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Death to the Insectoids! By Steve Gordon. All rights reserved. Write me at steve2 "at" allscifi.com and tell me what you thought of this book! Feel free to save this at any time in your hard drive (click on "file" on your browser, then "save as" to save it locally), so you can finish reading it at your leisure.

#### Chapter 1: Gladiator Games

Humanity had let down its guard, and paid a terrible price.

After decades of war a conflict-weary population was eager for peace. So when the Insectoids offered an armistice, the civilian leadership of the Alliance jumped at the chance to reach a final end to the bloody war.

The rest was history. The Insectoids ambushed the fleet at Vitalics, killing thousands of sailors and destroying the bulk of the fleet. After that there was nothing to stop them, nothing left to protect Alliance worlds, both League and Directorate planets. They landed on Alliance planets at will, killing those who resisted and enslaving the rest.

The destruction of the fleet at Vitalics was almost total--but not all the fleet was actually there. A small force under the command of the legendary War Admiral Norman North escaped an ambush and rallied the surviving forces. "Escape from the Insectoids" describes their flight from known space as they desperately searched for new technology they could use to take back their worlds. But the Insectoids weren't content to leave them to their search and made many attempts to destroy them. Finally after nearly twenty years of being chased, when the War Admiral's fleet was about to be destroyed, they were saved by a mysterious allied force, which was led by an old friend long thought to be dead.

During these nearly 20 years there was scattered resistance to the Insectoids on the worlds they occupied. Small bands of resistance fighters took the battle to the Insectoids, but at first their numbers were few and they were relentlessly hunted down. One of the most famous resistance leaders, former agency operative Clifford Croft, led one of the most successful teams to hamper the occupation force. But now the Insectoids struck back hard, killing some of his friends, and capturing others.

Date: One Year, 11 Months, and One Day after the Invasion

And now they were after Croft himself. The enemy had located his secret base and a heavily armed platoon of Insectoid troopers had surrounded it, awaiting only the order to attack.

The Insectoid officer surveyed the scene. Its troops were in position. It had more than enough firepower to assault the hideout. The humans had cleverly emptied out a power generator and hidden their base inside the outer shell. The officer clicked its mandibles. The successful completion of this operation would give its career a strong boost.

The officer had orders to take the Croft pest dead or alive. But the officer was taking no chances. Its troops had orders to shoot to disintegrate. If all went well the officer might even be permitted to reproduce.

"Attack," said the officer in a neutral clicking voice.

The troopers moved in. They simultaneously closed in from all directions. They saw a crack in the wall that looked like a hidden

door. The Insectoids bunched around the entrance, their weapons at the ready. The trooper in the lead pushed the door open and-

A fireball blasted its way out of the generator and engulfed the troopers. The Insectoid officer, at the edge of the explosion, was thrown off its feet. As it painfully struggled to get up, the sight of the burned body parts, splattered globs of green blood, and the screams of the dying troopers occupied its senses. There would be no chance of reproducing now. The officer would be lucky if it wasn't summarily dismembered.

A video monitor in a room half a mile in another direction clearly showed the fiery remains on the factory floor. The monitor also showed the faint reflection of the face intently watching the burned Insectoid body parts scattered across the factory floor. A face that was very much wanted.

Clifford Croft watched the scene with a measure of satisfaction. He wouldn't be that easy to catch; and if they ever did catch him, they would pay a higher price than that.

Croft reflected on the situation. Most of his allies had been caught or killed. General Markov. Markov's men. The Silencer. Preston.

He continued to watch the scene, burning the image into his mind. The only thing he felt was anger. He had known Preston for decades. The Silencer had saved his life countless times.

Croft suddenly heard a clap behind him, then another, then another. Without turning, he said, "Thanks for the applause."

The Clapper continued to clap. He had some sort of mental illness that caused him to clap when he was nervous, or bored, or agitated, or whatever. The Silencer had managed to curb the Clapper's urge to clap by sheer force of intimidation, but now-

Croft suddenly turned around, a look of annoyance in his eyes. The Clapper froze, in midclap. He was a powerful telekinetic, but was too timid to use his powers against allies. The same, however, could not be said of his companions.

"Where's Red?" said Croft, looking around. The only one in the small room besides them was Sashay, who was keeping an eye on the door.

"She went out," said Sashay. "She thought she heard something in the corridor."

"When was this?" said Croft. He elbowed Sashay away from the door.

"A few minutes ago," said Sashay.

And she wasn't back yet? Croft bit his lip as he looked down the gloomy corridor. Despite his bravado, he realized they were being chased and hunted down by an enemy who outnumbered and outgunned them in every department. The shock of the loss of his friends was still sinking in. And all he had left was the Clapper and Sashay, also known as the Paperweight.

He couldn't just abandon Red Sally. "Stay here," said Croft. "If I don't return in ten minutes, you're on your own."

Sashay grew wide-eyed, and the Clapper's hands fluttered nervously. Croft didn't stay to look for any further reactions before heading out the door, his blaster drawn.

If he ran into an Insectoid patrol he could take out two, maybe three of them before they got him. If only he had the Silencer with him! But the Silencer was dead. Or was he? Croft had seen him shot, but he didn't know for sure that he was dead. Maybe....

Croft inched down the corridor for several hundred feet. Suddenly, he thought he saw a flash of orange light from a side corridor. He turned down that corridor and started to hear the faint noise of battle.

The scene, when he reached it, was truly stunning; Red Sally and two men were trapped in a dead end, Red was shooting sheets of flames

at the Insectoids while the men fired blasters; the Insectoids, some firing back and others on fire, shrieking in pain, were running around blindly.

Croft, coming up behind the Insectoids, didn't hesitate, opening fire. After a second one fell, and the others turned to face this new threat. He saw a beam whiz by his right eye, and he instinctively crouched down, still firing. The Insectoids were falling rapidly, but there were so many of them!

Red Sally and the others were taking advantage of this distraction to cut down the Insectoids from their side. In a moment, the last Insectoid was hit, and all was suddenly silent, except for the crackle of Insectoid body parts on fire.

Croft stood up. He saw now that one of the two men with Red Sally was bleeding, and there were bodies of two other men on the ground besides them..

"Come on," said Croft hoarsely. "We're pushing our luck by just standing around."

Sally and the other two men gingerly picked their way over the charred Insectoid bodies to reach Croft. As they sprinted back to the hideout, Croft could see Sally's red hair, glistening with sweat, starting to turn blonde again.

They reached the hiding place without incident. The Clapper gave a muted squeal of joy when he saw Red Sally. They all sat on the floor, gasping to recover their breath, while Sashay continued to watch the door.

"This hideout isn't safe," said Sally. "It's too close to a main corridor and too near our last encounter with the bugs. We should go to the one that we set up."

After Croft's group had been forced to evacuate one of their previous hideouts during a particularly hurried retreat, leaving them with no secure base to go to, he had decreed that in the future they would always have a backup hideout. But, oddly enough, Croft had had his team split up into two groups, each setting up their own backup hideout, without telling the other group where it was. Red Sally, the Silencer, and Preston had set one up, and he, Mongo, and the Clapper had set up this one, and each group hadn't told the other where their backup was located. At the time they had wondered why Croft required this duplication and secrecy.

Croft shook his head. "Your backup hideout is a deathtrap."

"How do you know?" said Sally. "You don't even know where it is."

"But the Insectoids do," said Croft. "How do you think they found out the location of our primary hideout?"

Sally frowned. With all their running around, she hadn't given it much thought. "They may have stumbled upon it during a patrol--"

"No, it was too well hidden," said Croft. "Unless you believe the Insectoids have a policy of breaking into every generator they see, on the off-chance that it's been hollowed out and used as a hideout. They knew what they were going to find before they attacked. They set up specifically to attack this location; it was obvious from the monitor."

"Then how did they know?"

"They got to the Silencer, or Preston," said Croft. "It's the only answer."

"They're dead," said Sally.

"They may indeed be dead now, but not before one of them talked," said Croft.

"The Silencer would never give away our location."

"It may not have been his idea," said Croft. "Either way, one or both of them were captured, and lived long enough to tell them about our primary base. Now, both of them also knew about your secondary base. Want to bet that the Insectoids haven't staked that out as well?"

"Why don't we just check out-"

"If we check in, we won't check out," said Croft bluntly.

"As my dear departed wife used to say, better safe than sorry," said Sashay.

"How do you know it wasn't Mongo who was tortured for information?" said Sally. "He's unaccounted for."

"Possible," said Croft. "But he split before everything came apart. I'm guessing he saw far enough into the future to protect himself. We should leave now."

"Leave?" said Sashay. "But we're already at the hideout that your group built. Where else shall we go?"

"To the hideout I created on my own," said Croft.

Clifford Croft was not an especially trusting fellow. Working for decades as a spy hadn't sharpened his instinct to trust or rely on others, but even without his training, trust didn't come naturally to him. And so while he had gone through the motions of setting up an auxiliary hideout with Sashay and Mongo, he had, bit by bit on his own time, set up a real backup hideout for himself. And it was there that he took Sashay, the Clapper, Red Sally, and the two resistance fighters she had rescued. Only Croft insisted on a blindfold for the resistance fighters. No need to trust more people than necessary.

Nearly two years earlier, a light cruiser in the defense of August had been shot down during the initial invasion. The pilot had managed to make a controlled crash, landing on one of the few large open plazas in the heart of the capital city surrounding Sarney Sarittenden. The ship had broken open, but the main body of the craft remained intact, allowing the two thirds of the crew who survived to escape. The Insectoid ground troopers, after checking out the wreckage during the ground invasion, now didn't give it a second thought.

But Clifford Croft did. The impact had collapsed the upper levels of August underneath the crash site, reducing the amount of tunneling he needed to do. After some excavation, he had an ideal hiding place--in plain view of two Insectoid security checkpoints, on either end of the large plaza. The Insectoids would never, ever think to look there, and Croft had a secure method of ingress and egress--from the underground.

It was there that he took his allies. He had refurbished two of the crew quarters, which made a tight squeeze for six, but light and sound used there couldn't be seen on the plaza outside. If the Insectoids ever became curious and investigated the wreck again, they'd have to dig their way to the two compartments, giving Croft plenty of warning.

Czzz idly sat back in her chair. She was bored, and showed it. Now that they had conquered the humans, there was no fun, no excitement anymore! Czzz was a high-ranking Insectoid, a direct deputy to the governor-general of August, who had grown fat and lazy during the consolidation period. Perhaps the latest round of executions would add a bit of excitement to her day.

The prisoners shuffled into the execution chamber, herded by guards carrying long blades. Their faces were down, their body language showed they were defeated. How boring.

All except for one human. He moved slowly like the rest, shuffling along, and then, in the blink of an eye, he had somehow grabbed the giant four foot foot blade weapon from one of the guards, skewered it, and turned on the next one in line behind it.

An alarm sounded, and Insectoid guards rushed into the execution chamber. They attempted to disarm the creature, but it was too quick, even using the blade which was obviously too long and heavy for it.

Four guards were down before the rest pulled back, drawing their lasers for the inevitable putdown.

"Wait!" said Czzz, standing up suddenly. Everything stopped; the guards, the prisoner, even the one with the long blade who moved too quickly. Czzz looked down at the execution chamber. "You! Human! How do you move so quickly?" Looking more closely, Czzz noticed that the human was wounded, its right arm hanging loosely from it. Even more remarkable that it could fight like that while wounded!

The being looked up at Czzz and said nothing. Czzz wondered if her translator was functioning properly. "Human! How do you move so quickly?" Czzz said again.

The being spoke in a flat voice. "I don't; you just move so slowly."

"Do you have a name?" Czzz asked.

The being nodded.

Czzz waited. Then, seeing no response. "What is your name?"

"I'm called the Silencer."

The Silencer! The being responsible for the death of so many Insectoid troopers, the being who moved faster than a bat wing, the being who had raided Sarney Sarittenden itself. Now that was excitement!

"I think I have a use for you," said Czzz.

"We have captured or killed all the ringleaders," said the officer. A junior Queen, her name was Tsur, and she was in charge of internal security on August.

"All the ringleaders?" said Queen Zsst. "What of the one called Clifford Croft?"

"He is presumed dead," said the officer.

"When is he presumed to have died?" said the Queen. "Before or after the boobytrapped explosion which decimated your platoon?"

So the Queen knew about that. She must have her own sources within the military, Tsur realized.

"That could have been an automated boobytrap," said Tsur. "All evidence suggests he was killed along with the rest of General Markov's men-"

"All evidence suggests that you are trying to hide your failure," said Queen Zsst. "This Clifford Croft is one of the few senior agency humans still at large, one of their legendary Eight. He is skilled at sabotage and guerrilla warfare. Find this human, or I will find you."

"Yes, Queen," said Tsur, bowing as she exited.

Zsst turned to another aide. "Continue the report."

"We have broken the back of the resistance," the aide reported. "The raids in the capital area have virtually ceased."

"But only in the area of the capital," said Queen Zsst, noting the distinction. "That is not sufficient." She sat at ease in her throne room in the heart of Sarney Sarittenden. To her side stood a hooded figure. "Why are we not breeding additional troopers at full capacity?"

"We have the capacity to breed more, but not the foodstuffs to support them," said the aide. "We are working on increasing grubfruit production at the farms."

"See that you do," said Zsst. "We will only wipe out the human pest entirely when we have total numerical superiority."

"The goal is not to wipe them out," said the hooded figure. "I thought we were clear on that."

"To wipe out their resistance, I meant," said the Queen. "Of course, they can perform some minor manual labor as well."

"And other purposes," said the hooded figure. "We did not assist you in this invasion merely to provide you with cheap labor. The humans

have other uses, ones which you have not been using them for."

"Other uses, Baracki?" The Queen almost seemed to snort in derision.

The hooded figure shook its head sadly. "The humans can be used for skilled labor--"

"Skilled? For what?"

"Sophisticated product production. Driving. Piloting. You have a very educated worker base that you are squandering."

Zsst made a derisive noise.

"Do you not have a human in your employ?"

"The cook?" said Zsst. "It is a cook!"

"A sophisticated biochemist who is able to come up with dishes that your own cooks cannot," said Baraki. "I expect that you will make better use of the humans." The menace in his tone was clear.

The tension was palpable.

Zsst said, "Perhaps there are some minor tasks that they can be put to."

"Good. Also, you have ignored their industrial base. You simply level whatever they have in place in order to build your own factories."

"Their factories are not equipped to produce our munitions or other goods."

"Some of them can be retooled," said Baraki. "You might also learn something from their manufacturing techniques."

"Their techniques?" Zsst said incredulously.

"You don't even make use of their own power supplies," said Baraki. "Your race knows how to conquer, but doesn't know how to exploit. We invested a lot of time and effort in helping you with this invasion. You must profit fully from what you have conquered so that you can build up as rapidly as possible and be ready for the next step."

"Very well," said Zsst reluctantly. "We will see what can be done."

The Sarney Sarittenden Stadium was the largest event arena on the planet, with ample seating for 50,000 on-site spectators. Used in the past for sporting, artistic, or cultural events, the Insectoids had found a more practical use for it: gladiator games. Over the past two years over a thousand human prisoners had met their end providing the Insectoids with entertainment.

But attendance at the games had been declining. The audience, all Insectoids, was starting to find them boring. Thus it was with great pleasure that Czzz had located a new source of entertainment.

The Silencer stood in the arena, blinking in the morning sun as he raised one hand over his eyes. The other arm hung loosely on his right side. On the ground in front of him something gleamed in the bright sunlight. Coming closer he saw it was a smaller version of the sticks with the curved blades on the end that the Insectoids used. He picked it up with his good arm.

Over the announcement system words blared out in the clicks and buzzes of the Insectoid native language. "Announcing a new target... one of the most fearsome human opponents... a Graftonite... the one known as the Silencer!"

A buzzing went up in the audience. Obviously they had heard of him.

A seven foot tall Insectoid wearing the traditional red shoulder patch of a gladiator emerged into the arena. It carried a giant stick with a curved blade on the end, a larger version of what the Silencer now carried.

Normally, one of his top gladiators would take on several humans

at once. The weak, underfed, and poorly trained humans were seldom any challenge. But Czzz, sensing that the Silencer would be more of a challenge, had arranged for a one-on-one contest. She sat on comfortable pillows, watching the battle that was about to begin. She hoped the Silencer would provide some challenge.

The gladiator approached the Silencer. The Silencer didn't move, glaring at the Insectoid. He hefted the weapon in his good arm, as if feeling the weight.

The gladiator stopped several feet short of the Silencer. "Are you ready to die, human?" it said through its translation device. "I have killed 40 of your kind in the arena. I am only one short to move up to fifth place in the gladiator rankings."

The Silencer said nothing, but continued to glare coldly. The Insectoid, seeing it wasn't getting the reaction it expected, raised its weapon and cautiously started to circle the Silencer. The Silencer took a step as if to move in the opposite direction and to circle the Insectoid. The Insectoid took another step forward, and-

no one in the arena could see it, because it was so fast, but the Silencer doubled back, lunged and stabbed the Insectoid in the chitlins deep with the blade before anyone, including the Insectoid, could even blink.

The gladiator gave a hoarse scream as the Silencer tugged on the stick, causing the curved blade to sink deeper into the gladiator, pulling it down to the ground.

The green blood of the gladiator ran freely on the sands of the arena.

The crowd roared in anger. But Czzz was ecstatic. This wasn't the result she had been expecting; but it appeared this human would have some staying power. She wondered how it would perform when facing two gladiators....

"So as I see it, we've got to leave," said Croft. He looked around at their little group--Red Sally, Sashay, the Clapper, and the two soldiers they had picked up, Tanil and Yaney. It had been a week now since they had escaped from their last encounter with the Insectoids.

They were squeezed into one of the small renovated quarters aboard the crashed cruiser, all looking about aimlessly, except for the Clapper, who was watching something on the internal monitors. "The Insectoids have been mass producing troops at an incredible rate. The patrols here in the center of Sarney Sarittenden are simply too numerous for us to operate in safety."

"Who's to say that the patrols will be any lighter in an outlying area?" Sally asked.

"It just makes sense that they would build up their presence in the capital first," said Croft.

"And what happens when they build up their forces so much that it's not safe for us anywhere?" Yaney asked.

"Then we find a way to get off-planet," said Croft. He noticed their expressions. "Listen, I know we've just taken a bitter blow. All of us have lost friends. You guys have lost everyone you worked with under General Markov. We've lost the Silencer and-

"He's right there," said the Clapper, clapping slowly.

"-and Preston, who were colleagues of ours," said Croft, ignoring the Clapper.

"The Silencer's right there," said the Clapper, clapping slowly.

"What do you mean?" said Croft, looking annoyed at being interrupted.

"There," said the Clapper, pointing with a nod of his head, as his hands were busy clapping.

They all turned to look at the monitor. Croft had tapped into the internal network, to monitor Insectoid communications. The image on the screen was the Silencer, in the arena, holding a weapon of some kind, fighting three other gladiators.

Correction. Make that two. One of them went down with the Silencer's weapon in him. The Silencer gave a tug with his good arm to retrieve the weapon, but the weapon stayed firmly stuck to the Insectoid. A curved blade came whistling down on the Silencer's back even as he tugged; he jerked away at the last minute, gave its holder a sharp kick, and grabbed the weapon from the surprised Insectoid.

In moments, it was over, and the Silencer, expressionless, was standing over the bleeding bodies of three Insectoids.

"He's alive," said Croft. "We have to go get him."

The Clapper started to clap more quickly.

"Wait a minute," said Red Sally. "You were just saying how we needed to evacuate. Now you want us to go even deeper into the heart of the capital to make a rescue attempt?"

"Yes," said Croft simply.

Two days later, the Silencer was sitting in a cold, dark, windowless cell, quietly eating the bowl of gruel that he had been given. He didn't look up when he heard the cell door open, or even when he heard the familiar jeering buzz.

"Get up, human!"

"I'm not done," said the Silencer, continuing to eat.. He recognized his jailer; this one had given the Silencer a disproportionate share of his bruises and cuts.

The Insectoids reached out to give the Silencer a wack with one of its sharp arms. The Silencer ducked to the right before the arm landed, continuing to eat. The arm snaked out again, and the Silencer ducked to the left.

Roaring, the Insectoid lunged forward with two of its arms, and the Silencer, ducking underneath both of them, delivered a sharp kick into the creature's gut. With an oomph! it fell to the ground. But the Silencer wasn't finished yet; smashing down with his elbow, he cracked one the creature's large eye plexuses. It started to scream as it splurged green blood.

Other Insectoid guards ran up, brandishing lasers. Two of them pulled the still writhing body of the first Insectoid guard out, while the others kept the Silencer covered.

One of the guards, looking back and forth from the body to the Silencer several times, said, "Please eat quickly."

There was an enormous cage in the arena, filled with what the Insectoids called "beasts"; giant insects breed for viciousness. These beasts happened to be giant bumblebees, each half again as large as a groundcar. There were three of them in the cage. The Silencer wondered how they expected him to fight them off with one of their cumbersome blade weapons.

And then something was thrown down to him in the sand. He recognized it immediately, even before he picked it up. It was a simple, straight blade. With a button on the hilt. The Silencer hefted it in his left hand, and pressed the button. The outer edge of the blade gave off a thin glow.

It was a traditional Graftonite powerblade, or powersword. The forcefield along the edges of the blade could cut through the hardest substance like butter.

And then the door to the cage opened, and the three giant bees swarmed out in a direct line to him.

The Silencer wasn't an expert in the use of powerblades as other



Graftonites were. And using his left arm was somewhat awkward. But he was a Graftonite, one of the fastest, and he had used a powerblade before.

The three bees came towards him at an altitude of only five feet off the ground, their forms casting heavy shadows underneath them, their yellow and black colors glinting off the natural sunlight. They made a loud buzzing sound as their eye plexuses, sparkling in the light, homed in on him. It was as if headlights from large gravtrucks were fixed on him.

The Silencer seemed paralyzed into inaction. The shock of the sight of these beasts had caused more than one of their victims to freeze in their tracks.

But the Silencer was merely biding his time. At the last moment, the Silencer dodged to one side, running furiously as he raised his sword up. He ran under and around one of the flanking bees so fast that it took them a few moments to decelerate and turn around.

It was only then that the spectators noticed a piece of a wing on the ground, and one of the bees was flying unsteadily. The raised sword hadn't been a theatrical move, as many of the spectators had assumed; while running and dodging, the Silencer, quicker than anyone could see, had sliced through a piece of one of the beasts.

The beasts turned and charged again, but the Silencer kept running, for the only cover available: the cage. Running behind the cage, he stood along the edge of it, watching them approach. Because the bulk of the cage was between him and the beasts, the beasts couldn't charge him directly. Two flew above the cage and one of them came from the side.

But it was an uncoordinated attack, and the Silencer realized his advantage. These beasts had only a rudimentary intelligence, so their ability to cooperate with each other was haphazard at best.

The one attacking him from the side reached him first, and he ducked back behind the cage, so that it passed him by; it would take a precious moment for the bee to turn and accelerate back towards him. During that moment the Silencer ducked down and plunged his sword up, plunging into the guts of the bee who had just cleared the top of the cage. He yanked the blade out and spun to the side just as the bee came crashing down.

The third bee was just coming over the top just as the first bee was getting a lock on his location again, so the Silencer ran around and into the cage. The first bee tried to sting him through the bars, lunging at him, but the Silencer stood just out of range. The beast lunged again, and just as it pulled back the Silencer lunged, stabbing it quickly with his powerblade.

He heard a buzzing behind him and was lunging as he turned; the third beast was attacking him through the open end of the cage. The giant stinger lunged out at him, but a fraction of a second before it touched his body, his blade penetrated the beast first, causing it to jump back as if it had touched a hot poker. It fell to the ground in a heap just inside the entrance to the cage.

Without looking, the Silencer lunged behind him, through the bars of the cage, at the wounded bee that was pressing against the bars. His sword hit it straight between the eyes, and it dropped to the ground.

When the Silencer stepped out of the cage, there was raucous applause, with mandibles clicking and buzzing sounds everywhere. Even the Insectoids couldn't help but admire his skill.

The Silencer slowly walked to the entrance of the arena, still gripping his powerblade. Guards nervously grasped their lasers at the entrance, motioning for him to drop the weapon.

The Silencer seemed to pause, considering. Then he looked up, noticing the squad of guards above him, out of reach, who also had

lasers trained on him, and then he deactivated the blade, dropping it to the sand.

Deep inside the palace, in the heart of occupied Sarney Sarittenden, an interior wall illuminated, and a hooded figure stepped through. The illuminated wall seemed to show another room behind it, one much like the room the figure had stepped into. But this image faded almost immediately after the figure stepped through. The figure touched something on another wall, and the wall slid open, revealing a corridor in the palace. The figure glanced cautiously down the corridor; and, seeing it was empty, stepped forward.

The wall closed behind him, leaving no sign of entry or exit.

"You are very impressive!" said Czzz.

The Silencer had been brought, under heavy guard, to the hosting tower just behind the arena. He stood silently.

"You are the most entertaining human we have ever had in the arena," said Czzz.

She waited for some kind of reaction. There was one.

"Did you enjoy the use of your powerblade? It was I who procured it for you."

The Silencer didn't reply.

The guards stirred. The human wasn't behaving respectfully.

But Czzz wasn't disturbed, merely puzzled. "What is it that will make you speak?" He looked at the Silencer. "I notice one of your arms isn't functioning. I could have my veterinarian look at it."

The Silencer continued to say nothing.

"All you would have to do is ask."

There was no reply.

"Very well, then be silent!" said Czzz. "Speech is not required in the arena. As long as you are entertaining, you will continue to live. Guards!"

"Please, Silencer, come with us," said one of the guards, standing at a respectful distance. They had heard what had happened to the guard who had ventured into the Silencer's cell.

Croft thought he had found a semi-abandoned maintenance tunnel that led under the arena. At least, it looked like the tunnel hadn't been used in some time. Behind him were Red Sally, the Clapper, Tanil, and Yaney. Sashay, fearful about entering the heart of an Insectoid stronghold, stayed behind. They all were fearful, actually. But Sashay, the Paperweight, wasn't much good in battle anyway. All he was good at was cooking. And painting. For a moment, Croft wondered why he hadn't gotten rid of Sashay earlier. He was just another useless mouth to feed. Croft absentmindedly stared at an intersecting corridor ahead of them. He squinted; something was bothering him about that intersection, but he wasn't quite sure what it was. Maybe it was just an attack of the nerves.

In the intersecting corridor up ahead, just out of Croft's view, Tsur lay in wait with two handpicked squads of Insectoid troopers. Tsur knew that the Silencer was closely associated with the Clifford Croft human; and knew it was only a matter of time before the Clifford Croft attempted a rescue. Tsur had analyzed all the possible areas of attack, and concluded that Croft would attempt to come this way. And Tsur was waiting for him.

Suddenly Tsur heard a crackling sound, as if someone had stepped on the debris on the ground. Tsur peered just around the bend in the corridor, staring at the gloomy corridor, but saw nothing. Then he heard another sound, like a footstep, and another.

Tsur poked his head into the corridor. She still saw nothing.

But Croft staring ahead with infrared electrobinocurs, saw Tsur's head clearly. Using hand motions, he motioned for the team to withdraw.

When they had gotten several corridors away, Yaney asked, "What was that all about?"

"A trap," said Croft bluntly. "I noticed that while there was all sorts of garbage on the ground, that the intersection with the other corridor was clear, as if something had passed through there recently."

"What did you see?" Tanil asked.

"A very ugly Insectoid head," said Croft. "We can't reach the Silencer now. He's being watched and guarded too closely."

"We can't just leave him," said Red Sally, her hair starting to sparkle.

"We don't have the numbers for a frontal assault, and there's no other way to get easy access to him," said Croft. Suddenly, he made a shushing gesture, and they crouched down. In the distance they could see an Insectoid patrol passing by through a cross corridor. "Right now all we can do is worry about ourselves," he hissed. "Let's get away from here while we still can."

After the patrol had passed, they slowly started their cautious trip back to the ship. As they passed by a dark side corridor, they didn't notice a hooded figure standing in the shadows, watching them go.

## Chapter 2

Whatever happened to Mongo?

Turning back the clock:

Date: One Year, 11 Months after the Invasion

"Always ungrateful," Mongo hissed. "Always ungrateful, and foolish, yes, very foolish."

He was more irritated than usual. Croft and his allies had learned that Preston and Sashay were walking into a trap and had gone to rescue them. Mongo had tried to warn them but no, they wouldn't listen to Mongo. So as they headed in one direction, into a deadly ambush, Mongo headed into another.

As he scampered away, possibilities of the future flashed through his mind. But they were all jumbled, all coming too quickly. Mongo, however, saw images of his being captured, or killed by the Insectoids. The bugs were very active today. If he wanted to escape, he'd have to move fast.

Mongo headed down, down, down to the lowest levels of the underground. Insectoid patrols ran there too, but less frequently. He peered about cautiously in the gloom. Only the dim illumination of sparsely spaced emergency light panels flickered in the corridor. He heard the sound of water dripping. Nothing else.

Mongo scampered away into the darkness.

Three days later found Mongo on the edge of exhaustion and starvation. He hadn't eaten since he had left Croft's base, nor drank except for some questionable water dripping from a pipe. But at least he had moved away from the center of Insectoid activity; he had only heard sounds of movement twice, and both times in the distance. He had assumed it was the Insectoids, but hadn't stopped to check.

Mongo stopped at an intersection and peered ahead in the gloom. Suddenly, a flash vision hit him; Mongo, being grabbed in the dark and taken away. Mongo tried to focus on the image, but couldn't get another flash of it. He tried to remember the image as best he could. Hands were grabbing him in a dark corridor.

Mongo looked ahead. There were dark corridors to his right, his

left, and straight ahead. Which one was the bad one?

Mongo reflected, considering. His flash vision might represent an incident that might occur tomorrow, or next week. But no, he had felt an electrifying edge from the vision that told him it was imminent. But which way did the danger lay?

Mongo peered down the left corridor, then the right one, then the one straight ahead. He mumbled almost inaudibly to himself while chewing on some of his nails. His pale eyes stared out at the gloom.

Left, left, the danger must be down the left corridor, he sensed. Or was it? Mongo started to go down the right corridor, then stopped. Maybe the danger was down this corridor. Mongo was no longer getting visions, but instead relying on feelings.

Mongo looked down the center corridor. Then, an idea struck him. Of course, he should go back the way he came! That would be the only safe route. Mongo was smart, very smart indeed.

As quietly as he could, Mongo crept back down the corridor he had come from. His senses only spiked as he walked past a dark doorway. Before he could act on his intuition, a large form came leaping out of the darkness, pummeling him to the ground.

Mongo squealed and tried to resist, but his attacker was joined by another, and another, and in moments they had him pinned.

"Finally," said one of his attackers. "We've been tracking this one for close to an hour. Good thing he stopped so we could catch up. He'll fetch a good price, eh?"

