti's eyes questioned the word, "meat is the flesh of animals", stated Brillaree. "They ate animals", said Roesti, shocked. "Yes said Brillaree, "they ate anything they could catch, some say that eating animals, gave the early cavemen the time they needed to think, they began to make tools and organize themselves into hunting groups, they started to cooperate with each other and from that seed, grew the civilisation that has spread so far through the universe".

"So meat is good?" asked Roesti.

"Yes, it is, however there are other things that are equally good, that do not require us to take life in such a way", Brillaree's description left questions in Roesti's mind. It didn't matter for now, he was busy stalking a clump of tall grass. When close enough he leapt on it screaming and thrust his spear into the long grass. "Arrrgh!" he cried to accompany the thrust, it felt right somehow.

The moment should have been amusing, instead Roesti's spear had frightened a small flightless bird that was nesting in the clump. It scuttled around the clump, making a lot of noise and fluffing out it's feathers to make itself look more imposing. Alongside Roesti the size advantage was insignificant, but in crisis, bird decisions don't happen like that. Roesti leapt back tripping and falling as he did so, unhurt he sat up and watched the small bird display its protective fury.

Smiling again Roesti crept forward, carefully this time he eased the grass back

and could see the nest with three eggs and one tiny hatch-ling.

"Would you like to kill and eat the bird" asked Brillaree.

"No!" Roesti managed, his tone reflected his opinion far more strongly than the simple negative he uttered. "Why would I want to do that, the little bird just wants us to go away, so she can tend to the young ones" he said.

Roesti could see the eggs and the tiny hatch-ling, he had been in an egg, Brillaree had saved him and, like the fluffed up squawking bird, had stood guard and protected him ever since.

"How could anybody want to kill and eat this bird?" he asked

Brillaree could not answer, it was a question that always troubled him.

After a while and in response to Roesti's pleading eyes he said, "I cannot tell you why, only that some do, they are very polite about it" he offered, "the animals they kill feel no pain, they call it humane killing", Brillaree called it a contradiction.

"I don't think I want to eat animals" said Roesti

"That is a choice, for you to make" Brillaree told him, "there will be many such choices" .

Roesti considered this, then he considered that it was probably time for a swim, the spear was good as a walking stick, and that would be enough. He ran down to the lake flinging his clothes off as he ran and dived in.

------(O)-----

Julione prepares the final phase.

Space is not really empty at all, it's just that all the bits of stuff floating about in it are usually quite a long way apart. Except in an asteroid field where they could be quite close together.

Some times there are visiting comets that blast through close enough to be visible and sometimes there are things that you cannot see. Some are big and are in an orbit around something far away. Periodically these ones come back. It was one of these that Julione had selected, to use as a weapon, the HAMMER drives that Brass had built for him were installed on the surface, in a suitable place. They had been run, they would be run again. Julione wanted to change, very slightly the trajectory of the meteor, he wanted this to be it's last trip through the known range.

This was all in place and had been for a considerable period of time. He checked the trajectory against his simulations, very close, the next burn should

do it. He checked the fuel reserves against the simulation, everything looked good.

He then ran the simulation just for fun, as he did so he felt the Beasts presence, and felt it's satisfaction.

------(O)-----

Every inhabited planet, that wants to stay inhabited, has in the time so far available, decided to keep a watch out for passing rocks large enough to perhaps hit them.

Julione's plan expected this, by now just about everything floating about was mapped and monitored, that was why he needed a rare one, he chose the one called "Sword", it appealed to him somehow. Anyway like a sword of his own, it was now moving to his command, the adjustments he had made were quite small and would barely be detectable, it would be the next burn that would light the fuse.

He had spent a lot of time getting the final part of the simulation set nicely so the vid would be fairly accurate, or as accurate as it needed to be given the destructive force he was about to unleash.

Satisfied that everything was in order, he sat back and in response to a sudden urge ran the final part of the simulation again. The part he liked the most was the low pass over the moon. He set the view point to the just behind the meteor and watched as the moon's surface dropped away and his goal appeared blocked by the meteor but this was the image he liked, as it got closer he froze the viewpoint, the meteor carried on getting smaller and smaller, obscuring it's target less and less.

