

# WAR AGAINST THE ANCIENT: BEGINNINGS

*JOHN R DAVIS*

## DISCOVERY

### PART ONE

Se'Lak was just a simple bureaucrat. Hell, he wasn't even one of any significance. All he did was oversee the paperwork for his manager. He would just close smaller accounts held by one of the client species. That was all that was expected of him. Or it was until he was asked to do something out of the ordinary. Se'Lak worked for the Bank, a financial organisation responsible for the currency within the Vault. It had many different clients, the most important of which were the Ancients. These strange and isolated beings rarely traded with the other species, preferring to hide on their planets and watch from a distance. But, like every other species that called the pocket universe home they had an account with the Bank. Normally, this account was off limits to pretty much everybody outside of a selective few. But recently rumours abounded of the Ancients closing their account with the Bank. This would be unthinkable and would absolutely cause the collapse of the credit-based currency used by everybody else as the Ancients were the biggest clients the Bank had. Se'Lak had thought nothing of these rumours until his manager came up to him and asked him into a private room. "We need to close a major account," the manager said, "I need people who can keep their mouth shut." Se'Lak was confused by the request, because any information on accounts was confidential. Technically, he wasn't allowed to discuss any of them. "What's the account, sir," Se'Lak asked, already degrading himself for asking a stupid question. "Can't say. But word has come down that I need to send people over to the head branch. They were quite specific with what they needed." Se'Lak was starting to get more and more worried as the thoughts flooded his mind. Could the rumours be true? They couldn't be! "So, what do you want with me," he asked. But his heart sank when he realised the answer. If the rumours were indeed true, Se'Lak was about to close the biggest and most important account the Bank held. Things were going to change and not for the better.

The Cargo Transport OppenFien had over 250,000,000 tonnes of food from Illay in its racks and no escort. Not only was this outside of what could reasonably be called ordinary procedure, Captain Yilang was nervous about potential pirates coming across such a rich haul. If recent rumours were to be believed, then the chances of encountering pirates was very much a possibility. Even without pirates inside the usually well protected vault, the fact that no escort had been provided was worrying enough. It was normal, if not compulsory for at least two destroyers to accompany a cargo transport with such a large shipment of food. Yilang couldn't help but feel like this was a setup, but was forced to ignore the gut instinct screaming at him. "Lotrien, have you finished the deep scan yet," Yilang asked his navigator. "Yes sir, local space showing all clear." Yilang frowned. He had the OppenFien drop out of Slipspace after a distress signal had been picked up. If the situation he found himself in wasn't bad enough, the distress signal had stopped almost to the second after the Slipspace generators slowed to a crawl. "Get us back on....." Yilang had started to say before everything went dark. The normal white light was then replaced by the emergency blue lighting that usually accompanied loss of power. "What just

happened," Yilang yelled as his two subordinates tried to find out. He didn't have time to figure it out. The pirate ship revealed itself only for a second before sending a nuclear bomb the size of a large town into the guts of the OppenFien. A moment later and the OppenFien exploded into a small sun before fading entirely from view, leaving only fragments behind. As quickly as it had appeared, the pirate ship disappeared from view.

Se'Lak had found himself in a very peculiar position. After agreeing to help close the accounts, he had learnt that his role was to go through the recent transactions and make sure that everything was correct. Se'Lak wasn't to ask any questions about what those transactions were and he very quickly found that he lacked the ability to understand them on his own. Most he recognized as normal transactions, such as agricultural supplies and raw minerals and metals. But a few, such as a recent one outside of the Vault wasn't clearly labelled. Instead, it was simply labelled as [M.C501K.T1977]. It was obviously some sort of code. He recognised the C501K as the amount of credits that had been transferred over, but the context eluded him. Se'Lak did, however, recognize the code as similar to others he had noticed. Mentally he listed several codes: [M.C120K.T1507], [M.C44K.T1557], [M.C556K.T1669], [M.C556K.T1755], [M.C501K.T1977]. Each one went to the same place and was paid to an account from outside the Vault. It also meant that he couldn't access details on that account, though doing so would be entirely unprofessional on his account. Still, Se'Lak was curious as to why such odd transactions were being made. After making a mental note to follow up on the codes, he went back to focusing on his primary tasks.

On another planet, in another system, Tylong was starting to get concerned. A cargo transport had disappeared on its way to Lorrin, the Devonian Capitol Planet. Worse than that, the OppenFien was carrying one of the largest shipments Tylong had ever worked on. It wasn't enough to simply lose an expensive ship with a reliable captain, but Tylong had also put a lot of money into securing the shipment for his newly founded company. The Devonians were willing to pay handsomely, but had decided to go to a competitor as soon as they heard about the disappearance. Tylong wasn't just angry, he was furious. Had the OppenFien been given an escort as per standard then he wouldn't have lost so much money on such a big gamble. To make matters worse, the Vault Military wouldn't investigate why or how the OppenFien disappeared. "Accidents happen," they kept telling him. But Tylong knew it was all wrong. He sends a ship, unguarded, to Lorrin and it disappears along the way? Fortunately, Tylong had other resources at his disposal. Not that he was keen to share them. If he was to find out what really happened, then he was going to have to call in some less than desirable favours with less than desirable individuals. One way or another, Tylong was going to know what happened, even if it killed him.

Se'Lak had let his curiosity get the better of him in the weeks following his discovery. The codes were simple, making them easy to trace. Unfortunately, when the day came that Se'Lak finally got to see where the money was going, he instantly regretted it. Instead of some external colony or mining operation like he was hoping, Se'Lak instead found the money was going to an account known for being a pay drop for pirates and mercenaries. More specifically, it was one that was operated by a broker of sorts where a government could hire less than desirable help. It was pretty much an open secret that accounts like this one existed, but no one was allowed to work on them or even discuss their existence. It was an odd situation that was made even worse when he noticed the last transaction on the account was paid out after a cargo transport disappeared on its way to Lorrin. Coincidences happened all the time, but Se'Lak wasn't stupid

enough to assume this was just mere coincidence. As to confirm the worst, or maybe just to make a bad day worse, Se'Laks manager, Bo'Sheng, called the worried Ordovician over to his office. Now, Bo'Sheng was usually a very cheerful guy with a near constant smile on his face. But Se'Lak could see that the familiar smile wasn't being worn as he shuffled into the small room, causing his two hearts to sink. As he stood in front of his manager and boss, he tried to gather the courage to speak but couldn't find any within himself. "I've got word from above to let you go immediately," Bo'Sheng said grimly and to the point, "Heaven forbid they tell me why." Se'Lak didn't bother to say anything and chose instead to just stand in silence. He had a suspicion as to why, but knew he couldn't be sure. "I'll have a security officer escort you out and I'll make sure you get any personal effects in due time." Se'Lak simply nodded. "Want to tell me what this is about," Bo'Sheng asked, not expecting much, if any, of a reply. As expected, no reply came, even as the young former employee was escorted out. Life was changing in was Se'Lak never wanted.

Tylong had spent the last few weeks sifting through as much information as he could. He had spent a sizable fortune on leads, scout ships and dead ends that led nowhere. The only real break came when he found the wreckage of the OppenFien in a system not usually frequented by traders. At first, Tylong had wondered why the cargo ship would stop in such a distant system where not many ship passed through. But it changed when the secondary black box was found. Tylong knew that Captain Yilang was paranoid like no one else and would have multiple black boxes as a redundant bit of insurance. Of the five Tylong knew were installed, only the secondary black box was found (mostly intact, fortunately). While he was waiting for the information to come from the data recovery team, Tylong thought it was best to try and find out if anyone else had any idea what was going on. Multiple times, his private office and his home were both broken into and computers were accessed, seemingly with nobody noticing. No doubt, some very important people were interested in his investigations, leading Tylong to publically write off the loss of the OppenFien. Even those close to him had no idea the investigations had continued and the break-ins had stopped as suddenly as they had begun. Tylong wasn't a genius by any means, but was certainly smart enough to know that this would be the last he heard of the "intruders". Now he was sitting in an office in the middle of a nowhere town, waiting on the Black Box Data. The lead "expert" (read: hacker) was a half breed Devonian by the name of Tali. Her "father" was a Devonian who liked to travel and her mother was an engineer from some distant planet called Rannoch. Tylong had never heard of it, but Tali was always eager to talk about it. Today wouldn't leave much room for such trivial topics as Tylong would finally get the lead he needed. Tali, unusually silent, sat across from him staring at a datapad with her unusually yellow eyes. A feature from her father no doubt. "So, you recover anything from the black box," Tylong asked hopefully. "Yes. But you're not going to like it," Tali informed the Galaxian hesitantly, before sliding the datapad towards Tylong. After speed reading for a few seconds, Tylong became confused by what he was reading. "Is this right," he asked. "I personally double checked. If the video feed is at all accurate, then your transport was lured and destroyed by mercenaries."

After the meeting was over, Tylong immediately went back to his office and scoured through all the data the Black Box had recorded. There was no doubt in his mind, a mercenary ship had lured and destroyed the OppenFien. Strange thing was, instead of boarding it and taking the crew alive or stealing cargo, they had simply outright destroyed the ship. This was concerning, as it suggested a targeted attack as opposed to a random opportunity. The only reason a mercenary band would target a specific ship was because they were paid to. But inside the

vault? Pirates sometimes found their way in by accident, usually after they stole a cargo transport from one of the outside colonies. If someone was paying them, then it would be someone from within the Vault and that person would be paying using an account at the Bank. Picking up the commlink, he decided to make few calls, starting with Bo'Sheng, an Ordovician he could depend on. "Fur'Sheng? Didn't wake ya did I," Tylong asked humorously. "No, no. Actually got me at a bad time Tylong," he replied. Tylong leaned back in his chair. "Oh, is something wrong?" There was a moment's pause before the reply came through. "Nah, just had to deal with my brother. An employee of his was running traces on an account. Big softie is upset by it all," Fur'Sheng explained. "Anything I should be concerned about," Tylong pressed. "Not unless you run banking for the Ancients." This was something Tylong didn't expect to hear. "He was running traces on THE account! I'm surprised he even had access," Tylong nearly shouted down the commlink. "Yeah, can't say much about why he was on the account, but I do know he found some dodgy things," Fur'Sheng spoke calm as ever. Regaining his composure, Tylong grew intrigued. Many people would love to know what the Ancients spent their money on, regardless of the cost to themselves. "So, what did he find?" Seconds passed without a reply and Tylong was starting to worry about the reply he would get. "Shouldn't really say, but I hear that the Ancients have been dealing with some group outside the Vault. All low key and the like," Fur'Sheng finally surrendered. Tylong smiled. It was a lead he could work off and a piece that all too neatly fitted into the puzzle he was making. "Do you have a name to go with this mysterious trace," Tylong asked confidently. "If you want to get in touch, I'll arrange a meeting. And it'll cost ya. Otherwise I'm keeping it to myself," Fur'Sheng countered abrasively. Tylong expected nothing less from an information broker. "I'll send the credits over as soon as I get the details," he confirmed before hanging up the commlink. Tylong had managed to get a lucky second break.

Se'Lak waited nervously at the cafe. Not only was it a very open space (which he always had a fear of), but he felt like he was being watched. Why he had agreed to this meeting was beyond any sane thought he could muster. But Bo'Sheng promised that this Tylong he spoke of had a job for him. Se'Lak couldn't understand why someone would hire him. Being fired from the Bank was a virtual blacklist in terms of accounting. Se'Lak was unemployable. But he started to panic when he saw a Galaxian as big and as burly as they come make his way over through the crowd and to where Se'Lak was waiting. "Se'Lak," Tylong asked. "Y yeah," Se'Lak managed to squeak out in response. "I'm Tylong. I'm a friend of the Sheng," Tylong calmly told the frightened individual in front of him. Se'Lak calmed down a little. Sitting across the table from Se'Lak, Tylong decided he would be the first to speak. "I've heard you're looking for a job," he started to explain. "Ye yes. But you must have heard that I was fired from the Bank. I'm not sure..." Se'Lak started to say before being interrupted. "Then we both have something the other wants. Have you heard about the OppenFien yet?" Se'Lak nodded, unsure about where this was going. "Well, I'm going to be direct. I have a strong suspicion that the people responsible for my cargo transport were paid for from an account within the Vault, an account you recently worked on." Tylong watched as the fear returned in Se'Lak's eyes. "I... I don't know what you are talking about," Se'Lak stuttered in response. Tylong wasn't supposed to know about the account, or what Se'Lak had found. "I know you do. I have traced the specific transaction code to [M.C501K.T1977]. It was sent right before the OppenFien was destroyed," Tylong explained, doing his best not to speak too loudly. He could tell that Se'Lak knew about the transaction code, even as Se'Lak looked away, and smiled. "I want to find out who's responsible for the destruction of my ship and the murder of her crew." Se'Lak turned back to Tylong. "And then what? What you're doing isn't going to end well," he said with no ounce of confidence and

entirely with fear. "I don't need it to. I... have means to deal with people who get in the way. I just need your help finding out who." Se'Lak considered what Tylong was asking of him. Was he sure that he wanted to fall into such illegal activity? Ultimately, Se'Lak knew he had no choice. "Do you know who account belonged to? What it means to merely access it?" Tylong relaxed with knowing that Se'Lak was going to help. "Yes, and I don't give a damn. I'm in it till the end," Tylong answered, trying and failing to hold back one last smile.

## PART TWO

V'riK'Oldew had been an investigative official for many centuries and likewise had seen more than his fair share. As one of the few Ancients that had an active role outside of the secretive inner collective, V'riK'Oldew held certain views that many of his own kind considered uncomfortable at best and outright disgusting at worst. Not that it bothered him. Better to be among the masses than live among tired old relics. Being an Ancient did give him an edge though. The near immortal lifespan and near God-like reverence many of the lower species had for his kind help V'riK'Oldew hone his mind and skills to near perfection. And while he would never have the ability of foresight that some Devonians had, he could still predict the outcome of an investigation based on his many years of experience. Recently, though, V'riK'Oldew hadn't been taking on many cases. He hadn't had any time off for nearly three and a half centuries and it was beginning to show. He was getting sloppy and his last case had proven to be especially difficult. But now that he had some free time, V'riK'Oldew was finding it difficult to adapt to life outside of work. Sitting in his small apartment, he wondered if anything new was happening back home and decided to check the Light Speed Network for news. Nothing seemed to be out of the ordinary, save for a few small articles. One that caught his eye was the destruction of the OppenFien, which while unusual was not considered to be deliberate (if the article had been accurate) and right next to it was an article about that Ordovician that had been fired from the Bank. What was most intriguing about this was that the persona in question was rumoured to be working on a high level account. V'riK'Oldew briefly wondered if the account in question was the Government account for the Ancients, his people. If that was true, then the fact that this person was terminated from his employment meant there might be a bounty on his head. With nothing better to do, V'riK'Oldew decided to take a deeper look into it.

Tylong decided that the best place to put Se'Lak to work was in the middle of nowhere. Literally. He had bought a third-hand scavenger ship using credits funnelled through several accounts and had Se'Lak and the ship put in orbit around a gas giant. After a standard month on board, Tylong and Se'Lak had finally managed to get some hard evidence that something was going on. Thanks to some contacts at the Bank, Tylong had managed to get access to the accounts that Se'Lak needed to look at. After some very intensive searching, they had found that many of the payments had lined up almost perfectly with the destruction of important areas trade. That is to say, major shipments and sometimes even whole colonies that had been destroyed lined up with the payments shown in the information that the two had at their disposal. While not entirely conclusive, it was still more than either had hoped to find. "What do you think this is all for," Se'Lak asked, hoping that he wouldn't have to find out. "I think you already know. Whoever is in charge is deliberately trying to cause a financial collapse here in the Vault," Tylong explained, "There's no other reason to do any of this." Se'Lak had seen it with his own eyes and couldn't find any other reason, no matter how hard he tried. "It may be that the Ancients are doing this, or could be a rogue element within their own kind. Not entirely sure yet," Tylong wondered out loud. "Wait? You're suspecting the Ancients are doing this," Se'Lak called out, surprised at the

notion of such an accusation. Tylong looked his friend square in the eye and said, "Do you know of anyone else who could do such a thing? Someone who could have access to their Government account?" "No, of course not. But still, to suggest that they could have anything to do with all this," Se'Lak admitted, not fully believing what he was hearing. "The problem is, we have no way of proving it. Not without someone on the inside," Tylong again wondered out loud, though more directly to Se'Lak than to himself. "Why not use the financial records," Se'Lak asked in response. "Because they could mean anything. Many of the Governments use that Broker account for their dealings with mercenaries. Most of the time, it's just for scouting missions or bounties on runaways. The financial records alone won't mean a thing unless we have a paper trail tying them to the incidents in question," Tylong explained, "Keep looking through the records. The more we have, the better."