Mongo spat and tried to claw his attackers. But then a foul rag was put to his face, he found himself nearly suffocated by the fumes, and everything went black.

Something was burning. Mongo blinked, and then instinctively covered his eyes. It was sunlight, raw sunlight, and for someone unused to the rays of the sun the light and the heat were bound to be uncomfortable.

But then a shadow fell over Mongo's face, and a giant head appeared. Giant, at least it appeared, because it was so close to Mongo's face.

An irritating giant smile appeared on the face. "Are we awake yet?"

Something about that smile unnerved Mongo and he scampered away, still on his back. He struggled to sit up. He was inside some sort of dusty compound filled with dirty, weary looking humans. Looking further, he saw the area was surrounded with fences and guards.

"What is this?" he said, looking up at the face. Now the head appeared normal sized.

The man continued to smile. "I'm afraid you've been taken prisoner."

"What do you want with Mongo?" said Mongo, getting up. He felt a bit light headed, but otherwise all right.

"Want with Mongo?" the man asked, his smile turning slightly puzzled.

"Why have you captured Mongo?"

"I haven't captured you," said the man.

Suddenly, an antique bell rang. All the humans groaned and struggled to get up. Armed guards entered the compound and used blows to get the prisoners on their feet.

"They're the ones who have captured you," said the man, smiling again.

"Get a move on, Smiley," one of their captors growled, giving the man an offhanded blow to the back of the head.

Smiley, if that was his name, barely flinched. "Yes, my friend." He turned to Mongo. "Come on, it's time for work."

"Work?"

"We're agricultural workers. Isn't that exciting?"

Ten hours of back breaking labor later, Mongo didn't find it so exciting. Smiley, who could talk a mile a minute, made it clear what had happened. He had been captured by slavers, and brought or sold here to work in back breaking agricultural labor.

Slavery, on August? When the Insectoids had invaded August, some of the humans had managed to flee to the periphery of the western continent, which still hadn't been developed and even had open land in some areas. The Insectoids apparently hadn't gotten this far out yet, and so the humans were free of molestation, at least for the time being. When Mongo had been kidnapped, he had been drugged and brought to western August.

But food supplies were limited, and when the government collapsed, roving bands of gangs raided each other for what was available. When the food was almost gone, the bands turned to farming, but found it easier to use others to do the back breaking labor. So gangs that had formerly raided each other for food now raided each other for workers. Over time the raids yielded fewer and fewer results, so the gangs probed deeper into August, looking for labor they could co-opt. It was there that they "recruited" Mongo.

So they didn't know about his special abilities; he hadn't been targeted for any special reason, and wasn't under any special guard. That means he should be able to escape.

As Mongo worked he let the flashes of the possible future leak in, one by one. Climb over the fence over there? No, he would be shot. Cut through the fence at that point? No, he would be caught. What about over there? Mongo processed the possibilities, but didn't see any easy avenues of escapes. That was all right, sooner or later, he would spot a promising potential future and take advantage of it.

If he survived.

There had been no substantial farming done on August for centuries. But planets that did produced agricultural output were fully mechanized. Unfortunately, the slavers didn't have any autoplanters or roboplows at their disposal, and so used people for every step of the planting and plowing process, as they had untold centuries ago.

Mongo found the labor exhausting. His scrawny form wasn't built for heavy labor, and he wasn't used to it. But when he stopped, collapsing to the ground, an overseer rushed over. "Get up!" he roared.

Without waiting for a response he lunched out with his powerwhip. As the current lashed into Mongo's back he shrieked, jumping to his feet.

"Back to work!" the overseer roared.

Mongo, with hate-filled eyes, picked up the small tool he had been given for digging, and laboriously continued to dig the ditch. But his arms felt like lead.

"Gee, that wasn't a very nice thing for them to do," said Smiley. As Mongo soon learned, Smiley always was smiling.

"Mongo weak. Mongo cannot survive," he said, digging slowly, but just fast enough not to attract a return visit from the guard, who was eyeing him caustically.

"You just need some enthusiasm for your work," said Smiley. "Come on, dig, one-two-three."

Mongo groaned.

"How about a song while we work?" said Smiley. "I have a great singing voice."

Mongo managed to get through the rest of the day without being

whipped again, but his arms had almost stopped working. After the digging detail in the morning, he had been set to lifting and moving heavy rocks around the perimeter. He knew he couldn't survive another day like this. He was so tired he could barely stand, but he managed to stand in line long enough for the daily ration. There hadn't been any breakfast, or lunch, so whatever they were fed, he hoped it would be sustaining. First they walked by a bowl of water which the serving prisoner dipped a large cup of water into. He handed the cup to the person in line in front of Mongo, who drank it eagerly. Then he stepped forward as the server refilled the cup, handing it to Mongo. Mongo looked at the contents of the cup. This was it? This was all they would be allowed to drink for an entire day?

The guard standing by the vat barked at Mongo, and Mongo gulped the water down. The line moved forward, and Mongo saw the prisoners in front of him were moving forward with their hands cupped together. When Mongo got to the second part of the line a server ladled a pile of somethings into his open hands. Mongo cupped his hands tightly but that didn't prevent one or two of the somethings from falling to the ground. Before he could react, the person behind him in line had reached down, picked them up, and swallowed them.

Mongo moved into better lighting to see what he held. They were small, green balls, some kind of tiny vegetable or plant buds. He put one in his mouth and tried to chew. It broke into very bitter tasting pieces. Mongo almost wretched. But he was hungry.

"Swallow them whole," said Smiley, suddenly appearing besides him. "That's the secret," he smiled.

Mongo followed his advice. The plant buds or whatever they were settled uneasily in his stomach. But at least he avoided the unpleasant taste in his mouth.

Smiley led him to a place where they could sit down on the ground.

"Mongo cannot survive on this," Mongo groaned, almost collapsing from fatigue. "How do others survive?"

"They don't," Smiley grinned. "The death rate is rather high." Mongo suddenly noticed that Smiley was holding a fancy pair of boots and polishing them. He wondered where Smiley had gotten the fancy boots from.

"Why do they make so much effort to take peoples, and then let them die?" Mongo asked.

"There's a terrible food shortage," said Smiley, vigorously brushing the boots. "The guards eat reasonably well, but there simply isn't much left over for the prisoners. At least, not for the regular prisoners." He smiled again.

Smiley really irritated Mongo. He was so exhausted that the visions, which naturally popped into his head, were slow in coming. Mongo tried to think of a future where Smiley wouldn't be wearing that irritating smile, but he was now too weak to receive any visions.

Straining to keep his eyes open, Mongo focused on something Smiley had said. "Regular workers?"

"Yes, well, some of the prisoners eat better, those who clean up after the guards, those who go on raiding parties--"

"Raiding parties?" Suddenly, a vision came to Mongo. He would go on a raiding party, and, and....

The vision was hard in coming. But somehow he definitely got the idea that something, or someone, would help him escape. Who or what that would be was still a mystery to Mongo. But that was enough.

"How Mongo get on raiding party?"

"Oh, you can't," said Smiley, flipping one of the boots over to cheerfully brush the other side. "Only the favorites can."

Mongo was dizzy from fatigue and couldn't think straight.

"I could probably get you on a raiding party," said Smiley. He grinned broadly. "I'm a favorite."

Mongo stared hazily at Smiley. Smiley was a collaborator. "How?"

"I'll just ask," said Smiley. "The guards owe me favors, a lot of favors."

"How?" said Mongo again.

Smiley lifted their boots. "I always do their boots."

"What does Smiley get in return for doing boots?"

Smiley frowned, as if in deep thought for a moment. "Well, I've never asked for anything in return for doing their boots. One day one of the guards remarked how dirty his boots were, and I offered to clean them. It just seemed the neighborly thing to do," he smiled again.

Mongo lost the willpower to keep his eyes open. The last thing he saw was Smiley's grin, and his arm, vigorously rubbing away at a dirt patch on the bottom of the boot.....

"Get up, you!"

Mongo woke up to a boot in his gut. He made an involuntary omphing sound and opened his eyes a crack to give them time to adjust to the bright sunlight.

A guard with a blue beard stood in front of him. He was big and muscular and from Mongo's perspective looked like a giant.

"I said, get up!" said the guard, kicking him again. This time, Mongo was alert enough to dodge partially out of the way as he scampered to a squatting position. "This is your lucky day!" growled the guard. "You're going on raiding party!"

Mongo got to his feet, looking warily at the guard.

"You're lucky, I'm only doing this for Smiley," said the guard. "But if you try to escape, or cause the slightest trouble, you'll get this," he said, suddenly striking out with an electrowhip.

"Yeow!" Mongo cried out.

"Just setting the ground rules," said the blue bearded guard.

Mongo and seven other prisoners were taken for a ride into the outskirts of metropolis. They were warned to be very quiet for even here the Insectoids sometimes patrolled. They were taken down several levels to a storage area, and instructed to put anything of value into sacks they were given. Blue Beard (Mongo learned that was his name, or at least what the others called them), gave them a stern warning that they would all be closely searched when they returned, and if they hid any valuables on their person they would have to answer to him. He also warned that he would punish slackers who didn't acquire enough goodies.

Mongo didn't have very much trouble after that. The work was much less physically demanding than laboring in the fields, and they spent the trip outside the reach of the blistering sun. His flashes of insight started to return to him, and he used them to locate valuables--small bits of electronics, clothes, and occasionally food--before the others did. It helped him avoid punishment and gave him more time to look around, and to think.

Whenever they were brought into a room there were always guards posted at the exits. Whenever they left it was always in single-file, with guards at the beginning, middle, and end of the column. There would be no obvious chance to slip away, not unless they encountered an Insectoid patrol and Mongo could get away in the confusion.

Mongo strained to recall the vision where he had seen himself escaping. But he hadn't actually seen such a vision, more like felt it. It was difficult to get back, and it wasn't at all clear whether it was the Insectoids who enabled Mongo to escape or something or someone else.

Mongo stayed alert for all opportunities, but could see none in this trip. When they were herded back to the ground transport and taken back to the farm, the prisoners emptied their bags under the watchful eyes of the guards.

Blue Beard looked at Mongo's pile. "Not bad," he said grudgingly. "You did pretty well, for a first time," he said, shoveling objects into a bag he held. When he was done he glared at Mongo. "Are you sure you're not holding out on me?" he growled.

Not waiting for an answer, he lifted Mongo by a foot, held him dangling upside down, and shook him violently to see what would come out.

The only thing that came out of Mongo were his shrieks of terror. "No, we have nothing, nothing!" he cried. Blue Beard let him go, and he dropped to the ground like a sack of 30 day potatoes, sobbing and weeping.

The other guards had a good laugh at Mongo's expense.

They should have known better. But they didn't know Mongo.

Perhaps impressed with his success on his first day out, the guards called Mongo out again for scavenger duty the following day. That was after he had another night in the barracks with the other prisoners. And Smiley.

Mongo stood in line, wondering how much more food he would receive for the special duty he had performed. He was shocked to find the same small pile of plant buds in his bowl. He looked up at the guard serving as if to complain, but the expression on the guard's face muted him, and he involuntarily stumbled forward.

"Promised they did," Mongo muttered. He sought out Smiley, who was busy working on another pair of boots.

"Uuummm, plant buds!" said Smiley.

"Smiley says that Mongo gets more food, better food, for being on special detail," said Mongo.

"Yes, I did, didn't I?" said Smiley. "I wonder why they didn't give you more. Did you remember to ask nicely?" he grinned.

Mongo just stared at Smiley wordlessly, hoping his gaze would burn a hole through Smiley's forehead.

"Oh, don't be sore," said Smiley. He passed a bowl over to Mongo. "Here, if it means so much to you, you can have my portion."

Mongo, who had started to swallow his own portion, was so caught by surprise that some of the buds caught in his throat. He coughed some, dislodging them, and it took a few seconds to regain control.

He looked at Smiley through narrow slits. What kind of trick was this?

"If Mongo eat Smiley food, what will Smiley eat?" Mongo said. He reflected, briefly, that he didn't even know Smiley's real name. But others called him Smiley, and he seemed content to leave it at that.

"Me?" said Smiley, busy polishing a boot. "Oh, I'm not hungry."

Not hungry. They were given starvation rations and Smiley wasn't hungry. Mongo looked at Smiley critically. He didn't seem nearly as thin as the other prisoners.

"What you eat?"

"Nothing," said Smiley, shrugging.

What was going on here? Smiley must have another source of food, better food, if he were willing to turn over his daily portion to Mongo. But Mongo couldn't fathom it. Right now, he had a more immediate need, and his stomach rumbled.

Making a face, he put Smiley's foul tasting bud ration in his mouth and swallowed.

"Wasn't that good?" said Smiley.

Mongo said nothing, not sure which disturbed him more--the fowl



buds he had swallowed, or the oddities that made up Smiley.

The next day Blue Beard, feeling that Mongo was moving too slowly to board the ground transport, gave him a friendly shove that sent him sprawling to the ground.

Mongo quickly got up, dusting himself off as he glared at Blue Beard, who was leering at him.

But everything else was all right. After the past day of relatively light labor, Mongo felt some of his old self returning. He even felt an anxious buzz. Something, or somethings were going to happen that very day that would present Mongo with an opportunity.

When they got to their destination, they immediately went into the undercity. Mongo had gotten out of the transport but was held back by Blue Beard so he would be at the end of the line, with Blue Beard behind him. As they walked Blue Beard gave Mongo a little shove from time to time, just to let him know who was the boss.

Mongo felt a flash, and then a shiver. Blue Beard was about to get a taste of who was really the boss.

They were walking in a dark, underground level in single file. There was debris on the ground and they walked slowly along the left side of the hallway, where it was easier to step without tripping on anything.

Mongo waited until he reached a certain point, just a few feet before the intersection with another corridor, where he casually swept his right foot from the right, dragging a piece of something he knew would be there to the left side of the hallway. No one in the dark could see what he had done, and the debris only made a small scraping sound as it moved with his foot.

Blue Beard, shuffling a few feet behind him, first noticed the debris when he stepped on it; but whatever it was, he slipped on it, and went crashing loudly to the ground, smashing against some discarded cartons along the wall.

The other guards ahead in line rushed back to see what had happened; when they found out, they cursed Blue Beard for his clumsiness as he angrily got to his feet. Mongo looked away, hiding the grin that would surely have earned him a beating. This was only the beginning.

Blue Beard tripped and fell twice more, and finally he tried to blame it on Mongo, but the other guards pointed out that Mongo was only walking where the other prisoners in front of him were, and that if Blue Beard kept being so clumsy that he would be sent back to the transport, alone.

Blue Beard growled under their ferocious verbal assault and tauntings and yelled back at them. The guards were so wrapped up in their argument that they didn't notice the buzzing noise until it was almost upon them.

And then the guards did notice, just as an Insectoid patrol turned around a corner.

"Down!" a guard screamed, and the prisoners hit the ground, while the guards and the Insectoids started a loud firefight.

Mongo got under partial cover behind a pile of rubbish--it wouldn't deflect a blaster shot, but at least it took him out of direct view.

One guard was hit, and fell to the ground, and then another. The air was thick with weapons fire. Mongo eyed a side corridor. Maybe this was the opportunity for escape he had felt. Perhaps he could crawl away.

No. An equally firm feeling told him to stay put. Mongo had learned to trust his hunches.

It was a good thing too, for what happened next was very, very quick.

Out of the side corridor leapt a... well, a humanoid figure, one who was almost too quick to see, at first. Guns blazing, he took out the remaining Insectoid guards before they had a chance to turn their weapons on him or even react. Even before their bodies hit the floor of the corridor his weapons were already holstered, and then withdrawn again, pointing down the hallway at the prisoners and the guards.

"Don't shoot," said one of the guards.

"If I had wanted to shoot, you'd already be dead," came a flat voice. The figure stepped into the light, and Mongo saw a hard face framed by a square jaw and short red hair.

At this moment, Mongo sensed that this was the being he had been waiting for. This was his opportunity to escape.

The surviving guards got up and encouraged the prisoners to do likewise. Blue Beard was regrettably among them, and as the leader of the guards had been killed, Blue Beard now stepped forward to take charge.

"You," he scowled, staring at the red haired man. "Haven't seen you in a while."

"But I've been hearing a lot of you," said the red haired man. "Very clumsy."

Blue Beard's face turned to rage, but for the first time Mongo saw him strive to control it.

"I suggest we hold this meeting somewhere else," said the man.

They quickly entered a room off the corridor; the man only relaxed after checking it over thoroughly to make sure it held no hidden surprises. Even then he stood with his back to a wall so he could watch both the guards and the door.

"Thanks for your help, Red," said one of the guards.

"Thanks is cheap," said the man. One of his hands strayed near the butt of one of his blasters. "How much are your lives worth?"

Some simply called him Red. He was a Graftonite, a killer for hire with fantastic reflexes. But however quick his reflexes were, his temper was even quicker, and his full name was Angry Red.

At least, that's what he was widely known as. But no one called him Angry to his face.

He had been on an assignment on August when the Insectoids had invaded. That hadn't stopped him from carrying out his assignment--the liquidation of a business competitor. When he attempted to collect from his employer, not only did he have to spend several months hunting down his employer, but once found, the employer, citing changed circumstances--the Insectoid invasion of August--didn't see the point in paying.

Angry Red showed him the point in paying.

Ever since then he had been stranded on August, making a living by scavenging, performing odd jobs for local gangs, or simply taking--whatever he wanted, from whoever he wanted. There wasn't an Augustan, or a group of Augustans with the reflexes to stop him.

The Insectoids, individually or in small groups, were a nuisance, and Angry Red steered clear of the larger groups. But as the Insectoids expanded their numbers he found himself pushed to the periphery of the western continent, which is why he happened to be there.

He had had dealings with this group of guards before, trading goods. But now he had just saved them, and they were scared, and unbalanced; it was a great opportunity to take advantage of them.

The guards looked uneasily at each other, realizing that Red could take whatever he wanted. "Maybe we could give Red some of our

stash." They had just come from raiding a chamber earlier, and the prisoners had some goods in their sacks. The guards had had peaceful encounters with "Red" before, but they also feared him; and if Red felt that they owed him something, the guards were eager to pay up.

The prisoners emptied their sacks under Angry Red's watchful eyes.

"Pitiful," he sneered, shaking his head as he moved from prisoner to prisoner, eyeing the snatch.

When he reached Mongo, his mind was racing, and everything was moving in slow motion as visions flashed through his head. How was he to hold his hand... was that... yes, just right?

Angry Red looked down as Mongo slowly flashed something, a trinket perhaps, in his hand. "What's that?" he growled, bending down to grab it away from Mongo.

But in that instant Mongo whispered in Angry Red's ear.

Angry Red stopped, in mid motion, and listened, eyebrows raised.

He stared at Mongo for a moment, as if he might strike him, and the others wondered what Mongo had said to him.

And then Red, still facing Mongo and the guards, took several steps back, and started digging under some debris with his toes.

His eyebrows shot up, and he picked up something with one hand. It looked like an electronic blow puncher. In good condition, too.

"Have you been here before?" He asked it like it was an accusation.

"No, no, never," one of the guards assured him, not realizing why it was wrong if they had been.

Angry Red frowned, and the whole room grew nervous. "Then how did you know that was there?"

"Mongo knew," said Mongo. "Mongo knows where to find many things."

Angry Red looked at Mongo, then at the guards, then back at Mongo again, as if making a calculation.

"I can have anything I want?" Angry Red said.

"Sure, take your pick," said one of the guards.

"Then I'll take him," said Red, nodding at Mongo.

"Whoa-we're not authorized to trade prisoners," said Blue Beard. Red let his right hand drop to his waist, where his blaster was holstered. "You did say anything."

Blue Beard gulped. He knew how quickly Angry Red could draw. He could draw and fire before any of them could even raise their blasters.

"That one's nothing but trouble."

"Thank you for your concern, but I've made my choice," said Angry Red, as if the matter was settled.

Blue Beard, sweating feverishly, nodded.

Angry Red allowed himself to relax, slightly. "We go now. Come."

And that's how Mongo escaped from the farm gang. But he didn't realize what he was getting into. Right after they parted company with the guards, Angry Red took Mongo back to his hideout, an abandoned supply room several levels down about a half mile to the north. Mongo obediently followed; there would be plenty of opportunities for escape later. Angry Red was only one man, and even he had to sleep sometime. In the meantime maybe he had some goodies in his hideout that Mongo could appropriate.

Angry Red did have some interesting devices in his base of operations, but not all of them were ones that Mongo would appreciate. The first thing Red did when they entered was to grab Mongo by the throat. Mongo started to squeal and fight back but Red said angrily, "Don't move," and that sapped the fight out of Mongo.

Angry Red took a collar off a shelf and put it around Mongo's

neck, snapping an open part shut so it clicked together. Red then picked up a remote display with one hand while still holding onto Mongo with the other. Flicking a button revealed a red dot on the display, and several other indicators lit up as well.

Nodding in satisfaction, Angry Red released Mongo. Mongo sputtered and rubbed his sore neck, feeling the contours of the collar.

"I wouldn't play with that," said Red. "It's liable to explode."

"What have you done to poor Mongo?"

"Every pet needs a collar," Red grinned. His grin was nothing like Smiley's. "Except this collar has a homing device, and an explosive charge. Try to remove it, and it detonates. Try to run, and I detonate it."

He then sat down and grilled Mongo extensively about his powers. Red was smart enough to know that Mongo had some kind of special mental power. He asked Mongo many questions about his ability, and Mongo was forced to reveal that he was able to see things with his mind. But Mongo was able to deceive Angry Red in a small way--he allowed Red to believe that Mongo was only clairvoyant, that he could see things in other places with his mind. He didn't let on that his power was tied with the ability to see the future, or possible futures.

This was an important distinction. Because Mongo could see the future, he could look for a future where, sooner or later, he managed to escape from Angry Red.

But such a future had to have at least a potential to exist; with his boobytrapped collar, Mongo saw that in the futures where he tried to escape that Angry Red either tracked him down, or remotely detonated the collar. Mongo shuddered; it wasn't pleasant seeing visions of one own's head blown being off.

So Mongo was forced to cooperate. For several months he was forced to hunt for supplies for Angry Red. If he didn't work fast enough, or produce enough items that Red could use or swap for something else, Red would beat him, sometimes with his fists, or the hilt of a blaster rifle, or even with a stick.

He treated Mongo like an abused animal, only feeding him as an afterthought, requiring him to sleep in a distant corner of the room on a dirty mat with the word "Fido" painted on the wall behind him. It was some kind of joke Angry Red found amusing. But he was seldom amused, and Mongo never knew when he was going to burst into a fit of rage and beat him.

Mongo frantically searched for futures where he would be free. If he ran far enough in the underground, there should be enough metal between him and Angry Red to prevent a detonation signal from reaching him.

The problem was that Mongo didn't know how far was far enough; in a few futures, he saw scenes of himself escaping and not getting his head blown off. The only problem is that those visions were for short term futures; there was no saying whether in a "safe" future he wouldn't get his head blown off thirty seconds after the time shown in a vision. It would be just like Angry Red to roam around the underground, hoping his signal got close enough to detonate the collar.

Mongo constantly weighed his fear of beatings and mistreatment with the fear of escaping and constantly being in fear of being blown up. If he could only get the remote control from Angry Red! But Angry Red carried it on him full time, even sleeping. If the collar was indeed boobytrapped, then Mongo couldn't leave unless he got the remote control.

Or, as it gradually occurred to Mongo, unless Angry Red was dead.

That thought first occurred to him after a particularly vicious beating Red inflicted on him for "wasting time" and "not bringing

anything good back" on one of his latest hunts. Red constantly suspected that Mongo was simply goofing off when he sent him to find items that Red could use or sell, and this time he let him have it repeatedly in the stomach with the butt of his blaster rifle.

Red seemed immune to Mongo's screams of pain. Red only stopped when he decided he had made his point.

Mongo was really hurting. Something inside him snapped as he lay there in pain. He wouldn't endure another beating again, no.

He stayed up all night searching futures. Finally he found one. It was risky--in about half the futures Mongo ended up clearly dead, or ambiguously dead. But Mongo couldn't take this anymore.

The next day Mongo uncharacteristically volunteered to go out alone to hunt for useful items.

Angry Red interpreted that to mean Mongo wanted to goof off, and said they would both go together.

Good. It was happening exactly as described in Mongo's vision. All he had to do was what he had done in the vision.

It really wasn't very difficult. Red relied on Mongo to find useful objects. All it took was a vague suggestion that one hallway was better than another, or that a room might contain something useful, and Red would follow. Red didn't seem to suspect that Mongo was up to something that wasn't in his best interests. After all, he only thought that Mongo was a clairvoyant, and what harm could a clairvoyant do?

Mongo guided Red to several places where they found a few small items. It was necessary to start this way--if they found nothing, Red would be suspicious. But their entire day had been directed towards an event that would take place at the next juncture of corridors. If Mongo kept going, they would both be safe. But if Mongo paused in the intersection... well, he would either be free, or dead. It would require very tricky planning.

For there was an Insectoid squad in the area. Under normal circumstances, Red could take them handily. Mongo resolved to make the circumstances as abnormal as possible. But he couldn't tilt the odds too far the other way; if the Insectoids won the encounter, they could kill him just as easily as Red could. That was the difficult part; with so many possible future outcomes, it was difficult to decide what to do to get the right one. Should Mongo take such a dangerous risk? It would be much easier just to walk on.

Red gave him a little shove as they neared the intersection, and Mongo silently thanked him for making up his mind for him.

When they reached the intersection. Mongo stopped.

Angry Red glared. Angry Red always glared.

But Mongo reached out with his arms and closed his eyes, and Angry Red thought he understood what Mongo was doing.

Angry Red couldn't have been more wrong.

Mongo opened his eyes a crack. Was it this corridor, in this direction? Or was it in the other direction, behind him? He wasn't sure.

He could hear Red fuming behind him. He couldn't keep at this forever.

It must be this corridor, in this direction. Therefore, he needed to go the other way.

Turning around, he walked a few feet down the corridor in the other direction, where he saw a stack of debris.

Just like in his vision.

Mongo started rooting through the debris. Because he was listening for it, he could hear a very, very faint, buzzing from behind him, in the distance. Good.

Mongo sifted through the debris, making as much noise as he could. Angry Red, facing him, glared and said, "Do you have to make so much noise?"

Mongo continued to make as much of a clatter as he could, both to attract the Insectoids and to mask their approaching sound.

Angry Red wasn't dumb. Realizing something was afoot, he reached forward and grabbed Mongo by the arm.

For a second all was quiet and they could clearly hear the buzz, much louder now, from behind them.

Mongo's mind recorded the events that happened next in slow motion. Angry Red wasn't stupid. His eyes flickered at Mongo's, showing shock, surprise, and recognition. He knew what Mongo had done. But then he was releasing Mongo, spinning around as he drew his blaster. There were Insectoids down the corridor, several of them.

In the split second he took to aim, Mongo gave him a shove, pushing him against the wall.

His first few shots went wild.

The advantage that all Graftonites have is their tremendous reflexes, giving them the ability to shoot first (and second and third and fourth). When they lose that advantage, they can be shot at much like anyone else.

The Insectoids fired first, sending blaster bolts streaming down the corridor. It was during this steady stream of fire that Angry Red readjusted his aim and fired back.

A bolt sizzled next to Mongo as he dived behind some rubbish.

The bolts went back and forth furiously for a moment. And then, there was silence.

Silence. That meant the Insectoids were dead, or gone. But what about Angry Red?

Mongo heard a shuffling. He looked up and saw, a few feet away, a blaster, pointed straight at him. Angry Red was shuffling towards him, blaster pointed straight between his eyes.

Mongo tried to think of something he could say or do that would save his life. But nothing came to mind. He had gambled, and lost; he had fallen into one of those futures in which he didn't survive.

Red shuffled closer, and closer. In the bad light it was difficult to see his expression; his entire body was in shadow.

And then Red stopped, aiming straight at his head, and the gun wavered... and Red fell crashing to the ground, rolling on his back.

It was only then that Mongo could see that Red had been shot in the gut. Taking a deep breath, Mongo scampered over the body and pulled the remote control from Red's belt. Then he danced back a few feet.

Mongo stood there silently for a moment, looking for any sign of life. He felt a temptation to go back and feel for a pulse, but if Red was alive, he might take the opportunity to grab him.

Mongo eyed the bloody wound. Surely Red was dead. Even if he weren't dead, he was surely dying. There was no possible way he could survive just lying here, in a corridor. Even if another patrol didn't find him, he would surely bleed to death without medical attention.

Mongo tried to probe the immediate future. In no one could he see any sign of Angry Red.

But Mongo was afraid to get closer to be sure that Angry Red was dead. In a last gesture, he leaned forward, and spat on Red's face. Red's eyes were closed, and didn't flutter.

Mongo, feeling an intense sigh of relief, scampered away down a corridor.

Finally, he was free!

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From the personal log of Clifford Croft, two years and nine months after the Invasion

I'm brilliant, but I'm not a magician.

That's to say that I can do incredible things. I've made a career of it. But in order to get anything done, it has to be within my means. I'm a spy, an infiltrator; if I can do it on my own, I'll do it. But leading a large scale revolt, well, that's not in my resume.

We had relocated to a scenic spot on the edge of the metropolis in western August, that is, the western part of the western continent, Concord. Sarney Sarittenden, the capital, where the Insectoids are located in the heaviest concentrations, is on the east coast of Concord, and the Insectoids have been spreading westwards from there.

Occasionally I wonder what, if anything, is going on in Aridor, the eastern continent. It is, or was, largely uninhabited; it might make a great place to hide, once the Insectoids totally overran Concord. That's assuming they weren't overrunning Aridor at the same time. Do the Insectoids have any use for undeveloped wilderness?

That leads me to another thought: last I heard, my scientist friend Levi Esherkol was on Aridor. I wonder whatever happened to him. If he was warned in time, perhaps he was able to get into the bush and hide. There certainly was more than enough forest to hide in, and the Insectoids weren't likely to make an effort to root out one, fleeing human. Chances are he was a lot safer than I was right now.

We are attempting to organize some of the locals into a resistance group. At first when we got here, a few months ago, we didn't see any Insectoid patrols, but soon we saw one occasionally, and now we see patrols at least once a day. They're spreading, and with the western coastline not far off, there isn't much else where we can retreat to. Nor can we easily escape to Aridor. Aridor is several thousand miles away on the other side of the globe; the closest approach is only fifty miles away, but that's on the east coast, near Sarney, and we're near the west coast.

So I do what I can: organizing some of the refugees, going on raiding parties, striking a blow at the Insectoids. But most of the survivors of the Insectoid occupation who are free are civilians who are scared witless.

"We will not get involved," said the scraggly leader, Maprune. "We are pacifists, and believe in non-violence. In any case it is the duty of you, the military, to protect us"

Croft sighed as he stared at the other scraggly civilians, most dressed in dirty, ragged clothing, as they sat around in the burned out lobby of the entertainment center they were in. Red Sally and the Clapper stood behind him, while Tanil and Yaney kept an eye out for the Insectoids. Sashay had begged off joining them on this recruitment tour, saying he wanted to stay home to prepare a special supper.