Julione watched as the meteor flamed in the upper atmosphere, he could only imagine the wonderful shock wave in front of it, super-heating the atmosphere and turning the surface of the planet to glass, then the climax. Bang, flames explosions and the planet splitting apart, he smiled, images of fire raged through his mind.

That would take care of their Gateway he thought, and once we have the other.. he let the thought hang incomplete.

Julione reclined his chair and lay back, it had been a good day, he felt satisfied. Soon he slept.

------(O)-----

Regen hunts for Roesti

After the meeting, the Department of Off World Scanners (maintenance division) became quite busy. The normally quiet day to day routine was gone, it's warm seat was occupied instead by. *This is going to get done, right now!* The *this* in question was of course the tricky problem of...

"Analysing the Raw data from every scanning station in the known range", The Facility Manager paused to let the room quieten down.

"Looking for a fragment of a message that may lead us to Roesti"

"And", she paused, "quickly, since a life is at stake"

"What plans do you have in place"

Shur-Lee stood forward, right! she thought and sub-consciously straightened her blouse, she drew a stiff breath. "All server systems are in place for the data, we have placed time code filters, according to the cluster range, we have local filtering set up for several scan criteria, more are being written. We are all set."

After a pause, "We have one track of a possible echo as well" she said. Finding the process far less harrowing than she had feared.

While the FM was considering this, a hand went up at the side of the room.

"It seems like he was rescued." The voice came from one of the young technicians one of the crowd, the crowd cleared a little around him and suddenly the spotlight fell on a young slightly dishevelled technician. "Come on," he began hoping for some support, "flaming sun, changed coordinates" he moved his left hand in circles offering encouragement. "We don't know where he was sent but we can assume whoever did this wanted Roesti to survive", his eyes cast around again, "why else". The reflection of his courageous suggestion seemed slightly less gloomy. "If they didn't care or didn't like him, why intervene."

Silence hung steadily, then as gently as a hot air balloon, the idea began to lift.

"Good," said the FM and Shur-Lee more or less together, "have you any more?"

"Yes" he began. "If we concentrate on places where a highly regressed Roesti could possibly survive, it will be a long list but a tiny fraction of the other one." The crowd dispersed to their work stations without being asked. Terminals started to display planet details, people shouted search ideas like must have water, then fine tuned them, must not only have water, temperature, seasons, it went on.

The FM could see she was not needed, and quietly left the office, as she walked down the corridor she felt that all this work may be far too late. She shook the idea away, that was no way to set an example.

------(O)-----

Shur-Lee sat in her office, normally the door would be open but today it was closed, not that anyone would notice out there. She wanted peace and quiet to consider the facts again.

Nobody at Regen had done this, someone very clever had and it seems that someone even cleverer may have effected a rescue. It seemed that Roesti might be alive after all. An echo from his transponder relay might be useful if there were some idea of the region, but there was nothing. The terminal log from the experimental chamber was corrupted, where the insertion coordinates should have been there was just random white space.

Random white space, she thought, would need generating, the terminal only provides known codes. So why did the second person leave a footprint like that. She considered this for a while, then to clear her head, she went for a walk. The grounds of Regen were pleasant, for a while she sat by the lake. Why would someone leave a footprint? It rolled around in her head but made no sense. Getting up to leave she heard something fall, looking down to see what it was, she saw foot prints, not just one, often in pairs, there was also the pencil that had fallen from her pocket. Running back she used her personal Com to call the server manager. Je-Free answered her Com immediately, "I have an idea," she said a little breathlessly, "scan the low level maintenance files, the ones nobody can even read". She skidded on the polished stone floor turning into the stair well and started up the stairs. Je-Free opened the file section, this would be a good place to hide something only the computer could tell you it was there, "what are we looking for" he asked, fingers flying over the interface, bringing up lists of very very very similar files, he set the scrolling speed to high, "I don't know, I think it should be fairly", she paused for a doorway and into Jee-Free's office, "obvious" she said, panting slightly. Surprisingly, or perhaps not, the word that popped into Je-Free's head, as, he stopped the scroll, backed it up, and read an unusual file name, was, also obvious. He read her the file name, "everyone has two feet", she joked and together they called the FM.