V'riK'Oldew had been looking into Se'Lak for a week now and was finding the case more and more interesting. It wasn't the information that was interesting, but the lack of it. Despite having a bounty so big that it could easily buy a planet, there was no information on the specific crimes he had supposedly committed. V'riK'Oldew thought back to the article that led him to the case and how it said that the Ordovician was working on a high level account and wondered if Se'Lak had been skimming money. Depending on the amount, it was more than possible that Se'Lak was long since gone. But he doubted that. Years of experience screamed at V'riK'Oldew to tell him that something was wrong. No information and a high bounty. Most people would assume that the crime was too horrendous to put on a wanted poster. V'riK'Oldew knew better; whatever crime Se'Lak committed was either a fabrication or led to him finding out something he shouldn't have known. If that wasn't suspicious enough, then the recent reports he had suggested that Se'Lak had fallen into the wrong company. The poor bastard was seen at a garden with the Galaxian known as Tylong. Tylong was a former hitman and bounty hunter that had supposedly gone legit. V'riK'Oldew had heard of him but had never met him personally. Tylong was struggling to keep his supposedly legal agricultural company afloat after losing a huge shipment a few months back. A former hitman and a banker on the run. It was like those old holo-novellas that V'riK'Oldew used to read. If the two were connected, then maybe it had something to do with the OppenFien. It was certainly possible. At the very least, V'riK'Oldew had another lead.

Tylong did his best to try and pilot the old junkpile he was forced to call a ship, although with the ship in such a state of disrepair it was much harder that it should've been. But there was very little choice, given that a bounty hunter was on their tail. Tylong didn't know how they were found, but didn't really care regardless. Se'Lak was too busy screaming in his sleeping cube to be of any hope and there was no chance of requesting aid from anywhere else. That only left a single option and one that didn't make Tylong feel all warm and fuzzy inside. He started to input the co-ordinates for the hyper-dimension break generator and kept up the evasive pattern that was stopping him and his accomplice from getting killed. So far, it was working but Tylong knew it wouldn't last forever. If the break generator didn't hurry up, they wouldn't last much longer. Tylong counted down. 5. He double checked the co-ordinates to make sure they wouldn't be followed. 4. He made the calculations in his head again before giving up. 3. He checked to see how close behind the bounty hunter was and considered the pursuer too close for comfort. 2. The break generator started to spin and Tylong could see the glow of the barrier between universes breaking open. 1. In a mere instant, the ship and its two occupants were transported to another universe and a different spatial position. Tylong hesitated at the controls, expecting

the bounty hunter to appear in front of him. Moments seemed like days before the realisation dawned that they had not been followed, thus allowing Tylong to sigh in relief. He considered making a few more jumps, just to be safe, but decided against it so he could check up on a terrified Se'Lak. As he expected, Se'Lak had been so terrified that he had fainted during the escape. Tylong simply left him in his sleeping cube and went to check on the overworked engines.

V'riK'Oldew was now very much aware of the situation before him. The OppenFien was destroyed by mercenaries, and if his contacts were to be trusted, paid for by the Ancient Hierarchy. It seemed impossible to believe, but he knew better. The Hierarchy was full of tired old men who treated the lives of others as a means to an end. If something didn't suit the Hierarchy, then they simply removed it. V'riK'Oldew didn't know how the OppenFien was involved in their endless schemes, but he did know that both Se'Lak and Tylong were involved. Problem was, they couldn't be found. Several days prior, word got out that an independent bounty hunter had found the pair hiding out on a scavenger ship and had chased them into a barrier jump. V'riK'Oldew had no reason to doubt what was being said, but knew that it was now impossible to locate them. No one could track a ship once it broke the Universal barrier, meaning they could now be in one of an infinite number of universes. This whole case was beginning to complicate in too many ways.

Despite being in a different universe, Tylong wasn't quite out of the loop. He had long since cultivated many "friends" both inside and out of the Vault. It made finding out information incredibly easy, such as the knowledge that an Ancient called V'riK'Oldew was looking into the pair, among other such things. Tylong had heard of him and considered him too honest to ever bother contacting. Some people couldn't be bought, though there was an opportunity given the information that he and Se'Lak had. V'riK'Oldew had no love for his own people, this much was known. And if the situation was as bad as Tylong rightly assumed it was, then he would need the help of an honest cop. Se'Lak wasn't exactly thrilled when he found out what Tylong had intended to do. "What do you mean you're going to call him?! He's after us for the bounty, I just know it," Se'Lak screamed incoherently. "Calm down! That isn't going to happen," Tylong tried to reason. Somehow, this only served to make Se'Lak panic more. The Ordovician started to run around, somehow trying to find a way to escape, but Tylong managed to hold him down. "Listen to me! He's been investigating us! He already knows about the OppenFien and the mercenaries! Now just calm down," Tylong screamed at the top of his voice. This shocked Se'Lak enough that he managed to only so slightly calm down. "But..." he began to say. "No. He can help us, and I aim to ask for it. Besides, there is no alternative. We need to do this." Se'Lak remained silent before curling up into a ball and muttering to himself. Tylong didn't know whether to pity him or despise him, but knew that Se'Lak was simply overcome with fear. But that wasn't going to stop him from what he had to do.

V'riK'Oldew found it odd that Tylong would risk coming back into the Vault. Even odder that he had contacted V'riK'Oldew with the offer of a personal meeting. It was at the very least an interesting turn of events, undoubtedly the result of desperation. Tylong and Se'Lak now sat in his home, with the Ordovician twitching at every small sound or sudden movement. The fact that Se'Lak was afraid was more than obvious. But if Tylong was afraid, he refused to show any sign of it. "I was surprised when you contacted me. Especially after that little assassination attempt." Tylong didn't respond, but then again he didn't need to. "We have information many wouldn't like to made public. You've probably figured this out already," Tylong told with some

measure of confidence. "Yes, yes. You've been busy and the Hierarchy as ordered your deaths. They're willing to pay handsomely you know. A planet for anyone willing to present your bodies," V'riK'Oldew smirked. He had no intention of claiming the bounty, but was none-the-less interested in their reactions. "We are, but that's nowhere near as important as what we've found. What do you know about the accounts your Government has with the Bank?" "Nothing, other than your friend here somehow accessed them." Tylong smiled at this, drawing confusion from his host. "We have access. We also have some rather unsettling information." The smile dropped from his face as he said this. "You are more than aware of the destruction of the OppenFien by mercenaries. And you are most likely aware that they were hired by your Government to do so. We know it isn't the first time they've done this and we suspect they are up to something much larger." This time, V'riK'Oldew was the one to smile. "So, you've been busy. And what is it you think is going on?" Tylong didn't even hesitate. "The complete financial collapse of the Vault. For what reason, I don't know. But every time they pay their pet mercenaries, it lines up almost perfectly with an event that puts financial pressure on the major players. Such as when that little plague rendered seven agricultural planets uninhabitable for the Galaxians three years ago." V'riK'Oldew scowled, not wanting to take any of this seriously. "And you have proof of this? You're not seriously suggesting that the Ancients are plotting against the very thing they built?" Tylong could sense the rather upsetting turn in his opponents behaviour. "Yes, I am. But I need your help. We cannot directly link all this together. I need you to uncover what they're planning," Tylong asked, half-pleading, half-demanding. "What makes you think I would even consider helping you," V'riK'Oldew demanded to know. "Trust me, if I could do it myself, then I absolutely would. But that isn't going to happen, even if there wasn't a call for my head on a spike." V'riK'Oldew considered what he was being asked to do. While he had no love for his Government, it certainly wasn't reason enough to commit treason. But perhaps he could make something out of it. He had always been curious to find out what the Hierarchy did to maintain its power. "Okay. But you need to leave the Vault. Immediately. I'll contact you when I have your information." And with that, Tylong and Se'Lak left with no more words left to exchange.

It didn't take long for V'riK'Oldew to get access to the records he needed. In a previous life he had been highly regarded amongst certain members of the Hierarchy, a few of whom still owed him favours. He called them all in under the guise of wanting to clear a case. Not entirely untrue, though there was a little too much suspicion for any comfortable exchange. What he had found was beyond what anyone would call sane. He had a record of incidents starting with the attempted Genocide of the Devonians millions of years ago. Many species had been and gone, with many disappearing due to the Ancients and their orders. Their current target seemed to be the Ordovicians, with the idea of rendering them unable to fund any means of defending themselves. It seemed the Devonians were also being set up to be the "invaders", which was going to be used as the means to dispose of them. It appeared that the Ancients didn't take too kindly to their reappearance. This, all of this, was dangerous. V'riK'Oldew was left confused, but then realised what needed to happen.

Tylong and V'riK'Oldew met up one last time to confirm that this was what they wanted to do. There would be no going back. "You sure she will listen to us," Tylong asked impatiently. "Yes. She has no love for her bonds to the Hierarchy. And we have an advantage with her," V'riK'Oldew explained. "Which is?" "She was there at the end. She was a child when her people fell." "That's no guarantee. Who knows how she'll respond." "She will. And having her on our



side will make it easier to convince everyone else. Wrath will join us.” Tylong looked uneasy. They were about to tell the single most powerful being in the multiverse that she worked for the people who killed her whole race. Tylong sudden getting instantly regretted ever getting involved with any of this.

### PART THREE

V’riK’Oldew wasn’t entirely sure if Wrath would agree to help them or not. As an Arbiter of the Ancients, she might be willing to take him to whoever in the Hierarchy she reported to. But V’riK’Oldew was willing to bet his life on the fact that she would. Meeting Wrath wasn’t as easy as just calling her up. As an Arbiter of the Ancients, she was constantly on the move and her whereabouts were almost always to confirm. Fortunately for V’riK’Oldew, Wrath was currently on Earth-19987B, a distant planet. It wouldn’t be hard to blend in with the unremarkable inhabitants of the planet, and V’riK’Oldew looked close enough that he would blend in from a distance. Not that he needed to. Wrath for her part was seemingly taking some time off to visit her wife and kids. Surprisingly, she had taken a male form; V’riK’Oldew had heard that Wrath had taken such a form but couldn’t fathom why a Devonian would take one form over another. V’riK’Oldew had to be careful in how he approached her. Despite intending to, V’riK’Oldew never initiated contact. Instead, Wrath decided to approach him of her own free will. “You want to stop watching me,” she demanded. “Quite the opposite. I want to talk to you,” he responded hesitant about her intentions. “Figured. You from the Hierarchy? You’re not my usual contact you know.” “No. I’m here for another reason. Me and a select few need your help...” Wrath interrupted almost instantly. “Whatever it is, I’m not interested.” V’riK’Oldew wasn’t dissuaded from continuing. “Your people are in trouble. The Genocide is about to repeat itself.” Wrath instantly focused with a look that could kill if she so desired it. “Explain,” she demanded. “I’ve uncovered evidence that the Ancients are responsible for the Genocide all those years ago. And they’re doing it again.” Wrath didn’t look too convinced, but V’riK’Oldew knew he had her. “And you’re willing to show me?” “Yes, but time is short.” “Okay, I’ll hear you out.”

Se’Lak and Tylong had been busy sifting through the evidence that V’riK’Oldew had sent them. To say that this was the worst possible outcome was absurd; Tylong almost wished for that outcome. The information was solid and the details were clear; there was a systematic attempt to wipe out whole species, predominately those who the Ancients considered too powerful to keep around. It was clear that something needed to be done. Tylong and V’riK’Oldew had already decided that informing the Devonian, Galaxian and Ordovician Governments on what was going on, though sifting through the evidence was going to be an issue. Tylong didn’t want to just hand them any old evidence, he wanted to build a solid case. That meant going through everything and finding out exactly what the Ancients were doing. “So, what exactly are we doing,” Se’Lak asked nervously. “We’re trying to build three separate cases against the Ancients,” Tylong explained, “We can’t go to the three Governments with what we have. Even if they listened to what we have to say, they would take years just to find what they needed.” “So where do we start,” Se’Lak asked hopelessly. “We start with the Devonians. If we get them on our side, then their military can protect us.” “Wait, wasn’t the home planet of theirs infected by a virus,” Se’Lak remembered, suddenly perking up. “What, New Tellion? Yeah, there was an incident some time before they came back into the Vault. The Ancients helped them out with it,” Tylong confirmed, as if realising some major truth. “Check the files and see if the Ancients were involved. That would help us out a lot.” Perhaps, Tylong thought, this was easier than we expected.

"I've been thinking about what you said," Wrath said. "And? What do you say," V'riK'Oldew asked back. "I've done some digging and confirmed what you told me." Wrath spoke with an uneasy tone that put an unending feeling of fear within V'riK'Oldew. "I can't take them on myself, no matter how much I want to. We'll need to get in touch with my Government immediately," Wrath ordered strongly, something which caused V'riK'Oldew. "I have someone gathering evidence as we speak. We'll be able to make a move soon." V'riK'Oldew could feel the sheer anger come from Wrath, as if her very existence was itself raw feeling. Wrath was by no means a normal being, but even V'riK'Oldew failed to comprehend the limits of her power. He wasn't even sure that she had limits. "We need to move urgently. There is an invasion incoming on Lorrin," Wrath informed with a cold, calculating anger that withered V'riK'Oldew on the inside. He began to cower on the inside. "Wait, what! I didn't realise there was an invasion! How are we going to go up against a fleet of Ancient Ships!" Wrath didn't react to the outburst, either because she didn't care or because she expected it. "Ancient Ships? They don't have any fleets that I'm aware of. Instead they're going to send a fleet of pirates and mercenaries in their place." V'riK'Oldew was awestruck into silence. He didn't know any of this, despite being a member of the Ancient species. Despite his investigations. "What do we do," he asked. "We prepare for war. That's what we will do," Wrath said confident in her abilities and with enough anger to strike fear into any Gods that opposed her. V'riK'Oldew said nothing more, sensing that nothing more needed to be said. Things were certainly moving in ways unwanted.

"We have a problem," Tylong told Se'Lak in an unusually cold manner. "What is it," Se'Lak worried, feeling the panic rising inside. "Our respective Governments have been informed that we are terrorists. Apparently, word has gone around that we tried to blow up several ambassadors from several other species, and now everyone is after us," Tylong explained, maintaining the cold way of speaking. "But, but..." Se'Lak stuttered before phasing out entirely. Tylong expected this and didn't bother continuing the conversation. Se'Lak would be like this for a while, and Tylong had better things to do. It was up to V'riK'Oldew now.

V'riK'Oldew was starting to worry about the situation. Tylong and Se'Lak had been declared enemies of the Vault, making any information they gathered tainted. He knew that even if the information was as good as it could be, people would question why it came from them and not from someone else. He could always hide his sources, but then people would question why he would do that, unless there was something to hide. Wrath, on the other hand, seemed unconcerned. "If and when we convince the Devonians to help us, then some of the other races might follow suit," she commanded. V'riK'Oldew did not share her confidence. People often turned to their pre-set biases when given contradictory information, and the majority of races were often on the fence about the resurgent Devonians and their warrior culture. "What about the Galaxians and Ordovicians? Any war we fight will need them," V'riK'Oldew explained. Wrath seemed unfazed by this seemingly unimportant information. "That is why you will talk to them. I can handle the Devonians." A moment of silence washed over the pair. V'riK'Oldew knew what success meant. But failure didn't seem any better. Either way, war was inevitable. "Okay. I'll do it," he told her. She didn't say anything and simply walked away.

Hy'Lam found it difficult to believe what V'riK'Oldew was saying. He had barged into the Prime Minister's office and demanded to speak to her. Unable to turn him away, she conceded to hear the Ancient out. But now her head ached with the accusations that had been levelled. "If you claim to have evidence, then why haven't you gone through the regular channels," she finally demanded to know. "I can't go to Vault military with this. You really trust them to not cover this

up?" Hy'Lam frowned and sat forward, leaning on her desk. "What does Reling say about this?" V'riK'Oldew had already spoken to the Galaxian President. "He's in full agreement. We should also have word from the Devonians in due course." Hy'Lam almost choked on herself. "You brought the Devonians into this! Why in hell would you do that," she screamed at him. "Because, this directly involves them and because they have the largest military in Vault space. Besides, when push comes to shove neither the Galaxians nor the Ordovicians have the strength needed to hold back anything the Ancients can deploy. You need the Devonians," V'riK'Oldew explained. "This is getting worse by the minute. Fine, I'll enter into this little alliance. But I want to see the evidence first." "Of course. All three leaders will be meeting up soon. I'll be able to show you then." Hy'Lam seemed to accept this. "I'll clear my schedule, but don't waste my time with this."