Croft considered the words he had heard. "There are so many things wrong with what you said that I'm not sure where to begin," Croft sighed, realizing from their expressions that he, too, hadn't said the right thing. But he wasn't a diplomat, he wasn't a leader, he was pressed into this position by default. Who else was going to lead them? A finicky cook? A claptomaniac?

"For starters, I'm not military," said Croft. "I'm a spy."

"Spy, military, what's the difference?" said Maprune. "You are trained with violence in mind."

Croft reflected that he did in fact have violence in mind at this very moment. "Secondly, if you are pacifists, the Insectoids are not. What will you do when they come here and hunt you down?"

"The Insectoids will not come," said Maprune.

"We have started seeing some of their patrols coming out this far," said Croft.

"If they come we will move farther west."

"You are almost on the west coast already."

"We will show we are not a threat by not defending ourselves."

"Do you have any connection, however slight, with reality?" Croft said. He turned to the others, who were watching him with wide eyes, and raised his voice. "I have an e-mail for all of you: the human race is about to become extinct. If you keep going the way you are, you'll either be dead or enslaved before the end of the year. Is that what you want?"

Maprune's group watched him silently.

"Are you deaf?" Croft yelled. "Do you not understand my words? Isn't anyone going to say anything?" He caught the eye of one of the fugitives, who stirred. "You? Yes, you, sir, did I catch a hint of a thought?"

The man slowly said, "It's the job of the military to defend us."

"Hello!" said Croft, leaping forward and pantomiming as if he were knocking on the man's forehead. "The military is gone. Dead. No more military. If you want to live, you have to--"

He stopped in mid-sentence. Somehow, somewhere, he had the feeling he was being watched. He looked around for a moment. All he could see was the gloom of the surrounding buildings, which appeared to be dark and empty.

Croft spoke into his comm unit. "Report."

"All quiet," came Tanil's voice.

"Yaney?" said Croft.

There was a silence for a moment. Then, "All quiet. Except for you, chief. Can you lower your tone a bit? I don't see them coming, but yelling is an invitation--"

"I don't need a lecture about my lectures. Out" said Croft, closing communications. The feeling, whatever it was, was gone now. No, it hadn't been like a feeling, but more like an emotion....

He looked at the others. "You type 29 sheep can go home now. If any of you get a backbone, let me know."

He snapped his fingers to get the attention of Red Sally and the Clapper, and hooked his thumb out and down. They were leaving.

As Croft left the building, a hooded figure in shadow across the street nodded slightly, and followed.

They made the same appeal to other groups of scavengers over the next few days. Some were apathetic. Most were fearful. A few even begged Croft not to attack, for fear it would incite the Insectoids.

With every encounter Croft grew more and more disgusted. Finally, though, he encountered a group that seemed to have a little backbone.

"An Insectoid patrol took two of our people last week," said their leader, Alped. "If you're going after them, more power to you!"

This was like music to Croft's ears, compared to the defeatism he had been hearing. "We can defeat them, but only if you join us."

"I don't know," said Alped. "We don't have many weapons, and we aren't well-trained."

"Our first strike is a supply warehouse less than a mile from here," said Croft. "It's probably filled with all sorts of goodies. Including food."

At the mention of food Alped's ears picked up. "We'll fight with you!"

"Good," said Croft.

They arranged to meet at sunrise the following morning at a predetermined location. As Croft made his goodbyes and turned to go,



he got that feeling again. This time he identified it. It was a feeling of... anticipation. But it didn't seem natural in him; it seemed, somehow forced. He looked around at the buildings in the area, but saw nothing out of the ordinary.

He also failed to notice the hooded figure who followed him home.

Croft let everyone know at dinner what was planned for the next day.

"Going into battle, eh?" said Sashay, serving dinner. "Then I think it's appropriate that I made battle stew tonight."

"It's about time," said Red Sally. "I'm tired of all this speechifying. I came here to fight, not run for public office."

The Clapper clapped supportingly.

The next day they waited in the ground floor of a building a block away from the supply dump, just before sunrise. But as the sun rose, the others didn't show up.

Minutes turned into an hour.

"Maybe they overslept," said Tanil.

"Overslept! Clap! Overslept! Clap!"

"We'll just have to do this without them," said Croft grimly.

At that moment they heard noise, and drew their weapons, but it was only Alped and three of his followers.

"We're here!" said Alped cheerfully, making no mention of the fact that he was an hour late. "My feeling is that we would bring up the rear-"

"Where's the rest?" said Croft.

"What?"

"There were over twenty in your group when I met you, and you said there were still others I hadn't met," said Croft.

"Ohhhh yes," said Alped. He looked embarrassed. "Many of our people weren't up to it. They're not used to getting up this early in the morning."

Croft said nothing. Red Sally's blonde hair started to fringe red, and a light steam could be seen around her.

"Let's do it," he said bluntly.

They snuck up as close as they could without being detected, around the corner from the warehouse.

"Ok, I scouted this place two days ago," said Croft. "There are only a total of eight guards-"

"Eight?" said Alped. "But there are only eight of us. That isn't very good odds."

"-once we take out the ones at the door, your people race in go to the right, and we'll take the left."

"You mean in front?" said Alped. "I was thinking that perhaps we could secure the rear."

Croft turned to Alped. "You can either follow our plan, or leave, now."

Alped considered for a moment, and then nodded.

Croft caught the eye of Red Sally, Yaney, and Tanil. The Clapper and Sashay had stayed behind.

The three nodded at him, and he nodded back.

Croft eyed the sentries at the entrance, took a deep breath, and gave the hand sign to attack.

There were two guards at the entrance to the warehouse, and the Insectoids barely had time to look up and squeeze off a wild shot or two before they were gunned down by shots from their attackers. Croft barely paused as he ran past their bodies into the warehouse; as per the plan, he, big Red, Yaney, and Tanil took the left side, while Alped's people went right.

Croft nearly ran into an Insectoid guard as he rounded a corner; but Croft was ready to attack, and the Insectoid wasn't. Croft fired at point blank range and the Insectoid went down. Around him he could hear the fire from other weapons.

In seconds it was over.

He called out.

"Secure." They announced, one by one.

Good. Croft slowly walked to the other side of the warehouse, to see how Alped's people at done.

Two Insectoids opened fire on him as he rounded a bend. He ducked behind a stack of containers but their shots caused a shelf to fall on him, pinning him down.

The Insectoids came closer so they could get a clear shot. Croft reached for his blaster, but his arm was pinned down under the shelf.

Suddenly Croft felt a heat wave and both Insectoids burst into flames. In the distance he could hear several more blaster shots.

And then it was all over. Yaney came racing up and helped Sally pull the shelf off of Croft.

"Now that's what I call cookin'!" said Red Sally, her hair a bright red as she admired the charred Insectoid corpses.

"What happened to the others?" Croft said.

He quickly discovered that there were no others. Alped and his people had never entered the warehouse. The two wild shots the guards at the entrance had squeezed off had been enough to scare them away.

Croft mechanically ordered Sally to take the lookout point while the others collected the goods. But even as he issued orders he was shaking his head. This wasn't going to work. Enough was enough.

As they headed back to their hideout Croft took the rear point position, and constantly looked back. But he still didn't spot the hooded figure following him.

"So what are we going to do now?" said Sashay, as he started serving dinner.

"If only we had the Silencer," Croft muttered. "He would be worth 50 of these sheep."

"We tried rescuing him once," said Yaney. "He's too heavily guarded."

"Then we'll just have to keep staging attacks," said Croft. "If we do nothing, we'll be overrun in a few months. And in case any of you forget, we have almost nowhere left to retreat."

"As my dear departed wife used to say, don't invite the world in through the front door unless you're sure there's a way out the back," said Sashay.

"What about Aridor?" said Tanil

"Aridor! Clap! Aridor! Clap!" the Clapper clapped.

"Sure, we could hide out there easily enough," said Croft. "There are even three separate ways to get there. We could take the subcontinental tube from Sarney Sarittenden, if it weren't swarming with thousands of Insectoids. Or we could fly a shuttle, if we had one. Or we could build a raft and float several thousand miles."

"Even if we do kill some of the Insectoids, they must have vast breeding farms," said Yaney. "What difference will killing a few of them make?"

"You mean, why not just give up now?" said Croft morosely. He drew his blaster, and tossed it across the table so that it fell into Yaney's lap. "Point it at your forehead, and press the trigger."

He abruptly got up and left the table.

"I hope it wasn't my food," said Sashay.

Croft retrieved his blaster and went outside for a walk. Lately even a simple walk outside was becoming a riskier proposition, but

Croft desperately needed time to think.

The fact was, that Yaney was right. Their pitiful rearguard effort wouldn't change anything. In a matter of months, they would be dead.

Croft found that the thought depressed him. In his mind he started weighing the alternatives. Steal a ship? Then what? He might get blown up before he ever got out of orbit. He could make for Aridor, then. That might buy him some time.

But what kind of life would he live there, all alone in the forest? He'd go mad.

He could take Red Sally and the others with him.

Still, what kind of life would he have there? All his time would be spent in subsistence farming. What kind of life would that be?

At least he'd be alive.

But was it a life worth living? Did he even have a realistic chance of stealing a ship?

As he slowly walked around the underground and weighed these options, he gradually felt a layer of depression being stripped from him. Then another, then another.

Suddenly, he felt normal again. Not happy, not ecstatic, but normal.

Croft was smart enough to realize that his emotions were being controlled, manipulated, from an external source.

He sensed a presence behind him. Somehow he knew that when he turned around-

Croft wheeled around, his blaster drawn. A hooded figure stepped out of the shadows created by the dim emergency lighting.

Under other circumstances, Croft would have fired first and asked questions later. But suddenly he felt a wave of reassurance that dulled his trigger-quick instincts.

"You can stop with the mental cheerleading sessions," said Croft. "I'm not going to shoot you, at least until I know what it is that I'm shooting."

"You are the one," said the voice.

"The one? The one what?" said Croft.

"The one I've been looking for," said the voice. "The fact that you are so inner aware proves it."

Croft decided to risk some stronger lighting; he turned on his belt unit. A beam of light revealed....

...an old, bearded man in brown robes.

"Who are you?" said Croft.

The old man didn't answer, but projected a feeling, one which can't be easily described in words.

"Something about you feels familiar," said Croft, staring intently at the face. "I don't know you, but-"

"You did know someone like me," said the man. "Things tend to follow familiar patterns, and I am now doubly sure I chose rightly."

"Chose what?"

"Why you, of course," said the old man. "I have chosen you."

"To do what?"

The old man looked quizzically at him. "To save your people, of course."

### Chapter 3: The Return of General Arkik

Mongo peered out into the gloom. He had been clever, yes, very clever. For the past few months he had been living on his own, evading the Insectoid patrols and even the human scavenger parties, using his talent to the hilt to help him survive. There never was a time that

Mongo wasn't hungry; in this environment, it was impossible to have your stomach filled all the time; but Mongo was surviving, and doing reasonably well on his own. Sometimes he could see certain circumstances when he would be caught by a patrol, or a group of slavers, and avoided going to those places until the threat had passed.

So Mongo survived. But he still wore that annoying collar that Angry Red had put on him. He had to stop himself from tugging at it sometimes, remembering that Angry Red had said it was boobytrapped. Someone like Croft could have removed the collar.

Croft. He wondered what had happened to Croft, and the other annoying ones, the bounty hunter, the one who clapped too much, the pretty lady with the blonde and sometimes red hair. Mongo even thought about the sissy cook. He made very good food. What had happened to them?

Mongo presumed they were dead; at least, he hadn't received any more visions of them. But then he usually only got visions of other people when they were already around him, or were about to be.

Suddenly Mongo stiffened. For the first time since his escape, he had a vision of a very familiar figure.

It was Angry Red.

He was alive!

Mongo grew taut as he "saw" Angry Red come around a corner, and realize that that was just outside the building that Mongo was perched in.

Cautiously, very cautiously, he peered outside the window. He waited five seconds... ten seconds....

Then a figure appeared on the corner. Looking down at him, Mongo saw he had red hair.

The figure was holding some sort of device that he was peering into. He panned it left, then right. And then up.

And then the figure looked up, and Mongo found himself staring at Angry Red.

Mongo took off at a run. He didn't know if Red had seen him or not, but obviously he had constructed another tracking device.

And then, as he sweated heavily while running, another thought occurred to him--could Red detonate the explosives with his new device?

As he ran, he half-expected an explosion. Nothing happened. Either Red couldn't, or Red wanted him alive, or Red hadn't seen him.

Mongo scampered away as fast as he could.

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"Me?" said Croft. "I'm not exactly the leader type."

"I didn't say you would lead them, certainly not all by yourself," said the bearded man. "I just said you would save them. And you won't do it alone. Others will help."

Croft started to feel an infusion of self-confidence. Maybe he could do it!

"Wait!" said Croft. "Who are you? How did you find me? What's your agenda? How am I going to defeat the Insectoids? And lastly, though I'd like this answered first, is how do I know I can trust you?"

The old man smiled, deciding to answer Croft's first question first. "You would feel more comfortable with a name? Very well. Lately, people have called me Inspir."

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Croft returned to the hideout, followed by his mysterious new friend.

"It's all right," said Croft, gesturing for everyone to lower their guns as Inspir followed him into their hideout. "He's a friend."

His name is Inspir."

"Really?" said Red Sally. "How did you know that, from his name?"

"Just a hunch," said Croft.

"How trusting of you, to bring home any hooded stranger who appears kindly," said Sally tauntingly.

"I know it seems strange," said Croft, "but experience has taught me to trust this kind of feeling." And he wouldn't elaborate further. "Tomorrow we're going to assemble a gang of local fighters, and attack an Insectoid patrol."

"Whatever you've been smoking, can I have a puff?" Red Sally asked.

Croft located another ragtag group of refugees the next day. He was accompanied by his team, as before. He once again was preparing to give his sales pitch, to recruit volunteers to attack the Insectoids. The only difference, this time, was Inspir.

Croft made his pitch more aggressively than ever before. "We need to give the Insectoids a bloody nose!" said Croft. "If we don't fight back, they'll overrun us! They've forced us to live like rats, and are slowly exterminating us! Do you want to live, and fight like men, or do you want to die? I say Fight! Fight for yourselves! Fight for your freedom!"

Suddenly, the refugees, who had been murmuring all during Croft's speech, broke out into a chant. At first, Croft thought they were mocking him, but he quickly heard what they were chanting

"Yes! Yes! Yes! Let's fight! Death to the Insectoids! Death to the Insectoids!" they chanted.

"Death to the Insectoids!" Croft shouted back. Despite the fact that he knew the source of the inspiration, he allowed himself to be swayed with the moment. Even Red Sally and others were chanting too.

"Death! Death! Death to the Insectoids!" they shouted. For once, they didn't pay any attention to how loud their voices were or who they might attract.

They immediately prepared for battle. The crowd didn't want to wait--they wanted to attack the Insectoids on the spot. It was as if a match had been lit on a slow burning rage.

Croft looked over to Inspir, as if to ask, sure, they're excited, but can they really fight?

Inspir, standing inconspicuously in the corner, gave the slightest of nods, and Croft felt oddly reassured.

The Insectoid patrol had been beefed up, because of the recent attack on the warehouse. Fifteen Insectoids slowly walked down the empty street clutching their enormous blast rifles, their multiplex eyes scanning this way and that.

Suddenly, they heard a human voice shout a word, and they were caught in a crossfire, as humans came out of the buildings on either side and opened fire. They even opened fire from above, in the first and second stories of the overlooking buildings as well.

The squad was raked by blaster and laser fire. Half the squad was immediately cut down. The ones who managed to fire back were unnerved, to say the least, by this never before seen aggressiveness. One of them fired and hit a human, but as the human dropped to the ground another human appeared behind, scooped up the weapon, and started firing again!

In moments it was over. The entire squad had been wiped out, and they had only taken two casualties, and no fatalities. A ragged cheer went up in the crowd. Although they had had the advantage of surprise, and had outnumbered the Insectoids nearly two to one, it was still quite a victory.

Croft, grinning widely, suddenly found Inspir standing by his

side.

Croft looked questioningly at Inspir.

"It begins," said Inspir, with a small smile.

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Mongo kept running through the street. He was delirious with fear. He could now no longer afford to sleep for more than an hour or two at a time; the fear that Angry Red would catch up to him was too strong. Every so often he would have a vision of Angry Red catching up to him, or getting close.

Suddenly he stiffened and, getting another vision, dodged behind a pillar.

For a long moment nothing happened, and Mongo wondered if he was getting paranoid again. Sometimes he would get visions that Red was closing in on him and then nothing would happen.

Angry Red chose that moment to step around a nearby corner. He looked at his device as he took a few steps.

Mongo, mostly hidden from view by the pillar, took off at a run.

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"So just when I've succeeded in organizing the local gang, you take me away," said Croft, as they drove around in a ground car in the dead of night.

"The local gang, as you call them, will survive without your presence for a few days," said Inspir. "And you are needed more urgently elsewhere."

"It's great that you know my needs better than I do," said Croft. "I'm not accustomed to being guided."

"You are very individualistic," said Inspir. "That's what makes you a good leader."

"Correction," said Croft. "That only makes me a bad follower. Take this idea of yours of driving a ground car more than 1200 miles north on a whim. If I were in full form, I would question the need for doing this. I would ask 'where are we going, Inspir', without settling for a vague answer that I'm needed somewhere. I might also question how long we're going to go without being detected."

"We will not be detected," said Inspir, the wind from their acceleration pulling at his robe.

"How can you be so sure?" said Croft. "You never know when we'll encounter a patrol, and this air car makes a not inconsiderable noise, in case you didn't notice."

"We have passed close to several patrols already," said Inspir.

"Yes?" said Croft, doubtfully.

"Yes," said Inspir.

"And why didn't they investigate?"

"Because they didn't notice anything," said Inspir.

Croft gave him an odd look and said, "Although you talk more, you're even less coherent than the Silencer."

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"Tzzz-Ta! Tzzz-Ta! Tzzz-Ta!" the audience shouted.

The Silencer blinked at the bright sunlight, displaying the thousands of green Insectoids lining nearly every seat in the stadium.

Several dozen feet away stood their top champion, Tzzz-Ta. After dozens of bouts, the Insectoids had decided to pit him against the best they had, Tzzz-Ta had killed 94 humans with only its appendages. It was a giant, even for an Insectoid, a little over eight feet tall.

The Silencer squinted, and briefly recalled how he had gotten to this point.

It had been last night, in Czzz's quarters.

"Why is it you never speak?" Czzz had asked. "You are our top human gladiator, and yet you grant no post-game interviews, you do nothing to establish character."

The Silencer said nothing.

"Even now you seek to defy me with your silence. Do you think that you are so valuable that I would not hesitate for a moment to have you terminated?"

The Silencer looked down at the bindings he was wearing, and then briefly at the half dozen armed guards around him. It wasn't necessary to chain most prisoners when they were brought before Czzz, but as the guards around the Silencer began to drop like flies, they had had to take more preventive measures.

Czzz reached out with a claw to touch the Silencer under the chin. The Silencer felt a stab of pain but didn't flinch. Czzz gently stroked the Silencer's throat.

"It would be so, so easy to terminate you...."

The Silencer still said nothing.

Czzz abruptly released her grip and turned away. "There has been some call to have you face Tzzz-Ta, our most prized gladiator. Have you heard the name?"

The Silencer had indeed heard the name. Every prisoner who had been called out to face Tzzz-Ta had never returned.

"I've grown fond of you," said Czzz. "At least, as fond as one of our kind can be towards one of yours. You're an amusing pet. But if you want to stay as my pet, you have to learn some manners. If you face Tzzz-Ta, you will die. It's that simple. If you want to stay alive, you have to ask me the favor of not fighting Tzzz-Ta."

The Silencer said nothing.

"That's all you have to do, just ask," said Czzz. "Out of kindness, you won't have to beg."

The Silencer said nothing.

Czzz stomped an appendage down on the ground, and stood face to face with the Silencer. "This is your last chance!" Czzz shouted through her translation device. "If you do not speak, you will face Tzzz-Ta, and you will die! What is your answer?"

The Silencer spoke, for the first time.

"Please Czzz."

The guards murmured. This was the first time in recent memory any could remember hearing his voice.

"What?" said Czzz, suddenly delighted.

"Come closer," the Silencer whispered.

Czzz came closer.

"Closer," said the Silencer.

"Grab his arms!" Czzz was smart enough to say; for though his hands were cuffed, the Silencer was still capable of violence.

Czzz was now face to face. "Now, what would you say?"

The Silencer slowly opened his mouth, his eyes boring into Czzz's.

"Please," he whispered. "Let me kill Tzzz-Ta."

And then, before the shock set in, he gave a mighty kick that cracked two of Czzz's internal carapace supports and sent her spinning across the room.

The Silencer eyed the two foot sword he had been given and compared it to the four foot sword Tzzz-Ta had been given. Undoubtedly, this was a final touch of revenge on Czzz's part. The Silencer waved

the sword experimentally with his good left arm, to get a feel for it. His right arm still wasn't working.

As the applause and chanting slowly subsided, Tzzz-Ta spoke through its translation device. "Are you ready to die, human?"

"At any time," said the Silencer coldly.

Tzzz-Ta charged, brandishing the sword like a spear.

The Silencer dodged to the side, but Tzzz-Ta was quicker than most Insectoids, and changed direction as the Silencer did, and the Silencer was forced to jump out of the way to avoid being speared.

"I am genetically enhanced to be as fast as you, Silencer!"

"How nice for you," said the Silencer dryly. For the first time in a while he faced a real challenge. All right, then, he would have to follow the Graftonite rules of combat: finish things quickly, and finish them first.

Tzzz-Ta charged again, but this time the Silencer did something totally unexpected--he ran away, towards one of the walls of the massive stadium.

Tzzz-Ta followed rapidly catching up with giant, clumping steps. The crowd roared, thinking the Silencer ran out of fear.

The Silencer never looked back, but when the clumps reached a certain volume and the shadow over his shoulder grew to a certain length he did a backflip, springing into the air, and--

It was so quick that the holovids had to replay it three times at reduced speeds from different angles so everyone could figure out what had happened. The end result, though, was the same.

Tzzz-Ta suddenly and quite unexpectedly found the Silencer's sword impaling its throat.

Tzzz-Ta fell to the ground, and the Silencer jumped to the side to avoid being crushed. He looked coldly at the crowd which, after a moment of stunned silence, started to buzz angrily.

The only emotion the Silencer showed was to raise his sword, and he yelled one, solitary word at the top of his lungs: "Next!".

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"Halt!" said a human soldier, springing out from behind cover. He was brandishing a very modern looking blaster rifle, and he was quickly joined by two of his companions. All were in army uniforms, Croft noticed with interest, and their uniforms were cleanly pressed.

Croft made no motion, other than to turn to Inspir, who had led him here.

"We're here to see the General," said Inspir.

"Who are you?" said the trooper. "And how do you know the General is here?"

"We're expected," said Inspir. "You'd better check."

The soldier spoke into a throat com.

"Where are we?" Croft hissed, unconsciously bundling up in the cold. It was quite cool here in the northern sector.

"At our destination," said Inspir.

They had driven for several days to get here, wherever here was.

The guard listened to his audio input and nodded. "Sorry, sir. You're expected."

"As we should be," said Inspir soothingly.

"Just hang a left and stop by the entrance to the bunker."

Croft started the ground car up again and headed left. He was surprised to see a large courtyard with marching troops performing formations.

"What? How?"

"Not all your army was destroyed in the initial attack," said



Inspir. "And many who survived fled here."

They got out of the aircar and walked past a squad of soldiers who eyed them suspiciously but had obviously been given orders to let them pass.

"Here?" said Croft. "What's so special about here? Why don't the Insectoids come-" And suddenly it came to him. "Of course! The cold! The Insectoids are basically bugs-"

"And bugs don't like cold," said Inspir. "They can actually tolerate this weather in the warmer months, but don't have the means to permanently terraform this part of your planet without making drastic climactic changes. But that's not the only reason the military settled here."

They were politely but firmly frisked at the door of the bunker and Croft was relieved of his weapons. A search of Inspir didn't turn up any kind of devices.

"So what's the other reason the military gathered here?" said Croft, as they entered the bunker.

"I expect I am," said a familiar face.

Croft was stunned.

It was none other than the legendary General Jeffrey Arkik. One of the most famous generals in Alliance history, he was known, in a complimentary way, as the "Norman North of ground combat", having led numerous military campaigns over the past few centuries. But General Arkik had retired decades ago. Obviously, he had come out of retirement.

Croft had met the General once or twice before, briefly, and it was obvious that Arkik recognized him.

"Sir," said Croft. "I didn't even know you were still alive, much less on August-"

"Pah!" said Arkik dismissively, speaking in an old East-Euro accent, in a way reminiscent of Levi. "It seems everyone has overlooked me. When August was attacked, did they look for me? When the army was being decimated, did they call on me? No. They panicked, or they ran, or they died." The general pointed his walking stick at Inspir and squinted. "Only this one came looking for me. Some of my former comrades in arms had gathered here, and we began setting up defenses. But this one helped gather many more of the troops who had fled, and sent them here."

"The Insectoids don't attack here?" said Croft.

"Of course they attack!" said Arkik, looking at him like he was a fool. It was then that Croft remembered that Arkik was also famous for having little patience. "But not as much as I might like. They can't establish all-year bases here, you see, because of the weather. So they send in long range patrols, and we destroy them."

"How large are your forces?" said Croft eagerly.

Arkik gave him a warning glance. "Small, for now," he said. "But growing. Most are regulars, from the uniformed services. But your friend here has the crazy idea that we can conscript new recruits."

"They have the will to fight," said Inspir.

"But do they have the skill?"

"You'll only find out if you try to train them," said Inspir. "We don't have the luxury of waiting. Much of the rest of the western part of Concord is about to be overrun. Your forces alone aren't nearly enough to stop the Insectoids. You need to stop the Insectoids, or, at a minimum, delay their advance so the civilians who survive in the west can evacuate to the northern sector."

"It makes sense, in theory," said Arkik. He snapped his walking stick at Croft, who jumped. "And you? What do you think of this idea?"

"I'm just along for the ride," said Croft weakly.

"So this is the leader of the civilian resistance," said Arkik,

looking at Inspir. "If I didn't know that he was one of the Agency's Eight, I might have been deceived by his mild manner."

"Hey, who're you calling mild mannered!" said Croft, suddenly becoming belligerent.

"Better," said Arkik. "But your people will have to be made of sterner stuff to fight the Insectoids."

"I have some experience doing just that," said Croft.

"Oh really?" said Arkik. "What have you done, sniped an isolated outpost here, or a two person patrol there?"

"Last week we took out a 15 being patrol," Croft snapped.

"Wow. Fifteen," said Arkik sarcastically.

"And a few months ago, I led a raid into the heart of Sarney Sarittenden itself."

Arkik's eyebrows shot up. This time he really was impressed. He turned to Inspir. "Does he speak the truth?"

"Look at me when you speak," said Croft. "I'll be the one to answer your questions."

Arkik nodded, and gave a tight smile. "I'll gear up and get ready for our trip." He turned away and left the room.

"Very good, Clifford," said Inspir.

"Don't you patronize me, either," said Croft. "I feel like a pet who's just performed a recital."

"If so, then the pet won first prize," said Inspir.

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Huffing and puffing, Mongo made his way back to his hideout. He had been moving around, shifting from hideout to hideout, but so had Angry Red. He was definitely following him.

And yet... Angry Red hadn't found him. There must be some limits to his tracking device. Probably it didn't work beyond a certain range, or in the underground. That was Mongo's only advantage.

Mongo settled down on the rumpled bedding he had prepared for himself and sat with his back against a wall. His thoughts were miles away, his mind racing, so it took a few minutes for him to realize that there was something different about the wall opposite him.

Peering closely, Mongo saw new marks on the wall. No, not new marks, words.

"You're going to die!" it said, in big red letters.

Angry Red had found this particular hideout. He had recognized it as one of Mongo's hiding places. It was only chance that he wasn't here now, waiting to spring a trap.

Suddenly Mongo had a vision, a vision of Angry Red leaving to get something to eat, and another vision of Angry Red coming back to resume his watch on Mongo's hideout.

Mongo was on his feed and scampering away as the vision faded from his mind. It was only chance, and Red's sadism in leaving a warning message, that had saved him from getting caught.

This time.

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"Incompetent fools," muttered General Arkik.

They were back on the western edge of the continent; not actually at the very edge, of course, which was lined with a mountainous ridge, but close to it, where Croft had made his initial recruitments. Arkik was watching some of their new civilian recruits running through a drill.

"How are we doing, General?" asked Alped.

Arkik just stared at him, as if surprised that a civilian would

have the teremity to address him directly.

"You're making progress," said Inspir, putting a reassuring arm on Alped while steering him away. Alped glowed with that positive evaluation.

Arkik watched a recruit trip over his own gun. "Keystone cops," he muttered, making an obscure historical reference.

"Maybe things are going better at the firing range," said Croft, gesturing to another part of the subbasement where they had set up the impromptu training facility.

"Unlikely". They walked over to the training facility, and watched the recruits firing their weapons.

"They're hitting the targets," said Croft.

"About half the time," Arkik noted. "We'll only be fine if near misses can kill."

"Inspir, can you work on him?" said Croft.

"No, none of your feel-good trickery for me," Arkik snapped, waving his stick as if to ward off a mental attack. "Give it to them, they need it more."

Inspir smiled. "Naturally they are not going to have the same aptitude as your trained soldiers, not all in one day. But they have a fighting spirit, and that's the most important thing of all."

"Really?" said Arkik. "And what else is more important than combat skills?"

"Victory," said Inspir. "And that's why you need another one."

"Maybe we could take out another squad," said Croft.

"I was thinking of something bigger in mind," said Inspir. "One of their subregional headquarters, the forcebridge on level 242 of the local Commerce Building."

"The gravitator station?" said Croft. "Too dangerous. They use that to see for miles in every direction."

"Which is precisely why we have to take it out," said Inspir.

"It's a ready means of backstop support for the Insectoids. You take that out and you remove their backup. Not to mention their morale."

"They're not ready," said Arkik. "And I only have a handful of my men with me."

"Then you should have more," said Inspir. "Send for two more squads from the north. We'll make a combined attack with 30 of your own men and 50 of the best candidates."

Arkik spat, "This is foolishness!"

"Trust me, General," said Inspir, looking at him in an odd way.

"You have the will, and the means. Stop doubting yourself."

Arkik paused, then nodded. "All right. I'll send for the men." And he stomped off.

"You have a way of convincing the hard to convince," said Croft.

"You'll have to learn how to manage him when I'm gone," said Inspir.

"Are you leaving?" said Croft suddenly.

"Soon enough," said Inspir.