In the FM's office, the three met , Shur-Lee introduced Je-Free and they sat, there was a jug of water on the table, Shur-Lee drank some. The FM opened a quiet terminal, and called up the file, displaying it on the big holo screen.

The file named,

This is the file you are looking for

appeared on the screen, it contained some really good stuff.

The logs from the terminal the intruder used but without the co-ordinates they were looking for. Then they noticed a section called *Read Me* strange that it took them a while to find it.

It Began,

Our man is safe, co-ordinates withheld.

Your system is insecure, do not add this file to our man's files.

The terminal that drove these events is coded, (a long dull number) please do not find us yet.

The following sub-files contain all relevant information, to help you understand the breach, also I have suggested a code to prevent any further intrusions. The code is raw.

Aside from the list of file names that was it.

"OK then" said the FM, after a moment, "is this information honest."

"I think so, I looked at the files as suggested, and it led me to an intricate back door, it was well hidden". He paused, "I inspected the code segment, it's clean, not only would it close this door but it includes an alert routine, to help us trap any future intrusions, in fact, it is so elegant it's beautiful".

"Your recommendation?", asked the FM

"Run it" he said simply, she nodded, a few seconds of frantic clicking and a check, "OK" he said when he was satisfied, "it's closed now!"

At this point the meeting could have continued in the open, however the words of the message "please do not find us yet" caused them to remain quiet for a bit longer. The FM broke the silence, "Shur-Lee" she asked, "how likely is it that we will find Roesti with your search of the scanner logs?"

"Not very"

"and tracing, the echo?"

"significantly less", they looked at each other, the humour of the situation arrived at more or less this point.

"So", began Jee-Free, smiling, "if we carry on as we are we are not going to find Roesti and since we don't want to" the other two nodded at this, "we carry on"

Jee-free had hit the nail on the head, it was simple, they carried on with the hopeless task, enthusiasm un-diminished, the idea was funny enough to laugh at. So they laughed.

The FM didn't mind at all, she knew that a cheerful team worked better, even in adversity humour should be positively encouraged, worry affects judgement and she remembered an old lesson.

Next the terminal logs and the video files.

They ran the video first, back at the initial meeting the security captures showed just the boiling star, this version had a face in it, the face grew and with it the sneering voice of, Julione. "The Logs are from his ship, we have all the proof we need now" said Jee-Free.

"what about the second intruder", the FM considered, "do we know how he or she did it?"

"No" said Jee-Free, "other than the elegance of the code and the simple truths of the message, we don't know, anything about intruder 2"

"We know he probably saved Roesti" said Shur-Lee, nodding, the others nodded their agreement.

"And that he wants us to keep it in the background for now" concluded the FM, she gathered her thoughts.

"Stay motivated, keep looking", she repeated, the message could stay in the not sure tray for a while, that should do.

"Good she said, I am going to ask you to keep this to yourselves, if you can."

"What if I am asked a direct question that conflicts with your request" asked Shur-Lee.

"Answer as your conscience requires", said the FM simply"

Deception did not come easily to them, their whole society, based as it was on honesty, could not condone deception, finding a reason to call it something else was no solution.

They thought about this and individually made their choices.

The meeting concluded.

The FM sat alone, still in the quiet, Tambora, she thought. It would be unfair not to share this information with her, Roesti was one of her people and she cared.

The connection to Tambora's personal Com was answered immediately, Her familiar face showed worry and a lack of sleep, behind Tambora she could see the wall clock, it was late there. After the usual greetings Tambora asked, "Are there any developments?" The FM considered her words carefully. "We found the breach in our system" she began, "it seems that Julione was behind it, we have irrefutable proof".