Qander was as practical as a leader could get, and as the Emperor of her people was as dangerous as a being could get. But even she feared what Wrath would do to her if she made the wrong move. "I understand the situation, but is this really the way it should go," she asked the immortal warrior in front of her. "War is the only way. The Ancients have too much power and unlimited time. If we wait, that will give them an advantage," Wrath told the Emperor. "Fine, I throw in support. What about the Galaxians and Ordovicians. We cannot sustain a war without them," Qander asked, hoping that Wrath had some positive news. "They have both agreed to meet up and discuss this. The meeting takes place in three days," Wrath confirmed, much to the delight of the Emperor. "Good, then at least we stand a solid chance. What can you tell me about the strength of the Ancients?" "Most of their ships are automated or have very small crews. But in wartime they could prove dangerous. I would say one of their cruisers could easily take out five of our destroyers," Wrath explained. "I've seen worse odds. Now, about this incoming invasion attempt?" "Mostly just pirates and Mercenaries. The battle would be over in moments. I doubt the Ancients consider it to be anything meaningful." Qander sat back, her confidence in the situation growing. "I'll have the Home fleet placed on high alert, just in case." "Keep me informed on it will you," Wrath asked. "Yes, of course. Until the meeting then," Qander said, effectively ending the private meeting between the pair. "Until then."

Three days later and all three leaders were present at the meeting. The meeting itself took place in an unremarkable room onboard the same scavenger ship that Se'Lak and Tylong were hiding on, though the pair thought best not to take part in the meeting. "Are you certain this region is secure," Qander asked Wrath, not really caring either way. She had bought a small fleet with her and knew that it was. "Yes. This region is completely uninhabited and we'll be able to detect any threats long before they get to us," Wrath confirmed. "Good, then we can proceed with the meeting." "I assume you all studied the evidence I forwarded to each of you," V'riK'Oldew asked of the three leaders. They all confirmed. "Your sources, they can be trusted," Reling asked. "Yes, I have no doubts that the information they provided was accurate. I am certain there is more that hasn't come into the light, though even what has been discovered is serious enough," V'riK'Oldew replied honestly. "Serious is an understatement," Hy'Lam interjected, "I assume your feelings on the matter are clear then, Wrath." "Yes. War is the only option we have at our disposal," she informed the makeshift council. There was a moment of stunned silence between both Hy'Lam and Reling. "Isn't there another way? Isn't there something else we can do besides war," Reling asked, hoping for the best. "No. The Ancients won't stop. Their plans may change, but they find some way to achieve whatever goals they have in mind," Wrath informed them. "What about other Arbiters? You can't be the only one they have," Reling asked. "There are no other Arbiters. The Ancients are very careful about that. I am the only one in existence," Wrath

said calmly. "If we do this, if we go to war. Then there won't be any way back," Hy'Lam spoke up, "But given what has been shown, I don't see any other option." "But how do we organise? Who leads the military?" Reling had a point, though Wrath was starting to get annoyed at the amount of questions. "I propose a Coalition," Qander detailed, "A military alliance. The Devonians will provide the bulk of the fleet with both the Galaxians and Ordovicians providing extra ships. The Galaxians will supply food and resources, Ordovicians will help fund the whole thing." "Is it that simple," V'riK'Oldew asked. "Yes. Obviously, it would help a great deal if we manage to get the other races on our side. The Rylons are excellent shipbuilders and the Fortunes make decent scouts," Wrath explained. "You seem confident that it will work out," Hy'Lam noted. "That's because I know it will," Wrath replied. V'riK'Oldew stood as all three leaders agreed to the Coalition and the call for war. "One last thing, I nominate Wrath to lead the Coalition Military," Qander asked of the council. "I agree. She has more experience than anyone and if she's as strong as the stories make her out to be, then she would be the best fit for the job," Hy'Lam voted in favour. Reling, however, was on edge about the whole thing. "Wrath is an Arbiter of the Ancients. Can we really trust her?" "As opposed to who? It can't be any of us; we have our own to look after," Hy'Lam countered. "I would love nothing more than to lead our armies against the Ancients," Wrath said with a hint of pride. Reling remained unconvinced, but now the battle was lost to him. "Okay, I vote Wrath to be the Commander of the Coalition." And with the meeting concluded, the Coalition was born and war was declared. This singular event would change the future of the Vault in both good and horrific ways.

With the meeting concluded, Qander decided it would be appropriate to inform Wrath on the invasion she had warned about. "The first ships appeared 32 cycles ago. Apparently the same ship that was responsible for the OppenFien was leading the charge. Reinforcements arrived 14 cycles ago and were almost immediately destroyed by the Home Fleet." Wrath seemed unimpressed, though no one expected this to go any other way. "Any survivors?" "I have them sifting through the wreckage, but no survivors from their fleet have been found. Nor did any ships try to escape." Wrath knew that future battles wouldn't end as nicely or as cleanly as this opening move. "Did we lose anyone," Wrath asked. "The DavenPort and the Relic sustained heavy damage after a collision with an older cruiser. But it was light damage everywhere else. We only lost 6,738 to the battle." "That's good news. I don't expect future battles will go as smoothly," Wrath said, almost lamenting the lives she knew would be lost. "V'riK'Oldew, come here." V'riK'Oldew approached the two Devonians. "Yes, Wrath. How can I help?" "The key to winning a war is the intelligence gathered. I want you to set up a unit dedicated to such a task," Wrath commanded sincerely. "Are you sure about this Wrath? He is an Ancient after all," Qander questioned immediately. "Yes, absolutely. V'riK'Oldew here has no love for his people and was bold enough to find out the truth. Besides, his skills as a Law Enforcement Officer will come in handy," Wrath explained. "I'll do it," he blurted out, surprising no one. "Good. Then you can come with me and we'll discuss it privately. I bid you farewell Emperor," Wrath gleefully said, showing the first real emotion – the closest thing to a real emotion – that V'riK'Oldew had seen from the Immortal Warrior. The future looked to be interesting to say the least...

## BATTLE AT DELTA 501-066

Admiral Je’Vah was a rare sight among the Admiralty. As a Galaxian, he was one of the few non-Devonian Admirals to be in charge of a fleet. Sure, Battle Group 61 wasn’t as big and as impressive as many other Battle Groups, but that didn’t really matter. It certainly didn’t matter to Je’Vah, who took pride in his position and the work he put in to achieving it. From the A-Class Cruiser Blackstar, Admiral Je’Vah had command over 20 Frigates, 10 Destroyers and a Carrier. He also suspected a stealth ship might be hiding amongst his fleet, though there was no way to tell. Delta 501-066 wasn’t special in any real sense, save for the massive deposits of Titanium the Coalition used to build its warships and the factories built to use the precious metal. Titanium wasn’t rare by any means, but the war against the Ancients had depleted many of the known reserves by both sides of the conflict. In times of peace, planets such as Delta 501-066 would be ignored by most everyone, save for the mining companies that would come to find their riches. But these were times of war, and Governments were scrambling over each other to get to any deposits they could find and use it before the other side caught on. Unfortunately for Battle Group 61 as a whole and Admiral Je’Vah specifically, the Ancients had already found out about the planet they were now charged with defending. Now they were waiting for the inevitable, as the tension pulled as tight as it could go.

“Sir, incoming signatures, ETA three minutes” a Line Officer shouted across the bridge, “Scans report twenty ships.” Admiral Je’Vah held his breath. Despite having more ships, he knew that a large force of Ancient ships would be as dangerous as the Devonian Home Fleet. “Move the destroyers to the edge and tell the carrier to prepare her fighters,” the Admiral ordered, “Are the frigates ready to fire?” “All ships reporting in, ready to fire,” came the answer. Out in the darkness of space, the giant ships moved silently into position. The frigates lined up in a fashion not too dissimilar to old battle lines while the destroyers split into two groups and moved to the left and right sides of the formation. As the formation finished, several tears in the fabric of space opened up and jettisoned a small fleet in front of Battle Group 61. Admiral Je’Vah found himself cursing silently, as he counted three cruisers, backed up by two destroyers and fourteen frigates. To make matters worse, they had a carrier in the fleet. Admiral Je’Vah was hoping to have an advantage in terms of single pilot fighters. “Are the frigates ready to fire,” he shouted at his weapons officer. “No sir, MACs are still charging,” came the nervous reply. “Tell the carrier to deploy her fighters and overcharge our forward shield.”

His bridge crew word furiously, though Admiral Je’Vah knew they were terrified. Despite their smaller numbers, the Ancients had the stronger ships. “Sir, the enemy frigates are firing!” Admiral Je’Vah had no time to react when the very enemy frigates he feared fired their primary weapons. “Return fire!” His own ships fired their primary weapons just as fourteen balls of super-heated plasma hit the line of frigates at a fraction of the speed of light. Three of the frigates instantly imploded, before momentarily turning into three bright suns and disappearing entirely. Only wreckage remained. The remaining fleet had their shields up, but that didn’t stop them from sustaining heavy damage. Admiral Je’Vah barely managed to catch the counterattack hitting the enemy fleet. Their first strike cost them as it appeared they didn’t have shields up. Four of their frigates and both their destroyers were now out of the game. But all the other shots missed, allowing them to regroup. Between both scenes of destruction, a vicious fight was breaking out as enemy fighters collided. His own fighters wouldn’t last long against the automated drones that Ancient carriers often deployed, though Admiral Je’Vah knew that Devonian fighter pilots would fight to the bitter end.

“Move us into the enemy fleet; I want us close enough to fire our missiles!” His navigation and communication officers hesitated briefly, before relaying his orders and commands. It was a risky move that opened them up to the plasma and laser turrets that the enemy ships came equipped with, but Admiral Je’Vah knew it was better than sitting out of the open. “Sir, the Tellion is reporting engine failure,” the comms officer reported. “Tell them to hold back and protect the carrier. And tell those destroyers to surround the enemy fleet,” Je’Vah barked his orders, of which the comms officer relayed out. Both fleets accelerated into each other, instantly trading plasma and laser fire. The blackness of space lit up as missiles and fighters exploded inside a sea of confusion. Admiral Je’Vah could barely tell what was going on and felt helpless inside the situation he found himself in. But he didn’t show it. No leader ever had the option of showing weakness, an Admiral even less so. The Blackstar shuddered as several missiles streak across the hull. The massive cruiser returned fire, destroying the far smaller frigate that dared to take it alone.

The battle seemed to shift back and forth, with seemingly no clear end in sight. One side would gain ground, before promptly losing it when the opposing side pushed back. So far, neither side had gained the advantage. As ships collided with one another and the battlefield seemed to empty, Battle Group 61 started to gain the very advantage both sides fought over. As if sensing their foothold slipping, the Ancient fleet which had previously seemed too strong had now started the slow process of trying to end the engagement. Of the twenty ships they started with, only seven managed to escape the slaughter both sides had found themselves in. Only a carrier and six frigates were left to fight the Coalition forces. The others had either been totally destroyed or were so crippled that escape was impossible, sacrificing themselves as to give the few ships that could escape the chance to do so. This did not go unnoticed, as the remaining destroyers the Coalition forces gave chase. Amazingly, eight of the ten destroyers were still fighting and were still very much capable of destroying the escaping ships.

As the tide turned in battle, as did it often did in war, reinforcements came not from the Coalition for Battle Group 61, but for the now weakened Ancient fleet. Ten more ships joined with the seven that had fled and turned on the destroyers. As if expecting such a move, the destroyers fired their MACs, destroying six of the newly arrived frigates that had come to support the now decimated fleet. The destroyers retreated, ensuring that the Ancient fleet remained unaware of the trap that had been set. Admiral Je’Vah had suspected reinforcements would be on their way and had sent the destroyers as a decoy. Knowing that they would never make it back to the rally point, the Blackstar led the charge as the remaining 8 frigates primed their MACs. The Ancient fleet was caught by surprise when the destroyers they believed to be on the run suddenly turned to face them, just as a volley of MAC rounds passed them and slammed into the confused enemy. There was not a moment spare to regroup as the destroyers sped into the now scrambled survivors, using every means to destroy the remains of the Ancient force.

The battle had been won, though not without loss. Of the thirty-two ships within Battle Group 61, only eighteen remained. Over sixty thousand lives had been lost, with many more sure to die from their injuries. The Ancient fleet had been entirely decimated, save for three very crippled ships. Admiral Je’Vah considered the battle a victory, but it soured when he thought about it. The battle had been won, but he knew their souls had already been lost. That would only become more true as the war continued....

## COMBAT TRAINING

### PART ONE

The planet of Tydol was unremarkable, as far as planets went. Its potential for colonisation was matched only by its distance from known space, making it perfect for covert training. Hence the recent move to set up a base on the planet. Commander Vanuk wasn't impressed. The base itself was well equipped, with an armoury, a barracks and even an underground bunker for emergencies. But being so far from Coalition territory meant that safety wasn't guaranteed. And given the war was starting to stretch on longer than anyone would've liked, spending the time and resources to train a mere three hundred conscripts out of the middle of nowhere didn't make too much sense. But she went where her orders told her to go and she could see what they were intended to produce. The three hundred conscripts were going to be trained into an elite guard for the Commander of the Coalition, Wrath, to use personally. The conscripts had already received the basic training they would need to know; now it was up to Commander Vanuk to turn them into the perfect soldiers. The conscripts themselves had just arrived and showed incredible amounts of discipline. They all stood at attention awaiting their next orders. But they would need to think for themselves if they were to serve in their intended capacity. Commander Vanuk would ensure it.

"Troop leader. We have the location of the planet," the young Mid-Tier called out. "Good, put it through my screen," T'vaT'Bo replied cheerfully. The screen in front of him lit up as a complicated series of numbers formed into the co-ordinates he desperately sought. A secret training camp out in the middle of nowhere, one that would be the perfect for destruction. He would ensure that the pathetic beings that sheltered within the base suffered. "Inform the fleet leader and prepare for our departure," T'vaT'Bo ordered. He was about to have some fun.

Commander Vanuk drilled the conscripts hard. From her experience, practical teaching was the only form of teaching she would consider. Thus, she would constantly force the three units to combat one another in various situations. One of her favourites was king of the hill, which involved setting up one of the units at the top of the hill with drones and turrets. All non-lethal of course. The goal was to capture the hill with no outside resources and with as few casualties as possible. If the defence was able to inflict heavy casualties or if the offence failed to push them off, then it was considered a failure for the offensive unit. Other rules would also be put into place, such as only sending in fireteams only against a full unit or vice versa. The point of this was to get them used to working in smaller and smaller groups while maintaining unit cohesion. They had to be flexible regardless of the size of their group. "B66, give me an update on the current drill," Vanuk asked. The AI flickered to life and reverted to her normal form of an intense ball of light. "First Unit have yet to deploy the bulk of their force, instead choosing to send first squad only," she explained, "it seems they sent someone ahead of them, as all automated defences were shut down shortly before the attack." Vanuk smiled, realising what had been done. Recruit Talos was most likely responsible for the planning and execution. "Good, keep me updated." She walked from one computer to another, hoping to find evidence of a problem that concerned her more than the current drill.

"Have any more transmissions been made," Vanuk asked. "No. The transmissions ceased after the arrest of the supply manager," B66 replied. "Good. At least we got the one responsible." Recent problems with unauthorised communications had alarmed Vanuk, causing panic that

the Ancients had been made aware of the planet and its base. "There is one problem, however," B66 informed rather plainly; "I have deciphered the last transmission and have determined that it is interstellar co-ordinates of some form." Vanuk became alarmed at this information. "Don't you recognize the co-ordinates?" "I do not recognize the form they take, but it would be reasonable to assume that they are for the planet we currently stand." Vanuk considered this for a moment with an internal debate on what her next move should be. "Alert high command and request that a fleet be left on standby and tell Shipmaster Golem to stay ready. And get our own defences ready," she ordered. "Already done," B66 confirmed. Vanuk knew that any strike the Ancients brought down on them would end up being a long drawn out battle, unless they bought frigates. At that point, nothing would stop them from overwhelming the base defence.

T'vaT'Bo looked upon the planet below and saw easy prey. His escort of two destroyers had easily taken out the weak pile of metal the Devonians had the gall to call a frigate and his bomber drones had already begun their descent towards the communications tower. Soon, the first wave of troops would also land and begin their attack on the main base that these lower creatures called their home. Things were going well and T'vaT'Bo was confident that they would be totally destroyed within hours. And it would be a long time before the rest of their pathetic coalition would even notice that anything was wrong.

The attack had not been a surprise. Indeed, Vanuk would go on to describe it as if the attack was almost accidental, though that was little comfort. "Have all the cadets returned to base," she demanded to know, fearing for their safety. "Yes. The full retreat has been completed but the casualties are severe. Of the 130 cadets that were in the field, 98 of them have returned to base. Of the 30 trainers that accompanied them, only twelve made it back. Injuries have been widely reported on some degree or another and some are not expected to survive, given our limited medical means," B66 explained. Vanuk prayed to herself, hoping that one day she could be forgiven for not recalling them sooner. "Give me a rundown on the defence. I need to know what we can do," she asked. B66 detailed how bomber and fighter drones had destroyed the main communications tower, but were unable to make a move on the main base due to the small anti-air defence that had been installed. Vanuk wondered if the measly air support was all that the invading force could muster, at which point gave her hope. "Is there any way we can scan orbit?" B66 considered this briefly before her reply came forth. "No. Without the support of the Illumi, we are blind to any events that take place in orbit." Vanuk silently cursed this turn of events. Without the frigate in orbit, and without the main communications tower, they would be blind and mute. "Order any of the cadets who can fight to arm up. We'll be here for a while," Vanuk ordered. B66 processed her own equivalent of mild shock, before burying it and relaying her orders.