"Where-"

"I am needed elsewhere," said Inspir.

"Where elsewhere?"

"Many elsewheres, to be precise," said Inspir. "While the fight for August is an important one in the War against the Insectoids, do not believe that your fight is the only one going on August, or on other planets, or in space."

"Why are you so concerned with our war against the Insectoids?"

"I am always involved when the stronger is subjugating the weaker," said Inspir. "Especially when the weaker have the potential to be so much more. My work extends far beyond your little conflict with the Insectoids. There is much you do not yet understand."

"None of which I'm sure you'll enlighten me."

Inspir laughed, and put a fatherly arm around Croft as they walked across the length of the basement.

When the additional troops had arrived and four days had come and gone, Inspir deemed the time was ripe to attack. He held a war council with Croft and General Arkik.

"These civilians aren't ready," said Arkik.

"They will never be ready until they get actual combat experience," said Inspir. "And each day you wait increases the hold the Insectoids have on your planet."

"I'm afraid I agree with Inspir, General," said Croft.

Arkik glared at Croft. "It does not inspire me with confidence that you are afraid of anything."

"Only an irrational person fails to experience fear or apprehension," Croft counters. "I still think this stunt is too big, that we should go with a smaller target."

"You need to think big," said Inspir. "Word is spreading. There are a dozen groups of scavengers who are thinking of joining the resistance. If we secure one, big victory, we'll unite them instantly in a way that would take months to do otherwise."

"All right," said Croft. "But how do we even get up there without them seeing us?"

He indicated a diagram of the facility. Arkik had brought a briefcase holoprojector which had been programmed with the schematics of the area. Arkik pointed with his walking stick while going over the facts of the situation. "The Insectoids have an entire company of troopers in the area of their subregional headquarters on level 242 of the Commerce Building. Level 242 is actually a forcebound plaza that extends over the gap between the Commerce Building and the building opposite it, the Water Building, giving the Insectoids an unbridled view of the street going miles east and westwards, and, as it is taller than many buildings in the area, to a lesser degree to the north and south as well. One platoon provides security in each building, while elements of two gravitator platoons are on duty at full time. The gravitators themselves are on a full standby status here," he said, pointing with his stick to the force bridge plaza, "while the gravitator troopers are believed to be in makeshift barracks here," he said, pointing to the interior part of the level in the Commerce Building.

Arkik turned to Inspir. "How do you propose to get there without being seen, and eliminate a force nearly twice our number?"

"Did I also forget to mention we're going to steal those gravitators?" said Inspir. "That will undoubtedly make the plan even more challenging, but also more rewarding."

They all looked at him like he was mad.

"I see I did forget to mention it," said Inspir. "But that really is the primary reason for this mission. Once you have those gravitators, you will regain regional air superiority; at low altitudes, of course."

"So we're just going to walk in and steal their gravitators?"

"More or less," said Inspir.

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"Poor, poor Silencer."

The Silencer stood stoically, his right arm slowly dripping blood.

"Perhaps fighting three of our beasts was too much for you," said Czzz, walking carefully around the Silencer, without getting too close. Even now when he was wounded, surrounded by guards, and with his legs,

hands, and arms bound, Czzz was a little afraid of getting too close.

In fact, the three beasts, two giant bumble bees and a warrior ant, had almost been too much for the Silencer. While he had been fending off the ant with a sword using his good left arm, one of the bumble bees had almost implanted a killer stinger in his lame right arm. Not that it really mattered much; he hadn't been able to use it in a while anyway.

"Our veterinarians say they could restore the use of your right arm, if I requested it," said Czzz. "All it would take would be a request... if you asked me nicely...."

The Silencer said nothing.

"On the other hand, perhaps we shall simply amputate it," said Czzz, getting angry now. "What would you say to that, Silencer?"

The Silencer simply glared at Czzz, but continued to be silent.

"Oh, get out of here!" said Czzz angrily, not remembering that the Silencer's feet were bound.

The guards interpreted that as a signal and carried him off.

"There must be something I can do to get him to talk," said Czzz. She turned to an aide. "Find out everything you can about this Silencer."

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It was just before sunrise that Croft, Inspir, and 28 other men went sliding down a rope onto the roof of the Water Building adjacent to the Commerce Building.

The men were handpicked, as much as their limited selection allowed, to those who could climb down a diagonal steel strand from one building to another, and to those who knew how to fly gravitators. In practice that meant they took about 20 of the general's men and about 10 of the new recruits. Arkik had toyed with using all of his men for this part of the effort, but that would have left the ground forces without skilled direction. They could have used more men overall, but they had to keep an adequate backup force for the ground attack. Even if there were more than 30 gravitators and they grabbed "only" 30 of them, it would be a great victory for the resistance.

They exploited the first security flaw in the Insectoid's defense system: The Insectoids put guards in both buildings on either side of the force bridge that extended over the street, 242 stories up; but they didn't put guards on the roofs of either buildings, enabling a small team to gain access to the Water Building by going down a higher nearby rooftop, using a thick length of steel rope, and a rope gun.

Croft slowly worked his way down, using his hands. The pain on his arms were enormous; and if he dropped down, not only would he be severely injured (the Water Building rooftop was still some distance down), but he would in all probability alert the Insectoid troopers.

But that was all right. Finally he was returning to what he did best: Infiltration work. A small touch of doubt nagged at him as he remembered what Inspir had said to him the night before, right before the mission. But he put all thoughts of that out of his mind now. He had a job to do.

Croft was number two to land on the roof; number one was one of Arkik's experienced troopers, and he immediately moved to the stairwell, standing guard with his weapon at hand.

Croft watched the black clad troopers come down one by one. He wished they'd hurry. It would be light soon.

There was no sign of trouble until number twenty four came down the line. He was almost at the end, and safely on the roof, when he lost his grip with one of his hands. He dangled there by one hand, trying to regain his grip with the other hand, but failing...

Croft snapped his fingers, and two of his men started running. The man held onto his grip for a few seconds longer.... and dropped.... right into the arms of the two troopers below him. He barely made a sound.

Croft nodded as the troopers gave the universal thumbs up signal, and the troops continued to stream downwards.

When all thirty of them had made it safely on the rooftop of the Water Building he turned to Inspir, who nodded.

They went down the unguarded stairwell, counting flights until they were on the 243rd floor. One floor below them, they could already hear the buzzing of the opposition.

Well, here goes. Taking a deep breath, Croft gave the signal.

The troops rushed down the stairwell, clomping heavily. Surprise was no longer an issue now; Intelligence had indicated that there could be anywhere from five to ten Insectoids on this side of the force bridge, and it was unlikely that they could take them all out quietly. So what they lacked in subtlety they make up for in speed. They would quickly overpower the guards, rush out onto the force bridge, and take as many gravitators as they could. When the guards from the Commerce Building rushed out onto the force bridge, Inspir would cut the power, sending them plunging to their deaths.

The first part of their plan worked just as advertised. They quickly overpowered the guards on their side of the force bridge, and Croft was pleased to see that his troops stayed calm and collected, although most of them were, after all, trained soldiers. Even as the last Insectoid body hit the ground of the control station, Croft's troops were running onto the force bridge and strapping themselves into gravitators.

Alarms started to go off on the far side of the force bridge in the Commerce Building, and Insectoids started to emerge from the far side. "Now," said Croft into his throat mike.

At that moment several things happened at once.

The ground forces opened fire on the Insectoids on the ground far below them, keeping them pinned down to prevent them from reinforcing the troops on the 242nd floor, while also opening an avenue of escape when they were ready to retreat.

Two of Croft's men who had stayed on the roof of the Water Building started to spray down blaster fire on the Insectoids who started to emerge from the Commerce Building.

And two more men kneeled down on the same level at the force bridge and opened fire on the force bridge's entrance at the Commerce Building.

Croft stayed behind to provide covering fire as well. Inspir was in a room behind him working the generator controls, getting ready to cut the power.

That left two dozen men to get the gravitators. Even a quick count showed there were many more than that, perhaps three dozen. Well, whatever they couldn't take would be destroyed when the force bridge cut out.

The view was truly spectacular but Croft didn't have time to admire it as he and his two soldiers traded laser barrages with the Insectoid troopers on the far side. Every time they would shoot down one Insectoid, two more would take its place.

Meanwhile Croft's men were caught in the crossfire as they raced to the gravitators and strapped themselves in. Several were shot as they ran for the gravitators, or as they strapped themselves in. One was shot just as he launched, and he careened against the side of the Commerce Building before crashing into a fireball on the ground below.

But in groups of two's and three's many successfully launched, taking off. Croft and his men tried to provide covering fire as best

they could, but now the Insectoids were firing and charging at the same time. The laser fire was only getting fiercer from the other side and it was a relief when the last gravitator launched and Croft could order his troops to take cover behind a small wall, which at least gave them some cover.

A sizable number of Insectoids were now on the force bridge, the solid shining bridge over the street far below.

"Inspir, now," said Croft, telling him to cut the power.

The Insectoids continued to advance. A laser burst cut near Croft.

Croft raced inside the Water Building. Inspir was staring at the controls, muttering something.

"What's wrong?" said Croft. "Just destroy the controls!"

"It doesn't work that way," said Inspir slowly. "The controls are actually on the other side of the bridge, in the Commerce Building," he said, his face looking grave.

Everything slowed down for a second. Croft knew that their plan was in peril. In order for the six of them--he, Inspir, the two guards on the roof, and the two guards holding off the Insectoids a few feet behind Croft--to escape, they needed to use the elevator to get down those 242 floors rather quickly. But if the Insectoids were right behind them, they could cut the power or even worse sever the lift cables and send them crashing to a fiery death.

Inspir barely hesitated an instant, and then put an arm on Croft, "Don't worry about it," he whispered. "And remember what I told you."

And with that he walked past Croft, past the two guards, and onto the force bridge.

Time slowed down again as Croft watched from a nearby window. Inspir strided briskly across the bridge. It seemed like he was invulnerable, until a laser bolt hit him. He staggered, then stood upright, then another bolt hit him, and he staggered again, but he always kept going.

And then he was at the Insectoid's front line, now nearly a third of the way across the bridge, and Croft thought they would tear him to pieces, but they just ignored him like he wasn't even there. Inspir gently tiptoed around them, not an easy thing to do on such a crowded platform, and, grasping his body where he had been shot, made his way inside.

Despite the covering fire and the supporting fire from the roof, the Insectoids continued to advance. One of the two soldiers a few feet to the left of Croft was hit and fell, a sizzling wound in his chest.

Crouching low, Croft crawled over to his body. His partner looked inquiringly at the body as Croft felt for a pulse.

"He's dead," said Croft. "Keep firing!" he yelled opening up with his own blaster, trying to keep low.

The Insectoids were closing now, about half way across the bridge, a mere 25 feet away, and Croft was considering a run for it, down the stairwell. Hey, it was 242 flights, but the Insectoids would have to climb down them too. Just when the laserfire over his head was the thickest, and he was about to give the evacuation order, he heard a groan, and a reduced whine as if something were powering down.

The laser fire abruptly stopped and Croft risked popping his head up to see an amazing sight.

The force bridge was flickering in places, fading in parts. The Insectoids didn't have any emotions on their faces but they were surely terrorized; for standard Insectoid troopers, despite the presence of vestigial wings, can't really fly.

First one, then two troopers dropped through gaps in the increasingly flickering path, and then there was a mad rush back to the Commerce Building, and then the entire force bridge collapsed, dropping

several dozen shrieking, buzzing Insectoids down to the street level below.

One of them had half managed to strap into a gravitator, but hadn't strapped in all the way; and, slidding out of the harness, the bug fell to the distant ground, the gravitator falling a half second above the Insectoid.

It was difficult to see the ground clearly at 242 stories up, but Croft could hear the splatting sounds, and see the puddles of green forming even this far up.

And the best part was that the Insectoids landed on many of the defending Insectoid ground troops, inflicting additional casualties. Croft looking down for the first time, noticed that the ground troops under General Arkik seemed to be holding their own.

And then time speeded up yet again and the Insectoids who had made it back to the far side opened fire on Croft and the remaining soldier. They could no longer cross over, but they were still vulnerable to weapons fire.

"Evacuate," Croft said into his throat mike. He and the trooper on this level as well as the two from the roof quickly converged on the elevator. The elevator was there, waiting for them, one little detail Croft had a soldier attend to during their attack. They entered the elevator, and Croft pressed the "2" button.

He noticed that one of the soldiers from the roof was bleeding from a shoulder wound.

"Just a graze," said soldiers. "Did you see them fall? I never seen so many bugs get squashed all at once!"

Croft nodded, thinking of something else. Someone else. But there was no time for that now. They still weren't in the clear.

They got out at the second floor and took the stairwell down to the ground floor, where the remaining Insectoids were pinned down by Arkik's men. Fortunately most of the ground forces were in the Commerce Building, not the Water Building, and Croft and his team were able to take the remainder of the Insectoids in the lobby of the Water Building from behind.

They shot several bugs in the back while they were busy aiming at Arkik's men and then Croft and his men raced out into the street. The crossfire with the Commerce Building was murderous, and another one of Croft's men, one of the roof guards, was shot and killed as they ran to rejoin Arkik's main force.

After that, they staged an orderly retreat.

Everyone was cheery that night. They had taken significant casualties but inflicted even more on the Insectoids.

"Did you see the way they just fell and splat!" said one excited soldier. There was laughter and amusement all around. This was certainly the biggest target that had been hit since the invasion. Everyone seemed to have a new fighting spirit, as Inspir had predicted. Inspir...

Croft took a walk to a quieter area and wondered if Inspir were still alive. He could imagine Inspir reaching out and deactivating the controls for the force bridge, just seconds before the Insectoids tore into him.

Somehow he had gotten past the Insectoids on the force bridge, but he was definitely mortal--he had been hit by two laser bolts and had been visibly wounded. If those shots hadn't killed him, the Insectoids almost certainly had.

And what had Inspir died for? To save four, no three other people? Inspir had been much more important to their cause than any of them, even Croft.

And yet Inspir had accomplished what he had set out to do--to



reestablish a fighting spirit in the resistance. Croft remembered their discussion the previous night, right before the raid. Croft had been standing outside staring at the night sky, when he heard a voice.

"Is something troubling you?"

"You're leaving," said Croft, not looking back. "Right now, you're the one holding this gang together. Once you leave it's going to collapse faster than a gravitator with a faulty power line. "

Inspir chuckled behind him. "You still do not understand."

Croft turned around, facing him. "Enlighten me."

Inspir's smile only broadened. "That is, after all, my primary function. You think my efforts are maintaining this fighting spirit, yes?"

"Yes," said Croft.

"But what you don't realize is that I only helped you all find that which you had within you. Once I helped to bring that out, I am no longer needed to keep it there; it exists, naturally, on its own, and needs no further help from me," said Inspir. "Each person is a mass of often conflicting emotion. Once I show someone that they can select the best of their emotions to fit a circumstances, they no longer need any help from me. Contrawise, if the emotion didn't exist somewhere in the first place, there would be nothing with all my powers that I could do."

"That's a very nice speech," said Croft. "But even if we destroy this particular subcommand, there are hundreds of other subcommand bases all over August. And these guys reproduce like type-34 rabbits."

"Patience," said Inspir. "Yours is not the only force fighting the Insectoids. You may in time come across other allies you didn't know where there. After all, you were unaware of your own General Arkik, were you not?"

"Yeah, well, it's a big planet," said Croft.

"All you have to focus on right now is forming a viable resistance and keeping the Insectoids off-balance. That will be a good beginning," said Inspir. "Even after I leave, I will return to check up on you, from time to time, if I am able."

Now, standing alone in the night, Croft wondered if Inspir would ever be able.

#### Chapter 4: Lightning Raid in Sarney

He didn't give up.

He persevered.

It wasn't about profits any more.

It was about pride, and anger.

He was tired, but he rarely slept.

He was hungry, but he rarely stopped to eat.

He was one of the best Graftonite trackers, and he always got his man.

And his name was Angry Red.

Angry Red surveyed the makeshift detection device in his hands. The indicator was quite close now. Mongo was still wearing the collar.

Red was in an enormous junkyard. There were millions of places to hide. The problem with this makeshift detector was that within a certain range it didn't indicate precise locations. At this point all he knew was that Mongo was somewhere within a hundred feet of him.

"Give yourself up," said Red, in a booming voice, as he suddenly turned a corner. The goal was to keep moving, looking for a sight, listening for a sound that might reveal where he was hiding.

"Surrender now," said Red, yelling.

There was no response, but he was sure that his former slave was here. He turned around another corner, but saw nothing. He could be anywhere. It was time for more aggressive tactics to flush Mongo out.

"If you don't surrender in the next ten seconds," said Red, "I will detonate." He turned around another corner, but only saw another pile of junk.

"Ten... nine... eight..."

Mongo's heart nearly leapt out of his body. What should he do? What should he do?

"Seven... six... five..."

The thought of returning to Red was terrible. But the thought of having his head blown off was even worse. At least there was a chance that Red wouldn't kill him, if he surrendered.

Angry Red kept walking, scanning the area around him.

"Five... four..."

And then Mongo got a fast forward vision, and another, and another. All showed him successfully staying in hiding and escaping from Red. How could this be? Mongo searched frantically for futures where he got his head blown off.

"Three... two...."

Mongo couldn't find any futures where he got his head blown off. Does that mean they didn't exist?

"One...."

Mongo jerked up, causing a pile of debris to go scattering. He was on a wall of debris at the edge of the junkyard. Angry Red, fifty feet away, swiveled and saw him.

"Surrender!" said Red triumphantly.

Mongo stared at Red, concentrating hard on possible futures. In that one extra second he came to an undeniable conclusion.

Red couldn't detonate his explosives. His new tracking device was just that; a tracking device.

Mongo turned to leap off the wall and land outside the junkyard.

"If you do that, I'll detonate!" said Angry Red, his finger on the button.

Mongo took a deep breath and jumped.

He landed, but the only sound he heard was the heavy footsteps of Angry Red racing to find the nearest way out of the junkyard.

It had all been a bluff. Angry Red couldn't detonate the charges.

Mongo scampered to the relative safety of a nearby building with an entrance to the undercity before Angry Red managed to get out of the junkyard.

\*\*\*\*\*

An idea came to Croft one day, about a month after their raid on the level 242 force bridge, when he was watching the holovid. The three dimensional image showed the Silencer, fighting a wild beast in the arena. The crowds were roaring, the beast was attacking, the Silencer, looking bloody and bruised, was doing his best despite the fact that he had only one good arm, and then-

the camera momentarily panned to the open sky over the arena.

And then Croft realized something he already knew. Now that they had gravitators, for the first time they had a realistic chance to rescue the Silencer!

He told the others his plan. Sashay was worried, the Clapper clapped, and Red Sally pointedly asked if this rescue operation would give her the opportunity to torch some bugs. With such predictable responses, why had he bothered to ask?

He had little difficulty securing the gravitators. They had recovered 15 from the Insectoids. General Arkik had gone back north,

taking 10 of the gravitators and a number of recruits with him. That left five here. Croft used his influence to requisition all five. He promised to return them in good working order. He would take Red Sally, the Clapper, and two other soldiers. They would have to ferry the gravitators by night, going at low altitudes, as they headed back to the east coast, and that would be tricky. Croft estimated it would take three or four steady nights of flying to get there. But it was worth it, if they could rescue the Silencer.

He started to make plans. They would leave in two days.

\*\*\*\*\*

Wheezing and breathing heavily, Mongo lay down in his latest hiding place. Angry Red was still chasing him. What profit was there in that? So Mongo had arranged for him to be shot. But he was taking it very personally. Maybe he had never been shot before.

If he wanted to escape Angry Red, he needed to get rid of the collar. Was the collar really boobytrapped? Maybe it had all been a lie. If there were no explosives he could get a rock, or something sharp, and break the collar off himself.

Mongo fished the primary tracker he had taken from Red out of his pocket. The screen was dark. There was a series of slim buttons on it, but no way to tell if any of them could be used to detonate the collar.

No, there was no way he was going to take a gamble with this device. If he wanted to be safe he needed... he needed....

Mongo needed help. He didn't like to admit it, but he did. And how would he get help? Who would help Mongo? Everyone Mongo encountered wanted to enslave him, to lock him up. Everyone except... Croft.

Sure, Croft had used his ability, and had been unkind to Mongo at times. In fact, many times. But he had never held Mongo captive, or forced him to risk his life; at least, not more than the others, and he had treated Mongo equally, at least, as equally as Croft was capable of treating anyone else.

Croft could safely remove the collar, Mongo felt sure.

But where was Croft now? Was he even alive.

Think, Mongo, he told himself. The only way he was going to get out of this was to think, and think hard.

Squeezing his eyes tightly, willing himself to focus, he waited as one vision after another unfolded in his mind....

\*\*\*\*\*

The Silencer stood in the arena, his arms at his side. "I won't fight," he said bluntly, dropping the double-edged pike.

Facing him were three of his fellow prisoners. All had survived previous battles in the arena, though not nearly as many as the Silencer.

"You WILL fight," said Czzz, speaking through a loudspeaker.

"I won't kill innocent people," said the Silencer.

"Then YOU will die!" said Czzz. He addressed the three other prisoners. "PRISONERS! Only one of you will be allowed to walk out of the arena. Fight!"

The prisoners looked at each other with hesitancy in their eyes.

"Guards!" said Czzz. "If fighting does not begin in 20 seconds, kill everyone in the arena!"

The Insectoid guards raised their rifles in anticipation.

The Silencer sat down on the ground.

At that moment, something snapped and the prisoners, fearing for their lives, attacked. Two attacked each other while a third came for the Silencer

He stared calmly at the man approaching him, who was obviously terrified. But the man charged the Silencer with his pike and still the

Silencer sat there.

It was one of those instant replay moments that were so common of the Silencer. Everything proceeded in a blur, but in the slow replay they could see the Silencer grabbing his discarded pike while ducking to the side of the extended pike that was thrust at him, and then wacking his attacker across the legs with the handle portion of his pike.

His attacker went down, clutching his legs in agony, and the Silencer was on his feet, looking calmly at his attacker.

The attacker painfully got to his feet, grabbing his weapon as the Silencer politely watched. "I have no choice, Silencer."

"I understand," said the Silencer coldly. And he ducked in around the attacker's guard and landed an open palm attack against his opponent's forehead.

His opponent fell to the ground again and did not move.

The Silencer turned to the two who were still fighting each other and quickly knocked them out with open palm attacks as well, dropping them as easily as one might cut a clump of bananas from a tree.

"Kill them!" Czzz boomed.

"No," said the Silencer. "According to your own rules, only one of us could walk out of the arena. Well, the others can't walk."

The crowd roared and buzzed wildly. Czzz, in a rage, nonetheless ordered the prisoners removed. The Silencer had been an irritant for a long time, but that was now about to change.

The Silencer was bound in shackles and brought to Czzz's office.

"You have become more and more rebellious, Silencer," said Czzz. "I admit, we have never ordered you to kill your own kind before. But you have generally become less cooperative."

The Silencer said nothing.

"Even when you kill, it is all mechanical now. There is no showmanship, no flair to keep us entertained."

The Silencer didn't respond.

"But I think now, finally, we have found something that will break your silence, your monotony. Something that will energize you. Something that will make you positively talkative.

"That's unlikely," said the Silencer grimly, speaking for the first time.

"Why?" Czzz asked.

"You killed everything that I loved. Everything is meaningless now."

"Aaaah," said Czzz. "But we haven't killed everything you loved, not if you mean your wife... An-nee?"

The Silencer's face came alive, in a way Czzz had never seen.

"Ah, so I see we do have the right Silencer, then. You were under the perception that your wife was dead, yes?"

"She isn't dead?" said the Silencer sharply.

"We intercepted a cargo ship carrying her to your homeworld," said Czzz. "We destroyed the cargo ship, but not before boarding to take prisoners."

"Annie is alive?"

"She fought hard, and we were forced to use gas to take her. We quickly realized that we had a fellow Graftonite in our possession."

"Where is she?" said the Silencer.

"She is right here," said Czzz. He pressed a button, and an image came onto the screen. Annie was nude, unmoving, inside some sort of chamber.

"What have you done to her!" the Silencer growled, rattling his restraints. The guards involuntarily took a step back.

"She is unharmed, in cryogenic suspension," said Czzz. "But our

veterinarian experimentation division would like to use her in several promising tests-

"No!" the Silencer yelled, straining at his restraints. Two Insectoid claw arms pushed down on his shoulders, to prevent him from leaping for Czzz's throat.

"But I could use my influence to keep her safe," said Czzz. "That is, if you asked me to. All you would have to do is to ask me to."

"Keep her safe," said the Silencer.

"What was that. what did you say?" Czzz suddenly seemed to be hard of hearing.

The Silencer glared at Czzz. "Please keep her safe."

"Please? I didn't know you had that word in your vocabulary, Silencer," said Czzz. "In fact, I think this is the longest conversation we have ever had."

"What do you want?" said the Silencer, his shoulders slumping.

"Not much," said Czzz. "For now, merely to be more entertaining in the arena."

"All right," said the Silencer. "But I still won't kill human innocents."

"For now, that's acceptable," said Czzz. "You've already made good progress. We'll talk more."

"Wait! I want to see her!" said the Silencer, as he was dragged off.

"If you cooperate, all may be possible," said Czzz.

\*\*\*\*\*

Croft was taking one of his nocturnal walks to clear his head. It should be reasonably safe; the Insectoids hadn't sent a patrol into this area in days. Instead they had reinforced their previous position, only sending out fewer but larger patrols during the day. For once they were the ones reacting.

Croft walked around on the streets. As he walked, he heard a patter of feet behind him. The odd thing was, it didn't sound like the sound of human feet, or the heavier clomping of Insectoid troopers.

Croft stopped near a pillar, to provide cover for most of his body. The sounds behind him stopped.

Croft looked over his shoulder. He could see nothing in the gloom. He peered for a long moment.

All was quiet.

Croft started walking again.

The patter of feet quietly followed.

Could it be some kind of animal? There were no free roaming animals in this part of August that Croft was aware of.

A likelier explanation was that this was some new kind of hunting beast that the Insectoids were using, some kind of bloodhound.

But why didn't it overtake and attack him?

Maybe it wasn't a predator. Maybe it was following him so it could locate his hideout.

In which case going back to base for help would be the worst possible thing he could do.

Having considered the possibilities, and settled on a course of action, Croft quickly rounded a corner, ducked behind another pillar, and drew his blaster.

The thing that pitter pattered around the corner stopped, and started sniffing. It didn't need to know that Croft had stopped again, it could actually smell it.

Croft waited, sweat starting to form on his brow as he aimed his gun into the blackness. Could this thing be invisible? Well, at least he could hear it coming.

"I say, were you going to shoot me with that?" said a very cultured voice.

"What? Who's there?" said Croft, spinning around. He couldn't see anything or anyone in the blackness of the night.

"Perhaps a form will make you more comfortable," said the voice, which was starting to sound familiar. A white shimmering sheet appeared in front of Croft.

"How can this bright sheet appear in front of me without casting off light in any direction?" Croft said.

"Oh, you are really on top of your game, most impressive, for an inferior species," said the voice jovially. "I always knew you had potential. You see, this is all in your mind."

"You're communicating telepathically?"

"At the moment," came the voice.

"Would you mind identifying yourself?" Croft said, still rotating slowly, his gun in hand.

"Yes, as a matter of fact I would," said the voice.

"There's something... something familiar about your voice," said Croft.

"How about this one?" said the voice, lowering several octaves.

"No, that's not familiar at all," said Croft.

"Good," the voice continued.

"I know you," said Croft.

"Actually, we've never met," said the voice. "But I've heard nothing but good things about you, Clifford Croft."

"From whom?" said Croft, lowering his weapon. Whatever was going to happen, he already had a sense that he was in no imminent danger; if this was an enemy, the danger would be more subtle, more long-term.

"Good, good," said the voice, noticing he was becoming more relaxed. "I'm here to help."

"That's kind of hard to believe when you won't even show yourself or tell me who you are."

"That's not permitted," said the voice. "Oh, there's nothing technically wrong in revealing myself to you--"

"So do so--"

"But if the others found out, there would be nothing but trouble. You understand, don't you?"

"No, I don't," said Croft.

"Good," said the voice. "I need your help."

"I thought you just said you wanted to help me," said Croft.

"I do," said the voice earnestly. "But by helping me you'll be helping yourself."

"How stupid do you think I am?"

"For your race, you are reputed to be quite intelligent," said the voice. "Now, on to business. After years of research, the Insectoids have constructed a new version of the shield generators on their ships, and have started production. I need you to get me the technical schematics for this shield generator."

"I see," said Croft. "And where might they be obtained, Mr. Towel?"

"Mr. Towel?"

"If you won't reveal yourself, all I have to work with is this glowing flapping thing. It looks a little like a towel."

"I was trying for a sheet."

"Show yourself or tell me your real name and I'll call you anything you like."

"Mr. Towel is acceptable for now," said the voice.

"Now, how can I possibly get access to this information? It must be tightly guarded, and available only in a very limited number of places," said Croft.

"True, I suppose, but the computers on the flagship in orbit will certainly have them, I'm sure."

"I'm sure," Croft agreed. "So all I have to do is to get across the continent to Sarney Sarittenden undetected, steal a shuttle undetected, get aboard the mothership undetected, and break into the database, also undetected, even though I don't know a word of Insectoid?"

"Precisely," said Mr. Towel.

"Ouch!" said Croft, suddenly grabbing his head, which throbbed in pain. "What was that?"

"Recognition of the basic 200 words of the Insectoid written language you'll need to access their database, plus basic computer operation. You had better use it soon, it will wear off in a week or two."

"I'm not doing anything until I know more about who you are and what you're going to do with this information," said Croft, feeling the throbbing in his head start to subside. "How do I know that you're not another alien race that simply wants to use me to steal the technology? Or how do I know this isn't a trap just to capture me?"

"Clifford," said Mr. Towel. "If I wanted to capture you, the task would already be done. Isn't it obvious that I can incapacitate you at any time?"

"Oh. True."

"As for being another race wanting to use the technology for my own end, well, that's hard to comment on. You'll just have to learn to trust me in time."

"No thanks," said Croft. "There's no way that I'm going to risk my life just on your say-so."

"And yet you are about to risk your life heading to Sarney Sarittenden for a totally different reason, are you not?"

"What do you mean?" said Croft, his stomach tightening.

"To rescue your friend, the Silencer."

"Can you read my thoughts?" said Croft. Another thought quickly occurred to him. "Are you Inspir?"

"Who?"

"Well, I suppose that answers that question," said Croft. Inspir wouldn't hide like this anyway, even if he were still alive. "Yes, since you seem to know, I am going to rescue the Silencer."

"What if I help you?" said Mr. Towel.

"Don't need your help," said Croft suspiciously.

"You think you can just plunk down with your gravitators into Sarney Stadium, grab the Silencer, and head back up again?" Mr. Towel chuckled. "Clifford, oh, Clifford."