"What about.. ", The FM raised a finger to her lips, with a slight nod, Tambora showed that she understood. "We have confidence in *Our Man*", the FM concluded.

The rest of the conversation, which was brief, washed around the issues of secrecy and hiding but Tambora found that in the middle of everything, Our Man may be safe.

Roesti is ready

Brillaree's meticulous reconstruction of Roesti was proceeding well, gradually washing away the trauma of his arrival on Lema and the events that led him there. The training programme had carefully placed hooks on which to hang memories, skills, experiences and the ideas of the Roesti that the universe needed.

Brillaree was satisfied with the progress so far, all was going well, he watched Roesti leave the lake on the other side and make for the pod, very well.

In the comfort of the command chair, Roesti lay back and relaxed. He had just completed a complex simulated mission. It had involved a jump from base point to a simulated planet faraway in the simulated space. Then he had docked with a simulated rotating space station. As is often the case with simulations, some evil minded instructor, in this case the training terminal, messed about with some of the status parameters. It decided to give him a debris impact which took most of the dock thrusters off-line, damaged the communication systems, automatics, and set off the hull breach alarms. To the terminal's satisfaction, Roesti had coped well, very well, in fact, "This concludes your training Student Pilot Roesti" it said.

"I require only your commanding officer's authority to change your status to Active Pilot" it continued.

"Commander", thought Roesti, "Ah you mean Brillaree" he thought.

"Authorised", said Brillaree who had entered the pod at the height of the terminal's playfulness.

"Pilot Roesti, your status is confirmed Active Pilot" it said.

Roesti enjoyed this moment for another moment, then he got up from the command chair. "Sim off" he ordered, the terminal darkened.

He climbed of the now familiar command chair like an 18 year old. Roesti felt good, his body felt good, the swimming and walks and the running and climbing had all affected his highly impressionable body. Roesti was fit and healthy and there was something else too, not really a physical thing, his mind seemed to be filled up with things, although he couldn't quite tell what.

"Well done Roesti" Brillaree's even voice disguised the fact that he was pleased

with Roesti's accomplishments. The training terminal and the pod, even the swimming had all really been just a distraction, to keep Roesti busy while his memories were carefully put back. The memories were holding, providing the framework for Roesti to expand back into them. Brillaree could have said, "you have all your memories back but lack the associations to know they are there". However, out of an appreciation of Roesti's general condition, Brillaree said nothing of the kind. Instead he beckoned Roesti to one of the auxiliary view screens near the door. "What do you see", he asked. It was an image of him, with short hair and no beard, he was in uniform, another man stood next to him.

They were on the flight deck of a ship, in front of the main view port, behind them the stars stretched out to everywhere. The two close friends, Roesti and Julione.

"I am a pilot", he began, " a member of the Space Police", he had to wait while a considerable portion of his memory reorganised itself.

"Julione, was, my friend" he said.

"Yes" Said Brillaree.

Roesti looked at his bare arms, they were tanned, then he felt his chin, bearded, he felt the patch on the back of his neck but stopped as Brillaree gently raised his hand.

"Leave that there for now, it is inhibiting your signal to Regen" he said.

Roesti understood, but in the way of a person reading a new word in a sentence, the meaning came without the detail.

"What happened?" he asked.

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On the way back to the cave Brillaree explained as simply as he could what Roesti needed to know.

Roesti had come to accept everything Brillaree said, as truth, which was fair. So he listened carefully to Brillaree's descriptions, of events. Much of it sounded incredible and yet here he was.

Later, in the evening after everything was quiet, Roesti went back to the pool, he knew they would soon leave this place, he knew it because most of him was back and gaining ground all the time. The old Roesti, the before Roesti had things to do, there was urgency. The new Roesti, would have been quite happy to enjoy the rest of the summer here. Somehow they were both there, laying in the pool enjoying the night and the water and the peace.