T'vaT'Bo whistled and hummed to himself as he headed to the drop ships that would take him and the second wave down to the planet's surface. He was going to join them, of course, and went out of his way to imagine the kill count he would personally receive after all this was over. It didn't matter that the first wave had failed to capture the main base, which was not their purpose. For T'vaT'Bo, the joy was in fighting an enemy that knew you were there, but couldn't do anything about it. The first wave was a statement of intent, not an invasion force and one that worked better than he would have hoped. Now he would lead the second wave and completely destroy the pathetic creatures below. It was so exciting, he almost squealed in joy at the thought of slaughtering each and every one of them.



The fighting didn't let up once; in fact it only intensified and Vanuk knew it. Two of the five anti-air guns had been destroyed by portable missile pods and the others had their ammo depleted by 50%. Vanuk didn't know how much more they could hold on, or if it was even possible, but she knew that support would arrive if they could just hold off the invasion long enough for the support to notice. The cadets had been fighting tooth and nail alongside their instructors, with the supply squads being split between medical and supply. It made more sense that way. But then a thought fell into her mind. "B66, is the secondary comms array still functional," Vanuk asked her AI companion. "Checking. Yes, the secondary relay is intact, with records indicating it was left behind from initial construction as a distress beacon. There is, however, a small problem," B66 explained. Vanuk turned to the holographic representation of his friend. "Tell me," she said. "The array was never modified to broadcast into deep space. Without modification, no signal will reach the support fleet." Vanuk once again found herself cursing under her breath. "Do we have the means to modify it?" B66 hesitated to answer for a moment as she thought about it. "Yes, we can modify it. But it will take time that we do not have and the hardware itself would need modification." Vanuk thought about the situation and made a decision. "We have no other choice. Start working on plans to modify it, I'll come up with a plan on getting us there."

T'vaT'Bo stood on the primitive planet, looking on as the second wave was being pushed back. He had underestimated the defences of the base and now both forces were locked into a standstill, with neither being able to move forward. T'vaT'Bo loudly screamed at his own troop leaders at not doing enough, but that mattered little. As soon as the drones finish recharging, he thought, and then he could destroy the pathetic creatures who dared to challenge him. It was only a matter of time.

## PART TWO

A second wave had arrived, just as Vanuk had predicted. Clearly the commander in charge of the invasion had underestimated the defences she had at her disposal. This gave Vanuk the advantage, something she would use to the fullest extent. "We cannot spare the man power to break through the enemy, nor can we let them know our intentions," Vanuk explained to her squad leaders, "I need volunteers to slip by under the old tunnels and get to the old relay before they can realise what we're up to." None of the seven remaining squad leaders immediately volunteered, nor did they give approving looks. They were outnumbered eight to one, and everyone knew it. "I don't have to repeat how important it is to get that relay working. If you cannot volunteer, then speak to your squads. Dismissed." Vanuk frowned as her squad leaders awkwardly left the room, not one even considering what had been said. She could have ordered them to go, and she would've been right to do so, but deep down she didn't feel right ordering someone on a suicide mission. "Cadet Talos wishes to speak to you," B66 informed the tired and annoyed commander. "Let her in," she answered tiredly. The young Devonian walked in with a giddy movement that seemed perfectly at odds with how Vanuk felt. "What is it Talos?" "I wish to volunteer for the Relay mission," Talos offered in a confident, commanding voice. Vanuk inspected the young cadet. Talos was eager to get moving but hid it well. She was also the best cadet Vanuk had trained and was more than capable of pulling the mission off alone. But she was also just a kid. Vanuk wasn't entirely sure this would be the right decision, but no one else had volunteered and time was short. "Okay, it's yours. Get down to the armoury and gear up," Vanuk ordered with some discomfort.

T'vaT'Bo had made several attempts to reorganise his attack force, firstly by separating his troops into platoons of 60 troopers and secondly by sending scouts out to locate any weaknesses the parasites had kindly left open. He would then exploit those weaknesses and destroy those who stood against him. He also had the troop carrier in orbit make a scan of the environment, something which proved rather educational. Three miles south of the base was an old communications array. T'vaT'Bo knew that it wasn't much of an array as the scans had shown that it was non-functional, but perhaps he could get it working. If he could, then T'vaT'Bo could pick up signals the Coalition used to communicate. Even just getting the frequencies they used would net him a promotion from mere troop leader to fleet leader. The thought of a promotion was too much to bear and he sent a platoon to secure the array. He would deal with that after removing the parasites from their base.

Talos made her way through the waste pipe that purposely went underneath the wall. Usually, it would remain sealed but could be opened if flooding became a problem (which was often the case during the late summer). The pipe was long enough that it exited a good distance away from the main base and near to a river. The river itself would prove useful as it passed the old comms array, which Talos planned to use as a travel path. Before she left, Vanuk had told her to stay light so she could travel fast and silent. Keeping this in mind, Talos only chose to carry a handgun and two clips of ammunition. She also chose not to wear the heavy armour that was typically expected of those going out into the field. This was smart: the heavy field armour would slow her down and make too much noise. Reaching the exit of the waste pipe, Talos made sure to slow down (to minimise the clanking she made while crawling) and check to see that the entrance was clear. Talos drew her handgun and prepared for a fight that never came. Seeing nothing wrong, Talos silently exited the waste pipe and made her way up river towards the comms relay.

Vanuk tried to distract herself from Talos and the comms relay by reorganising the defence of the main base. "B66, how many missile launchers do we have in the armoury," she asked. "We have twelve launchers with six armed missiles each. We have plenty of stun rounds, but I doubt they can be used against the automated drones," B66 responded. "Didn't U2S3 just finish their missile training?" B66 just replied with a simple "yes". Vanuk sized up what the enemy might do next. Both the first and second waves failed, forcing them to retreat despite having the element of surprise. She wanted to believe that the enemy commander was incompetent, but deep down knew this wasn't something any commander should ever rely on. If the enemy commander knew what they were doing, they would send in air support to cover their infantry. It was both smart and safe. "Distribute the launchers among U2S3. Also shut down one of the Anti-air guns. We can't spare the ammo to keep all three running. Let the engineers know to re-distribute the ammo to the remaining two anti-air guns." B66 worked on giving out the orders. Vanuk looked out the sole window the command room had and across the warzone she found herself in. She would do anything to make sure the cadets were kept safe, even if that meant arming them.

It didn't take long for Talos to reach the comms relay. She made sure that no one else was around and entered the building. She found herself in a simple room with a complicated computer system meant to utilise the long range satellite that was connected to the building. Talos took out a data chip from her pocket and inserted it into the computer and started re-organising the wires and cables that surrounded her. She quickly followed the instructions B66 gave her and turned the power on, automatically broadcasting the distress signal into space.

Battle Group 841 had been put on standby, just in case they received a distress signal from Tydol. Admiral Deandre wasn't sure why a distress signal would be originating from a distant planet, but orders were orders and she followed them religiously. She was concerned about the fleet she had been given. In this case, Battle Group 841 was made up of five destroyers, three frigates, two troop carriers and a fighter carrier (which also served as the flagship). The fleet was small and more suited to support for the much larger fleets Deandre had hoped to lead since her promotion, but she went where she was told to go. "Admiral, we're receiving a distress signal from the planet," the comms officer reported in, interrupting the train of thought that seemed intent on keeping the admiral distracted. "Move the fleet in to respond and tell Commander Feyland to prepare her troops," Deandre ordered. It was about time to see what all the time was about.

"Are you sure about this," T'vaT'Bo demanded to know, angry about the sudden news. "Yes sir. The signal is coming straight from the comm relay." T'vaT'Bo was angry at being lied to. The comm relay wasn't supposed to be operational. As soon as he was done down here, he was going to execute the people who lied to him. "Send in the bomber drones and tell T'loK'In that his orders are to destroy the comm relay." The comms officer back up on the destroyer didn't respond. He didn't have to.

The fighting had become more intense after a bomber drone managed to blow a hole into wall surrounding the base, forcing Vanuk to order a full retreat down to the bunker. Ancient troops flooded the open grounds, with hand to hand combat and close quarters gunfire suddenly becoming normal between the two opposing forces. What had been an organised defence had descended into chaos as both sides clashed in a vicious struggle for survival. Vanuk had hoped that the support fleet had arrived by now, but knew it could come to this. Vanuk struggled to organise the full retreat while also fighting off the superior numbers that threatened her own life as well as that of her fellow combatants. As the defenders got pushed back, they fell to the overwhelming numbers that seemed both unending and suffocating; it was like a tidal wave of death and blood that flooded the ground. Many of the cadets that had not pulled back found themselves surrounded and thusly were slaughtered. The standing force that was meant to train them also suffered the same fate, leaving the few survivors struggling against ever increasing numbers trying to kill them. They regrouped and made a final effort to retreat to the bunker with many falling along the way. When they finally reached the bunker, Vanuk found that U3S1 had set up defences leading up to the heavy duty entrance. "B66, activate the automated turrets," Vanuk shouted over the comms. On top of the defences U3S1, the bunker had automated turrets that any resident AI could take control of. This made the narrow hallway leading into the bunker itself near impossible for the enemy to move forward. "Turrets activated," B66 confirmed as several of them descended from the ceiling. Vanuk would make sure that the bunker defence would hold.

Battle Group 841 arrived in orbit around Tydol to find two destroyers and a single troop carrier. The two destroyers moved to intercept, but the Coalition frigates didn't give them a chance to move as a barrage of high impact MAC rounds slammed into all three ships, destroying them completely. The two troop carriers descended into a stationary orbit as they deployed multiple drop ships to support and reinforce the sole base on the planet. Admiral Deandre looked on as escape pods from the destroyed Ancient ships were gathered by the frigates and the survivors taken prisoner. She could only hope it was this easy on the surface below.

### PART THREE

Talos found herself in the middle of a problem: Ancient troops had arrived at the array just as she was preparing to leave. They hadn't spotted her yet, but Talos knew that it wouldn't end well for her if they did. Sneaking into the long bushes to hide her small, slender body, Talos watched as several Ancient engineers laid explosives within and without the array. She sat there for an hour, not moving save for her head and not making a sound before deciding to head back to the main base. But first, she would need a weapon. Talos watched a single trooper signal to his friends and wander off in a deliberate way. Talos focused like a hawk and followed her target with both a quick pace and as little sound as she could produce. As soon as both were out ear shot and sight, she pounced on her target and snapped his neck, killing him instantly and without much fuss. Both Talos and the now dead trooper landed on the ground with a loud thud, causing the young cadet to near-instantly pick up the rifle and point it towards the direction of the array. Thirty seconds passed and nothing happened, giving Talos the opportunity slink away from the dangers that lurked just out of sight.

Vanuk looked around the survivors, all of them tired and weary. Out of the one thousand people that originally called the base and planet home, only 236 had survived – including the few surviving cadets. Many were injured, though they would survive said injuries so long as the Ancient troopers could be held off. "Commander, I have good news," B66 announced over the intercom. "What is it," came the tired reply. "Coalition forces have arrived in orbit and have begun landing troops just outside the base." Many of the survivors perked up after hearing this and even Vanuk seemed to shrug off the previously evident tiredness. "Have they engaged the enemy forces yet," Vanuk asked. "Yes, but it will take time for them to break through the line." Vanuk turned to look at the survivors. "I want anyone who can fight to pick up a rifle and defend that hallway," she ordered with renewed confidence. She was going to get these people out of here one way or another.

T'vaT'Bo was not blind to the failure of his two destroyers up in orbit. He was also not unaware of the equally dumb decision to continue fighting after learning about the distress signal, even though it was a decision he himself made. He commanded that all platoons fall back into the forest as the parasitical troopships landed on the far side of the river. He had wrongly overestimated the fight he had started and now he was caught between a drawn out fight in the forest or a quick bloodbath within the walls of the base he had sought to destroy. If T'vaT'Bo could not destroy the parasites that lay within, then he would retreat until help came to rescue him. Perhaps he could make it to that relay in time to stop his men from destroying it.

The retreat by the previously threatening invasion force allowed a reprieve from the endless fighting, one that was enjoyed by Vanuk and her fellow survivors. Vanuk had left U3S1 to defend the injured and personally led the remaining 40 battle ready Devonians into battle to push back the invaders. None of them wanted to die in the underground bunker; if they were to die it would happen after taking the fight to their enemy. They fought tooth and nail and with a renewed vigour and vengeance for their fallen friends. It didn't take long for Vanuk to meet up with the commander of the Coalition support, Commander Feyland. "Are you the one in charge here," Feyland asked Vanuk. "I was," she replied. "I've got my orders to allow you to take command," Feyland told the battered commander. "Before that can happen, I need you to help get my injured off the planet," Vanuk explained. The injured personnel were her first priority. "I'll see to it personally," Feyland said. Good, Vanuk thought. Now was the time for cold revenge.

Talos had taken a very different route than the one she took leading to the array. She had originally thought to take the river, but after spotting some of the retreating forces using the river bed as an escape route, she decided to take the longer but safer route around a large hill used during training exercises. Along the way, she noticed the many defences that were in the process of being set up by the troopers. The fleet must already be here, she thought to herself. She decided it would be best to have a look around before moving on. The defences themselves were not exactly well thought out, with simple barricades made out of wood and stones and huts made out of tree leaves and logs. Talos saw no heavy weaponry and no engineers setting up mines, though considered the possibility that this was simply a forward station. Growing bored and hungry, Talos decided it was time to move on.

T'vaT'Bo screamed at his troops just as the last of his automated drones fell to the skilled pilot fighters provided by the Coalition carrier up above. Without the troop carrier to provide more intelligent direction, the automated drones simply weren't as effective as a fighter operated by a living being. But he knew that without air support his own forces were sitting ducks for the parasites that infested the air. Knowing this, he ordered an emergency base to be set up at the array, which he had just arrived at. Hoping that at least he would be able to use it for his own ends, instead found the complicated computer systems non-functional and without power. The entire array was useless. He had come to Tydol hoping for an easy hunt and now found himself at the mercy of beings lesser than him and for the first time in his immortal life found himself afraid of a mortality he never once considered.

Vanuk led the newly arrived Devonian troops against the invaders that had murdered so many, personally making sure that none escaped death. There would be no prisoners today, only a pile of corpses. As the Ancients pulled back, the Devonians would move forward, systematically killing everything that dared to move. The Ancients retreated into the forest and into the presumed safety of the makeshift defences. Vanuk and her forces made quick work of these useless attempts through overwhelming force. The fighting continued until it reached the main comms array, which Vanuk realised was being used as an emergency base for the Ancients. She pulled her own forces back and ordered artillery strikes from the frigates above. Explosions abounded throughout the forest as the encamped invaders were utterly destroyed. Even T'vaT'Bo would perish as he cowered inside the walls he thought would protect him. Vanuk eventually ordered the bombardment to stop and for her own forces to flood the remains of the camp, killing any who dared to survive.

The battle ended and Vanuk returned to the base to find Talos waiting for her. In the heat of battle, Vanuk had completely forgotten about Talos. "Cadet, I see you made it back in one piece," Vanuk said, glad to see the young Devonian alive. "Yes sir. Was eager to rejoin the defence," Talos confirmed at attention. "Relax Talos, the battle is over," Vanuk told her, "though I expect the war to continue for a long while." Talos thought for a moment. "What will happen now," she asked. After everything that happened, Vanuk had taken a liking to the young cadet. "We'll most likely rejoin the war effort. I doubt the program you volunteered for will continue, something you don't need to worry about." "All I ask is to serve," Talos asked, hoping to fulfil her duty. "And you will, that I will guarantee. But don't rush to fight. Only a fool fights when she doesn't need to," Vanuk shared. It was a wisdom her own mentor had once shared. She could mentor far worse than Talos. Yes, that was the fate the two shared. Vanuk would be sure that Talos would go far in her life, one way or another. A promise written in blood.

# INVASION OF BRE'LOT'USA

## PART ONE

Wrath sat at the head of the meeting table with a cold, calculation confidence that failed to portray both her age and experience. What it didn't do, however, was fail to inspire both respect and fear within the sub-ordinates that joined her. "The plan you're suggesting.... It will cost a great deal in both ships and manpower," Lus'Andi noticed out loud. As the only Ordovician (and by extension the only non-Devonian present at the meeting), she knew the numbers better than anyone else in the room. "I am aware of this, which is why we will use overwhelming force and strategy. We will first weaken them, then we will distract them and then we will destroy them," Wrath explained coldly. There was obvious discomfort among the other admirals. "I realise the simplicity of this plan, and my cold behaviour towards its success, may discomfort everyone here, but I can assure everyone it will work, so long as everybody follows the plan," Wrath added. The discomfort she sensed did not ease up and if anything it had actually gotten worse. "If nothing else, then we will do considerable damage to the Ancients and hopefully remove Bre'lot'Usa as a major ship-building world." No one dared question any of this out of fear. "If there are no questions, then assume your posts. Our enemy will not wait for us to make a move," Wrath ordered. The four admirals said nothing as they stood up and walked out. Wrath gave a knowing smile that only hinted at the cost she was about to pay.