"What, what? It's a good plan!" said Croft defensively.

"It's only good in comparison to your previous efforts to rescue your Silencer," said Mr. Towel. "As you see, I do know quite a lot about you. Now, if I agree to help you, will you help me?"

"Specifically how will you help me?"

"I'll tell you why your attempt to save your Silencer can't possibly work; in return, for saving your life, you'll go on my mission instead."

Croft was about to respond when he suddenly heard a sound; then another, then another. It was the sound of repeated claps.

His weapon drawn, he watched as the Clapper came out of the gloom.

"Croft! Clap! Croft! Clap!"

"What are you doing here?"

"Sally sent me looking for you," said the Clapper. "You've been gone a while."

"I'm fine," said Croft.

"She didn't ask if you were fine," said the Clapper, standing right in front of the white, wavy sheet.

"Thanks," said Croft. He looked at the bright, white wavy sheet. "You don't see anything here, do you?"

"See what?"

"Oh, I don't know, a bright wavy sheet, maybe?"

The Clapper looked around, and right through it. "No."

"Thanks. You can head back to base now."

"What about Sally?"

"She's already back at base," said Croft, being deliberately obtuse.

"So she is," said the Clapper. Clapping sporadically, he headed off into the gloom.

"You still there?" said Croft, talking to the wavy sheet.

"Yes," came Mr. Towel.

"Where were we?" said Croft.

"I was telling you how you were risking your life for nothing to rescue your friend."

"No, I remember now," said Croft. "You were about to tell me how to safely rescue my friend."

"It's an unnecessary risk. If you die, you won't be able to get my the shield schematics."

"Then you'll have to help me so I won't die," said Croft. "I believe you now."

"You do?"

"Yes. I believe you want the shield schematics. If you want them, you're going to have to help me save my friend."

"Very well," Mr. Towel, sighing. "The Insectoids are painfully aware that you were behind the attack on their substation. They have photos placing you at the scene."

"And you know this because--"

"They also know of your attachment to the Silencer, and have made an elementary deduction as to what you mean to do with those gravitators you captured."

Elementary? Croft had only figured it out yesterday!

"They have placed two laser AA emplacements around the upper edges of the stadium. And they have a gravitator platform waiting to ambush you when you arrive," said Mr. Towel.

"And how do you propose to defeat them?"

"I don't propose," said Mr. Towel. "It's an unnecessary risk."

"And breaking into the Insectoid flagship isn't a risk that's ten times greater? I think if the shield schematics you wanted were in the stadium, you'd be pushing me there."

"Those schematics could save millions of lives, Clifford. Your friend is only one man."

"If you want my help, you'll have to give some of yours."

"Oh, very well," said Mr. Towel. "There may be a way to defeat their defenses."

"Somehow," said Croft, "I thought there would be."

When he got back to their base he immediately sought out the Clapper. "There's been a change of plans. You're going with us."

The Clapper clapped hysterically.

"Why?" said Red Sally.

Croft decided it would take too long to explain, and just waved her off for now.

The next day they made final preparations. They would fly the gravitators by night, traveling low to avoid the Insectoid detection grid. The team now consisted of Croft, Red Sally, the Clapper, Yaney,



and Lopka, one of Arkik's soldiers. Lopka (Sergeant Lopka, actually) claimed he used to be in the jump troop, so he should be able to handle a gravitator.

They prepared to take off at sundown. They were getting ready to take off in a courtyard when Croft heard a scream.

"Croft! Crooof!" he heard, and saw an emaciated figure with flapping arms scampering towards him.

Croft immediately drew his blaster, though he thought he recognized the figure.

It was Mongo.

"Croft!" said Mongo, running up. He grabbed Croft's boots and held on for dear life. "Nice Croft! You have to help Mongo!"

"That's a bit abrupt, isn't it?" said Croft. "Why not start with 'Hello Croft, it's Mongo! I have returned! How are you? Sorry I ran out on you last year-'"

"No time, no time!" Mongo hissed. "Must leave now!"

"Does the time sensitive nature of your request have anything to do with the rather unusual collar around your neck?" Croft inquired.

"Red coming, Angry Red!" Mongo hissed. "Must go, must go now!"

"I'm right here," said Red Sally, getting confused. "And I'm not going to hurt you. She quickly amended, "Not unless you give me a new reason to."

"No, Angry Red," said Mongo, his eyes wide. "Killer, after Mongo! It was he who put explosive collar on Mongo. He treats Mongo badly, beating him. Now hunting Mongo."

"I begin to understand," said Croft. "Understand what happened to you, that is, after you left us. What I still fail to understand is why I should help you after you cut and ran?"

"Must help," said Mongo, trembling as he grabbed Croft's knees. "Please, please please please! Not much time."

Croft, despite himself, was starting to feel sorry for the poor creature.

"Hey, if we help you, what will you do for us?" said Red Sally.

"Mongo help," said Mongo. "Mongo help you now."

"Help us what?"

"Do whatever it is you are going to do," said Mongo. "Now that Mongo with you, Mongo can better see what you will be doing, what dangers there will be."

"What dangers will there be?" said Croft.

Mongo closed his eyes, concentrating. Angry Red would be here at any minute. But he tried to focus.

"Danger!" said Mongo. "Danger in stadium."

"Thanks, but we already knew that," said Croft. "Do you have anything else for us?"

"Mongo can prevent danger, but only if you take Mongo with you."

Croft considered. Mongo was already scared out of his mind. Obviously, whoever was after him was formidable.

"We don't have room, and I'm not about to trust you with a gravitator and bump one of my own-"

"Mongo can ride with someone," said Mongo.

"Not me!" said Red Sally, her hair turning the slightest bit red at the thought.

The Clapper clapped.

"Yes, yes, I go with Clapper. Friend, Clapper, friend!" said Mongo.

"Are you willing to spend three or four days strapped in with him?" Croft asked.

The Clapper clapped again, either agreeing or just clapping reflexively, Croft wasn't sure which.

"All right," Croft sighed. "Shall we remove your collar first? I

don't want it exploding--"

"No time, no time, must go now!" Mongo shrieked.

They strapped themselves in and prepared to launch. As Croft finished attaching the last strap he yelled to Mongo, who was getting strapped in with the Clapper, "Who is this Red Anger anyway?"

"Grafton Killer!" Mongo said.

The gravitators slowly took off. The Clapper and Mongo looked comical in theirs--the Clapper was strapped to his gravitator, while Mongo was strapped to the Clapper, wriggling and squirming around. The Clapper looked troubled, until he wormed his hands free so he could both operate the controls and clap periodically.

As they gained altitude they clearly saw a red headed man running into the courtyard. Before they knew it there were blaster shots whizzing around them. They were probably too far up for even the Graftonite to make an accurate hit, but they didn't want to wait around to get lucky.

Croft maneuvered his gravitator forward so that it was level with the Clappers.

"Mongo, was that the guy?"

Mongo nodded.

"Very nice," said Croft. As if they didn't have enough problems, now they had one more.

They flew low for three days, always flying at night and hiding during the day. Croft was acutely aware that if one of the gravitators broke down during the trip that two of them would have to double up; from the looks of Mongo and the Clapper, that looked very uncomfortable.

The trip was tiring; gravitators weren't made for long journeys, and they felt the harnesses digging into them during the first night of flying. But after three and a half nights of relatively uneventful flying (except for the time that Mongo and the Clapper got lost) they managed to make their way to Sarney Sarittenden. They needed rest, and a place to hide; stashing their gravitators in an abandoned building under some rubbish, they made their way on foot, through the underground, to Croft's abandoned spaceship hideout. It had been a long time since he had been there, and he approached it cautiously; but when he climbed inside, it appeared that it hadn't been touched. From the outside it looked like (and was) a crashed spaceship; but on the inside it was the perfect hideout near the heart of Sarney Sarittenden.

They rested for a day before taking up flight again. Now the mission was really getting risky. If they were spotted getting into position they could easily be caught, or shot down.

The plan was for Croft and Yaney to fly to the stadium at night. The stadium had all sorts of defenses, but it was empty at night, and it was hoped the Insectoids wouldn't prepare for an aerial attack when no one was there.

When Croft landed on the very edge of the lip of the stadium, everything seemed quiet. They had seen some guards at the entrance to the stadium, but the night sky had masked their approach. It didn't seem like there were any guards inside the stadium.

They got to work; Yaney went inside one laser emplacement while Croft went inside another. In ten minutes, their job was done, and they silently mounted their gravitators and headed back to their hideout.

But first they headed straight up into the clouds before heading west; if they were spotted, the whole effort would be worse than useless.

They got back to the hideout, apparently without being spotted. But tomorrow they would have to fly during the daylight, which would be much more difficult.

"So when are you going to help us?" said Croft. "So far you haven't told us anything useful."

"Tomorrow," said Mongo. "Mongo help you tomorrow."

"Good," said Croft. "Because if you aren't helpful, I may just drop you off where I found you."

"Mongo help, Mongo help," Mongo squeaked. "What about Mongo collar?"

"It looks fetching on you," said Croft.

"Croft remove Mongo collar?"

"Croft remove Mongo collar when Mongo do something for Croft," said Croft.

"Oh," said Mongo.

The next day the Silencer was scheduled to fight in a match with a new enemy, some kind of giant salamander. He stood out in the arena under the morning sun, holding an electroblade. He was only given an electroblade for the tough monsters.

What would happen now was the same thing that had happened many times before. Czzz would make the announcements, combat would begin, and the Silencer would kill.

Only this time the script was playing out differently. Suddenly, out of nowhere, five gravitators streaked out of nowhere and started to touch down near his position. As they came close to the ground Croft gave the crowds something to think about, pressing the buttons that would detonate the explosives they had placed in the AA positions. The fiery explosions distracted the crowds, at least momentarily.

"No, no!" Mongo shrieked as they approached the ground.

"What?" said Croft.

"40 feet to the right, 40 feet to the right," Mongo shrieked.

Croft looked quizzically at him, but motioned everyone to land 40 feet to the right. That put them farther away from the Silencer than they wanted.

The Silencer was immediately running for their position, but so was the recently released salamander. This time, however, a new factor came into play--blasters. Croft opened fire on the creature, but his shots only seemed to tickle it.

The Silencer was running for the gravitators, but the salamander was now right behind him.

"Dodge!" Red Sally screamed, and the Silencer rolled to the side just as she sent forth a sheet of flame that burned the top of the salamander's head, neck, and body.

Croft smelled burning salamander as the thing shrieked wildly and started to roll on its back to try to put out the flames. While that was happening a shadow appeared over head.

It was a massive gravitator platform, and it was losing altitude, fast. When it was level with them it would undoubtedly open fire.

"Now!" yelled Croft.

The Clapper concentrated, and the gravitator platform started to spin wildly. The pilot tried to regain control, but every time it regained control for a few seconds, it would spin wildly again, casting off trooper bodies into the crowds and the arena.

The Clapper was getting blue in the face, fighting to keep the platform destabilized. Finally he gave a giant push with his mind that sent the platform careening against the stadium. It actually bounced as it went down the stadium seats, crushing the Insectoids underneath, like it was a giant sled going downhill, until it crashed and exploded in the arena--just 40 feet to their left.

"Mongo helped," said Mongo, making eye contact with Croft, for an instant.

At that moment the Silencer ran up to Croft and grabbed him in a

tight hug with one arm. "Go!" he cried.

The gravitators lifted off as one, zooming up and out of the arena at top speed. A few stray bolts were fired but none came close enough to notice.

They stashed their gravitators and took a circuitous route back to the crashed spaceship hideout. The Insectoids would be mobilized in force to look for them. Croft's plan was to hide for a few days until the search abated.

After they had eaten and drank, they rested as best they could in the cramped quarters. "You came back for me," said the Silencer, a little surprised. "It's just been so long. I thought you were dead, or-

"We never forgot about you," said Croft. "But until recently, we didn't have the means to rescue you."

"The gravitators," said the Silencer.

Croft nodded. He pointed to the Silencer's right arm. "Is it-"

"Still," said the Silencer. "But that doesn't matter, Clifford. Annie's alive."

"Alive?" said Croft. "How do you know?"

"They showed me a vid," said the Silencer.

"Do you know where?"

"Could be anywhere," said the Silencer. "But now I have a reason for living, again. I've got to find her."

"Good," said Croft. "You know, I'm going to tap into an Insectoid database in a few days. It's a very dangerous mission but-"

"I'll come," said the Silencer quickly.

"What mission is this?" said Red Sally, coming into the room. The Clapper and Yaney soon followed.

Croft sighed, and told his story.

"So because some anonymous voice told you to do this, you're going to?" said Sally.

"Mr. Towel gave me accurate information about the stadium," said Croft. "Without it, we might've been killed by the AA guns or the gravitator platform."

"Mongo help too," said Mongo, pointing to his collar.

Croft nodded. "Come here, boy," he said, calling him like a pet. Mongo scampered over and Croft started looking at the collar.

"It sounds like a suicide mission to me," said Red Sally.

"Luckily for you, I'm the only one who has to go," said Croft. He hmm-hmmmed as he studied the collar, and took a small electropick out of his jacket.

"Careful, may be explosives," said Mongo.

"Explosives?" said Red Sally, not liking this conversation one bit.

"Don't worry," said Croft. "I know what I'm doing."

"I'm getting out of here," said Sally, turning to go.

"Too late," said Croft. There was an almost inaudible click, and the collar came off.

"Off? Free?" said Mongo. He gave Croft a hug. "Thank you! Oh thank you, Clifford Croft! Mongo, very, very grateful!"

Croft grinned. "It was easy."

"Was no explosives in collar then?" said Mongo.

"Yes, there were," said Croft, pointing to a putty like substance on the inside of the collar. "See? But picking the lock was still easy."

"Getting back to this mission-" said Red Sally.

"I'll go with just the Silencer," said the Croft.

"But you'll be recognized!" said Sally. "If not you, certainly the Silencer."

"Please don't teach me my job," said Croft, opening a homemade

disguise kit he had brought with him. "Picking locks, disguises, and infiltrating are something I know more than bit about. We leave in two days."

Actually, they left in four. It took that long for the signs of the frantic search for them to dissipate; once they weren't found in the city, the search expanded outwards. Croft watched the progress of the search on the city monitors. He had tapped into much of the Insectoid public network, from cables running through the undercity which the Insectoids were now using.

But Croft's analysis of the broadcasts also brought him disturbing news. He was watching a news broadcast, which, being in the Insectoid language was meaningless to him, but watching the pictures he saw a human receiving what looked like a medal from an Insectoid. A human receiving a medal?

Croft rewound and instant replayed the broadcast. It was definitely a human, and, zooming in on the small screen, he recognized the image.

It was friend, armorer, and brilliant cook, Levi Esherkol!

"Levi," Croft whispered in disbelief.

"He's a collaborator," snarled Red Sally.

"Not Levi," said Croft.

"Some people will do anything to survive," said Yaney.

"From this broadcast, it looks like he's on the flagship," said the Silencer calmly. "That's good."

"Good?" said Croft.

"We'll kill two birds with one stone," said the Silencer. "When we go to get the shield schematics, we'll also kill your friend."

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Croft and the Silencer, wearing plastiform disguises, made their way surreptitiously through the undercity. They were wearing the same control collars that human slaves wore; Mr. Towel had told Croft that human slaves were for the first time being allowed onto the flagship.

For the first time. If true, that meant if Levi was on the flagship, then he wasn't a slave. Then he was a collaborator.

Croft wondered if they would be able to find Levi, wondered if the Silencer would really kill him, and wondered if he could dissuade the Silencer from killing him, and, most importantly, wondered if he should dissuade the Silencer from killing him. If Levi had become a collaborator....

That was very unlikely. If Levi wanted to escape the Insectoids, all he had to do was pack up and go into the woods. But maybe the Insectoids had taken him by surprise.

Croft glanced at the Silencer. He had changed. The old Silencer would never volunteer for a mission like this, at least not before being told how many Insectoids he'd be allowed to kill.

But now the Silencer once again had an agenda for living-- locating his wife, Annie. Croft only hoped that they would be able to find some information about her in the Insectoid memory banks.

They retrieved a small box inside a panel in a certain junction of a certain sublevel. Croft studied the official looking disks. He wondered how Mr. Towel had been able to obtain them. They would be easiest to obtain if Mr. Towel worked for the Insectoids. Were they walking into a trap?

They would find out soon enough. Croft and the Silencer stepped out of the undercity onto the surface at Sarney Spaceport. Croft had to resist the impulse to run as he saw two Insectoid troopers snap to awareness, pointing their blast rifles at him.

"Humans! Why are you unaccompanied?" came the harsh voice over the glowing translation device. Not waiting for a reply, it added, "Identify!"

Croft wordlessly held up their official disks, which were scanned.

If they were to be betrayed, this is the moment that it would happen, so Croft figured.

There was a pause, and then a beep.

"Day shift laborers," said the guard, reading the panel. "I was unaware that you were permitted to travel freely."

"We were completing an errand for our master," said Croft meekly, his head bowed.

The Insectoid guard paused. "Proceed!" it said, opening the gate.

Croft and the Silencer entered, walking with their heads down, shuffling like dispirited laborers.

The Silencer started walking to an Insectoid shuttle, but Croft hissed, "No, this way," and indicated that he should follow Croft.

Croft looked around. There were Insectoids crawling about everywhere. They didn't seem to be attracting any attention, but it would only take seconds for someone to sound the alarm and grab them.

The Silencer followed Croft, who led him to an Alliance shuttle.

"They let Alliance shuttles aboard their flagship?" said the Silencer incredulously.

"I'm told that they have been using a lot more human resources lately," said Croft. "When they first arrived they wouldn't use any human technology or even humans for anything other than brute labor. But something changed that made them more accommodating."

"And the voice told you all this," said the Silencer.

"Yes," said Croft. He operated the controls. "Launching."

"Shouldn't we have gotten launch permission?" said the Silencer.

"And won't the flagship challenge us before we land?"

"They don't quite trust humans well enough to pilot shuttles," said Croft, "So anything I said to their air traffic control would give us away. Believe me, I thought of that too. I'm told that shuttles fly back and forth so frequently that they don't have to check in."

"Again, you're trusting the voice," said the Silencer.

"Again, I'm trusting Mr. Towel," Croft agreed.

They approached the flagship. It was a huge superbattleship, bristling with armaments; one pulse from one of its smaller cannons could have completely decimated the shuttle. The hanger bay was big enough to fit a small destroyer. Croft landed the shuttle, apparently without notice.

Shutting down the engines, Croft picked up a box and handed another to the Silencer.

"What are these for?"

"We're laborers, remember?" said Croft. "We also can't let on that we were the pilots. Now, just follow me and let me do the talking."

They disembarked from the shuttle; an Insectoid was standing there, apparently staring at them with its multiplex eyes.

"Yes, master," Croft hurriedly said, speaking into the shuttle entrance as if there were an Insectoid pilot there. "We will deliver these immediately and return."

He and the Silencer left the landing bay, and slowly walked down a hallway, apparently at random. But Croft had a partial map imprinted in his mind; he went down an elevator, left, then right, then right again; they found themselves at the entrance to the records interface center. He looked around to make sure they weren't seen, and then nodded to the Silencer; both of them dropped their boxes and drew their

guns, which they had hidden under their pants, strapped above their ankles.

"Remember, be careful not to shoot instrumentation," said Croft. The Silencer looked at him scornfully, as if he were giving a grownup advice that one would give to a child.

They charged into the room, which was filled with gleaming machinery. Two Insectoids looked up; and, a second later, two Insectoids dropped to the ground with large holes in their thoraxes.

"Guard the door," said Croft, sitting down at the terminal. It all looked alien to him. He tried to concentrate and think about the instructions Mr. Towel had put in his brain. Then he started tapping keys.

After a bit of trial and error, he found the information about the shield schematics, and downloaded the information onto a disk. Croft only briefly paused to wonder how Mr. Towel would be able to access information on an Insectoid disk, and then put it out of his mind; Mr. T. obviously had more access to resources than he did.

When the information was downloaded, the next thing he did was try to locate Levi. He had really only been given enough of an understanding of the Insectoid written language to find the shield schematics, and quickly gave up. Then he got an idea. Pulling up a map of the ship, he tapped into the internal sensors, scanning in the most likely areas.

He found himself staring at one ugly group of bugs after another. But after a few minutes, he caught the familiar image of the portly scientist who had helped him on many missions.

"You've found him," said the Silencer, glancing at the matching location on the ship's map. "Now what about Annie?"

Suddenly the door slid open and an Insectoid stepped in. The Silencer shot it quickly, his eyes barely flickering from Croft.

Croft returned to the database. He scanned it for several minutes, but even the Silencer could see that he wasn't making progress.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't have the vocabulary, and any frame of reference," said Croft. "It's not like I can do a name search, I don't even know how her name would translate in that category."

"Try searching for prisoners."

Croft gulped. "I don't know the word for prisoners."

"Then try searching the ship visually."

"We don't have the time," said Croft. "We don't have any reason to believe she's even on this ship. We don't know where she is, and I'm sorry to say it but I don't know enough of the language to search this database."

"But I'll bet he does," said the Silencer tightly, pointing to the image of Levi, who was pattering about in what looked like an Insectoid lab.

Levi Esherkol, formerly a top scientist for the Agency, as well as the best (and only) cook on Aridor, was pattering about in his lab, trying to deal with a problem that had eluded him for days. He pressed a number of buttons on a large electronic device. He mixed several nasty looking chemicals together, and dumped them into the side of the device, and pressed another button.

The large device creaked and groaned. Lights bars on the side of it flashed brightly. Then, in the center of it, a greyish substance slid down into a beaker inside a sealed containment unit.

Levi unsealed the containment unit, and stared at the substance gravely.

Then he stuck a finger in it, and put it to his mouth, and tasted

it.

Hmm. Not quite there yet, but closer.

His ruminations were disrupted by the sounds of someone entering his lab. It was probably Tsur again. She was jealous of his influence over Queen Zsst, and was always watching over Levi, looking for signs of betrayal.

So no one was more surprised than he when two humans wearing slave collars stepped into the lab.

"What you doing here?" said Levi, in his old easteuro accent. "I not ask for deliveries."

Croft suddenly realized that Levi didn't recognize him under his disguise.

"Levi, it's me, Croft," said Croft, after first looking around to make sure no one else was in the room.

Levi quickly looked up at something behind them that they couldn't see.

"Croft?" he said, looking disturbed. "You shouldn't have come here."

"What?" said Croft.

The Silencer drew his blaster and pointed it at Levi.

"What is this?" said Levi.

"Death for you, traitor," said the Silencer. "I'll make it quick, if you give me what I want."

"We want you to find someone for us in their central computer records, Levi," said Croft.

Levi shook his head. "I can't... I can't help you...."

"Then you'll die," said the Silencer.

"All right, all right," said Levi. He moved to a terminal, and started pressing keys. "Who is it you're looking for?"

"My wife, Annie Oakley," said the Silencer. "She's a prisoner."

Levi nervously depressed keys for a few seconds. Suddenly, two doors on either side of the room opened.

The Silencer spun around, his gun in hand-

to find six blast rifles, pointed straight at him.

Graftonites are fast, and the Silencer was among the fastest of the Graftonites. But he knew he had no way to take out all six when their weapons were all pointed at him and ready to fire.

"Surrender," growled the translator for one of them.

Croft and the Silencer slowly dropped their weapons.

"Thank goodness you got here so quickly," said Levi. "I only sounded the alarm a few seconds ago at my terminal."

The Insectoids didn't comment on this, but one of them said, "Queen Zsst wants to see you."

"What will happen to them?" Levi asked casually.

"Take them to interrogation," said the guard.

Croft and the Silencer were marched to a detention area and put into a cell bordered by a force field.

"It's not like you not to go down shooting," said Croft.

The Silencer said nothing.

"I forgot, you have something to live for now," said Croft.

The Silencer glared at him.

"Are you angry with me?"

The Silencer actually laughed, something Croft hadn't heard in years.

"What's so funny?"

"We're facing torture, followed by probable execution, and you're worried whether I'm angry with you," said the Silencer grimly.



Levi Esherkol nervously entered Queen Zsst's inner chamber. To his knowledge, he had been the only human to ever enter her throne room chamber. A correction: the only one to enter and leave alive.

Levi had started out making tasty tidbits for the Queen and her entourage when he was first captured during the initial days of the invasion. Gradually, as he had acquired some degree of trust, he had been granted a limited degree of freedom and discretion. He had been given free run of non-secured areas of the ship. His wife, Mindy, had been allowed to return to Aridor. And he was untouchable; no one could order him tortured or killed, save the Queen.

But his status as the only semi-free human aboard the flagship was always a tenuous one. Though he had won over many in the Queen's court with his tasty cooking, there were others who would have liked nothing better than to have him executed. Tsur, for one, had already set several traps for him. Most recently she arranged for classified information show up on his terminal; when he saw that, he had immediately reported it to the guard and Queen Zsst.

Levi was never quite sure where he stood with the Queen. Her emotions towards him ranged from mild amusement to occasional anger, especially when she was irritated by other matters. Levi always knew that his life hung by a thread; if, in a fit of rage, the Queen ordered him executed, there would be no second chances. But the perks of his position justified the risks.

Levi bowed his head as he entered the Queen's presence.

"I have heard news involving you, Lev-I," she said, mispronouncing his name as she always did. But the use of his name was a good sign, usually.

"Some humans came to kidnap me," said Levi. "I sounded alarm as soon as I able to."

"Yes, we are impressed by that," said the Queen, continuing in a monotone. "There are those who challenge your loyalty to us."

"I completely loyal to you, my Queen," said Levi.

The Queen didn't comment on that. "The u-mans seemed to know you."

"I used to know them, your excellency," said Levi. "One of them is called the Silencer."

"I have heard of that one, from the arena," said the Queen. "And the other?"

"Clifford-"

"Croft!" hissed the Queen. "We know that one, and we hate it!"

"My Queen?" said Levi, trembling.

"He is a leader of the pitiful resistance," said the Queen. "He must be liquidated immediately." Her vestigial wings fluttered angrily, and for a moment she buzzed in a way that was untranslatable. Her buzzing infected her retinue in her chamber, and they started buzzing too.

Levi stood perfectly still, in fear of his life. It was at times like this that the Queen was mostly likely to forget that he was still useful to her. He held his breath and waited for the buzzing to calm down.

"No..." said the Queen, when the buzzing had subsided. "No," she contradicted herself. "First he must be tortured and brainscanned, for everything he knows, then he will be executed. It will be a great victory for our empire!" The Queen held up a slender disk in one of her claws. "Do you know what this is?"

"No, my Queen."

"It is classified information about our defense systems," said the Queen. "Do you know where the humans obtained it?"

"No," said Levi.

An aide approached the Queen, and whispered something into one of

her audio organs.

"I have just been informed that this information was obtained before they encountered you," said the Queen.

The atmosphere in the room improved dramatically.

"You have done well, Levi. If you keep me amused and well fed, you will continue to live," said the Queen.

"I am working on some new dishes even as we speak," Levi stammered.

The Queen waved a mandible, indicating that the interview was over. Levi, covered with sweat, left her presence.

Croft and the Silencer were dragged, kicking and screaming, to two sinister looking chairs in the detention block. The heavy duty chairs had an elaborate electronic gadget mounted on the headrest, sinister looking black needles.

Croft and the Silencer were strapped in. Croft managed to injure two of his captors as they strapped him in, but the muzzle of a blast rifle pressed against his face, and he stopped resisting.

"What is this?" said Croft, watching the Insectoids lower the set of needles towards their heads.

"I've been here before," said the Silencer. "Take my word, it's pretty painful."

They set the needles so that they were just in contact with their scalps, but aside from the prickliness felt nothing.

Most of the Insectoids left the room except for a technician who was working at a control and another, presumably the interrogator, who was waiting to begin.

They felt the needles start to hum.

Suddenly the power died, and, except for emergency lighting, everything went dark. Emergency klaxons could be heard in the distance.

They heard the interrogator barked "What are you doing here?" to someone out of their field of vision, and then they saw the flash of a blaster fire.

The technician turned to see what was happening, just as it too was gunned down.

Levi Esherkol, cook, scientist, and now superspy extraordinaire, stepped into their field of vision, holding the smoking blaster. He worked rapidly on loosening their restraints, taking off the Silencer's first.

Once he was freed, he started on Croft. The Silencer had a presence of mind not to kill Levi on the spot, but he did relieve him of the blaster.

"Good, I cannot be seen carrying that anyway," said Levi. "Official story will have to be that Graftonite escaped and shot guards."

"Levi-"

"No time," said Levi, freeing the last of his restraints. "My lab, always monitored. Knew guards already coming, so no harm reporting you. Constantly need to prove loyalty. "

"Levi-"

"Take disk," said Levi, handing him something. "No, not disk with spy data. Queen have that. Go up two levels, then left, then right to shuttle bay."

"Levi-"

"Hurry!" said Levi. "Power gone, monitors out, but will not last long." He practically ran out of the room, and the Silencer motioned Croft to follow.

By the time they reached the dark corridor Levi was already gone. "The buggers' quicker than he looks," Croft muttered, as he followed

the Silencer down the corridor.

They encountered several Insectoids as they quickly made their way to the landing bay; but they were unprepared and they didn't have Graftonite reflexes; the Silencer simply stepped over their bodies, not breaking his pace for anything.

The power returned and with them the lights only came on when they reached the shuttle bay. The Silencer shot two more Insectoids before they reached the shuttle. The first sounds of alarm were sounding as they closed the hatch.

"I take it we shouldn't request takeoff clearance," said Croft, rapidly flipping switches even as he slid into the pilot's chair.

"Go!" said the Silencer, with unexpected urgency.

The shuttle launched. The Insectoids weren't yet alert enough to activate their exterior weaponry, but they weren't halfway into the atmosphere before they detected Insectoid fighters, closing fast.

"I have some good news, and some bad news," said Croft.

The Silencer said nothing.

"The good news is that at the rate they're gaining on us, we have just enough time to reach the surface," said Croft.

The Silencer said nothing.

"The bad news is that if we take the time to land, they'll be right on top of us."

"I assume you have a plan," said the Silencer.

"I had a plan, if we escaped undetected," said Croft.

"And if we were detected?"

Croft shrugged. "I'll have to improvise." He pushed the nose of the shuttle down, causing it to glow as it flew deeper into the atmosphere.

They cleared the cloud layer, and they could see the majestic spires of Sarney Sarittenden directly below them.

"Looks impressive from above, doesn't it?" said Croft cheerfully, as they headed towards the tall buildings at several hundred miles per hour.

It looked like they were going to plow into one of the buildings when, almost at the last minute, Croft veered off and turned the shuttle to the right. He struggled to get the nose straight.

"I don't think you'll get it straight in time," said the Silencer. "You may have waited too long."

Croft, struggling with the controls said nothing.

Seconds later, the shuttle plowed into the surface of Sarney Sarittenden.