Julione presses the button

Julione relieved the officer of the watch, and entered the bridge deck. Nobody ever questioned his orders, well not twice anyway. He looked across the empty navigation station and the weapons terminals, now safe and quiet, "for now", he thought. He paced the bridge deck back and forth waiting, on his terminal the meteor, Sword. A soft alarm chimed and Julione returned to the terminal. He checked everything, it was all good, Sword was in an ideal position for the final burn. Because he liked such things, Julione had installed his big red button that lit up when it was armed. He wanted to fire the HAMMERS, for the final adjustment personally. The stupendous amount of energy stored in the Meteor would be amplified by the trip round the Alphan moon, and Alpha's gravity would do the rest.

The moment came, Julione pressed the button, 4 Massive motors literally exploded into life over the next few minutes the remaining fuel would be expended, and by that time, the trajectory would be as he wanted it to be. He watched the burn indication slip down and down until, it stopped. The trajectories looked good, it all matched the simulation.

In 4 days 23 hours and 27 minutes, Alpha would go boom.

The beast overheard this thought, and rewarded Julione with some nice flaming images, "fire" it offered, helpfully.

"Yes" said Julione to give the beast the opportunity to eavesdrop properly, "in just under 5 days Alpha will be reduced to rubble. There will be lots of fire"

The beast flashed more images of destruction and flames.

"All those well meaning Alphans, with their open honesty and their dedication to social development, education and health care, will die, in flame and with them the world that they care so much about".

Julione wiped some saliva from the edge of his mouth and allowed him self to calm down.

Fire burned behind his eyes the flames dancing as though alive, which they probably were back in The Beasts lair.

He reached over to the microphone and keyed it up, "Crew to the bridge" he barked.

Roesti goes back

Roesti awoke as usual, with the sun. In his cave things were different, Brillaree had been busy during the night. The terminal had gone and so had all the little bits and pieces that generally followed, or at least gathered around, people if they stayed still for long enough. There was another difference, Roesti knew who he was, his knowledge lacked the confidence of completeness but he knew. Strangely he was still the new Roesti as well, full of eagerness, innocence and the vigour of youth. He reached for the cup that was always there and drank it all down, then he jumped out of bed and gathered it up into a roll. Roesti looked around the cave, aside for himself and the bed roll he carried, it was empty, they were about to leave. But there was time for one last swim, he ran down to the lake. Swimming cleared his head, the cool water, the sunlight, the breeze everything about this place was perfect as far as he was concerned. "What could be better", he thought and dived to the bottom in the clear water. Roesti liked swimming underwater and practised holding his breath for longer and longer. It was the weightlessness and the fact that he could fly without a machine. On one of his trips to the surface, he noticed Brillaree standing still, he used no words or gestures and gave no indication of urgency. Roesti understood and climbed out of the lake.

On the ground by Brillaree, was the bed, the jumpsuit, rather tattered and the caveman costume he had made which had become his normal attire. He picked it up and put it on.

The old and the new Roesti's agreed, the caveman would do, they both knew it was time to leave.

Crossing the river by the pool, Roesti stopped, "I've been wondering, did you place these stones to make an easy place to cross", he asked Brillaree who simply said "Yes".

Roesti wondered about Brillaree where he had come from, why he really came to save him. He knew that Brillaree had been his friend before, perhaps those memories were still a little mixed. Anyway, there was fun to be had today, he felt a tingle in his stomach as he thought of the Pod, it was a jitter, actually a pre-flight jitter.

Once inside the pod, Roesti made for the command chair, as he always did, on the way he carelessly dropped the remains of the jump suit into a sort of draw, which said Re-Use on it, as the door swung shut there was a fizzling sound, he opened the drawer again the suit had gone, Roesti remembered what Re-Use meant.

At the command chair he paused, looking back at Brillaree, "May I", he asked nodding hopefully.

For the Roestis this was a interesting situation. Consider, old Roesti is already a pilot, with many significant missions behind him, he is now awake. The new Roesti is WIDE awake and has just learned how to fly a spaceship, he is therefore eager for his first proper flight.