Front Admiral Kanvi and the Front Fleet that made up Battle Group 23 made a short and quick jump from the safe zone to the designated co-ordinates. As the plan dictated they would only engage the First Defence Fleet in order to antagonize them. Battle Group 23 could not defeat the three Defence Fleets by itself, nor was the intention that it would. "Terria, make sure the frigates have their MAC cannons charged," Kanvi asked of her comms officer. There y little room for was very little room for error. "All frigates reporting MAC cannons fully charged," Terria reported. "Undylla, get me an update on the enemy positioning," the admiral asked the targeting officer. Moments passed before the reply came. "The First Defence Fleet are moving to intercept, the other fleets are holding position," Undylla confirmed. Kanvi allowed herself a moment of relief. The plan was working, for now. "Have the carriers deploy 20% of their fighters and have them target the engines on those destroyers," Kanvi ordered. Terria confirmed the order and passed it along.

"Enemy frigates are preparing to fire," one of the linesmen shouted from a console. "All ships are to stay on target," Kanvi shouted back. The entire command deck braced as multiple projectiles passed the cruiser, shaking it in the process. "Status update," Kanvi screamed. The main viewfinder showed the total damage: a total of sixteen ships were either destroyed or damaged beyond any meaningful use. "Order the damaged ships to retreat if they can and order the frigates to return fire," the order came. The forty three remaining frigates fired their rounds on an unprepared enemy fleet, successfully destroying eighteen Ancient ships and damaging another six. The Ancient fleet returned fire, this time more haphazardly than before. Kanvi watched on as another ten ships were either damaged or utterly destroyed by the onslaught as the First Defence Fleet moved to surround the smaller Battle Group. "Order all ships to fall back," Kanvi ordered as another cruiser was destroyed in a battle against three destroyers.

The First Defence Fleet chose not pursue the retreating Battle Group, just as Wrath had predicted. Instead, Kanvi watched as the Third Defence Fleet moved to intercept as the First

Defence Fleet returned to their original positions. Under any other circumstance, Kanvi would be impressed by the ease at which the plan was progressing. Perhaps, she thought, they could win this battle with ease after all. The Third Defence Fleet moved ever closer to Battle Group 23, unaware that they were being drawn into a trap. Both fleets moved ever closer to the pre-arranged co-ordinates, seemingly without any higher purpose. "Terria, send the signal to Battle Group 15," Kanvi told the focused comms officer. "Signal sent," the Devonian confirmed. It would only be a few minutes now, Kanvi thought.

As planned, the signal brought the entirety of Battle Group 15 into the carefully planned encounter. Each individual ship had arrived at specific co-ordinates, perfectly surrounding the rear and sides of the Third Defence Fleet, which found itself at the mercy of a much more dangerous adversary. In the confusion, they failed to notice Battle Group 23 turn and face them. A moment later and the combined force of two Battle Groups worth of frigates had fired every MAC cannon down onto the Third Defence Fleet, destroying it completely. The few ships that managed to survive the initial barrage of MAC rounds returned fire, with no luck. Despite the huge fleet that now stared them down, the Third Defence Fleet hadn't hit a single ship. Now it was the turn of the destroyers and cruisers of the two Battle Groups as they fired their own MAC cannons, destroying the remains of the Third Defence Fleet. Phase one of the plan had worked with outstanding results.

"Incoming transmission from the Prime Atoll," Terria informed her admiral. "Put it through," Kanvi replied. The front viewfinder switch from an overview of the battle field to the transmission from Wrath on the Prime Atoll. "Your Battle Group seems to be holding up well, Admiral," Wrath humoured over the vast distance. "Indeed, my Battle Group is about ready for another pass," Kanvi humoured back. Wrath smiled wickedly, knowing that the plan was working perfectly. "I'm sending you the details of the next stage of the plan. Be sure to follow them to the letter," Wrath commanded. "Yes, sir," Kanvi replied back, mentally preparing for the battle ahead.

Wrath had planned the second assault on the defence fleets well. Instead of a drawn out fight in orbit that jeopardized the safety of the ground invasion force, she instead had chosen to open up an opportunity that would allow the invasion force to land at the start of the battle. This was how it happened. Battle Group 15 had merged with the surviving ships of Battle Group 23, forming the largest fleet the Coalition had fielded to that point. Not only had that, but the deployment of the individual ships been required for this to work. Instead of spearheading the fleet, the frigates would take the place of the destroyers on either side of the formation while the destroyers would spearhead the fleet. Both the cruisers and the carriers would remain at the rear of the fleet. The plan was for the destroyers to race down the centre of the joint First and Second Defence Fleets, at which point both the destroyers and frigates would fire their MAC cannons to destroy many of the enemy ships. If it worked, it would put the Coalition forces at an extreme advantage over the Ancient fleets.

The merged Battle Group 15/23 approached the two Defence Fleets, almost daring them to attack. The Defence Fleets fired the first volley of MAC rounds, taking out forty eight Coalition ships. Unfazed, Battle Group 15/23 moved forward. As soon as they were within 3Km of their target, the Coalition destroyers sped up and shot through both Defence Fleets. As they did, the co-ordinated attack began. A volley of MAC rounds shot from both the frigates and destroyers, decimating both Defence Fleets. One hundred and twenty four ships shuddered from the

multiple impacts they suffered before shattering completely. Only eighty two Ancient ships remained to face the one hundred and ninety two remaining Coalition ships. It was immediately after the shattering of the Defence Fleets that the invasion fleet arrived. Over one thousand troop carriers backed up by a smaller escort fleet jumped behind Battle Group 15/23 and began the long march towards the planet. The newly arrived frigates hunted down any enemy ship that dared to stray onto the open corridor created by Battle Group 15/23 while the destroyers defended the troop carriers.

The population of Bre'loT'Usa very quickly found themselves under siege as the troop carriers descended onto the world. Tens of thousands of dropships were deployed and began the attack on the military installations that littered the ground. Both bombers and fighters helped clear the way for the dropships to land and a slowly the anti-air defences became overwhelmed from the onslaught of Coalition forces. The troop carriers themselves began to bombard the various cities, having been modified for the task beforehand by Wrath.

As the invasion of the planet began, Battle Group 15/23 was tasked with cleaning up the remains of the First and Second Defence Fleets. Roaming bands of destroyers lead by frigates hunted down ships one by one as the cruisers destroyed any and all who attempted to flee. The Ancients, for their part, continued to fight but found their own numbers dwindling as the battle wore on. It didn't take long for the Defence Fleets to be utterly destroyed under the increasing weight of their enemies, conceding both the planet and the battle. Wrath looked on from the Prime Atoll with a sense of pride and disgust. Pride in that her plan had worked flawlessly and disgust that such a plan was needed. Too many lives were being lost and it was beginning to wear on her although if given the choice again she would begrudgingly decide to once again go to war. "Commander Ferlund, tell the 31 and S313 to reinforce us," Wrath commanded. The battle in orbit had been won and now the battle on the planet would be fought.

## PART TWO

The foul stench of the Coalition had inundated the planet, causing the seething hatred V'buG'Sa felt for the united peoples to rise in intensity. How dare the parasites come here, he thought, how they dare infect his planet! His own commanders had told him the fleets in orbit had lost and then had promptly told him to consider surrender. It was an absurd idea to suggest that the Defence Fleets had lost against a mongrel collection of lesser beings. To then add the suggestion of surrender caused V'buG'Sa to fly into an impotent outrage that was soundly ignored by the commanders he screamed at. Many would be forced to fight, as the planetary governor still had the support of the Hierarchy, but all secretly knew that V'buG'Sa would sign their death warrants.

Wrath arrived at the newly built Alpha Base to find the ground invasion stalled in its advance. Indeed, while much of the planet had started to fall under Coalition control, its capitol city was proving difficult to enter let alone capture. "Admiral Fandear, I was expecting the city to be captured by now," Wrath commented to the scarred Devonian. "It seems that the majority of their forces have gathered to defend it," Fandear explained, "I have the city surrounded, but they have too much anti-air and artillery guns for us to consider entry. We'd lose more ground than we'd gain." Wrath didn't question the aging commander. Fandear had led the Devonian Infantry for most of her life and was as battle hardened as an individual could get, with Wrath being the sole exception. "Why don't you use one of the troop transports? They could easily remove the defences," Wrath asked. "Those troop carriers have no shields. Had to be removed to fit the



extra guns you wanted. Any troop carriers we sent would be destroyed before it reaches the city," Fandear explained again. Wrath looked towards the city and the lack of any smoke. There were only eight cities on Bre'loT'Usa and seven of them were on fire. "Any contact with the leadership within the city," Wrath asked. "None. Reports say the planetary governor is nice and cosy in there, but we can't just walk in and confirm." For now, it seemed, both sides were at a stalemate.

V'buG'Sa considered himself the only sane individual in command, therefore he would lead the defence of the city. From the comfort of his office, of course. But he would lead it regardless. The only set back was the refusal of many of his commanders to do as they were meant to and swear their allegiance to him. Even worse than that, some were even refusing to fight. V'buG'Sa was infuriated by this. That his own commanders would give up so easily against the hordes that would surely murder them if given the chance escaped even a glimmer of understanding in his mind. Thus he chose the only option he had: an old law that stated every civilian to take up arms against any and all invaders. Of course, V'buG'Sa had some resistance from the commanders. Nothing a few executions couldn't fix. He would defend his city and his planet, no matter how many deaths it would take.

Wrath considered her options. Word had gotten out that the governor of the planet was going mad, causing tensions to run high amongst the military command charged with holding the city. In fact, reports had suggested that some executions had taken place. While Wrath wasn't sure of the extent of these executions, but it perhaps indicated that things were not going well for the encamped military. "Do we have a way to contact the commanders that are in charge of the opposing forces," Wrath asked Fandear. "We have a bunch of captured drones. They have speakers on them," Fandear replied. "Can we use them," Wrath inquired again. "Yes sir. But it will take some time for us to set up their systems. We got to them before they could be activated," Fandear again answered. "I want to record a message," Wrath explained, "Offer them a chance to surrender." Fandear looked at Wrath in a state of confusion. "Is that wise, sir. Would they even consider surrender," Fandear asked, still confused about the intent behind the message. "Even if whoever is in charge doesn't choose to surrender, many of their subordinates may want to. Make sure to let everyone know what we're up to," Wrath said in complete confidence.

Troop commander Let'onD'Es was now certain that V'buG'Sa was mad, maybe even insane. The Coalition forces had just broadcast their offer to let the Ancients surrender just an hour before. But as soon as V'buG'Sa heard about this, he completely blew up. What few troop commanders he hadn't yet executed had long since decided that they would rather deal with a Devonian prison camp than with the very angry governor and had already left to surrender with their various forces. "It's all a hoax," he exclaimed in anger, "The parasites intend to kill us all!" "That's absurd! I've never known any Devonian to lie, particularly when it comes to surrender," Let'onD'Es countered. He was, of course, right. Devonians had very strong feelings on the concept of lying and surrender, none of which favoured such behaviour. "If you don't continue the fight, I'll sort you out myself," V'buG'Sa raged incoherently. Let'onD'Es didn't get the chance to respond. Clearly his expression was all that V'buG'Sa needed to reach for the plasma shotgun hidden underneath his desk. Without hesitating the troop commander pulled out his own sidearm and shot the madman in front of him. If he hadn't just committed treason, he doubted the hierarchy would've minded the death of the governor.

“Sir, the troop commander is here,” Fandear called out. She was escorting Let’onD’Es up into the command tent and towards Wrath. Wrath offered them both a drink, which was very gratefully accepted by the weary Ancient. “You the one in charge here,” he asked cautiously. Wrath was well known for her brutality and her deceptiveness, something which put her at odds with her people. “You’d be correct,” Wrath confirmed. “Then I would like to offer an unconditional surrender from myself to you,” Let’onD’Es offered with eyes that betrayed how tired he was. “This is rather surprising, I expected the governor to surrender instead,” Wrath humoured. She had already suspected the obvious. “The governor is.... no longer available,” the troop commander stated in as serious a tone as he could muster. Wrath smiled a cruel smile, imagining the exact series of events that may have played out. “I accept your surrender, commander.” Let’onD’Es let out a relieved sigh. For him and his troops, the battle and perhaps the war were over. If rumours were to be believed, they would be relocated to a system outside the vault and kept under observation. That, at least, would be better than this war.

## THE VIEW FROM OUTSIDE

### PART ONE

Ger’Ling and his sister, Fuy’Ling, had a rather simple life compared to the rest of the multiverse. They ran a small farm on a small planet on the very edge of Coalition space. The war itself was a distant problem, with only holo-nets and news casts actually referring to it at all. This didn’t bother the pair of siblings, who were nominally opposed to any war that came their way. None of their business and they shouldn’t get involved. Better to stay home on the farm and keep out of harm’s way. Fuy’Ling for the most part seemed the most eager to know more about the war. She had a certain fascination about the sheer scale of it. Galaxians were peaceful to the point of utter weakness, so it was pretty shocking to believe that they had formed a coalition specifically to fight against the Ancients, a mysterious species many assumed were victims of the war. Ger’Ling didn’t care that much. He was content on working on his farm and taking care of their adoptive mother She’Ling. A simple life was all he needed.

One evening, Ger’Ling was at the local Tavernry enjoying several rounds of Humdersweet with his best friend Fohdex. “I’ve been thinking,” he said with a serious tone. “I’m assuming it’s about the war,” Ger’Ling said in response. “Yeah, I can’t believe that people here are just ignoring the war as if it doesn’t exist.” “The war ain’t our problem, so it ain’t any of our business.” Fohdex turned to his friend. “It’s only a matter of time before the Ancients get to us. Don’t forget, we’re on the edge of Coalition space. That makes us easy targets for the Ancients,” he glumly told the farmer. “Don’t be ridiculous. The Ancients won’t come here. This may technically be Coalition space, but it’s also the middle of nowhere. Besides, we have nothing to do with the war at large.” Fohdex gulped down the last of his drink. “You’re too naive. They’ll come for us eventually. Unless this war ends soon.” Fohdex didn’t give Ger’Ling the chance to respond, instead simple getting up and leaving in a minor state of anger. He might’ve been drunk, but he was no pacifist.

Fuy’Ling always enjoyed the market. Today was different. Today, the market was overrun with protesters who actively criticised the war. Not just thought it was wrong, but actively hated it and were attempting to force the Galaxian government to withdraw from both war and Coalition. Fuy’Ling could understand why people would be against the war. With new conscription laws being considered and the news from the frontlines wasn’t encouraging. Yes,

there had been some minor victories and the recent victory at Bre'loT'Usa was a major win for the Coalition, but for many it simply seemed unnecessary. Many of the signs proved this with "No Reason/No War" and "Stop the Pointless Fighting". It made Fuy'Ling think about the actual reasons for war. Surely the Coalition wouldn't have gone to war without good reason? She decided she had to find out.

Back at home, Ger'Ling and Fuy'Ling sat eating a basic meal ration. The fact that Fuy'Ling was lost in thought did not go unnoticed. "Something is bothering you," Ger'Ling asked his sister. "No, no.... just thinking about the war. I don't understand why it even started." "Does it matter? Politicians start wars for reasons known only to them. Probably money or power. Rarely do they act for any other reason." Fuy'Ling remained unconvinced as she stared at her dinner. "How can you be sure? To rise against the Ancients is a big leap for simple greed." Ger'Ling felt some pity towards his naive sister. "The Ancients are the most powerful beings we know. The same politicians responsible for the war most likely grew jealous of that power and sought to take it for themselves. Not that the Ancients are any better. Power, much like control, is one of the few things that cannot be shared." Seemingly accepting this answer, Fuy'Ling decided it was best to change the topic. "How was Fohdex when you saw him last," she asked dismissively. "Oh, he's fine. Being an idiot, but that's nothing new," Ger'Ling replied, returning his focus to his food. "What's he doing this time," she asked. "Joining the Coalition military. I tried to convince him out of it but he refused to listen." Fuy'Ling hesitated at the alarming news. "Really! I never thought he would do something so reckless!" Ger'Ling was taken aback by his sisters' sudden outburst. "He was quite adamant about joining. Kept saying the war would reach us eventually." Fuy'Ling was alarmed because she was in love with Fohdex and everybody knew it.