Sarney Sarittenden was established on the east coast of Concord, about half of the distance down from the northern polar region to the equator. No one knows for sure why that particular spot was picked, but some have conjectured that the first settlers found it useful to be near the ocean, to ferry goods up and down the coast before roads could be built for the ground cars.

Crashing into the ocean, of course, was Croft's plan all along the minute that they launched from the flagship. The timing was tight--if he descended too slowly, the pursuing fighters would catch up; too fast and they wouldn't survive the crash.

Croft timed it just right. There was a sharp crack as they hit the surface, and the creaked and groaned as they sunk, but it stayed all in one piece.

"We're sinking fast; we'd better drop out soon," said the Silencer.

Croft shook his head. "We're leaving in style. Break out the spacesuits."

As it turned out the ship suddenly settled on the ocean floor,

just a little over 100 feet below the surface.

The Silencer checked the storage locker. "There are no spacesuits."

"Well, we'll have to do it the old fashioned way," said Croft, putting the disk he had received in a vacuum solid pouch. He looked at the Silencer appraisingly. "Can you swim with only one arm?"

The Silencer nodded.

They opened the lock and braced themselves, but it was still a shock to feel the flood of cold water hit them like a wave. Croft and the Silencer spent precious seconds fighting the flood to get out of the airlock; when they did, they immediately swam upwards

Croft felt his lungs were about to burst as he swam upwards. He was encouraged by the fact that it was getting brighter and brighter, but when would he reach the surface.

He gasped, his lungs starting to give out. He exhaled slightly, buying himself a few more seconds....

...And then he was on the surface, gasping for breath, peddling the water, and basking in the bright afternoon sunlight.

But where was the Silencer?

Croft looked all around him. There was no sign. Could he really swim with only one good arm? Croft waited a few seconds, then what seemed like a minute.

And then the Silencer surfaced right next to him!

"I didn't think you were going to make it!" said Croft.

"You dropped something," said the Silencer, holding up the vacuum tight pouch.

Luckily the shore wasn't too far away. Or perhaps luck wasn't involved, for Croft had always planned to splash down near the shoreline. They swam slowly, conserving energy, watching the skies for signs of pursuit.

In the distance already they could see fighters, streaking across the skyline. Fighters would probably be moving too fast to see their small forms, but once the Insectoids broke out a gravitator patrol, it would be easy to pick them off at sea.

The shore loomed closer and closer. As this was Sarney Sarittenden coastline, the buildings came right up to the shoreline, as one might expect. The Silencer moved towards a ladder on the side but Croft waved him off. He could hear sounds of buzzing on the street above.

He motioned the Silencer to swim down and follow him into a large underground sewage pipe. They swam inside and held their breath for only a short time before the pipe rose and the water level dropped, giving them precious air to breath.

"It doesn't smell very good," said the Silencer.

"Only the living have the ability to breath," Croft reminded him.

As they slogged through the tunnel a fluttering white sheet materialized in front of Croft.

"Greetings, Clifford."

"Are you in here too?" said Croft.

"Who are you speaking to?" said the Silencer.

"Mr. Towel," said Croft.

"Do you have the data?" asked Mr. Towel.

"Not exactly," said Croft.

"And that means...."

"We got the data, but we caught, and when we escaped, we didn't have time to ask for it back," said Croft.

"That's most disappointing," said the voice.

"Tell me about it," said Croft.

"We were really counting on this information."

"Life is full of disappointments," said Croft.

"I don't suppose you'd be willing to go back and try again?"

"I don't suppose so," Croft agreed. Then, slogging through the pipe, he held up his vacuum tight container and remarked, "But there may be another option."

They made it back to their hideout in the crashed spaceship. After a period of rest and recovery, Croft took out the disk that Levi had hurriedly given him. "This may have some great information on it, but it's completely useless. How are we going to analyze an Insectoid disk without Insectoid machinery?"

He was talking in private to the Silencer. He had told no one, not even Red Sally and the Clapper, about what they had learned about Levi. The more people who learned that Levi was acting as a double agent, the shorter his lifespan would be.

"He probably didn't have any conventional Alliance computers to work with," said the Silencer. "Is there really no way to determine what's in the disk?"

Croft studied the disk, flipping it over, and frowning. "What's in the disk? No. But what's on the disk, well"... he flipped the disk over again, showing the Silencer a sequence of numbers clearly written on the side of the disk in Levi's hurried handwriting. Upon further inspection, they realized the numbers corresponded to a certain location in the undercity....

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Levi entered the Queen's chamber. He noticed that his dreaded enemy, Tsur, the chief of security, was also there. This wasn't looking good already.

"Yes, my Queen?" he said, bowing.

"You were seen in the vicinity of the prisoner compound after the loss of power," said the Queen.

"I was?" said Levi, putting on his best stupid look. "Where?"

Tsur spoke, buzzing menacingly. "Two levels above the prison block, in the same section."

Levi inwardly gave a sigh of relief. So he hadn't been seen actually in or outside the prison block. So he still had a chance.

"Yes, I was going to get some more equipment from stores."

"Stores was in the opposite direction," said Tsur.

"I... I must have gotten lost in the dark," said Levi.

Queen Zsst said, "Did you know that our power system was sabotaged?"

"Sabotaged? No, my Queen," said Levi.

"It was sabotaged, and then someone helped the prisoners escape," said Tsur.

Levi blinked. "Are you saying I did it? My Queen, do you think that I could sabotage the power system and then go and overpower several guards, all without being noticed?"

"No," said the Queen.

"Not unless you had other help," said Tsur.

"My Queen, if you recall I was the one who turned in these humans earlier today. Why would I betray them and then work to set them free?"

"It doesn't clearly make sense," said Zsst, and now she was addressing Tsur. "It seems most likely that we have other saboteurs aboard. Find them and bring them to me."

"Yes, my Queen."

Zsst started discussing other security measures with Tsur until Tsur made a noise akin to clearing her throat and pointed at Levi.

"You may go," said Zsst, waving a lazy appendage.

For Zsst, the matter seemed to be over. But Levi felt Tsur's eyes bore into him as he turned and left. He would have to be a lot more careful now.

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"We're at the proper location," said Croft, whispering to the Silencer as they stood in one of the deepest levels of the undercity beneath Sarney Sarittenden. It was so dark and gloomy that even Insectoid patrols seldom came there.

"All I see is blank wall," said the Silencer.

"Yes," said Croft. "Perhaps we'd better knock." And he actually rapped on the wall, several times.

There was a pause, and they heard a faint hum, as if they were under the lense of a surveillance instrument. Then the wall slowly slid aside.

Croft looked at the Silencer into the gloom. "It seems we've been expected."

It was only gloomy until they rounded a bend, and were buzzed in through another wall that became a sliding door.

They found themselves in a large bright lab that was packed with instruments, machinery, and discarded food items.

"Hello," said Croft cautiously, his blaster drawn. "Is anyone home?" The lab was so large and filled with gadgets that it was hard to tell who was there.

"You're here," came a meek voice.

A thin man in a white lab coat pattered up to them

"Inglorious!" said Croft, recognizing him after a fraction of a section. Inglorious Interon had been one of Levi's research assistants, back in the days when Levi had worked directly for the Agency.

"Croft!" said the man. He looked at the Silencer. "I don't know you. I was only told to expect Croft."

Croft lowered his weapon, gesturing the Silencer to do the same. "Expecting us?"

"Well, I got the message two days ago," said Inglorious. "You sure took your time getting here."

"You're in direct communication with Levi?"

"Have been for years," said Inglorious. "Well, since the Invasion started." He paused. "Well, almost direct communication."

"What? How?" said Croft.

"When the Insectoids invaded, Levi knew that they would probably be here for some time" said Inglorious. "He had General Markov-"

"General Markov? General Tenor Markov?" said Croft.

"Yes, I believe that was his first name," said Inglorious.

"Anyway, he secured a body for Levi to study, so Levi could see what made them tick, particularly, what made them hungry. Then he arranged to get himself captured-"

"He got himself captured?"

"If you repeat every word I say it's going to be a much longer story," said Inglorious. "Now, if I may continue. Based on his understanding of their biochemistry, he created some irresistible food that they simply loved. Goey stuff to you and me, you understand, but for them-"

"-it was wonderful, I understand," said Croft.

Inglorious glared at him for interrupting again. "Word of what he created spread up the Insectoid command chain, and Levi was quickly able to secure a position as the Queen's personal cook. He's been using that position for years now to report."

"Report? On what?" said Croft.

"Most everything," said Levi. "I have entire databases full of

information-

"How does he report?" said Croft.

Inglorious paused, as if he were resisting giving out this particular secret. "He piggybacks their planetary holotransmissions, creating tiny pixel fluctuations that I can translate here."

"And how do you communicate back to him?"

"A broadband signal," said Inglorious.

"Don't the Insectoids pick up on it?" said Croft.

"Not when it's disguised to look like planetary static," said Inglorious, smiling.

Croft gave a low whistle. "Levi, you are a genius."

"Well, I helped him implement the plan," said Inglorious defensively.

Croft paused for a moment. Suddenly it all made sense. He had wondered how General Markov's group, all massed together, had escaped detection for so long. The answer was clear: Levi had been feeding him intel.

"I'm so glad you're here," said Inglorious. "You're the first people I've seen in person in quite a long time."

"So when Markov died, who did Levi pass his information onto?"

"Well, no one," said Inglorious. "There was no one we knew-"

"So you've just been sitting accumulating data on the enemy for what, over a year now, and not doing anything with it?"

"More or less," said Inglorious. "Now don't you see why I'm glad to see you?"

## Chapter 5: Years of Resistance

The next twelve and a half years passed like a blur. One of the first things that Croft did was set up a conduit to pass on useful information to General Arkik, who was managing much of the growing resistance in the west and the north. But Croft only passed on selected information and made sure the information was "scrubbed", either by changing small details or adding or removing others, to reduce the chance the Insectoids, if they intercepted any of this information, could work backwards and figure out the source of the information.

And Croft swore the Silencer to secrecy, and didn't tell anyone else about the identity of their new intelligence source. Levi was in a very dangerous position, and Croft wasn't about to contribute to the risk by letting others in on the identity of their top intelligence source.

Who would have thought it: Levi Esherkol, a cook and scientist, was their top secret spy. Levi on rare occasions had accompanied Croft on active duty missions in the past (before he retired from the service), but always in a support capacity. Croft never imagined that Levi would have had the courage to put himself in the front line like this, and he wondered what had motivated his old friend to do so.

Their first order of business was to get those shield schematics that Mr. Towel wanted. Inglorious and Levi messaged each other back and forth, and it was immediately clear that while Levi could get access to the information, it was simply too much data to transfer in a piggybacked micropixel broadcast. The data would have to be transferred over an open line, which was impossible, or transferred by disk personally, which didn't seem possible.

But Levi proved more creative than even Croft had given him credit for. A few days later a message came in that Levi had found a courier for the shield data, ten of them each with an identical copy of the data, no less, and had tagged the couriers with an isotope that would allow Croft to track them using a special detector that

Inglorious could provide. But Croft had been warned that the couriers would only be carrying the data for 48 hours, so he had to find at least one of them in that time.

Croft wondered why Levi had used ten couriers, and why Croft would have to find the courier rather than the other way around, and why they would dump the information after 48 hours. "What aren't you telling me, Inglorious?" he asked.

It was then that Croft learned that the couriers didn't exactly know that they were couriers. They were Insectoids, who had actually SWALLOWED a data disk, wrapped around some confection that Levi had cooked up. He had evidently convinced a bunch of gullible Insectoid troopers on their way for duty on August that this latest treat must be swallowed to savor the full taste of it, and 48 hours was the amount of time the data would stay within their digestive track. Croft blanched at the thought of having to dissect one of those disgusting creatures. Why couldn't anything ever be easy?

Croft lurked in the vicinity of the spaceport, and immediately picked up one on his scanner. But he had no way of getting access to this Insectoid. They waited a while, and then picked up another Insectoid, heading away from the spaceport.

Undoubtedly part of a patrol.

They intercepted the patrol, with Red Sally flaming the column from the front and the Silencer and Croft gunning them down from the back. Sally and the Silencer had explicit orders to only aim for the heads.

In moments they had their pick of charred, headless Insectoids. Checking with his scanner, Croft searched for the right corpse. Sighing, he opened his laser scalpel. This would be disgusting, but necessary.

"I hope you're happy," said Croft, leaving the data in the designated location in the undercity. "I don't think I'll eat for a week after this."

"Your assistance will be vital to the war effort," said Mr. Towel soothingly.

"It would be more comforting if I knew exactly how," said Croft. "What use are shield schematics if we don't have a fleet to fight with?" He paused. "Do we have a fleet left to fight with?"

"I'm curious, however, how you got the shield information," said Mr. Towel.

"There were rumors that some of the fleet survived," said Croft. "Commanded by one War Admiral Norman North, I believed. But we've heard nothing from them since the early days of the invasion."

"You obviously didn't board the flagship again to get this information," said Mr. Towel, still sticking to his topic.

"That's correct," said Croft. He grinned. "If I show me mine will you show me yours?"

"You cannot see what I have to show you, Clifford," said the voice sadly. "I'd love to meet you. You're one of the most entertaining humans I've ever met."

"So you're not human and you've met our kind before," said Croft. "Perhaps you're working with others of my kind even now?"

"I can't reveal myself, Clifford. If others find out that I'm involved, the consequences would be disastrous."

"What others? Who?" said Croft. "Are you afraid of the Insectoids?"

"You don't understand, Clifford," said Mr. Towel. "I will keep in touch, supplying you with new missions as needed."

"Thanks for the generosity," said Croft sardonically. Then, after a silence, he said, "Towel Alien? Mr. T?"



After securing the shield schematics, their next order of business was set by the Silencer himself.

"If he has so much access to information, he should be able to tell me where Annie is," said the Silencer tightly.

Messages were sent and received by Inglorious. It took a few days of back and forth before they were finally able to get a definitive answer for the Silencer: no.

"No? He can't?" said the Silencer, looking enraged. "He can get top secret shield schematics, but can't tell me where my wife is being held!"

"Let me explain," said Croft nervously. He had never seen the Silencer angry before. Depressed, morose, yes, but not enraged, and there was no telling how the Silencer would react.

"What I heard through Inglorious was that the shield information, while somewhat classified, was available to a large group of Insectoids. It would have to be, because Insectoid crews would have to know how to repair the shields when something went wrong. Levi tells me that most prisoner information is also available to a wide range of security clearance holders, and there is a file on your wife."

"Then why doesn't he access it?"

"Levi tells me that he did some snooping around first, and found that it was a dummy file, merely put there to identify the user who accessed it. He's really quite good with computers, you know," said Croft.

"Then why can't he find my wife?"

"Levi determined that your wife's real file has been transferred to the highest level access--only the Queen herself and her top security people can access it, and only then from secure terminals Levi doesn't even have access to, and a level of access he simply hasn't been able to crack."

The Silencer said. "So that means we do nothing?"

Croft grabbed him by the shoulders. "That means we continue to fight. We'll beat the Insectoids, and when we do we'll find Annie."

"You don't know that," said the Silencer. "It might take years. It might take forever."

"I will do everything in my power to help you, John," said Croft.

The Silencer nodded, but he still looked miserable

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Over the next few years the resistance grew in size and strength, buoyed by its initial successes. With Levi's help, they were not only able to locate key Insectoid installations, but determine how much security there was and how it was deployed. Information about the pattern and deployment of Insectoid patrols all over the continent were sent to the resistance, and the Insectoids started to discover that they were becoming the hunted ones.

"Another blast rifle factory destroyed!" raged Queen Zsst, buzzing angrily at her advisors.

The door to her chambers opened and a hooded figure entered. "Is there a problem?" said the figure pleasantly.

"No... no problem, Baracki" said Zsst.

"I've been hearing reports to the contrary," said the hooded figure, Baracki. "The humans are organizing and attacking like never before. And recently, it's become clear that they have top level access to your intelligence. They seem to know exactly what installations to hit. How are the humans gathering such detailed and voluminous information?"

Levi chose that moment to enter the Queen's chamber, bearing a tray of edibles.

"What is this human doing here?" said Baracki.

"It cooks," said Zsst. "It has a minor talent for producing edibles."

Levi felt a wave of fear fill him as bright eyes in the hood gazed at him with malice and understanding. "Yes. I have seen this one before."

"You were the one who suggested that we employ the humans in other capacities."

"Yes, I did," said Baracki quietly, still gazing at Levi, who felt his legs starting to wobble.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" said Zsst angrily to Levi. "Put the edibles down and leave. You're dismissed!"

Suddenly, as if a spell had been broken, Levi put the tray down and scampered for the door.

When he had gone, Baracki said, "This human. Do you keep it watched?"

"Constantly," assured the Queen. "Do you suspect...."

"Probably not, but it may bear further watching," said Baracki.

"I think it more likely that a third party is involved."

"A third party?"

"Your race, the humans, and my race are not the only races in this galaxy," said Baracki. "There are others who may be sympathetic to the humans, who are working with them."

"What races might they be? And how could they get access to classified information?"

"Quite easily," said Baracki, answering the second question while ignoring the first. "But while they could slip by you undetected, I or others of my kind would notice them. I will send Rugani to investigate this possibility," he added, without elaborating further.

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Croft woke up in the middle of the night to feel the ground around him shaking. "Not again," he groaned. He picked up one of his boots and threw it in a carefully planned trajectory.

"Ooof!" said the Clapper, as he jerked into awareness.

The tremors suddenly stopped.

"You were doing it again," said Croft.

"Sorry. Clap Clap!" The Clapper stopped clapping long enough to feel the heel imprint on his forehead.

Lately the Clapper had been using his powers unconsciously at night to cause the room around him to shake. This hadn't done anything to increase his popularity with Red Sally or the other soldiers. When he tried to ask the Clapper what was wrong, the Clapper merely looked dumbly at him, like a dog who wanted to please his master but didn't understand the language.

He had attempted to ask Mongo for help, but found him to be of no help.

"Bad nightmares, shake Mongo," said Mongo.

"Yes, but do you have any ideas what's causing these nightmares?"

"Mongo not know; Mongo reads futures, not minds. Did Croft not know?"

"Croft knew," Croft sighed. "But Croft wonders if Mongo sees a future which explains Clapper's behavior."

"No, Mongo see no future for Clapper. Well, Mongo sees Clapper in futures, but in futures, all Clapper does is clap."

"Hardly surprising," said Croft. Then, before turning away, he said, "Do you see anything in your visions about a bright white sheet?"

"Bright white sheet?" said Mongo. "Shimmering, bright white sheet?"

"Yes."

"Shimmering bright white sheet that appears only in your mind?"

"Yes!" said Croft, getting excited. Now he was going to get some answers!

"No. Mongo sees nothing."

Croft was instantly deflated. "Then how did you-"

"Mongo saw future where Croft asks Mongo about sheet. That is all."

And that indeed was all. From time to time Mr. Towel came back to him, asking for favors. Oh, it wasn't a totally one way exchange; Towel Man would often offer valuable advice, intel that Levi didn't have access to. It made Croft wonder how Mr. Towel gathered his information; did he have other people like Croft that he worked with?

The Clapper wasn't the only one acting strangely. Sashay was also acting bizarrely too, spending his time making crazy paintings and then posting them in public places.

Croft didn't know it, but the origins of Sashays confusing behavior began during a routine shopping trip. Sashay, with a suitable military escort, had gone shopping for some supplies they didn't have at their latest hideout, when they decided to hide from an incoming Insectoid patrol in an old art museum.

But when they got inside, they had found it gutted. Not merely raided, but blasted to pieces. They had recognized the work of the Insectoid blast guns.

"But it's only art," Sashay had said, feeling the tremendous loss. "Why would they do such a thing?"

"Hey, art boy, what are you going to do, attack them with a paint brush?" chuckled one of the accompanying soldiers. The others thought that was funny too, and they started laughing, at Sashay's expense.

Sashay's face had turned bright red with anger, but he had said nothing. For the rest of the trip he kept silent, the wheels rapidly turning in his head.

When they got back to base, the first thing he did was get some watercolors, a makeshift easel, and large poster paper. And then Sashay started painting like mad; not one painting, or two or five or ten, but nearly 30 paintings, hastily dashed off. They were all images of the ruined metropolis, images Sashay knew by memory.

But it was when Sashay started posting them on the surface, in very public areas, that he started raising eyebrows.

Croft took him aside. "What are you doing?"

"Making the city a more beautiful place," said Sashay.

"I think some of our troopers will beautify you if they find you placing those paintings near our bases of operation."

"I'll plant them at least a mile away from any of our hideouts," Sashay promised.

"So you would risk your life, risk being caught by an Insectoid patrol, just to spread your art?" said Croft.

"Yes," said Sashay.

Croft shook his head, realizing he probably couldn't stop Sashay even if he wanted to. "Just don't bring an Insectoid patrol back home to dinner with you."

And then there was another incident, the very next day; 20 pounds of explosives had disappeared from their supplies. The explosive had evidently disappeared during dinner, when most everyone was eating.

But Croft, focused on conducting the campaign of the resistance, still didn't piece together this minor mystery.

But the Insectoids thought they had. An Insectoid named Plss was the intelligence officer for the brigade assigned to one of the regions

where Croft's fighters were most active. Plss was under heavy pressure to locate and destroy the rebels.

Plss accompanied her troops on patrol, scanning the burned out buildings. She actually walked by the first painting, posted to the wall, before realizing she had seen it several times before.

"Halt!" she buzzed the squad, and went back to the poster. These paintings were relatively new. They had been placed there.

Plss studied the paintings. They showed a scene, in the city. Looking more closely and taking a step back, she realized the scene that had been painted was this block. She looked at the painting again. The painting was almost uniformly in black; but part of it, to the left, was in red

Plss ordered the squad to turn left. Two blocks later, they found another painting.

Obviously, these were directions to a hidden rebel base! And they had been left right out in the open, the whole time! This was how the humans communicated with each other. Plss opened her comm and summoned the rest of her company.

It was almost nightfall before the troops had been gathered and they had reached the last sign. Their destination was an apparently abandoned warehouse. Readying their blast rifles, Plss gave the signal and her troops, 135 strong, rushed into the warehouse from three directions.

It was empty. Empty, that is, except for some boxes scattered around, and a large painting which stood in the center of the room.

Plss approached. She saw tiny lettering on the giant painting. She couldn't read it from a distance. She closed in, her troops around her. Walking forward, she approached the painting, walking close enough to see the lettering-

-when at that point she stepped on the pressure plate right in front of the painting, setting off the twenty pounds of high energy explosives that had been secreted around the room. Insectoid bodies went flying through the air, mashed against walls, many burning from the heat and flames of the explosion.....

The 29 troopers who managed to report back to base, some leaking circulatory fluid, reported that there hadn't been enough left of Plss to bring back for a funeral ceremony.

When Sashay heard reports of explosions in a certain part of the city, he hummed a happy tune and smiled to himself, but that was all.

Croft eventually solved the Clapper's problem upon further investigation. After enough nights of waking up to having the ground shake around him, Croft had a talk with him. "So what's going on?"

The Clapper shrugged.

"We have you sleeping in the lefthand corner; you like sleeping in the left hand corner, right?"

The Clapper nodded.

"You're sleeping with your head to the wall like you always do, right?"

The Clapper nodded.

"And you're sleeping on the same kind of bedding you're-"

"Pardon me for interrupting," said Red Sally, looking half awake and half annoyed. "But being unable to sleep, I thought I might make a contribution to this discussion. The Clapper is a creature of habit, right? Well, we've been moving around a lot lately, shifting from one hideaway to another-"

"And that's what's making him agitated?" said Croft. If so, what could they do to fix that?

The Clapper clapped.... which might mean anything.

"I'll fix things," said Sashay, who, like everyone else, had been

awakened by the tremors. He got up, and grabbed his brushes and a fresh sheet of posterboard.

"You're going to fix things with a painting?" said Croft.

"I've done it before," said Sashay. "As my dear departed wife used to say, there's always a painting for every occasion." Humming quietly, he painted away like a madman; a few minutes later he announced, "Done!" and set the painting down near the Clapper.

"Careful, it's not fully dry yet," Sashay warned.

"What is it?" said Croft, peering in the dim light. "It looks like a room of some kind."

The Clapper clapped with delight.

"It's the room we spent many months in, during our stay in Sarney Sarittenden," said Sashay. "For him, it's home."

"A large supply closet?" said Croft.

The Clapper clapped enthusiastically.

"When you get homesick, just stare at the painting until you fall asleep," said Sashay.

"I've never seen a painting that came with instructions before," said Red Sally.

"I can't believe any of this," said Croft. "A painting serving as therapy? Ridiculous!" He turned away and went back to bed.

But the next night, they knew immediately that Sashay's painting had worked--they stopped feeling the tremors.

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"So how are they doing, General?" Croft asked, watching the recruits going through an obstacle course.

"They are making progress," said Arkik.

"Good. How would you rate them?"

"I would say the troops, and I use the term loosely, are... somewhat less pathetic than they once were."

"That's progress," said Croft.

Arkik turned to Croft. "We're very lucky to have the intelligence you were able to provide us. But I am wondering, where does this intelligence come from?"

"That's need to know, General," said Croft.

"I see," said Arkik. "Well, then maybe there's something you need to know. We're having some troubles with some of our latest recruits."

"Really?"

"I hesitate to call them recruits," said Arkik. "They're groups of scavengers, many of whom have preyed on or even enslaved other scavengers. They want to join us, but they're not willing to submit to our authority. They want to operate under separate or joint commands."

"What kind of numbers can they bring?" said Croft.

"All together? Maybe several hundred," said Arkik.

"Why don't you organize a joint mission with some of them and see how it goes?" said Croft.

"I already did," said Arkik.

Croft looked surprised. "I thought we were going to consult with each other--"

"You didn't have any need to know," said Arkik. He stood taller. "Remember, I'm in charge of military operations."

"How could I forget," said Croft. "All right, what happened?"

"The scavenger groups performed adequately, but then they demanded a disproportionate share of the spoils," said Arkik.

"And your recommendation?"

"They're more trouble than they're worth," said Arkik. "We already have several thousand fighters. A few hundred more would be helpful, but won't make the difference in any particular battle."

Croft nodded.

"You realize, despite our victories, that every time we kill ten of them and they kill one of ours, that it's a victory for them," said Arkik.

Croft nodded again. He knew that the Insectoids reproduced rapidly. "That's what I'm off to talk with a friend about."

Getting to Aridor wasn't exactly easy. But it was one of the few opportunities Croft had to see Levi face to face. Levi was occasionally allowed to return to Aridor to see his wife Mindy and to check on certain test crops he was growing for the Insectoids. So flying low in the gravitator he flew to the east coast and then skimmed low over the waves to reach Aridor.

The lodge was at the Visior's Center, which was on the western most edge of Aridor, on a tip of land that stretched west into the ocean between Aridor and Concord. At it's closest approach, with Sarney Sarittenden on one side and the Visitor's Center on the other, the two continents were only about 50 miles apart, but up and down the rest of the coastline the distance widened to hundreds of mile of ocean and sea.

Aridor, being one large nature preserve, didn't have any cities, but it did have the Visitor's Center, and that's where in better days Levi used to serve the customers who would visit the park.

Levi cast a backwards glance at his Insectoid escorts who were waiting at the landing pad as he entered the lodge. Fortunately they didn't seem inclined to follow him inside. Good, that demonstrated at least a certain degree of trust.

He found Croft waiting for him inside, his blaster ready.

"This very risky," said Levi.

"I'm tired of all this back and forth talk," said Croft. "I type a message to you, it gets encoded and translated, you type a message to me, encode and translate it back--but there's one issue we can't seem to resolve using this method of communication."

Levi sighed. "Not killer virus again."

"Levi, we need the killer virus," said Croft. "That's the only way we're ever going to be able to wipe out the Insectoids. "

"As I told you, very complicated," said Levi. "Not simple insects we talking about. Very complex lifeform."

"You can't find something that will kill them?" said Croft.

"Yes, that easy to do," said Levi. "Much harder, to find something that will kill them but not harm us."

"Why?"

"Very complex lifeform. Very germ resistant. If experiment, and find complex agent that kills, no way to know what effect it will have on people."

"Well, can't we test it on someone before we use it?" said Croft, starting to feel uncomfortable with the ethics of it. He wondered if they could nab a collaborator or two.

"Not sufficient," said Levi, stamping his foot into the ground. "Virus may reside in human for years, doing little, then come out and harm, kill. No way to tell when constructing something so complex."

"But Levi, they're overrunning us," said Croft. "According to your reports, they've established huge breeding farms on the eastern end of Aridor. We can't kill them fast enough to deplete their numbers."

"I working on something," said Levi. "Alternative. Several alternative-"

There was a buzz from outside and they heard a translation device bark, "Human!"

"Must go," said Levi. He handed Croft a disk. "Here information

you requested. Will be in touch."

"Levi," said Croft.

Levi turned around.

"Stay safe."

Levi nodded, and left the room.

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"I've had a look at some of these requisitions you made, Lev-I," said the Queen.

Whenever the Queen showed too much interest in his work that meant trouble. "Yes, my Queen?" said Levi.

"These little insects--what do you call them?"

"Moths, my Queen."

"We do not generally consume lower forms of insect life," said the Queen.

"But you haven't even tasted what I intend to prepare for you," said Levi. "Let me try, and see if you like it. Certain kinds of moth wings can be quite a delicacy."

"And why do you need the gene splicing equipment?"

"Majesty, I hope to breed more flavorful breeds of moths," said Levi.

"Very well," said the Queen. "Now, you have also requested special lighting equipment. Is that also to breed your moths?"

"No, majesty," said Levi. The Queen knew full well that this wasn't the case. "It is for a new field of experimentation, special light shows that will please you."

"You have also requested permission to experiment on one of my troopers," said Zsst.

"No, my Queen, your trooper will not be an experimental subject, but an audience," said Levi. "I need to know if the special light show I prepare will have the potential to entertain you."

"We wonder why you are doing this at all," said the Queen. "Come closer."

Sweating heavily, Levi took a few steps closer.

"Closer," said the Queen.

Levi approached until he was at the step of her throne. With one of her claws she could reach out and decapitate him in one blow.

"There are those who say I should eliminate you," said the Queen. "There are those who say that your presence is an abomination, given the fact that humans like you are killing my kind every day on the surface of the very planet in which we orbit."

"My-my Queen," Levi stammered. "I have always been loyal."

"Yes, and that's why your life has been spared," said the Queen. "Until now."

"I-I am creating this light show to show you that I have more skills that can be of use to you, not merely cooking," Levi said, feeling that his life was on the line.

"So you wish to increase your value to me, to stay alive."

Levi nodded.

"I find such thinking..." the Queen paused. "Acceptable. For now. But keep me entertained, Levi."

Levi nodded, leaving. He had the mind of presence not to collapse until he got back to his lab.

He couldn't quit, not yet. There was too much at stake. Even Croft didn't know.