To save them from the mental effort of resolution, Brillaree simply said "Yes"

Both Roestis were feeling very happy, New Roesti had his mind on *His first take off*, Old Roesti was giving more serious thought to *His first landing*. Old Roesti had a slight blemish on his flying career, succinctly expressed, by the "Boing!" noises, made by the other cadets in his team, noisily, boisterously and repeatedly, as they were all celebrating Old Roesti's first first solo flight, what seemed like an eternity ago.

The thought of that time of happiness and wild freedom, when anything was possible made him want to keep the old memory. He was just going to make sure that the "Boing!" would not be repeated and that made him smile too. The smile continued all the way through to the new Roesti, eager fresh and young, together they sat back, and smoothly joined, the smile widened, slightly.

Refreshed and wearing a caveman outfit, Roesti felt unstoppable, so good in fact, that he decided to narrate, theatrically. "At his single word of command" he began, in a deep narrator's voice, the Pod interrupted, "Student Pilot Roesti, you require one further authorisation, Before you may operate in REAL mode." Roesti grinned, "just get on with it" he thought. "Authorisation, Confirmed" ordered Brillaree in what he thought may be a suitable theatrical tone, the smile had spread.

The controls came alive in Roesti's hands, the pod responsive almost vibrating, it felt like a wild animal in need of taming. Nervousness built and he started to fight the controls but then just like the moment when one learns to ride a bike, it clicked. Roesti's movements synchronised with the Pod. Upon recognising the hand of a skilled operator, the pod stopped messing about with the controls and it immediately returned to being a docile Pod, the smile was still going.

Roesti lifted the pod and circled the lake area before heading off, towards Lema city. The Chameleon circuits on the pod did not quite keep up and so for a time a small patch of forest may have been seen, flying low in the mountains heading for Lema.

Still with the pod set to zero emissions and flying in the spaces where the scanners couldn't reach, they hoped to avoid detection, it was difficult but in a great fun kind of way, Roesti felt born to it, which in a way he was.

The flight took quite a long time, but time is a relative concept and it depends rather on the things that occupy it. Roesti was flying low and fast in mountains, such actions are completely absorbing. His terrain display showed the ideal flight path, which Roesti usually followed. Approaching the last ridge of mountains before the plains of Lema, and Lema City itself, the terminal displayed a conservative curving approach path. Roesti identified the landing area, sweeping around fast and low, to a surprisingly gentle touchdown, he listened but there was no "Boing!".

With the pod secured, they stepped out onto the the long meadow grass, the Pod flickered and looked like a forest again, which was appropriate.

They walked together to a rough stone trail which led steadily along and up the ridge, it was wide enough to walk comfortably on as long as you didn't meet someone coming the other way. In that unlikely event, the sight of a robot apparently leading a cave man, would have probably caused the someone to back up, probably quite quickly.

They reached the top after an invigorating scramble, at least as far as Roesti was concerned. The track widened, opening onto a plateau. Excitedly Roesti ran over to the edge, it was Lema City, gleaming in the late afternoon sunlight. At a more steady pace Brillaree joined him, there they stood, Brillaree, Roesti and a long stick that could just pass for a spear, if you didn't look too closely. It would have made a great picture.

The sun slipped lower in the sky as they watched.

"Brillaree, who are we here to meet"

"Tambora"

Roesti considered his appearance and shrugged, then he struck a pose, bared teeth and shook the spear a bit, "Grrr" he said.

"There will be something more suitable to wear on Tambora's ship" the robot said

"I doubt that Tambora will be concerned, she will be more interested in the fact that you are alive and well" he concluded.

"Are you coming with us" Roesti asked

"No" said Brillaree, "We will meet again soon but for now you must go with Tambora".

They stood in silence and watched the light change.

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Tambora's personal transport was a state affair, with every practical comfort, it was at the disposal of anyone with a reason to use it but generally it was available.

Brillaree saw it lift out of the port, on the outskirts of Lema City, he watched it climb gently, as it swept towards them, a brief circle then a landing. With such a grand ship, one might have expected a fan fare or something but there was nothing, a door opened and a platform folded out and descended.