In the days following her conversation with Ger'Ling, Fuy'Ling became more and more obsessed with finding out why the war had started. She refused to believe that the Coalition would rise against the Ancients simply because they sought more power. In her mind it simply didn't make any sense. Eventually, she decided she needed to go to the Rvandi, the main data centre in her home region. It wasn't far and only took a day and a half for her to reach the Rvandi. Ger'Ling had tried to convincing Fuy'Ling not to go but ultimately relented when he realised she would go one way or another. As soon as she arrived, Fuy'Ling immediately found the section devoted entirely to the political history of the Galaxians and their allies. She accessed a Holo-Viewer and began searching through the records hoping to find any mention of the war and its reasons for starting. Hours went by and still she found nothing. Of all the records she could find on the Coalition, many were either censored or were the already publicly available newscasts she was familiar with. It was frustrating to come to the one place she knew should've held all the answers and instead finding no real answers at all. Worse than that, no formal declaration of war existed within the database. In fact, no mention of any declaration was present within the last data servers that were housed within the Rvandi. Accepting that she wouldn't find answers here, Fuy'Ling decided to return home.

Despite his strong, negative feelings in regards to the war, Ger'Ling couldn't help but dwell on the direct cause of the war. Galaxians were not known for being power hungry, usually electing to keep to themselves, and if the rumours were true then the Devonians favoured a meritocracy. It didn't feel right that all three groups would suddenly rise up against the Ancients, God-like beings who stayed out of politics and never interfered with the other species. And yet, the war did start. The last hundred and twenty years saw more war than the previous sixty million. Certainly, not since the first fall of the Devonian culture had the Vault seen such a destructive

conflict across so many planets. It begged the question: why risk peace for power? If the Devonians wanted power, then they had the strength to simply bully the other races, yet had entered into an alliance, effectively sharing any power they gained. Ger'Ling did the only thing he could and started to ask around. In his youth, Ger'Ling often travelled extensively throughout the Multiverse and even visited the Capitol in the Vault. He had made many friends and some still owed him favours. It was through them that he found out about the rumours: the Ancients were planning on eliminating the Devonians, with some going so far as to hold them accountable for the previous genocide. Ger'Ling was sceptical about these rumours, but noted that such reasoning would fit better with the facts he knew about the war.

As soon as Fuy'Ling returned home, Ger'Ling sat her down and told her what he knew. "So, the Ancients were the cause? How do we know that is true," she asked of her brother. "We don't. Not really. The causes were censored out of fear that people would not believe it," he explained, "We may never know why the war started, only that it did." Fuy'Ling thought about it for a moment. "My search at Rvandi gave me nothing. No declaration of war was recorded." This didn't surprise Ger'Ling at all. "The Coalition has their own databanks. It would seem they are unwilling to share the records they have." There was a moment of brief silence between the siblings. "What of Fohdex? Does he still intend to join the Coalition military?" Ger'Ling nodded. "He is adamant that it is the right thing to do. He'll be going down to the recruitment office tomorrow." Fuy'Ling took a moment to decide her own fate. "Then I must join too," she declared confidently. "What! Why?" "The only way to end this war is to fight. Something which needs to happen." Ger'Ling became silent as he tried to process the declaration of intent. Soon, Conscription would be enacted and they would be forced to fight regardless. Better to join now and choose where you go, than to be forced into a position you didn't want. "Okay, but only if I go with you. I don't want to fight, but I won't let you fight alone." "Okay. Then we'll join together." On that night, both siblings promised to always fight for each other, with the goal to end the war for good.

## PART TWO

"But why do we continue to support the war!? The sheer cost alone should have stopped any ability to concede the matter," Fo'Quiin argued. "It was never about the cost! You know as well as I do the treachery of the Ancients cannot go unpunished," Twi'Loz argued back. Both Ordovicians had been arguing for hours without hope for an end. "You've offered no proof! The Coalition High Command refuses to allow independent Justicars to view any of the evidence they claim to have!" Twi'Loz wouldn't concede the argument. "The Coalition High Command refuses to allow Justicars because they operate under the Ancient Hierarchy! You'd be handing the Ancients a free pass to beat the Coalition into the ground," he shouted angrily. "Still, the fact that they are hiding anything is a cause for concern. Too many people are right now fighting and dying on the front lines and none of them know why," Fo'Quiin angered back, "Both in terms of money and lives, it appears to a lot of people that this war is just a pointless excuse to commit bloodshed! I wouldn't be surprised that the Devonians forced us into the Coalition and thus into the war!" Twi'Loz didn't back down. "The Devonians provide the biggest fleets, yes. But don't forget that we fund them. Without our help, they would never have lasted this long!" "That's the point Senator! The Ordovician Government is paying for the war. A war which seemingly has no end goal and will eventually bankrupt us, that's if the Ancients decide not to destroy us," Fo'Quiin pointed out, "The Ordovician Government should withdraw from the Coalition and the

war entirely.” “Impossible,” Twi’Loz bellowed, “That would leave us open to attack with no defence!”

“May I remind you of the attack on my own homeworld of Tal’Cali! A world so utterly destroyed by the Ancients that it is no longer habitable,” Fo’Quiin cried out, not even hiding the emotional impact the memories were having on him. “And may I remind you that the Coalition is the only reason anyone made it off of Tal’Cali in the first place,” came the response. “The Ancients only attacked because of the Ordovicians funding the war effort! And let’s not forget that the Ancients have not said anything about the war. They have simply attacked without saying why!” “Yes, it’s true that the Coalition have admitted to reasons for the war, reasons they have yet to disclose. Despite the Coalition being a burden of the Ordovician collective, it was the Ancients who attacked first..,” Fo’Quiin started to back down as he realised what the war was truly about. “This is a war for survival, pure and simple. We must all play a part, even if we don’t understand why,” Twi’Loz explained. “Yes, yes you are right. I still believe this war is not in the best interests of those involved, but it is the only way forward,” Fo’Quiin conceded to his opponent. Twi’Loz smiled as he finally won the week long argument.

## (BONUS STORIES) THE PERSONAL HISTORY OF WRATH AND THE DEVONIAN EMPIRE

### MY TIME WITH THE ELLESINDAL

Years after the near Genocide of my people, I ended up on the planet Gyllia, a small distant planet inhabited by the Ellesindal. I was 10 million years old, I think. It’s so hard to know for sure. For the most part, they were a broken species, not unlike humanity. They fought endless wars with themselves, choosing to endure the countless deaths rather than put aside their differences. At the time, I had grown arrogant. I was considerably stronger than any of the ones I encountered, thanks in part to my genetic heritage. I was stronger and faster and capable of shifting into any form I wanted. And I had my telekinetic abilities, though at the time they were very much in their infancy (more on that later). It didn’t take me long to put myself in a position of power over the Ellesindal. I thought them weak, nothing but cattle or slaves. In my arrogance I created an empire, one that I ruled for thousands of years (helped by my own Immortality). They had several continents, and after I conquered them all had them pitted against one another in unending war. At the time, I thought it was hilarious. These small people, giving their lives over to me completely. I would abuse that power, killing whenever I wanted however I wanted. I remember the Golden and Silver Palace I had slaves build. 8 miles long and 3 miles wide. Had a tower with a giant diamond on top of it. It was the height of luxury. I ruled them as a God for some thousands of years, all of which blended together. In that time the Ellesindal had tried and failed to gain their freedom and under my rule their numbers had diminished from several billion to a few hundred million. The continents of old had been destroyed under nuclear fire and a few weapons unique to the Ellesindal (many of those weapons were meant to “kill” me, if such a thing were even possible at the time). Only a single country remained. Or the remains of it did. Towards the end of my reign, the Ellesindal became very aggressive. Led by a former adviser and commander named Jiper Kansiy, they had been fighting harder and were stronger than they had ever been before. In hindsight, I understand now that they were desperate for me

to die or otherwise be removed from my lofty position of power. This war, it changed me. It opened my mind to possibilities I had never thought of before.

By the closing of the war, it had raged for 150 earth years. I let it last so long for a laugh, I was getting bored and wanted to see what they could do. Their leader, the aforementioned Jiper Kansiy, was more than competent. He had led a portion of my army before being recruited into this little rebellion. I wasn't shocked; I knew that he sympathized with their cause for years. But I didn't stop him. I had actually come to respect him after the many victories he had given me. But his many victories against me were infuriating. I was used to everything going my way, despite letting him have those victories in the first place. One thing you've got to understand – I thought I was a God. For these lower beings to rise against me was amusing, for them to win was an insult. I honestly thought I was better than them. I ended up being wrong, as we will get to now.

The last two years of the war was an eye opener. I had a harem of women to sleep with. Most were physically attractive and many of them were smart. But there was one. Illumi was not just any old female. She was my friend. My queen. For the first time in my life I had fallen in love with someone who I should have thought lesser than myself. But she had this way with me that no one else had. I later found out that she was an Empath, but not until after her death. As you can figure, this story doesn't have a happy ending. Illumi and Jiper both knew of each other of course. But I didn't realize that they were secretly married when I took her as a concubine. All the clichés are there. But Illumi was different than you would expect. Very subtly, she was influencing me to be better. And it was working. She helped me see where I went wrong, not through force but patience. While Jiper was busy forcing me out of power, Illumi was trying to convince me to step down. And I considered it. I did consider stepping down after she made me see all the evil I had caused. I held on out of fear rather than thinking I was better. But it cost me. My Praetorian Guard, Ulinda Muyreel, found out that Illumi was working with the Jiper and had her killed without me knowing. She then attempted to seize power by killing anyone even remotely close to me. My Harem was slaughtered, the council I had set up was executed and I was forced out of the palace. Many will wonder why I didn't do anything then. I couldn't out of grief. Confusion played a part, but losing Illumi changed something in me that I still struggle to understand today. It was if everything I considered worth living for was gone. Thanks to the immortality given to me by my father, I could not die. Neither injury or illness, old age or time would touch me. But I realized that the people around me would always die as I watched on helplessly. This gift that I had squandered suddenly became a curse to bear. I was an Immortal God, yet couldn't save the woman I loved. It made me question everything I ever knew.

Before I knew it, my confusion had led to Jiper and his rebellion. They tried to kill me multiple times. I couldn't and wouldn't blame them for trying. I had been a monster and still was to many. Eventually, I came to meet Jiper for the first time in over five years. He'd changed from the hopeful commander I once knew to a right miserable bastard, but other than that he was still the same commander I called friend many years ago. I was surprised by how calm he was around me. He didn't scream, didn't shout. He always sat across from me and treated me like our friendship was still intact. We talked and debated and eventually came to an agreement. We had both loved Illumi and losing her had been the catalyst for a temporary peace. I no longer cared to rule the planet or its people; I wanted to kill Ulinda Muyreel. I wanted revenge. I had long memorized the layout of my palace, even back then I had a deep seated interest in exploration. This was useful when the rebellion attacked the capitol. It was a brazen attack, with

many wondering why the Rebellion would dare attack the capitol when the army itself was still strong. But the plan became clear. If people saw me fighting with the rebellion, then that could only mean that the Rebellion was anointed by God. By me. Ultimately, it was a tactic that worked. I won't bore you with the details, but I will say this: when the dust had settled and the dead laid where they fell, I was no longer a God but a broken man without a future. This world no longer belonged to me, the people were dead or dying and I had lost the one person to give my life meaning. This realization was costly, but I'm grateful that I had it.

I must add, me and Illumi had a son together. Shortly before she died that is. He was an infant when his mother passed away. I'm ever thankful that he didn't get killed. For those wondering, when the Rebellion was over I gave the child to Jiper. Don't judge me for that. After all that I did, he deserved better than to have a monster as a "father". And I was in no state. My mind was lost and I was universally hated. Sure, many still followed me as their God, but I was anything but. I don't know what would've happened if I'd stayed, but would it matter? Give the child to someone who could raise him right. Jiper was by all accounts a good man and I knew with absolute certainty that he would be a better father than I. I don't regret that part, one of the best decisions I ever made.

As for myself, I travelled. Like the rest of my species I have the ability to travel through time and space without the need for technological help. It's hard to explain and I don't fully understand it myself, but it otherwise allowed me to go places that I would be unable to see. Thanks to the events I have just described, I went into the Multi-Verse with no idea who I was and more questions than answers. Worse, I was truly alone save for my brother and sister (who I will talk about in a minute). I was left to contemplate everything I've done and, thanks to my immortality, I had the time to do it.

## REVIVAL AND RESURRECTION

I spent a lot of time going from place to place. Most of my life in fact. My people were all dead, my family was dead and I had nowhere to go. What I didn't know was that others had survived. Out in the coldness of space was one of those colony ships we used. I found out about it after a friend of mine talked about it whilst we were both getting drunk in some dive bar. Said he found some strange ship that looked real old. We checked it out and I was surprised by what I found. The way colony ships work is much the same way the planetary escape pods (PEP) that carried me, George and Sandra. The only real difference is that you get to decide where those colony ships go. But they can be programmed to jump to random co-ordinates in a random series of dates, much like the PEP. Colony ships generally have several compartments, mostly for cargo. Three cargo holds, a birthing chamber and a bunkhouse for the colonists. The birthing chamber holds up to 25 birthing pods, but the one on this colony ship was three times that size. It seems that the ship builders removed one of the cargo holds to make room for the extra birthing pods. But the more surprising aspect came from the rest of the ship. One of the cargo holds had been converted into data banks with a sole interface where the door should be. I didn't know much about computers at the time (and still don't), so I left that alone for my companion to check out. I decided to check out the last cargo hold and the bunkhouse. Now you can imagine my surprise when I find not just a cargo hold full of colony supplies, but a bunkhouse that isn't a bunkhouse. It had been converted into a Cryo Chamber: an unusually large room with 600 very full cryo pods on three levels. I couldn't believe it. There were Devonians in every single pod. Suddenly, I wasn't as alone as I had been for so many millions of years. Obviously my friend wasn't too

happy. Since the crew was still alive, any claim we had on the ship was null and void. I appeased him with some claim I knew about but never acted upon (I never cared much about being a salvager).

It took some time to use the terminal connected to the databanks to find who to thaw out of cryo. No one I recognized (I was a ten year old kid when my planet burned). The person in charge turned out to be a rather progressive individual who for the sake of no human translation will be called Ingrid. Ingrid was one of the few warriors produced by the civilization that fell before and was clearly had a lot of experience fighting. I judged this from all the scars visible on her\* body. The process that thawed her from cryo was automated but took a long time to finish. I was excited, though weary. Long periods sat in a cry tube did not sit well with the mind of an intelligent being. Fortunately for me, Ingrid didn't seem fazed by all this. In fact, she wasn't even awake. She didn't wake up until three days later. I had already decided by that point that I wouldn't wake up any of the others until I could guarantee their survival. I wasn't going to lose this chance to have a people again.

You know, it's funny. I spent most of my life alone. Many would consider immortality to be a blessing rather than the curse it had become for me. I would often fall in love, only for it to die before my very eyes. But Devonians have a natural lifespan of 20,000 years. By all accounts, the Devonians in cryo were quite young, no more than 5,000 years of age (human equivalent would be mid-twenties). Given their age, and the existence of the birthing pods, it would mean nothing to find a habitable world and found a colony. All I would need to do is helm the ship.

One thing you need to know about all Devonian ships: they always have an AI on board. They weren't meant for military purposes before anyone wonders about them. They were used for navigation. Ever heard of Slipspace tunneling? It uses a form of quantum tunneling to get from one place to another very quickly. As with standard means of transportation, it has variable speeds. The lower speeds can be handled by any Devonian who has had the time to learn the equations. But the faster speeds require both AI and Devonian navigators. Like a massive plane that requires two pilots – one for each jet engine. The colony ship had an AI. Had being the operative term. For some reason, there was no AI. There were signs of one amongst all the data files I sifted through. But for some reason, it seemed to have been deleted. I don't know how anyone can delete an AI, especially on a colony ship like this. I did find the ship name. Roughly translated, it said "ECS Ulysses". Ulysses was a Devonian scientist known for discovering and explaining spatial paradoxes. The Ulysses, as I mentioned, lacked the necessary AI to get it to its current position. AI's not only help with the higher speeds of Slipspace, but could also take control of a ship when necessary, useful on a colony ship with a crew in cryo-stasis. There were no logs explaining why the AI had seemingly been deleted, so I made a mental note to ask Ingrid when she woke up.

When Ingrid did wake up, she wasn't what I expected. She was afraid yet confident, strict yet quiet. She gave off a sense of experience. Barely 5,000 years old and I suspected she saw than most her age would even dream of seeing. She'd certainly seen war. That's what her eyes told me. I didn't say anything, standing in awe as you do. I hadn't seen another Devonian since I killed my brother, and hadn't seen one unrelated to me since I was a young child. And now I stood across from one of my own kind millions of years after the supposed genocide of the Devonian species. That first meeting has left an impact on me. For years, I roamed without



purpose or intent, wondering if there was any meaning to be had in an immortal life. That was the moment I knew. My purpose was to help rebuild my species.