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From the log of Clifford Croft, 14 years and two months after the invasion

Things have been going pretty well, until lately. The size of our motley army had grown, their training and professionalism had improved, and they now operated a moderately well provisioned combat force through much of western and northern August. And yet we always conducted operations in small, guerrilla forces; one lesson we had learned from the Markov days was always to stay in small groups, lest we all be discovered in a single enemy raid.

We've been engaging in a number of hit and run and search and destroy raids for the past few years, based on reliable intelligence. And then everything changed last week; one of our ambushed parties was itself ambushed, and only two people from a raiding party of twelve returned; and this week, one of our secret caches of arms was "accidentally" discovered by the Insectoids.

Only I don't think it was an accident. We have a traitor in our midst.

Why would one of us sell out to one of them? For money or for power? Or was the person simply brainwashed.

We had some newcomers join the cause last week. I suspect that one of them is reporting to the Insectoids. I even have a suspicion who it is. Not much is really known about him, other than that he goes by the name "Smiley".

Here's how it all began:

Croft's group was just eating breakfast one morning in a burned out lobby of a building when an odd-looking man walked by on the street.

Croft wasn't sure at first what was so odd looking about the man, but later he figured out that it was his moronic smiley. The man looked like he had been lobotomized; that's what convinced Croft that he was an Insectoid plant, brainwashed by the bugs to spy on the resistance.

The man casually walked by, turned, and smiled (or continue to smile), but actually stopped and waved when he saw a familiar face.

Mongo jerked upright like he had seen a ghost. "Smiley?" said Mongo.

"Hi, how are you?" Smiley said, walking over and ignoring the presence of suddenly raised weapons. He stopped, looking around, and grinned. "Can't we all be friends?"

"Mongo, do you know this person?" said Croft.

"He's Smiley," said Mongo.

"I can see that," said Croft, misinterpreting Mongo's remark.

"Smiley help Mongo when Mongo held prisoner. Help Mongo get easier work, even give Mongo his food."

The guns slowly dropped, but everyone looked confused. No one ever gave up their precious food allotment, especially in a labor camp.

"Good to see you, my friend," said Smiley.

"How did Smiley escape?" Mongo asked.

Smiley smiled. "I just walked away."

"You just walked away?" said Croft, his eyebrows raised. "Didn't anyone try to stop you?"

"Yes," Smiley smiled. "Then I wandered around. Now I'm here," he said.

"Uh huh," said Croft, now certain that something wasn't quite right here. "Would you excuse us, for just a moment? Feel free to amuse yourself--there's a mirror by the far wall." He took Mongo aside.

"Mongo, what's your feeling about this guy?"

"Mongo not have feeling," said Mongo.

"No, don't hold back," said Croft. "Is he some kind of spy, or what? What's his agenda?"

Mongo shrugged.



"Can we trust him?"

Mongo shrugged again.

"Do you see any futures where he betrays us?"

"Now for first time you ask question that Mongo can answer."

"And?"

"No," said Mongo.

"No, he won't betray us, or no you don't see any futures involving him?"

"The latter," said Mongo. "But he be nice to Mongo, so you be nice to him. If he betray us, Mongo may get warning in time."

"How comforting," said Croft.

They processed several more new arrivals that week, but only one other was as memorable.

It was during breakfast the following day, and it started with a scream, first Mongo's, and then his attacker's.

Angry Red leapt over the low fence as he spotted Mongo. He had long ago given up actively searching for Mongo, but now that he had actually found him, all the adrenaline and rage came back. Mongo tried to run, but Angry Red slammed him against a wall and drew his blaster. "You don't know how long I've been waiting for this!" said Red, his eyes brimming with hate.

Suddenly, Red felt a blaster in his ribs. "You may have to wait a bit longer," said Croft. "Now, I'm no Graftonite, but I'm betting my half depressed trigger finger is faster than your ability to spin around and shoot me. So drop it!"

Angry Red froze, but didn't drop the gun.

"I mean it!" said Croft.

Red dropped his blaster. Without turning, he said, "This is my property."

"Sorry, we don't believe that people are property here," said Croft.

"He set me up to be ambushed and shot," said Red.

"From what I heard, you had it coming," said Croft. He took a step back, relaxing his trigger finger. "Now are you going to turn around slowly so we can talk about this, like living beings?"

Angry Red nodded. He turned around... and in an instant that was too fast to see, grabbed the blaster from Croft and aimed it at him. "You're no match for me," Red smirked.

"No, but I might be," came a new voice.

The Silencer had entered the room, and his blaster was pointed straight at Red.

"Do you know who I am?" said Angry Red, still pointing the blaster at Croft.

"Do you know who I am?" said the Silencer.

"Doesn't matter," Red spat. "You can't be faster than me."

"I'm called the Silencer," said the Silencer.

Red paused, and for the first time looked nervous. "That can't be; I heard the Silencer was dead."

"No," said the Silencer. "Only my opponents. Drop the gun if you don't want to join them."

"Silencer, what business is this of yours?"

"That one's my friend," said the Silencer.

Croft's eyebrows were raised. This was the first he had heard of it.

Angry Red swiveled slowly, so his intentions would be clear, to point the blaster at Mongo. "And this one?"

The Silencer didn't answer immediately, so Mongo did. "Mongo save his life!"

"What?" said Angry Red.

"In stadium rescue, Mongo tell gravitator where to land; Mongo

give Silencer place to hide when shot; Mongo help Silencer many, many times," said Mongo desperately.

The Silencer paused. "It's true that a neutral third party could interpret that to mean I'm indebted to him."

"That's hardly a ringing endorsement," said Angry Red.

Croft used this distraction to pull out another blaster and point it at Red. "How's this for an endorsement? Care to try and grab my blaster again?"

After a small delay, Red dropped Croft's other blaster.

"Thank you," said Croft, picking it up.

"I wasn't going to kill him," said Angry Red. "I just wanted to scare him a little."

"Consider him scared," said Croft. "Now, the exit's to your left."

"Wait," said Red. "I came to join up."

"You?" said Croft, looking doubtful.

"Sure," said Angry Red.

"Why?"

"I've heard about your successes," said Red. "I'm impressed."

"Thanks."

"I want to join a winning team, and get my share of the spoils."

"Ah," said Croft, now understanding. "But you have to realize that we're not always looting."

"But your troops are well fed."

"Reasonably so," said Croft, trying to decide if he believed Red.

"Ah, how do we know that you won't simply kill Mongo the minute we drop our guard?"

Angry Red raised a hand as if he were taking an oath. "I promise I won't kill Mongo."

"He lies, he lies!" said Mongo.

"Do you see a vision?" said Croft.

"A vision?" said Angry Red.

"Don't see, don't need to see," Mongo whimpered. "He'll kill poor Mongo."

"But he just promised not to," said Croft. He considered for a moment. "What if we get the Silencer to promise to kill him if he breaks his promise?" He turned to the Silencer. "Would you do it?"

The Silencer shrugged. "Why not?" Then he added, "But if I did, you'd owe me one."

"There, now everything's settled," said Croft, lowering his blaster.

Angry Red didn't move; but then, the Silencer still had him covered.

So Croft figured if there were a spy, a traitor working for the Insectoids, it had to be either Angry Red or Smiley. Oh, it could be someone else more low key, in fact that was the logical profile for a spy, but something struck Croft odd about both of them. He didn't quite trust Angry Red's conversion to becoming part of the team, and Smiley seemed too disconnected from reality to be believed. The idea of Smiley as a brainwashed Insectoid plant seemed to be the best bet.

Before they had any more casualties Croft resolved to test his theory. He took a scouting party consisting of himself, Angry Red, Mongo, the Silencer and Smiley on a scouting mission. He and the Silencer would serve as the cheese in the trap, as they were both on the top of the Insectoid's most wanted list. If Angry Red or Smiley were going to betray them, this would be a perfect opportunity to do so, when they were isolated from the rest of the resistance.

Before they left Croft gave Yaney and some of the other troopers secondary orders. Then he spent some quality time with his left shoe.

Mongo wasn't pleased to be included on this mission. "Why me? Why Mongo?"

"Because maybe you can warn us if someone is about to attack us," said Croft.

"Mongo IS warning you--Angry Red will attack!"

"Do you have a vision to that effect?"

Mongo mumbled.

"Well?"

Mongo shook his head.

"All right, here's what I want you to do, for the first time in your life I want you to exercise a bit of subtlety," said Croft. "If you get a premonition that Angry Red is the traitor, I want you to quietly get my attention and tap your foot once. If you get a vision that Smiley is the traitor, I want you to quietly get my attention and tap your foot twice. Can you manage that?"

Mongo nodded.

"And if you lie just to get me to shoot Angry Red, you'll have to face Angry Croft," said Croft, jabbing Mongo with a finger for emphasis.

Mongo squealed and curled himself up into a ball.

The next morning Croft grinned at the assembled crew, the Angry face of Red; the unreadable face of the Silencer, the bright smiling face of Smiley, and the terrified face of Mongo. "Are we all ready?" he said.

It wasn't like Croft to risk his life on a whim; but he realized how important it was to catch the spy before any more lives were lost, and there was no one who knew spycatching better than him. Like it or not, he was best suited to catch the spy. He just hoped the traitor would be walking into his trap, and not the other way around. Croft started out first, followed by Angry Red, Smiley, Mongo, and lastly followed by the Silencer, who brought up the rear. That way if anyone tried to shoot him in the back, he would be as dead as Croft only seconds later.

The incident happened several hours later. They found themselves walking through the undercity, supposedly scouting locations for an attack, when Croft felt they were far enough away from base and decided to take a break in an empty room.

Suddenly, Mongo, who had been looking bored from the hike, sat upright like a lightning rod, and, eyes popping, made contact with Croft. When he saw Croft was watching, he slammed his foot down once.

Unfortunately, it was impossible for anyone else to miss Mongo's antics as well, and Angry Red drew his blaster and pointed it at all of them.

Croft sighed and rolled his eyes. "Subtly, Mongo, I told you to get my attention subtly." Croft looked relaxed, sitting still on a crate. The Silencer too was sitting still, his weapons still not drawn, but staring intently at Angry Red.

"You can't draw and fire, not before I can fire," said Angry Red.

"I don't know, I'm pretty fast," said Croft.

"I'm not speaking to you," said Angry Red scornfully. "Although I do have a score to settle with you as well, for sticking a blaster into me last week. But if you behave, no one has to die, yet."

The sounds of laser fire could be heard in the distance.

"What's that?" said Croft.

"It's just some of my friends holding off the force you sent to shadow us," said Angry Red. "Do you think I'm a fool? It's obvious that you were setting a trap. I just decided to take the bait. It will be worth it, for the reward I'll get for all of you."

"Is that what this is all about, money?" said Croft. "Do you honestly think you're going to live 30 seconds longer than we are?"

"The bugs want you alive," said Angry Red. "At least, delivered that way. There's no telling what they'll do to you once they have you. As for me, they'll have other jobs for me to do. They may even reward me with a little time alone with that one," he said, gesturing to Mongo. "Premonitions, huh? Thanks for the warning. Maybe I'll even get a bonus for turning you over."

"So it's revenge too," said Croft.

"Of course!" said Angry Red. The sound of laser fire was coming closer. "You're dumber than you look."

Croft, smiling, slowly stood up.

"Don't move!" said Red. "I don't want to shoot, but I will if I have to!"

"Don't shoot my friend," said Smiley, speaking for the first time. He stood up to stand besides Croft.

Angry Red frowned. "What do you want, freak?"

"Don't shoot my friends," said Smiley. "Be nice to my friends."

At that moment several things happened at once. Croft ground the back tip of his left heel against the ground, and a needle shot out and hit Angry Red in the knee; gasping, Angry Red got off a shot just as Smiley moved in front of Croft as Mongo screeched-

-and then it was all over. The Silencer, with his guns drawn, was standing over Red's body, and Croft was leaning over Smiley's fallen body.

"You took a blaster hit for me," said Croft, fearing the worst. He looked at Smiley's shirt where a hole had been blasted through it. He was probably dying if not dead already. Croft probed the wound... to find there was no wound. Only healthy skin underneath.

Smiley opened his eyes and smiled, causing Croft to jump.

"That was quite a jolt!" said Smiley, getting up.

"You... you're..." said Croft, searching for the words. "You've been shot by a blaster at point blank range."

"So I was!" said Smiley, as if he hadn't noticed.

"And you're not even scratched," said Croft

Smiley looked down at his scorched shirt with an exaggerated "Poor Me" expression on his face.

"Croft, we've got to get out of here," said the Silencer. The sound of laser and blaster fire was getting closer.

Croft nodded, then stopped, looking at the body of Angry Red.

"What about-"

"Leave him!" said Mongo. "Leave him. All will work out well. Let us go, let us go!"

They ran out, heading away from the sounds of weapons fire. A minute later, the room was filled with Insectoids.

In Mongo's vision, Angry Red slowly struggled to his feet.

"What... what happened?"

"Where are the humans?" said the Insectoid leader. "Where is the Croft? Where is the Silencer?"

"I... uh... they were here"

"We sustained serious casualties in holding off the humans," said the Insectoid. "You must pay for your failure. You are Graftonite. Take him to the arena."

"No!" Angry Red screamed.

A week later, millions watching the Insectoid holobroadcasts watched the spectacle of five killer bees stinging a tough looking red headed man to death. He screamed loudly as each stinger penetrated his body, and then his lifeless body fell to the ground.

When they got back to base, Croft turned to Smiley and said, "You survived a full blaster round to the chest without even a scratch. Who are you? What are you?"

"They call me Smiley," said Smiley, smiling broadly.

## Chapter 6: The Insectoid Spacegate

From the Personal Log of Clifford Croft, 17 years and four months after the Invasion

It's times like this, when I'm in a slimy bug suit and bugs are coming onto me sexually that I wonder how I ever get into situations like this.

It all started a few days earlier, when Croft had received a telepathic visit from Mr. Towel.

"Clifford... wake up, Clifford..." Croft looked at the towel, which was suspended above the other sleeping soldiers in the room.

"Can't you contact me during normal business hours?" Croft grumbled, waking up two soldiers who glared at him with a mixture of dislike and concern for his mental health.

"Let's go to another room so we can talk in privacy, shall we?"

Nodding mostly to himself, Croft left the room and went to an isolated makeshift office.

"What is it, Mr. Towel?" said Croft, putting his hands on his forehead. "I just want to let you know that I don't perform heroic missions on less than eight hours of sleep."

"I have an important mission for you," said the voice.

"They're all important," said Croft.

"You have to locate and destroy the Insectoid spacegate."

"The Insectoid wha?"

"Spacegate," said the voice. "Have you ever wondered where the Insectoids came from?"

"No," said Croft. Then, waking up a little in spite of himself, "Yes, I supposed. We were never able to locate their homeworlds. It's like they just came out of nowhere. Our best scientists hypothesized that their worlds were somehow hidden."

"Your best scientists were wrong, Clifford. Their worlds are very open to see; they're just in a distant part of the galaxy."

"What?" Croft quickly thought through the implications. "Then how did they get here? Their fastest ships travel at about the same speed as ours."

"Spacegate, Clifford, Spacegate. That's your new word for the day."

"What is it, some kind of..."

"Gate through space, exactly," said Mr. Towel. "They always come in pairs, and they allow ships to instantly travel from one point in the galaxy to another. That's how the Insectoid ships suddenly appear in your part of the galaxy."

"I didn't know the bugs had that kind of technology," said Croft hazily.

"They don't, it was given to them, but they still don't fully understand it, just enough to maintain it," said Mr. Towel.

"And how do you know so much about this?" said Croft.

"There are two spacegates, one at their worlds, and one somewhere in the vicinity of Alliance space. You have to find the local spacegate and destroy it."

"Sure thing," said Croft. "Shall I take my cruiser, or my battleship?"

"This is serious, Clifford."

"I'm serious too," said Croft, sitting up. "Something's happened, hasn't it, something involving War Admiral Norman North's fleet, correct?"

"I can't tell you--"

"You want to prevent the Insectoids from bringing in reinforcements to crush his fleet," said Croft. "The only thing I can't figure out is why you care. You're almost certainly not human."

"Is being human a prerequisite for caring?"

"No, but if I'm going to risk my life, again, I'd like to know the motivations if not the identity of the person I'm risking it for, Mr. Towel," said Croft.

"My people..... are not people as you know them," said the voice. "We are not permitted to interfere."

"But by helping me, you are interfering," said Croft.

"Precisely, which is why I have to stay hidden, in the background," said Mr. Towel.

"If I saw you, would I recognize you?" said Croft.

"You might recognize what I am, but not who I am," said Mr. Towel.

Croft sighed. "Well, I suppose that's the best I can get from you tonight, Mr. Towel. So how do you suppose I find this information and get off-planet?"

"You're the expert infiltrator," said the voice. "Surely you must have some ideas."

"Yes, but only if I have the right tools--" said Croft, in midsentence. He had an idea.

Four days later he was in Inglorious's lab deep underneath Sarney Sarittenden. "We used to have elaborately designed costumes that could let us pass for Insectoids," said Croft. "They've probably all been lost or destroyed in the invasion, but I was wondering how long it would take you to--"

"No, we have one right here," said Inglorious.

"What?" said Croft. "All these years, you had an active Insectoid camosuit and you didn't tell me?"

Inglorious held up a restraining hand. "Not one of the few finished models, just one of the early prototypes. I discovered it last year when I was cleaning up one of the storerooms."

"Let me see it!"

Inglorious brought it out. It looked like the fully finished version that Croft had once used, many years ago before the invasion. He said as much.

Inglorious looked at him pityingly. "The exoskeleton is finished, but the internal software and hardware is incomplete. The speech analyzer is deficient--"

"I thought you knew the Insectoid language--" said Croft.

"The written language, well, yes, except for some nuances," said Inglorious. "But the spoken language is something else. Do you know the simple screech" and Inglorious made a whining sound that made Croft want to cringe, "can mean eat, kill, sleep, taste, or dance, depending on the slightest differences in tone, inflection, and body language?"

"Oh."

"Oh is right. Similarly the speech generator, where the suit speaks what you want to say in convincing Insectoid, is similarly rough, giving your desired meaning no more than perhaps 70% of the time, depending on how complex the phrase you wish to speak is. "

"Well, I'll try to use simple phrases," said Croft. "I'll take the suit. It's either using this suit, or walk around wearing a sign saying 'I'm a human, please shoot me'. Let's get started."

Levi, naturally, didn't have access to the ultra-top-secret information concerning the location of the spacegate. Indeed, in all his years he had only heard the slightest whispers that such a thing existed. It really was that secret. And justifiably so. If their spacegate were knocked out, the Insectoids would be totally cut off from homeworld reinforcements.

But Levi did volunteer that there were several terminals inside the palace at Sarney itself that required the highest security access. They probably contained the information he needed.

And so Clifford Croft, dressed like a senior level Insectoid officer, walked into the heart of the Insectoid defenses, walking with a slight buzz.

As he walked into the palace, a guard challenged him with a buzz.

Croft's readout monitor in the suit said that the guard most probably was either asking him what his business was, or else he wanted to know where he had gotten his toenails done.

Croft chose the first interpretation, and tried to send a simple message which translated roughly to "Me... going... to... Rotunda... Central Control.... report...."

If the guards noticed anything about his rough accent, they didn't say anything; instead, looking at his thorax badge, they simply waved him through.

What a relief! As Croft entered the building he barely glanced at the schematic that Levi had provided. He had been to the palace before, under less happier circumstances.

He remembered the last time, during a poorly planned raid, when the Insectoids had cornered his group around the bend of a dead end hallway, and Croft was sure that they were about to be slaughtered.

And then Croft heard screams around the bend, and who else should appear but Professor Capybara? Croft never did figure out what the lovable rodent had been doing there, but one thing was for sure, he had saved all their lives.

What were the odds of Croft meeting another unexpected ally inside Sarney Sarittenden this time?

Two levels down from Croft, in a hidden room, a wall shimmered. An old man wearing robes stepped through. The shimmer faded. The old man touched a button, and the hidden door opened; once he exited, the wall slid back in place.

Mongo had made a special point of saying that Croft should undertake this mission today, not yesterday or two days before, and so Croft had delayed the mission just on his say-so, much to Mr. Towel's annoyance. But when he had asked why, all Mongo had done was repeat what he had said the last time.

"No time is good to go to Sarney. Too many bugses. But if must go, go on this day," he said, his bony finger pointing to a specific date on the electrocalendar. "May live, or get shot at less. Who knows? Even Mongo is not sure."

And so here he was. He entered the Capitol Rotunda. He was immediately challenged by a guard.

Croft pressed what he hoped was the right option on his touchscreen, that he had come to recalibrate the sensors, and hoped his suit would articulate the sound correctly.

"I... instruments... sexy... sexy... now."

The guard came close and buzzed in a different tone, and for a moment Croft shrank back, until he read what he thought was the translation on his screen.

"Smell good... off-duty... one cycle...."

Croft nodded, and made his way into the Rotunda. There were several bugs at work there, but they only glanced at him in passing. Croft casually made his way to another room behind the rotunda, a monitoring station which fortunately happened to be empty. It was meant for command personnel but right now the command personnel were somewhere else. Maybe Mongo was right, and maybe he had picked the perfect time to infiltrate.

Croft went to the computer terminal, and set the suit's translation and decrypting sequences to work on the interface, obediently clicking buttons when his suit's computer told him to. In a few minutes he had access to the database.

Hearing rustling in the rotunda, and realizing time was at a premium, he limited his search to spacegates. Since this was a new word, both to him and to the Insectoids, he wasn't sure what the Insectoid equivalent would be. He found one reference to a gathering place, and a set of coordinates, but wasn't sure if that was a reference to a spacegate or simply a refueling station.

Croft heard sounds of movement behind him, and was about to turn around when he heard something that almost made him jump out of his suit.

"You look ridiculous in that suit."

Croft turned around, his heart racing, to find none other than Inspir smiling at him.

"Clifford Croft, I presume," said Inspir, speaking in a low voice.

Croft could only nod dumbly.

"I thought I recognized you," said Inspir.

"I thought you were dead," said Croft, speaking softly through his suit.

"I told you I would be leaving for a while."

"But you walked right into a bunch of Insectoids--"

"Just like now," said Inspir.

"Yes," Croft said. "Say, how did you--"

Suddenly it was Inspir's turn to stiffen. His face turned grave. "You have to get out of here, now."

"What?" Suddenly, Croft felt a wave of fear that he couldn't explain or identify.

"Hurry," said Inspir. "Use the other exit. Follow me. Now!"

Croft hurried out the other exit.

A moment later a hooded entered the monitoring station. It was empty.

The being pulled back its hood, revealing a very reptilian face. It was Rugani, Baracki's deputy. He looked around and sniffed. Then he turned to the terminal, and saw what it was set to, and he hissed!

"What was that all about?" said Croft. Inspir had guided Croft out through a secret exit that led into the undercity. They were now walking through the undercity. Inspir seemed unconcerned that they would run into a patrol.

"I was about to be recognized," said Inspir. "Rather, it's too late for that; I've already been recognized."

"What are you talking about?"

"We don't have much time," said Inspir. He touched Croft Insectoid head. "Look at you, how you've grown!"

Croft quickly explained his mission and what he was trying to do. For some reason he totally omitted mentioning Mr. Towel, and if Inspir picked up on this, he said nothing.

"A worthy goal, to knock out their spacegate," said Inspir.



"You know about it?" said Croft.

Inspir gave him a look that said, "Of course!". Then he actually spoke, "Have you given any thought how you're going to get there?"

Croft sighed. "I thought maybe I could steal an Insectoid corvette-"

"There would be an alarm out on you before you had gotten half a light year out," said Inspir. "Why not travel in style?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why not go on an Alliance ship?"

Croft still couldn't believe after all these years that there were any Alliance ships still functioning within Alliance space. It was one thing to talk of the mythical Norman North's fleet, lost far out among the stars, but here, at home? How could any Alliance ship survive more than a minute before being hunted down and destroyed?

Well, he would soon find out the answer to that. Inspir had instructed him to go into orbit. It was easy enough to get aboard a shuttle heading for one of the orbital stations.

And then came the hard part. Inspir told him to go out into space and go to certain spatial coordinates and wait for retrieval.

For retrieval? Was an Alliance ship really going to dally in orbit to pick him up?

But Croft did as he was instructed. He was forced to get into an Insectoid spacesuit, which he struggled into within difficulty--it was like putting one suit on over another. But he couldn't survive in the vacuum without it. And then he stepped out of the airlock of one of the orbiting stations, and used a jetpack to head towards the specified coordinates.

If anyone was checking on short ranged scanners, he would be so small as to be unlikely to attract notice. They would be looking for shuttles, and ships, not objects the size of individual Insectoids.

When Croft got to the designated coordinates, he looked down at August. Even now, it was certainly pretty. He was over the ocean separating Concord from Aridor. The contrast couldn't be more striking. To the west was one, big metropolis spanning an entire continent; to his right was untouched forests, mountains, and hills... or not quite untouched. even from here, he could see a bit of eastern Aridor, which had been devastated by the Insectoid breeding farms and grub fruit orchards. Croft shuddered, and turned his face towards the stars. He checked his gauges; he only had an hour of air left. He hoped they came soon, whoever they were.

He didn't have to wait long; in a few minutes, he saw something dangling towards him, a thin strand of... rope? The funny thing was, it didn't seem attached to anything, it was just a wandering, aimless strand.

Croft jettied over to it, using his jetpack. There was a loop on one end, clearly indicating that he was meant to tie himself to it. But he could see the other end floating dead in space.

This must be it, whatever it was. Croft tied himself to one end. As he did so he gently tugged on the line; to his surprise, the tension was firm. When he had finished tying himself, he felt himself pulled forward, at a gentle but firm speed.

And then the most amazing thing happened. One minute he was looking at empty space, and the next he was looking at the inside of a small landing bay. It was if the landing bay was floating around in orbit, without an outer shell. Croft saw people inside the bay, unsuited and walking around, exposed to vacuum. That couldn't be; how could that be.

It was only when he passed through the entry field and was inside, and he looked around and saw walls and ceilings again, that he

truly understood the significance of where he was.

He was inside a cloaked ship.

There were sailors there yelling and pointing blasters at him, and he instantly realized the problem.

"I'm human," Croft cried, but then realized they couldn't hear him through his suit.

Raising his hands slowly, so not to panic them, he took his helmet off under the watchful gaze of half a dozen blasters. Then, he said loudly, loud enough to be heard through his monster suit, "Boy, am I glad to see you!"

"You gave us quite a surprise," said Captain Hollister, of the subship Nautilus, gesturing for Croft to take a seat in his cramped quarters. "We were expecting a VIP, but we thought it would be human."

"Well, it's what on the insides that counts, Captain," said Croft. "I have to say, I'm very surprised to see you here. And this ship."

"Surprised, eh?" said Hollister. "This was still a prototype under development when the bugs attacked. We scooted just in time with a skeleton crew, took potshots at the bugs for a while."

"And then?"

"Had to go to ground," said Hollister. "Too much battle damage."

"How can your ship be targeted if it's invisible?" said Croft.

"We have to surface when we fire our weapons," said Hollister.

"Surface?"

"Sorry. Surface into the visible spectrum," said Hollister. "The Insectoid ships started travelling in packs, so that when we surfaced to attack one, the others would hit us. Finally, our raiding partners were destroyed and our ship was damaged. We hid for a while until we could make repairs."

"And then?"

"And then we met Mr. Inspir," said Hollister, grinning.

"How did he find you?"

"He just seemed to know where we were," said Hollister. "There's no explaining it. We were suspicious, at first, but he helped us repair the ship, and set us on useful missions."

"What kind of missions?" Croft asked.

"All kinds," Hollister grinned. "Ferrying people and material around, mostly." He changed the subject, avoiding Croft's question. "I hear we're taking you on a special trip, to the Coranna Nebula. Any idea what's there?"

"Yes," said Croft.

Inspir walked casually through the ground floor of the building. Like most buildings on August, this one was over 200 stories tall.

Inspir walked among the dark support pillars, but then stopped. "You can come out," he said quietly.

Rugani stepped out from behind a pillar. They slowly started to circle each other, as if waiting for the right time to strike.

"You shouldn't have come," said Rugani.

"You shouldn't have come," said Inspir.

"What business do you have interfering? This is none of your affair," said Rugani.

"I am helping the oppressed," said Inspir.

"The weak, you mean," said Rugani.

"What's your excuse?" said Inspir.

"We are improving this Insectoid species," said Rugani. "By helping them assimilate the assets of the humans, they will become stronger and more powerful."

"To what end?" said Inspir.

"Power. Dominance," said Rugani, continuing to circle. "You should not have come," he repeated.

"What about the rights of individual races to set their own destiny?"

"The weak must service the strong," said Rugani. "That is the way of things."

"You may find that you've backed the wrong side this time," said Inspir.

"And who should we have backed, those who were conquered?" said Rugani. "Normal North, who leads the smallest sliver of a fleet--"

"--that manages to continually defeat your fleets--"

"Or Clifford Croft, who is headed towards a trap in the Coranna Nebula?" Rugani hissed. "I sensed his presence and saw the readout. I imagine you used your powers to smuggle him into the Rotunda. But you won't be able to help him at Coranna. I've doubled the guard there and ordered all humans to be slaughtered on sight."

"You know, you're less intelligent than I give you credit for," said Inspir.

Rugani hissed, and lightning bolts emerged from his scaly hands. Inspir dodged out of the way before the bolts hit, and they turned a pillar behind him into powder. The ceiling shook around them.

Rugani fired another blast at Inspir. Inspir dodged again and this time fired back. But Rugani was nimble too, and Inspir's bolts slammed into another pillar, weakening it....

It was almost like watching two storms, each casting lightning bolts at each other, one a storm with a lightness in the center, the other one filled with darkness and hate. Everything in their path and around them turned to dust, but they, through force and nimbleness, were barely harmed.

Finally, when another pillar shattered, and another and another, and the ceiling started trembling above them, they both realized the more immediate danger. Inspir, closer to the edge of the foundation than Rugani, sent a pair of bolts into two more columns, and ran for the exit.

In seconds the entire building, all 202 stories in all, teetered and finally toppled, collapsing on itself and into the surrounding streets with a gigantic boom so loud that in neighboring Sarney Sarittenden they thought someone was dropping bombs. Floor collapsed against floor, as the giant building was rocked from its foundation, and broke into pieces which fell on top of one another.

When all was done a giant cloud of smoke rose from the scene, momentarily covering the scene of destruction in a wall of gloom.

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The Nautilus, traveling under cloak, nosed around the Coranna Nebula.

"We may be traceable in all this dust, if someone knows what to look for," said Hollister, making another check of the passive sensors.

"What do you mean?" said Croft, crowded into a small cramped corner of the tiny bridge. It was so crowded that it seemed like every time a crew member shifted position or moved from one post to another that Croft had to move to let him pass. The ship was so crowded because the experimental cloak took up so much space. But how had the crew endured such claustrophobic surroundings for so long?