Roesti stood and watched as Tambora descended into view, she smiled as their eyes met, he recognised her and smiled back. At her side Sophie-K, her daughter, she was smiling broadly. As they reached the ground Sophie broke away from her mother.

"Roesti" she cried, running towards him, she caught his arm and swung him round, "we thought you were lost" she said sadly and hugged him, immediately feeling better.

"Come on she said, we have a new observatory building I want to show you". They set off to look over the city again. Sophie K tried to get Roesti to run and succeeded.

Brillaree and Tambora watched them go.

"Thank you Brillaree" she said, "saving Roesti as you did was a fine thing."

"There is more" said Brillaree, The happiness on Tambora's face dimmed slightly, it was a pity to disturb her happiness but there were urgent matters. Brillaree explained what he had discovered in the terminal on Julione's ship.

He discussed the plans he had in play, the expected consequences and his overall intentions. Tambora considered this for a while, not smiling at all now.

"There is something else" he said, "some time ago Julione took delivery of, 4 HAMMER drive units, from the machine shops of Brass. "While I was shadowing on his terminal, I found this vid, it seems to be part of a simulation" Brillaree showed the file.

It showed a rough simulator representation of an asteroid streaking through space, the path of the asteroid, shown as a line, passed very close to a moon and bent around it, the red line stopped on the surface of the unknown planet. Brillaree caused the vid to skip forward. The meteor was now approaching the moon, it made a low pass apparently very close to the surface, swung around the moon like a sling shot, and then, leaving the influence of the moon's gravity, it, tracked for the planet

Tambora was speechless, how could anyone think of such a plan let alone implement it, it was too terrible.

"Can he really do this," she asked, the tone of her voice begged for the answer to be no.

"I not only believe that he can, I believe that it may already have started" said Brillaree,

Tambora considered this, "Is there more of the simulation" she asked.

Sophie K and Roesti, strolled back towards the the ship, the light was failing and as wonderful as the new observatory was, seeing it from the outside was not the same. Walking along they looked like brother and sister, laughing and joking about anything, happy in each others company. As they got closer they could see Tambora and Brillaree standing together, in conversation.

Roesti's playful side hatched an idea, creep quietly behind them, shout bang!, he thought. Another thought was that perhaps he would have to dissuade Sophie K from doing the same thing. He watched as Brillaree project a holo screen, it was too far to see so he quickened his stride slightly, Sophie-K kept pace.

When they were closer, details became clearer, it was a vid of a rock flying over a moon, a simulation and not a very well rendered one. They watched as the moon left the screen and was replaced by an image of a planet.

The planet grew, continents and oceans became visible. The point of view pulled back, to give a better view of the impact, then the impact came, tearing the planet apart, there were close up's of the destruction, as the planet absorbed the enormous energy of the asteroid.

The vid ended and there was silence, the silence lasted a while, stunned by what they had just witnessed.

"Is that Alpha", asked Sophie K, "it's just that the moon the continents, you know, look a bit like Alpha".

They all considered this, and hoped it was not.

Brillaree broke the silence.

"You must go now" he said, "we must find this meteor, alert everyone who can assist. I will be in communication with you" he closed off the holo screen, "I must go to set in motion plans for this eventuality"

He produced a small device, "All the files are here, I have also left a message for you Tambora", he handed it to her.

Then he turned to Roesti, "On the back of your, neck there is a patch, it is inhibiting your trace signal to Regen, you may not remove it, it is important that Julione thinks that he was successful. If he questions how you were rescued, he may discover that we have some of his plans, do you understand" Roesti, understood and Tambora did too, no signal to Regen, no regeneration, they nodded.

"Good luck" he said, turned and set of in the direction of the track that he and Roesti climbed earlier.

Roesti watched him go, "I never said goodbye" he said softly.
"Friends do not need such things" it was the voice of Tambora.
"Come" she said, "I'm sure you have many questions"

The door closed behind them as they crossed into the interior of the ship, Tambora, signalled to the captain, he nodded and issued the orders that would lift the ship.