Ingrid and I spoke for days. A simple greeting can be such a formal process that it can take hours to simply say hello. Today, such formal greetings are relegated to one of the three noble houses, but it would've been unthinkable to not perform the traditional greetings to another survivor. Ingrid was well spoken and knowledgeable. She was fully aware of my parents and their experiments, though she admitted that the colony ship launched before my birth. She was more than curious to find out about me, though ended up horrified by what I'd become. Couldn't blame her for that one. Calm and patient, Ingrid decided to put aside my past evils and focus on getting the other survivors out. I informed her that without a planet suitable for habitation, the waking up 600 Devonians whose last waking memories involve a full scale interplanetary Genocide. Not knowing anything about the wider multi-verse, we both agreed that I would find a new planet while she thawed out a small crew to help her get started.

It isn't difficult to find a suitable planet. The multi-verse is infinite in scope, with an infinite number of habitable planets to choose from. My issue was finding one where realistically we could get any resource we could ever need, yet be far enough away from other species that we wouldn't get noticed. Alternatively, the need for trading routes with other species is also

important as no interstellar species can exist without trade. Fortunately, I know of the perfect place. (Roughly translated) New Tellion is planet in the Gumitton System in the Loxa Galaxy. The galaxy itself has always been teeming with civilizations, with the downside being that they are constantly at war. The Gumitton System has always been uninhabited, being far enough away from the known trading routes and no intelligent species to make it worth the journey. New Tellion is rich in all sorts of raw elements such as hydrogen and iron. When you consider a lot of land suitable for agriculture is readily available, the New Tellion makes the perfect planet for a colony.

When I informed Ingrid of the planet I had chosen, she had already thawed out 73 Devonians. Thirteen of them were the crew of the Ulysses. The other sixty were the warriors sent to protect the ship and the precious cargo it contained. An argument ensued regarding the action Ingrid wanted to take. Her plan was to dump the colony off on New Tellion and then pursue the alien species responsible for the death of our culture. I've heard of a lot of absurd plans in my lifetime, but this is one of the dumbest ideas anyone has had in my presence. I told her as such and that it wouldn't mean anything anyway, since I had already wiped out the species. The Redvar was one of the species I had vindictively wiped out in my youth. This angered her. But she relented when I convinced her it was already too late to take revenge and there was nothing left to do regarding the matter. All we had was a planet and 500 other Devonians waiting for a new home. If someone were to attack the colonists, then any chance to rebuild would be lost. I essentially argued for her to lead them since no one else was in any position to do so. I couldn't do it, my past notwithstanding. And if she was meant to be the captain of the Ulysses, then she was officially in charge. Ingrid countered that warriors had no place leading the Devonian people. I still laugh about that to this day. Ingrid was mired in the pacifism of the old world. I told her we needed to change as a species, which perhaps the reason why we were here was because the warriors weren't in charge. Ingrid was unconvinced, but willing to give it a go.

Ten years later and a thriving colony had been established. Ingrid did come round to leading the colony. Shortly after the colony was established, I convinced her it would be a good idea to teach everybody how to fight. That included any children who were born. Note that I'm not talking about using child soldiers. I will make the point now as I did then: training should start at an early age, preferably around the age of ten. They would only be bought into active service when they reach adulthood (For a Devonian that would be around 500 years old). I made this point then under the reasoning that a single attack could wipe out the whole colony if the attack itself was large enough. Ingrid agreed with me, explaining that she had seen entire cities be wiped out overnight due to no warriors defending them. I did have an ulterior motive that I chose not to reveal: I wanted it to become part of our culture. You see, I've lived long enough to see all the variants of culture you can reasonably expect to see. And the strongest will always be the warrior cultures. Of course there needs to be those who farm and build, but if everyone knows how to fight and act like a soldier and can follow orders, then a lot more people can be saved. At the time, I didn't fully realize the implications of what I had done but I stand by my decision now as I did back then.

Thanks to the Birthing Pods in the Ulysses, our numbers grew from a mere 600 to over 1800 (we could only birth 60 at a time due to power issues). I was happy that the Devonian race had re-established itself, but worried about the future. Ingrid was worried too. The reason being was simple. The Ancients were watching. The Ancients were the creators of the Vault, the pocket universe. Normally, they would avoid interacting with outsiders. Even the species habiting the Vaults had minimal contact with the Ancients (they only traded for supplies through Arbiter). It was common knowledge that they kept an eye on any races that had made it inside the Vault. Chances were they had found out about this colony and it made everybody uncomfortable. Who knows how they would react?

We wouldn't have to worry about them for a while though. Our more immediate concerns were with defense. Remember that pesky little detail that I mentioned plagued the Loxa Galaxy? Well, it intensified in such a way that threatened the colony. Not only had the multitude of active species detected us, many of them considered us hostile. They had space faring fleets, superior numbers and had been fighting longer than the colony had even existed. We already had a few scouts test our very limited strength. Sure, we had weapons and experienced soldiers. But with less than a hundred of said soldiers armed to the teeth with our equivalent of handguns and shotguns, it just wasn't realistic that we could hold out against an invasion force. That's where I came in. I had stuck around with the colony, acting as a sort of advisor. But the situation demanded I find a solution, as did Ingrid. I knew exactly where to go. In the last ten years, we had gathered a lot of valuable elements such as Gold and Silver. In fact, New Tellion was literally covered in Gold. The three active gold mines produced roughly 15,000 tonnes of Gold a month. That gave us a lot of money to barter with. My first thought was to buy ships with space-bearing weapons, but without the crews to operate them it would be a useless endeavor. But there was a solution. Anti-ship cannons were very common and the kinetic variants were very cheap. They had the added benefit of only needing crews of two people to operate them, meaning we could have a lot of them covering the colony. I didn't need too many, fifteen would be more than enough. The next thing to do would be to acquire an anti-air defense network. The biggest issue wouldn't be the space faring ships but the aircraft they'd throw at us. I didn't want to cheap out, so I went and "borrowed" the old colony ship. I bought a large cargo ship from a species whose name I can't be bothered to remember. The ship itself was fairly unimpressive, with only three

space capable fighters, minimal single fighter defenses and one escape pod. But it had eight large cargo holds, two of which were technically joined (so they can be converted into a single fighter bay). It allowed me to fit both the fifteen plasma cannons and a midsized anti-aircraft defense network. Hell, it would still have room to spare if not for all the food and medical supplies I also acquired.

The situation would take a turn for the worse over the next twenty years. The colony would still continue to increase its numbers (from 600 at its founding to over 2400 in the thirty year span), but it would at the cost of ever increasing threats. Attacks became more frequent, but the plasma cannons and anti-aircraft network halted any aerial threats. On top of that, the decision to train everyone how to fight proved useful. The cargo transport proved to be more than excellent, not least because of the refits I ordered. The cargo ship had a name I had a certain attachment to: Illumi. The CTS Illumi would be refit with better defenses (1500 anti-fighter missiles, two nuclear launchers and a MAC) and the two cargo holds I mentioned above were adapted into single fighter bays. We'd eventually have ten single pilot fighters on the CTS Illumi and another twenty on the colony. This was on top of the crew complement. The CTS Illumi would be piloted by the twelve that served on the Ulysses (save for Ingrid, who was busy leading the colony) and another 50 for other roles (10 crew members that filled roles such as engineers and medics, 10 pilots and a unit of Marines). But the greatest additions came from the two AIs we had purchased from a friendly species (who are sadly extinct now). One was sent to the colony and the other was kept with me on the ship. The ship-bourne AI went by the name Filhar 18B6 (but we will call him Filhar) and was a welcome addition to the crew. He was funny and cheerful and had the unique ability to make everyone around him laugh and smile. One of the major refits for the CTS Illumi was a new cold fusion reactor to replace the old nuclear power plant. In this respect, Filhar proved his worth ten times over. With the Slipspace engine and new reactor, the Illumi was able to travel at speeds most cargo ships would be unable to reach (remember what I said about AI navigators). Let me give you an example. It would take the Illumi six months to get from Earth to Jupiter before the refit, but would be able to do the same journey in less than two weeks after the refits (it was already an ancient ship when I bought it). The Slipspace engine was scavenged from the Ulysses, so wasn't as fast as I would have liked. From Earth to a planet in the Alpha Centuri system would take 3 months, for example. This made resupplies an uncertain thing given the situation in the Loxa Galaxy.

The Ulysses also had a few refits. I don't know how, but the engineers somehow added all sorts of weapons to the former colony ship. For obvious reasons, the Ulysses would never leave the system. But it could act as a warship. The refits gave it 1,000 anti-fighter missile pods, an underpowered MAC and several ship-based plasma cannons. The reactor was more advanced than anything we could acquire from the local galaxy, but was modified to put out more power. It was essentially an underpowered weapons platform. It wouldn't stand a chance against large fleets of destroyers or cruisers or even frigates, but would certainly do some damage against carriers and pirates (we had a lot of them). Compared to the warships we have now, it was a joke. But it did its job at the time.

You're probably wondering where this is all going. Many of you reading this already know. Thirty two years after the founding of the colony, we were attacked by a small fleet of warships. The fleet belonged to the Hundill Empire. Empire would be stretching it, since the only really controlled eight planets. Several of the other big players (The Axions, the Yandill and the Ilo Ferx) had at least 15 planets each. But the Hundill Empire was a vicious threat that wiped out

the native populations of the any planet it controlled. Who knows why they would target New Tellion. Perhaps they had no reason. No communication was offered, they simply attacked. Three destroyers, two frigates, a carrier and a cruiser made up the fleet. The Ulysses wouldn't stand a chance and was destroyed after the crew decided to ram the enemy cruiser. The suicide move worked, but our airspace was undefended. Now, the plasma cannons had been automated and had been improved (we purchase thirty more cannons), meaning that they couldn't land their frigates anywhere near the colony. With the anti-air defense network, any direct attack would have been impossible. It ended up coming down to land based combat. They outnumbered us thirty to one and were backed up by several armored tanks. We had minimal air support, no tanks and a colony that by all accounts had no substantial military. But we had several advantages. Firstly, the colony was built into a mountain range. This was done to give us the advantage over the terrain, since the only way to access the colony was via three well travelled roads (to the farms). It made defending the colony from the ground much easier. Secondly, the training had paid off. Everyone knew how to fight and most of them turned into decent fighters. Not soldiers, but certainly capable of holding off skirmishes and the odd siege. The actual soldiers (of which there were 120) were tasked with fending off the tanks and larger attacks. I should note that the fighters and Marine unit on the Ulysses managed to get off the doomed ship and rejoin the colony (I'll explain in a minute). And the third and final advantage was the CTS Illumi, which wasn't in system when the attack started.

I should make things simple. Below is the designation between the different units with a brief explanation of how they were used. Please be aware, human names will be used for the designations:

- Colonial Infantry: The 120 soldiers based at the colony fulfilled the role of defenders. They never left the planet. The Colonial Infantry was split into three units that served different roles. Units Alpha and Bravo would defend the colony itself with support from civilian forces. Unit Charlie would use hit and run tactics to deal as much damage as they could to enemy tanks and bases. They took a lot of casualties before the conflict was over;
- Marines: Two units of marines existed. Unit Delta was stationed on the CTS Illumi to fend off any boarding parties. Unit Epsilon was stationed on the Ulysses for much the same reason. They managed to get aboard a dropship before the ship was destroyed. After rejoining the colony, Unit Epsilon joined unit Charlie in hit and Run tactics and caused serious damage before being wiped out themselves;
- Fighters: We had a total of 45 fighters at the time, but only thirty five were kept at the colony. They were used in support roles only, carpet bombing convoys and supply lines whenever the opportunity presented itself;
- Civilians: The civilians all had basic combat training, meaning they could defend themselves if needed but weren't in any position to be deployed as soldiers. But it was for the best that they were able to defend themselves;

It would be two months before I would find out what was going on in the colony. We hadn't yet developed an interplanetary communications network, since we didn't need one, so there was no way for the colony to send a signal for help. The Illumi had been given orders to search for an old warship we could use, preferably with some sort of ftl engine (Slipspace, war, anti-grav etc).

We did find one (the DCW Calune, as it would be named), but it needed some refits in order to be bought back into service. The only reason we came back to New Tellion was to pick up the Marine unit that was intended for the warship as they were being trained while we were away. We were all in shock after seeing the small fleet. We tried to get in contact with the colony, but I'm guessing the fleet was blocking communications. We couldn't stay for too long as two Destroyers moved to intercept. I gave the order to cut and run with the knowledge that we couldn't do anything, even with survivors potentially still fighting.

The next 18 months were difficult. The crew was getting restless with many saying we should go back. I had to point out several times that the Illumi wasn't equipped to deal with a war fleet and having a single Destroyer wouldn't change anything. With limited funds and two ships to fuel and supply, I made the choice to put our services up for sale. We would transport cargo from one destination to another, taking whatever payment we could get. My ulterior motive was to hire some of the mercenary fleets that were prevalent on that galaxy. But we needed money before that was even a possibility. I was fully aware of the situation back on New Tellion, but there wasn't anything I could do. It would turn out that I was overly worried. The colony was being held, with Unit Epsilon being wiped out. From my understanding, Unit Charlie also suffered losses.

In the two years the Illumi and Calune spent in exile, we would hear snippets of the ordeal New Tellion was going through. A friend of mine had connections in the Hundill Empire and word had come down that they were struggling to take the colony. For whatever reason, they had decided to not nuke the colony and had been in a stalemate for the two years since the invasion. I knew that the Devonians couldn't hold. I had managed to accumulate a decent amount of wealth and even gather some allies willing to help me (although many of them had their own reasons to hate the Hundill Empire). The tipping point came when an alliance was formed between my people and the Axions. They needed a steady supply of Gold but had already mined what little they had on their own planets. I approached them after hearing of this, mentioning the fact that New Tellion was rich in Gold. A deal was arranged where they would help me liberate the planet and the Devonians would let them set up a few mines at various points on the planet. With the money saved from all the cargo runs, I was able to hire some very ruthless mercenaries to help on the ground.

The Axions didn't waste any time putting together a fleet. Six Destroyers, two Carriers, four Frigates and two Cruisers, this was by far one of the strongest fleets they had mustered. Meanwhile, I had a single outdated Destroyer, a cargo ship and some less than reputable mercenaries. It was a good thing that the Axions were a very honest people; they weren't fond of betraying allies. I was hoping that the ensuing battle would be quick, but the Hundill Empire didn't go down easy. The battle between fleets was a long and hard fight. In the two years since the initial invasion, the Hundill Empire had swapped out their chosen ships. Now they had two Destroyers, a Carrier and three Frigates. We outnumbered them three to one. But they had superior ships armed with plasma cannons and shielding. In a fair fight, one Hundill Empire Destroyer was worth four Axion Frigates. And they had two. I stood on the bridge of the Calune and ordered the Illumi to descend onto the planet below. The Illumi was full of mercenaries and Axion tanks and infantry. It also had relief supplies provided by the Axions. All I could do about the colony itself was trust Ingrid to know what to do.

The only reason I took command of the Calune was because I had the most experience in space battles of any Devonian alive. Previously, I had spent time with Forerunners in another universe a few millions years previously. I was one of the few non Forerunners to serve under the military (their equivalent of a navy). It only made sense that I would assume command and take part in the naval battle. The DCW Calune was armed to the teeth, but it showed its age. There weren't any shields and had six plasma cannons on either of the ship. The Calune also had a kinetic MAC, but it was an older, underpowered version. With over two hundred missile pods and anti-fighter cannons, the Calune barely qualified as a Destroyer. The best course of action was to engage one of the enemy Frigates. They didn't have shields and were on par with the Calune.

I don't know how long the battle lasted. But the damage reports didn't lie. The Hundill Empire fleet had been destroyed in its entirety. Not a single ship attempted to flee. But it came at a cost. Five out of the six Destroyers the Axion provided had been destroyed. The remaining Destroyer had been gutted.... But had made it in one piece. The two Carriers hadn't been damaged. They had offloaded their precious cargo of single pilot fighters before moving away from the hellish battle. The Frigates sustained heavy damage but had made landfall before being destroyed (they had carried troops and supplies to set up staging areas on the planet itself). They would rejoin the battle after the first three Destroyers were themselves destroyed. Frigates are good all rounders. While they're better off as troop transports, the Axions used Frigates as giant battering rams, knocking enemy ships off balance. Only the two Axion Cruisers came out without serious damage. Both ships were armed to the teeth and were giant weapon platforms. Each cruiser had two MAC, eighteen Plasma Cannons and over 3500 anti-fighter missiles and cannons on each side of the ships. Each cruiser had a personal shield. It wasn't very powerful, but any advantage is desirable.