Tambora showed Roesti to a comfortable cabin, it was larger than the word cabin conveyed. "You may rest here, there are fresh clothes and everything you may need", she waved her arm indicating wardrobes, and toilet facilities. In the middle of the room was a large comfortable bed. Roesti thanked Tambora and she left. The bed was soft and it had been a busy day.

Tambora walked steadily towards the flight deck, the ship was in flight, the view out of the main view port confirmed this rather than any sensation she had felt. "How long until we reach the orbital observatory Captain", she asked. He consulted his terminal, "Three hours standard." he answered, she nodded, "I will be in my quarters, if I am needed" the Captain saluted, respectfully and Tambora left the bridge.

Could it be Alpha she thought, bringing up the star charts and fitting in the simulation, it looked like a reasonable fit, but so could any number of worlds with moons.

At her terminal she opened a channel to Alpha, and passed all the information that Brillaree had given her.

She talked at length with Alpha, the leader of Alpha the planet. Historically and as a way of accepting the full responsibility of the role, each duly elected leader had always taken the name Alpha. To begin with, he was unconvinced about the feasibility of the plan, they had early warning stations and tracked all known objects around them for a considerable range. Nevertheless, he watched the vid with her and agreed to get people looking at it straight away.

"We are taking this threat very seriously" she told him, "and will mobilise all our forces as soon as we are sure of the target." the call ended and Tambora got on with sending the files that Brillaree had given to her, into the main systems of Lema, from there they were copied and re-directed to everyone who could possibly have an input or an idea, the files were travelling all over the universe within minutes.

Then, she issued orders to her forces and planners, the gist of which were,

prepare and stand by.

Finally she issued the order that would alert everyone in the known range, to *find Julione*, "he must be stopped" she said to herself.

Her terminal listed the files from the device that Brillaree had given her, most of them were hurtling across space by now but there was one that was not, the message from Brillaree to her, she opened it. As was Brillaree's way the message was simple, it was essentially a list of instructions, things that he wanted her to do, and times. She would follow the instructions. When all was done, she sat for a while, in silence.

Often success or failure hang on the turn of a card, it is the element of chance, but waiting for such a chance is always hard.

They simply did not have enough information.

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Alpha considered the facts again, he looked out over the city, his city, everyone's city, so peaceful, could it be under attack, if it was, could they stop it, this would be a test beyond any he had faced so far. Sadness and desperation rose up from deep within him. Alpha felt the despair and saw it as a negative emotion, nothing could be solved by accepting such a fate. They would act, they would find a way to stop the attack and if Alpha was not the target then they would help whoever was the target. He stamped his foot to confirm his resolve. Alpha moved back to his desk and raised a Com link to the central observatory.

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4:23:56, 4:23:55, 4:23:54, 4:23:53.....

Julione reviewed the trajectory, it matched all parameters, the track was good. He felt The Beast, he felt it's anticipation, he felt the fire. And he watched the 5 great ships filled with the army of battle droids, move into position around Galaxus.

Everything has to change some time, he thought.

------(O)-----

The target is confirmed

Alpha's face was ashen, concern had now been replaced by dreadful certainty, the young Tech at the outer observatory had spotted it. Sword, it had been moved, how? they did not know but where it was going was certain. Alpha, collision in just under 3 standard days. Alpha had been reviewing the emergency actions documentation and it was open on his terminal.

He reached for the microphone, and entered the special sequence, as he pressed the last key, he was connected to every Alphan on the planet. "My fellow Alphans, This is not a drill." he paused for a few moments, "It is with deep concern that I must declare a *State of Emergency*", he paused again. "gather in community centres, and await further instructions, account for everyone, there will be further information broadcasts. Please co-operate, lives are at stake. That is all for now, Good luck to us all".

He closed the connection.

His simulations, painted a bleak picture, it was impossible to contemplate, Alpha, his face in his hands, wept.

What could save them!

Leave it to Roesti, The Known Ranger