As for the Illumi and Calune, well. The Illumi stayed on the planet, avoiding the battle at all cost. But the Calune took heavy damage. I remain thankful that I only had a crew of eight (including the AI Seran) and that none of them were injured or killed. Things looked even better planetside. The colony hadn't even been touched. Unit Epsilon had been wiped out and Unit Charlie had taken losses, but the colony had been saved. It seemed like the Hundill Empire spent more on its ship than it did on its infantry. Simple slaves, brutal and untrained. It seemed that the Hundill Empire didn't train its soldiers. This was the primary factor in the battles. We had trained everybody to fight whilst they seemed to train nobody. That is what saved us. I couldn't hide my relief. Ingrid was just as happy as I was that the colony was safe. Over 113 people had died, mostly civilians caught outside of the colony when the invasion happened. I honestly thought that we would take much heavier losses. But happiness was short-lived when Ingrid found out about the deal I made with the Axions. It took a long time before I could convince her that it was for the best.

Within 6,000 years, our population had grown from a mere 600 to over 150,000 Devonians. The occupation by Hundill Empire showed that training everyone was a good idea. It became a part of our culture, as I intended it to be. 150,000 Devonians, of which a third were non-military (mostly the young and farmers) and our fleet included 30 cargo ships, 70 warships and over 10,000 single pilot fighters. Best thing was, the Axions were helping us build the ships and in return we'd support them with Gold and military support. Eventually, the galaxy would stabilize as many of the civilizations collapsed (including the Hundill Empire and the Axions), but it

wouldn't matter too much thanks to the next major event that would change the course of my life....

## A DEMOCRATIC TEST

The colony that had been founded eventually became the capitol of New Tellion, Minerva (loose human translation). Minerva still exists as the secondary capitol of the Devonian Empire and is currently home to over 6,000,000 and New Tellion has a combined population of 1.8 billion when you factor Half-Breeds into the mix (which we do). Only 800 million Pure Breeds live there, but that is considerably more than the original 600 survivors. There are now over 60 billion Pure Bred Devonians in existence, with another 54 Billion Half Breeds. But there is a story (or collection of stories if you will humor me) behind the massive population growth. Please note, we will now switch to using a dating system to try and keep the huge distances between times clean. The founding of the colony (FC) will be the base point. We pick up my story 98,875FC (98,875 years after the colony founding). I had long since left New Tellion, deciding to go my own way after Ingrid passed away. She ended up passing away of old age (21,300 years old), leaving behind a very successful new world. 98,875FC was a strange year. I had been away for some number of centuries and had been out of the loop since, but had decided to visit after a run in with a patrol with two Destroyers escorting a colony ship. We had been expanding to new worlds across the different universes and I had unexpectedly encountered one such effort. The encounter was brief is not worth describing here, but it did leave me with a desire to return home.

New Tellion had already changed a lot since its founding. With nearly 80 million inhabitants across three large cities (dwarfed only by the agricultural land that surrounded them), it had started to feel like an actual home instead of a last refuge for survivors. Whether it be the extensive Planetary Defense Network (PDN) or the towering skyscrapers that the majority of the inhabitants called home, you wouldn't think that the planet had been colonized by just 600 people nearly a 100,000 years prior. The biggest difference wasn't on the planet itself. Instead, the formerly empty void above the planet was now filled with a variety of ships (both military and civilian) and four orbital platforms. One of the platforms was the Orbital Construction Yard (OCY) where new ships would be built and crews trained. A considerable distance away was the Docking Station where trade ships would transfer goods to and from the planet. It also allowed the massive warships to refuel and resupply personnel and ammunitions. Both stations had AIs who manned the considerable calculations needed to keep both in orbit as well as the semi-formidable defenses they had. But the real treat was the two MAC platforms that covered both stations. They were former Axion Frigates that had been gutted and refitted to serve as the defense of the planet. They had no real jump capability and couldn't travel through space, instead focusing solely on weapons. There was enough fire power to destroy a fleet three times larger than the invasion force the Hundill Empire had sent millennia prior. It was truly impressive.

I took a shuttle bus down to Minerva to find a greeting party waiting to welcome me. Despite not sending a message stating that I'd be coming, the newly formed Government had somehow found out and sent a delegation. It was a very fitting show, but I instantly knew something was wrong. Other than the colony ship and its escort, I had made every attempt to avoid ships with Devonians on them. I had even gone to great measure to hide my identity by taking on the form of another species and working as a deck hand on the ship that bought me here. So I found it

odd that they knew I was here before I even arrived. None of the delegates talked, as if to hide something from me. I lacked the connection to the Hive Mind that the rest of my people shares, so I was unable to find out what. Something else bugged me. The city itself wasn't anything special. I had seen a million other cities, all very impressive. But there was a great sense of hesitation and worry clouding its people. Almost as if the future proved uncertain. I soon found out why. The Government HQ wasn't a very impressive building. It didn't need to be. Large enough to house the several thousand Devonians that made sure the Government worked, it was still technically under construction when I arrived. But the main building and its defenses had been finished and only the barracks for the resident politicians and defense force was being built. Moving inside was like walking through one of my dimensional tears (the thing that lets me move from one universe to another). Instead of the very Spartan interior I had been expecting, I instead found myself in an ornate theatre with a central stage surrounded by ever rising pews. Then it hit me, I was no longer on New Tellion. The door had been a dimensional tear, but one of such high degree that I couldn't recognize it.

It is important to note that very few species can create small dimensional tears without massive technological equipment. To create a dimensional tear the size of a door requires precision not found in many species, even within the Vault. The Devonians of the First Age (before the Genocide) found out how to do it on the genetic scale. The Galaxians have the technology, but abandoned it long ago. That leaves the Ancients, who were the ones responsible for removing me from New Tellion. They are, as their names suggests, an ancient species responsible for the creation of the Vault. Very little is known about the isolationist species, even now. 98,875FC was the first time the Devonians had any contact with the Ancients since the First Age. I had heard of them from my father when I was considerably younger, who himself noted that they avoided talks even when we were being slaughtered. Suffice to say; if they brought me here then they had something important to say.

At first, I didn't notice all the Ancients surrounding me. The low levels of light tricked my eyes into not seeing anything. It is only when what I assumed was their leader spoke up. I don't remember the dialogue for some reason. I've always assumed they didn't want me to. I only remember being in that amphitheatre surrounded by some ancient species I couldn't see. I do remember what it was all about (chiefly because of the end result). They were apparently seeing if we were good enough to rejoin the Vault. Though I would later come to understand why, back then I spent a good amount of time wondering why they would start to contact us.

After returning to New Tellion, I decided to seek out the new Prime Minister. Julia was only 8,000 years old but had already shown a lot of political acumen. If anyone would know what was going on, it would be Julia. When I got a chance to talk to her, she straight up refused to discuss the issue with me. In fact, no one would talk to me at all. This was worrying, as they had no reason to keep anything from me yet I was treated as the black sheep. Maybe I was, considering all the things I've done in my life. But to be shut down whenever I tried to find out what was going on infuriated me. I noticed something was odd after a short investigation. Someone was on New Tellion influencing things a certain way. Worse, this person (or group of people) had somehow severed the planet wide Hive mind that almost every Devonian shared. The hive mind is a leftover from our ancestors. It cannot share memories, but can share feelings and is incredibly important to us as a species. I cannot connect to the Hive Mind due to a genetic illness. It's so rare that I've only encountered four others in my lifetime, including my own brother. The side effect being that I am more of an Empath (meaning I can sense the general



feelings of other species). I noticed the Hive Mind had been severed by looking at the way people behaved. They were lost and confused, with many outright stating that they couldn't access it. At this point in time, I had come across many different species with a Hive Mind and nothing like this had ever happened to them. I didn't even know it was possible.

I had an idea of what happened soon enough. A rogue member of the Ancients had unleashed some sort of plague or virus onto New Tellion. One of the side effects was the severing of the Hive Mind. Or so it was claimed. The whole event was quickly resolved and hushed up. The virus was dealt with and the memories of what happened were removed. I was off planet when that happened and was otherwise preoccupied with tracking down the colonies. I wanted to know if they had gone through the same thing. They hadn't, but I felt better having seen it for myself. The Ancients themselves didn't say anything about it. I don't think they realized I still knew. Either that or they simply didn't care. Doesn't matter.

Another 3,000 years passed without word from the Ancients. Those years proved more than eventful for us Devonians though. A few minor wars here and there proved to be nothing more than a minor distraction. Julia, it seems, was an imperialist. Under her leadership, our influence grew to over 30 galaxies across three universes. She also founded multiple new colonies, using the birthing pods to expand our numbers. It worked like this: a colony ship with 1,000 Devonians would be sent to a new world, escorted by two Destroyers. When they got to this new world, they would set up a simple colony and utilize the birthing chambers to increase their numbers. How many birthing pods did they have? Around 2,000 per colony ship. You can guess at what happened. These colonies grew very quickly. As did our numbers. I warned her that such quick expansion wouldn't keep the empire she so desperately wanted together. But she refused to listen. I suspected the reasons why, but never seemed to have proof. Without ties to New Tellion, each colony would develop its own Hive Mind, its own community. She didn't listen. Some of the earlier colonies, ones founded before the plague, had started to question the rule of the Government. They didn't understand why someone they never met, someone that didn't live on the planet and didn't share the same Hive Mind was ruling them. It is so easy for us as a species to make the case of a unity – that is, for us to come together as a community rather than as a group of planets. To mess it up so badly that they consider themselves independent, even back then, begs the question.

The war that ensued was short and bloody. The first colony to take up arms was the Undying (translation). Founded in 43,980FC, Undying was the largest and oldest colony to break off from New Tellion. Over 200,000 Devonians with a small fleet (one carrier, two frigates and three destroyers) as well as a large military (75% of the population) made the surprisingly formidable force even stronger. To make matters worse, thirteen other colonies joined the fight, bringing their own armies and resources. In total, they had 2 cruisers, 6 carriers, 10 frigates and 25 destroyers. The New Tellion Fleet was three times as large, but was spread thinly over the remaining 25 colonies. The thing is, I very quickly joined the side of the rebels with the idea that they were the better choice. Julia had long since proved herself incompetent by this point, so it was only natural to want a change in leadership. Elections are good and all, but sometimes a bit of violence will keep the leadership in check. So I advised the one leading the whole thing, a Devonian by the name of Talia. She was in a whole different league to Julia in that she was incredibly popular amongst the populations. She was also a military commander of high standing. Julia was a farmer by trade who used.... Other means to acquire power. Back then, we

were a democratic species. It was a short lived experiment due to the corruption we faced, thanks in part due to Julia and her sponsors. But that will be explained further in a minute.

The war involved a lot of hit and run tactics. Talia knew damn well that if the Loyalist fleet ever came together, she'd lose. Julia still had over 60 destroyers and seven cruisers under her command. That doesn't even count all the other ships defending the home turf. It was good for us then that the destroyers and cruisers were spread all over the place. In most cases, we outnumbered them four to one or more. Within three years, we had decimated the opposing fleet to such a scale that the numbers had evened out (we had built or captured more ships than we destroyed). It was that point which we decided that an attack on New Tellion was the best idea. Over the course of the war, I had convinced Talia that she should take over the responsibility from Julia. At first, she was simply dismissive of the idea in favor of independent rule of the colonies. But I simply kept pushing by saying that people would support her attempts at unification. Besides, who better at securing independence than the leader of the free colonies.

The attack on New Tellion was as swift as any attack we could muster. The fleet defending the planet consisted mainly of frigates and carriers but had been reinforced by the remaining destroyers and cruisers that we hadn't been able to destroy or capture. They had about 30 frigates, 6 carriers, 8 destroyers and 2 cruisers. We had a single cruiser, 38 destroyers, 15 frigates and a single carrier. Sure, we outnumbered them. But numbers don't mean a damn if you don't know how to use them. And Talia knew exactly what she was doing. She had the frigates line up in two rows, sort of like a firing line. As the enemy ships approached, the frigates began firing with a five second delay between the two rows. The ploy worked as several of the enemy destroyers blew. Many of the other ships, predominately frigates, were damaged or crippled. With five of the eight destroyers and two frigates down for the count, we made our move. Talia held most of the fleet back, sending in ten destroyers backed up by single ship fighters and a secret weapon - boarding craft. The idea Talia had was simply genius. The single ship fighters would make up the first wave, clearing the path for boarding craft that would arrive in the second wave of reinforcements (who would end up masking the signatures). The intent was to capture the two cruisers and set off the self destruct, with the hope of crippling the enemy fleet. Not at all a simple task, but a daring plan nonetheless.

The destroyers we sent held up well, but we lost two almost instantly. By all accounts it wasn't a total loss, but I could feel the discomfort many of my fellow shipmates felt as they felt the deaths of their friends and family over the Hive Mind. I couldn't help but admire their will to keep fight regardless of the circumstances. Talia also felt the same discomfort but made sure to not let it get to her. Another one of our destroyers blew up, once again drawing my attention to the battle ahead. We were down to just five destroyers out of the ten Talia sent into the middle of the New Tellion Fleet. We had no idea if any of the boarding parties had managed to get aboard, but Talia was already in the process of ordering the remaining destroyers when one of the cruisers suddenly rammed into the other. Both exploded with the intensity of a sun for the briefest of moments before disappearing. When I turned to look back at the colossal scene of destruction, I was both appalled and shocked by what I saw. The explosion had been so massive as to destroy nearly the entire remainder of the opposing fleet. The rest was crippled, unable to fight. Our destroyers hadn't even been given the orders to retreat yet. But it didn't matter as three were completely destroyed and the others were crippled to the point where I questioned whether or

not any of them could be salvaged. The sudden loss of so much life connected to the Hive Mind caused many on the bridge to throw up, with some even fainting. I was one of those. Despite not being connected directly to the Hive Mind, my Empathic ability still connected me to everyone else in the room. The grief I felt emanating from the room struck me like nothing else had. It was so much that I ended up blacking out.

I woke up in a hospital room several days later. The battle was long since over and Talia was already in the process of taking control of New Tellion. It would take some time, given that the previous Government was still holding on in the Parliament Building (they wouldn't last too much longer, though). I shared a wing of the hospital with many other Devonians. Many of them were part of the Rebellion who themselves had suffered much like me. Many of them were in comas or were otherwise unconscious. It didn't take me long to get on my feet and make the rounds. There weren't many injuries among the crews of the crippled warships. Too many had died, on both sides. Instead most of the injured were there for the same reason I was. They were all connected to the Hive Mind and were subsequently burdened with the death of many thousands of other Devonians. It was described to me as dying over and over again. You feel it, even though you're not the one dying. It must have been horrifying for them. So much death and destruction and all of this because of what? A few more worlds to colonize. What a waste.

It took a few days for me to be discharged from the hospital due to my unique condition (the one that stopped me from connecting to the Hive Mind). But I was in for a surprise when I managed to get out. Talia had made me aware of the situation following the defeat of the loyalist forces. Talia had taken complete control over Parliament before dismissing it entirely (a move which upset a lot of people on both sides of the conflict). In doing so, she earned the ire of many who called for representation, even though they never really had any to begin with. The former warzone in the Space above the planet had been filled with debris, most of which was being burnt up in atmosphere. The bigger pieces were being moved out into the dark recess of Space by tugboats meant for moving ships from the construction yards. There was a lot of unease as leadership changed hands. Julia had committed suicide in refusal to accept the circumstances she helped create while her army stood down. It wasn't an easy fight, but three years of war were finally over. But it had an impact that forever changed the fabric of our species. Firstly, our experiment with Democracy ended in failure. Every time elections came about, corruption reared its ugly head. Many of the colonization efforts were privately funded, as in through a single company that produced the colony ships. That is to say, Julia owned shares in a company that built the colony ships used during the effort and later warships for the war effort. Not only that, but the rest of Parliament wasn't any better. Corruption, it seems, is intrinsic to Democracy. I had originally helped set up the system centuries before I left to travel. It seemed like a good idea at the time, though I was very much aware of the corruption that usually followed such a system. I thought that we were above all that, but I was wrong. So long as people think of themselves, corruption will always exist. As long as that is a reality, Democracy is just a pipe dream for idealists.

The effects of the civil war had a lasting impact, despite its short duration. In the end, it did very little for the colonies seeking independence. Only two of the colonies remained independent, with the others now staying as part of the empire (arguably for all the benefits Talia was offering them). Politically, we moved away from Democracy and experimented with a new form

of Governance: a Meritocracy. I'd seen many species pull it off, especially other warrior species like ourselves. Thankfully, it's worked out for us. Our empire couldn't be stronger and, at the very least, our leadership isn't corrupt as it would've been if we had kept with the Democracy you Humans are so fond of. If only you realized the benefits of only putting those who earned it in charge. That's not to say there's no accountability. Any leader we have is subject to punishment by the law set forth by the council (a body of Admirals and Generals with a few elected councilors from the civilian masses). Funny thing is, this is what I wanted from the very beginning. I never intended for us to have a democracy or anything like that. I am often disgusted by how often you humans are fooled by your "leaders". You admit they're lying to you but you do nothing about it? Do you not see how pathetic that is? How lazy you've become? But I'm not one to talk. I did convince myself I was a God at one point in my life. It would be funny if it were not so true.