"We are submerged out of the visible spectrum, but if the bugs are smart enough to watch the dust dispersion pattern, they'll notice a path being plowed through the dust. It will be like a bright line that heads directly for us," said Hollister grimly.

"Any sign of the bugs yet?" said Croft.

"No," said Hollister. "But I'm only using passive sensors that have a short range. I can't use the active sensors while we're submerged. But effectively our cloak is almost useless here, and we don't have the legs to run away if we're caught. Just how important is this mission?"

"It's important." Croft didn't entertain the idea of turning back. If they could cut the Insectoids' line of supply with their home planets, well, that could turn the war in their favor.

The Nautilus drifted through the dust, the crew looking very tense. Since the Nautilus could only use passive short ranged sensors while cloaked, an enemy could spot and fire on them almost before they knew what was happening. The only advantage they had was that the dust made it harder to scan; and if the Insectoids didn't know what to look for, they might be able to slip in undetected.

"We're almost at the destination point," said Hollister. checking a reading. "I don't see anything yet."

Croft nodded, but said nothing.

The Nautilus sailed through the Coranna Nebula, silently gliding out of a thick dust patch, to suddenly find itself on a pocket of open space inside the nebula framed by a yellow star.

"Wait... picking up something... multiple contacts," said the sensor officer.

"Identity?"

"Bug BB... three, no, four bug cruisers... multiple destroyers... a second BB... a carrier... and what's that?"

"What?" said Hollister, peering over the officer's shoulder.

"I don't know, I've never seen anything like it," said the officer, pointing to an outline on his screen. "It's HUGE. It's like a big, round hollow frame. Just hanging in space. Definitely artificial. I see a small orbital platform just several miles off it."

"Do you know what that thing is, Croft?" said Hollister.

Before Croft could reply, the sensor officer broke in again.

"Wait, I'm indicating a sudden power spike from that... thing!"

"Have they detected us?" said Hollister sharply, preparing to give the order to evade. Not that it would help much; most of those ships could easily outrun the Nautilus.

"Don't think so," said the officer. "The bug ships are continuing in a normal sweep pattern. But that thing is generating a tremendous amount of power. It's almost off the scale... there are huge bolts of energy, surging from the sun into that thing... it's acting like a magnet, drawing power to it!"

They huddled around to watch his screen. A vortex was forming in the center of the circular object. At first it was hazy, but then, after several minutes, it solidified.

"What was that all about?" said Hollister.

"Two of the bug ships are changing course," said the sensor officer. "They're heading straight for that thing!"

They watched on the scanner screen as the two blips representing the ships closed on the circular object. When they got close, the two blips disappeared.

"What happened?" said Hollister. "How did they just disappear?"

"It's a transportation device of some kind," said Croft. "It links this region of space to the Insectoid homeworlds." He watched the jaws drop as they realized the implications. "My mission is to destroy that thing. Can you blow it up?"

Hollister studied the readout. "The sensors don't recognize the material this thing is made up. But if it can absorb direct bolts of energy from the sun, chances are that a torpedo or two is not going to destroy it. I wouldn't want to even attempt to tackle it without a full

fleet, and even then there would be no guarantee that their combined firepower could do the trick."

"That was my guess as well," said Croft. "So if I'm to destroy that thing, it will have to be through sabotage. Take us closer to that orbiting platform."

"Is that safe?" said Hollister.

"The thing has powered down," said the sensor officer. "It's quiet again."

Now that they were out of the dust cloud, their cloak once again protected them. But still, it was unnerving to head into the heart of an Insectoid fleet. They never knew when they might be suddenly detected. And at close range, they wouldn't have any chance of escape.

The Nautilus slowly closed in, nosing near the path of two cruisers that were circling the object on routine patrol. The sensor officer watched the path of each ship, looking for the slightest deviance or sign of awareness of their subship.

They closed on the orbital platform, coming to a dead stop just a few hundred feet away. Croft suited up in his bug suit and outer spacesuit.

"You look real ugly," said Hollister.

"Thanks," said Croft. "All right, here's the drill. Wait 24 hours for me to return. If I don't return, or the alarm is raised, or you see big explosions, get out of here immediately--"

"We won't leave you behind," said Hollister.

"If I don't come back, I'll either be dead, or captured, so it won't really matter," said Croft. "Follow your orders, head back to August, and make contact using the static frequency I provided you. Then figure out a way to assemble a strike team to destroy that thing. If I can't figure out how to sabotage it, I will at least try to gather information that will let us destroy it in a follow-up raid. Any questions?"

There were none. They all looked at Croft as if he were incredible brave.

And Croft would be lying if he said he didn't have apprehensions. He was about to break into one of the highest security bases the Insectoids had.

But he was an Infiltrator, one of the Agency's Eight, who was repeatedly called on to do what for others would be the impossible. Taking a deep breath, he opened the airlock, and headed out into space, maneuvering with his jetpack.

The spacegate looked large and imposing even in the distance, a large, glistening circular shape that framed the bright yellow sun behind it. The concept of it was overwhelming--that one could pass through and instantly be in another part of the galaxy. Mr. Towel had said that the bugs hadn't developed it themselves, but if not them, then who? The Chent? Perhaps the Insectoids had discovered some usable technology. That would explain a great many things. Including why they had been able to destroy their fleet so quickly and thoroughly at Vitalics.

Croft turned his attention to the orbiting platform. Hopefully it was a control station for the spacegate; and if he could learn how to sabotage it, then he might be able to destroy the spacegate.

As Croft closed on an outer airlock, he noticed what looked like a long range shuttle maneuvering into a docking port. It was probably a normal crew rotation. It was of no concern to him; he looked like an Insectoid, and once he was through the airlock and had removed his spacesuit, he would be able to blend in easily with the rest of the crew. He'd never be detected.

The long range shuttle docked and Rugani, his lizard eyes glaring, stepped out. "You may have an intruder aboard. Take me to

command. Hurry."

Croft clomped around the unfamiliar hallways, looking for a terminal which could provide him with a schematic. So far the Insectoids he had passed hadn't paid him the slightest attention. This should be easy.

"Intruders? The Clifford Croft?" said the Insectoid commander, listening to Rugani's report. She immediately turned and slammed the alert signal. Klaxons blared throughout the ship.

"Fool!" Rugani blazed. "Deactivate that at once!"

The Insectoid commander, confused, did as she was told. The klaxons went silent.

"But I thought-"

"You cannot detect him!" said Rugani. "He is most probably in the company of another who is masking his appearance."

"Then how do we-"

"You don't," said Rugani. "Only I can. But now by sounding the alarm you have put the enemy on alert!" His reptilian eyes glittered dangerously. "I intend to bring back the head of this Clifford Croft. If I fail, I will bring back yours instead." And he turned and left the chamber, leaving a cloud of fear in his wake.

Croft heard the klaxons, fearing he or the Nautilus had been discovered, and then just as suddenly the klaxons stopped. A false alarm?

Possible, but not likely.

Croft decided to cut his losses. He had verified the location of the spacegate; now it was important to survive long enough to tell the resistance about it. He turned back towards the airlock where his spacesuit was hidden.

On his way there he felt a wave of fear wash over him. It was unreasoning fear, and Croft found that moving forward was an effort.

The fear was... familiar. He had felt it before, near the Rotunda, when he had been with Inspir, and Inspir had been warning him to leave, as if some dreaded enemy was coming.

And now Croft was alone and was feeling this fear again.

The airlock was only a few dozen feet ahead, but the feeling of fear was stronger with every step that he took. He just knew that whatever was around the corner would find him if he continued that way.

Turning around, Croft headed in the other direction. The fear eased off noticeably as he walked away.

Rugani, trailed by Insectoid troopers, found the discarded spacesuit in the airlock. Some hunch had told him to go there. He frowned. The spacesuit was for an Insectoid, not a human. A human couldn't even fit inside such a large spacesuit.

So why was he getting the feeling that something was still terribly, terribly wrong?

Rugani appeared to sniff the air. Yes, there was definitely an intruder. And nearby too... Rugani strided down the corridor.

The fear seemed to be FOLLOWING Croft. Unless he was experiencing delusions, there was something chasing him, something that concerned even Inspir. Croft walked as quickly as he could in his Insectoid suit without attracting attention. Where could he go? Where could he hide?

His imperative was to get off the orbital platform. He'd have to find another airlock. But what if the Nautilus had already gone?

And then, walking by a window, he found a better solution.

The scoutship, still docked with the platform.

Croft got to the ship, still trailed by the unrelenting fear, which was growing stronger. He went inside and closed the hatch, and then went to the forward piloting area.

The pilot buzzed a puzzled greeting. Croft pointed his blaster at the creature's thorax. "Launch. Now." There was no time to teach himself the controls.

Rugani walked by the window showing the view of his shuttle. Suddenly, staring at it, he felt a sense of urgency.

The pilot buzzed angrily. Croft felt the fear building. Once his nemesis boarded the shuttle, there would be no escape.

Readjusting the setting on his blaster, he fired at one of the alien's appendages.

The bug howled in pain.

Croft pointed the blaster back at the creature's neck. "You have five seconds to launch. Five... four..."

Rugani reached the airlock to his shuttle, and his scaly hand reached out for the open button when a light above flashed, and the floor shook slightly as the shuttle broke free.

"Order the fleet to intercept that ship," said Rugani, turning to one of the troopers. "Now!" he hissed.

The Insectoid piloted the ship under Croft's direction. But when the creature asked, "Where are we going?" it was a question that Croft didn't know the answer to.

Was there time to get to the Nautilus before the general alert went out?

Suddenly, they heard just such a general alert over their comms, and Croft saw on the scanners that the Insectoid fleet was bearing down on his position.

No, there was no time, no time at all. He was all on his own now. Croft checked the scanner for the edge of the dust field. Could he get there in time? Even a cursory examination of the range and the proximity of the other ships clearly indicated that he couldn't.

Then what was left?

Suddenly Croft noticed a burst of light, and then another, and then another, lancing towards the spacegate. Four ships were in position to cross over. Could Croft get there before the other ships intercepted him?

Maybe.

Croft immediately ordered the pilot to set a course. The pilot buzzed something incredulous, but complied when Croft jabbed his blaster into its neck.

The spacegate led to the Insectoid homeworlds, a region of space simply teeming with Insectoids. Was Croft mad to go there?

That remained to be seen. All Croft knew was that if he stayed here, he would be dead or captured in the next ten minutes. Faced with the certainty of capture or death, almost any alternative, even being flung to the far corners of the galaxy in a region of space home to his worst enemy, was an improvement.

At Croft's urging, the shuttle accelerated to catch up with the last of the four ships that was positioning to cross through the spacegate. Either the Insectoids couldn't shut the gate down or didn't have sufficient time to.

There was a flash and the ship passed through. Through the spacegate Croft saw not the sun behind it but an unfamiliar region of space.

Suddenly Croft felt explosions around him and saw a battleship, closing fast.

The power surges from the sun were diminishing, and the image of the stars through the spacegate was flickering. They were attempting to shut down the spacegate!

The ship was rocked again by another explosion, this time closer. The image of the stars ahead flickered--one moment there were stars, the next there was the mighty sun behind the spacegate. It was all a matter of chance now; would they hit the spacegate in a split second while it was flickering, or simply pass through to the sun behind it?

The shuttle hit the spacegate, and there was a flash.

At first, Croft thought they had simply passed through without going anywhere. Checking the sensors, he saw the sun behind him.

But wait, the sun had been in front of them when they had passed through, not behind them.

And there, up ahead, were the four ships they had followed passing through!

They had made it!

Croft checked the spacegate behind them. It was silent. He had been lucky enough to get through just before it shut down, blocking the pursuing ships.

But it wouldn't take them long to open the spacegate again. Croft had the pilot scan the area and check for damage to the ship.

There was an identical orbiting platform and spacegate here, as well as guarding warships, but no alert had been raised.

Well, that would be raised the first time they had contact with a new ship from the other spacegate.

The pilot reported that the ship hadn't suffered any serious damage. It advised Croft to give up.

Instead, Croft demanded an explanation of the controls, and after another dig with his blaster got his way. Piloting an unfamiliar alien shuttle was more difficult than piloting a human shuttle, but it wasn't as nearly complicated as navigating a large alien warship--in piloting, there were certain basic principals that had to apply, regardless of who built the ship.

Croft learned the essentials quickly and then punched up a navigational chart. Most of the planets were keyed green, Insectoid worlds, spreading lightyears in every direction. How depressing.

But one world, pretty close nearby, was keyed in orange. Croft asked about that one.

The pilot shook its head, saying nothing.

Croft pointed the blaster again.

"It is filled with ruthless enemies," buzzed the pilot, or at least that's what Croft's translator seemed to indicate. "They will kill anything that comes near!"

"Ruthless killers, huh?" said Croft. "If they're your enemies, they might be my friends." He set a course towards the planet. It was in a system not far from the spacegate. Croft idly wondered why the Insectoids would build their precious spacegate so close to their enemy. It was another mystery to be thought more about when he had some free time.

"No!" the pilot buzzed. "No one who goes there ever goes back."

"But I imagine your experience is limited to Insectoids," said Croft. "When it comes to aliens other than Insectoids, perhaps they'll ask questions first."

"No!" said the pilot again.

"I don't have much choice," said Croft. "Your people won't exactly welcome me with open appendages."

The pilot stared at the growing image of the star system they were approaching. Suddenly, the pilot lunged towards Croft--

--and fell back with a nasty hole in its chest.



Croft watched the green ooze leak onto the floor of the pilot's cabin. "I suppose I'll have to clean that up," he sighed.

As the ship sped towards its destination Croft took off the top of his Insectoid suit so his head stuck out. He didn't remove the entire suit because it bulked up his size, enabling him to reach most of the controls.

It was a few hours later that Croft noticed the first signs of pursuit, several warships heading towards him. By this time he was more than halfway to the system.

The Insectoids transmitted in English. "Human. Surrender."

Croft activated the transmitter. "I don't think so."

"If you enter that system, you will be destroyed," came the response.

"I don't think I can expect much better from you," said Croft.

"We want you alive," he heard back.

"It's always nice to be wanted," said Croft.

He bit his lip, pausing to consider for only a moment. If the Insectoids planned to take him alive, chances were that he wouldn't stay alive for very long once they were done interrogating him. No, his best chances were with the unknown ahead. Realigning his transmitter, he broadcast towards the approaching system.

"Attention, people of-" Croft realized he had no idea what the system or its inhabitants were called. "-the system I'm approaching. My name is Clifford Croft. I am not an Insectoid. I mean you no harm."

Croft entered the outer edges of the system. The Insectoid fleet closed rapidly. According to his calculations, they would be in weapons range before he reached the fourth planet, which seemed to be the only one with a habitable atmosphere.

"Are you there?" said Croft. "Please respond."

There was no response. But then, on the scopes, Croft noticed the Insectoid fleet breaking and turning around. They were no longer in pursuit. They were running away.

Checking his forward scopes, Croft soon discovered why.

There was a gigantic ship approaching, from the fourth planet.

It was at least several miles long. Croft identified it immediately, from likenesses obtained from archaeological expeditions to monuments throughout known space.

It was a Chent ship, a ship from one of the oldest (and thought to be extinct) races in the galaxy. Bristling with alien weaponry and power, it could vaporize a spacefleet in seconds.

And it was heading straight for Croft's tiny shuttle.

Croft gulped but didn't change course. He was committed now, and there was nowhere else to go. He kept transmitting.

"My name is Clifford Croft. I am from a race called humans from another part of the galaxy. I am not an Insectoid, or whatever you call the bugs hereabout. I mean you no harm."

The giant ship approached Croft's shuttle, and slowed as it overtook it from above. Croft marveled at the miles of ship slowly floating over his cockpit.

Then, suddenly, something like a gunport opened, and a weapon emerged. Croft quickly scrambled for the controls, but a beam stabbed out, he saw a white light flashing towards his cockpit, and then all went black.

## Chapter 7: The Planet of the Capybaras

Tweatle, tweatle.

Clifford Croft gradually regained consciousness. He was in an in-

between state, where he realized he was asleep, and could hear the world around him, but couldn't muster the effort to move a muscle.

"Is it dead?" A soft, musical sounding voice said. "I wish (tweatle tweatle) wouldn't leave his specimens lying around."

"Is it even moderately sentient?" Asked a second voice. "It looks like an abandoned toy to me. Let's get rid of it-"

"Stop!" said a third voice, and Croft, still struggling to fully regain consciousness, could hear the sudden pad-padding of approaching feet.

"It is not dead," said a familiar voice. "It is not a toy, and it is not (tweatle tweatle) abandoned!" Croft made a mental surge, and, as if he were breaking through a psychological barrier, managed to crack open first one eye, and then the other.

He found himself staring into a very large snout with whiskers, not two inches from his face. The snout puled back, revealing the unmistakable features of Professor Capybara.

Professor Capybara. An alien who had come to August many years ago. He looked like a large, 250 pound furry rodent with webbed feet, wore glasses and smoked a pipe, had impeccable manners, and other than that there was nothing Croft or the Alliance had been able to learn about him. They hadn't even been able to learn his species' real name; the Professor had cleverly deflected all questions. So, because he looked like a Capybara, and because he said he was a scholar, the name 'Professor Capybara' simply stuck.

But Professor Capybara had disappeared right after the invasion of August. He had helped Croft out of a tight situation many years ago, and then disappeared completely. And now, on the other side of the galaxy, they had met again. How was this possible?

"Are you (tweatle tweatle) all right Clifford?" the Professor asked, in his usual singsong way. He poked Croft gently with his snout, as if giving him an impromptu physical examination.

"Professor," said Croft, sitting up slowly. Croft blinked. "What are you doing here-" was all Croft said, stopping in midsentence. For despite all he had heard, it was only now, looking around the room, that there was not one but three Capybaras there. No one had even known that others of his race beside the Professor existed.

"What-" Croft started to say, suddenly unsure which one to address. Which one was the Professor?

"Not very articulate, is it?" said one of the Capybaras.

"It's me, Clifford, said the capybara closest to Croft, the one who had brought his snout within point blank range. "I'm the one you know. I'll help you tell us apart," he said, and the world grew fuzzy, before becoming clear again. "I imagine it's a shock seeing more than one of us."

"That's not the only shock," Croft grumbled. But his brain was turning back on. Whatever they had used on him was wearing off. He looked at the other Capybaras and noticed subtle differences. The Professor wore his trademark spectacles, while one of the other Capybaras wore what looked like a pink beret, while the third wasn't wearing anything (aside from the customary rough coat of fur that all Capybaras had), although he did have what looked like an old-fashioned stethoscope dangling from his neck.

Croft started to stand up, felt a wave of dizziness, then tried again, this time successfully.

"Not very durable, is it," said the Capybara with the stethoscope.

"It hardly seems worth the effort," said the Capybara with the pink beret, referring to Croft as if he were an object. "Is this all it does?"

"This is one of the most ingenious of the humans," said the

Professor.

"Doesn't say much for the race then, does it?" said the other Capybara, the one with the stethoscope. But no, that couldn't be; why would a Capybara be wearing an old-fashioned medical device? There must be some reasonable explanation.

Croft felt a smaller wave of dizziness, but he felt stronger now, and managed to stay standing.

"Easy, young Clifford, said the Professor. "You've been through quite an ordeal."

"Why did you zap me?" said Croft. "Didn't you get my message?"

"We quickly realized you weren't one of the (tweatle tweatle)," said the Professor. "That's why we came out to intercept you."

"That was your ship?" said Croft. "Wait, then why did you shoot me?"

"Animal handling rules," said Pink Beret. "No animals or (tweatle tweatle) pets allowed on the planet without proper sedation."

"Wait, we're not on the ship anymore?" said Croft. He looked around the decidedly alien but well-lit room. "We're on the planet?"

"Have a look, Clifford," said the Professor, pad-padding towards a window.

Croft walked over and peered out and gasped

It was a city like none other. There were dozens of alien buildings in all directions as far as the eye could see, glittering in all different colors, sizes, and shapes, connected by elevated walkways. There were other things too, shapes suspended in the air and objects whose purposes he couldn't discern but must have had some meaning. It was such an incredible sight that even Croft, who thought he was supremely jaded, couldn't help but be shocked. He had never seen anything so wondrous in his life.

He suddenly realized that looking down he couldn't see the ground below. They must be far above the ground, in a building far taller than anything on August.

Croft was used to the metropolis, having spent years on August. But what he saw took his breath away, and made Sarney Sarittenden look like a small black and white cardboard parody of a real city. A Chent city.

Croft slowly turned around to his hosts. "Are you... the Chent?"

"Chent?" said Stethoscope Capybara.

"I think he refers to a race of older beings, probably the (tweatle tweatle) ," said the Professor.

The other two Capybaras tittered as if they had heard a funny joke. Croft realized that he had guessed wrong. "But... but you have a giant ship, and this city-"

"No, Clifford, we are not what you call the Chent," said the Professor. "In fact-"

They heard a gentle ringing sound.

"What's that?" Croft asked.

"It's the others," said the Professor. "I think they want to meet you."

"Should it be put in restraints first?" said Pink Beret. "And is it housetrained?"

"Clifford will pose no danger, and will not make a mess," said the Professor. "Will you, Clifford?"

Croft nodded absentmindedly as he looked down, noticing for the first time that he was out of his Insectoid suit and that his weapons were gone.

They took Croft to a large, circular room which reminded him of the rotunda in Sarney Sarittenden. He stood in the center of it, looking around.

There were several platforms around the room, on which stood more Capybaras than Croft had ever seen in his life. Actually it wasn't that many, seven in all, but it was still a shock. Each wore a different piece of clothing or had a different accessory. There was the Professor, of course, and Pink Beret and Stethoscope Capybara. There was also a Capybara wearing a lab coat, one wearing a robe, and one wearing a tool belt, and one, most improbably, wearing a four piece suit and elaborate long tie.

As he stared, openedmouth at these ridiculous and powerful creatures, the Professor waddled over to him and whispered, "I can imagine your confusion, Clifford. I have provided virtual cues to help your mind (tweatle tweatle) distinguish among us. Some of what you see is symbolic or otherwise representational."

The most well-dressed with the site and the tie Capybara made a clomping noise as if he were gaveling a session into order.

"Don't worry about a thing," said the Professor. "Just be polite and non-threatening and it is mostly likely that the hearing will not (tweatle tweatle) go against you."

Croft opened his mouth to speak but the Professor had already waddled away to his own platform. A hearing? First Croft had thought they just wanted to meet him. But now he was on trial. Croft felt the situation spiraling out of control. He thought he was among friends, but now wasn't so sure.

The Capybara in the suit brought the meeting to order. Speaking in a typically Capybara voice, he said, "I call this session to order."

Immediately, the Capybaras sat down on padded rugs and started munching something from nearby containers. Obviously, eating during a trial was as common as snacking during holomovies on August.

"Clifford Croft!" said the Capybara. "We have done you the courtesy of spending several minutes to (tweatle tweatle) understand your language so that you may understand these proceedings. My name is (tweatle tweatle) and I am (tweatle tweatle) of (tweatle tweatle), not to mention (tweatle tweatle) or (tweatle tweatle)."

Somehow, Croft got the idea that this one was in charge, or at least was the coordinator for the others. Mentally in his mind he dubbed him "Mayor Capybara."

"We are given to understand that you are a quasi-sentient being and so can understand, at least in a rudimentary way, what we are (tweatle tweatle) saying. Is that correct?"

Croft nodded.

"Visitors are not permitted to (tweatle tweatle). Normally, we would (tweatle) without further inquiry, but (tweatle) has spoken out on your behalf." Mayor Capybara seemed to be indicating the Professor.

"So, before we pass judgment, we wish to know--what has brought you here? Indeed, how did you (tweatle tweatle) the (tweatle tweatle)?"

Croft took a deep breath. He saw now not only a danger, but an opportunity. Perhaps by telling his story he could convince the Capybaras to help him.

"I am from a planet called August--"

"We know all that," Lab Coat Capybara.

"A race called the Insectoids--"

"That's not their name," interrupted Tool Belt Capybara. "A race of aliens conquer you, and you don't even know their name is (tweatle tweatle)?"

Several Capybaras snickered at Croft's expense.

Croft continued. "We had learned that what we call the Insectoids had established a spacegate, a window between your part of the galaxy and ours--"

"How did you learn of that?" interrupted Mayor Capybara.

Croft was about to open his mouth and mention Mr. Towel, when he paused.

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"Why can't you reveal yourself?" Croft had said to the bobbing and non-existent image of Mr. Towel.

"Believe me, I'd like nothing better, Clifford. But if the others find out, there will be real consequences," the voice had said.

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Croft had a sudden flash of insight. It wasn't the Insectoids that Mr. Towel had been afraid of, but the Capybaras!

"We're waiting, Clifford Croft," said Mayor Capybara.

Better to use Inspir. Inspir didn't seem afraid of anything. "It was a being named Inspir who told me this."

"Inspir? Is this a fellow human?" said Mayor C.

"Almost certainly not," said Croft. "He has a lot of incredible powers. I don't know very much about him. He just appeared, one day."

"Very well. We may return to the subject of this person later. But for now, continue."

"So I went to check out this spacegate."

"How did you get there without detection?"

Croft gritted his teeth. Until he knew for sure where the Capybaras stood, he was reluctant to reveal all his secrets. "I used a special ship that can cloak itself from others scans."

Tool Belt Capybara tweekled something. The other Capybaras laughed.

"I got onboard and stole a shuttle, and made it through the spacegate," said Croft.

"Why?" said Mayor C.

"Why what?"

"Why did you come through?"

Croft licked his lips. "To enlist your help. I had heard of you--"

"The truth, please," said Mayor Capybara.

"Somehow, the Insectoids caught onto my presence on my side of the spacegate. This was my only avenue of escape."

"And they chased you, here," said Mayor C. He turned to the Professor. "What say you? Is the (tweekle tweekle) animal capable of deception?"

"I believe him," said the Professor.

"Do you think he has been primed by the (tweekle tweekle)?"

"Unlikely," said the Professor. "From my understanding, he is one of the prime adversaries of (tweekle tweekle)."

"Still, we should dissect and (tweekle), just to be sure," said Stethoscope Capybara.

"Dissect and (tweekle), that's always the answer with you, isn't it?" said the Professor. "I scanned Clifford myself. He has no hidden devices."

"But he is a threat," said Lab Coat Capybara. "He has come to (tweekle tweekle) and seen (tweekle)."

"It's hardly a secret that we're here," said the Professor.

"That's not what keeps the (tweekle) away."

"But if we release him, and he gets caught and examined by (tweekle) or (tweekle)--"

"Our location is hardly a secret," said the Professor. "You can be sure that if (tweekle) and (tweekle) know where we are, that (tweekle) and (tweekle) do as well. I really don't think we have anything to worry about."

"You seem passionate in your defense of the human," said Mayor

Capybara. "I would hate to think that you are letting sympathy cloud your judgment, like (tweatle)."

Several of the Capybaras gave a low whistle. Whoever or whatever (tweatle) was, it was obviously someone or something that had made quite an impression.

The Professor's tail stood up and he looked indignant. "If you will recall, it was you who sent me to (tweatle) after (tweatle tweetle tweetle). I didn't volunteer for it. And I was always one of (tweatle)'s harshest critics."

"Yes," said Mayor C. "But some say you have (tweatle) since you returned from (tweatle)." He paused, then considered. "This is obviously very complex. We will think on it more, and hold a vote at the first of (tweatle)."

"And in the interim?"

"The human may go freely, provided (tweatle) takes responsibility for his actions."

"I do," said the Professor.

"Then this hearing is adjourned," said the Mayor. Like the others, he started eating, chewing on something crunchy that, from a distance, looked like peanuts.

Croft looked around. The Capybaras were all talking to themselves now and eating, virtually ignoring him. He had moved from being a potential threat to someone not even worthy of their attention.

Croft cautiously made his way to the Professor's platform. Looking closely, he saw that he and the other Capybaras were eating peanuts!

"Quite a delicacy," said the Professor, sensing his gaze. "You must be hungry." A webbed foot swept and passed some peanuts to Croft. "We learned of them from your world, and started growing them here. But we can't get the taste just right like the ones I brought from August. (Tweatle) has labored over it, but can't understand why."

Croft looked around. Some of the Capybaras were shelling theirs, while others were eating them whole. All were making chomp-chomp sounds as they ate. It would have been comical, if the situation weren't so grave.

"What happens now?" said Croft.

"Now we await the (tweatle tweetle) outcome of the hearing," said the Professor. "So far it's gone very well for you."

"It did?"

"Our last two visitors, both semi-sentients, were (tweatle tweetle) dissected and (tweatle) on the spot," said the Professor.

"You told me I had nothing to worry about!" said Croft.

"I was trying to build your confidence," the Professor explained.

There were several days before the vote. Croft spent much of the time with the Professor, who gave him a guided tour of the city. As with August, the "city" stretched over much of the planet. It was wondrous in its size, shape and complexity. Buildings seemed to branch out in all different directions. Some were slimmer at the base but thicker at the top; others were thick at the base but split off into different branches towards the top, like a tree. Other architectural objects he saw he simply couldn't identify. And it was all huge, as far as the eye could see in every direction. But it was also apparently empty.

"It's a mighty big place," said Croft. "But where is everyone else?"

"Everyone else?"

"We haven't come across a single person since we started," said Croft.

"Well, there are only seven of us here," said the Professor. "So

it's unlikely you'd just randomly run into one of us, unless we were seeking you out."

"Seven? Only seven?" said Croft. "Why did you build this huge city for just seven people? Did there happen to be more of you?"

"Yes," said the Professor.

"What happened to them?"

"Two of them are out on survey missions," said the Professor. "In fact, it's unusual that this many of us are (tweatle tweatle) at one time." He didn't elaborate.

"So for nine of you, you build this huge city?"

"There used to be 11, actually," said the Professor.

"What happened to the other two, did they leave too?"

"We don't like to talk about the other two," said the Professor.

"I like to feel that we have the kind of relationship where we can talk about anything," said Croft

The Professor looked around, as if to see if anyone were listening, and wiggled his whiskers. "One of our kind passed away," he said, in a low voice.

"Is that unusual?"

"It is when he's killed," said the Professor.

"How did it happen?" said Croft, as they continued walking.

"He got involved," said the Professor bluntly.

"Involved? In what?" said Croft.

"We're a race of scholars, Clifford. Our mission is to study other cultures, not get involved. Each of us, you may note, as a specialty. (Tweatle), the one you perceive to wear a pink hat, studies fine art. (Tweatle), the one you perceive wears a medical device, studies biology and microbiology, and is also our doctor and forensic veterinarian."

Croft didn't like the sound of that last one.

"(Tweatle), who you perceived was wearing a lab coat, is an expert in what you would call physics, mathematics and theoretical sciences you may not have heard of. (Tweatle) who you perceived wore a robe, is a specialist in literature and philosophy among highly sentient cultures. (Tweatle) who seems to you to wear a toolbelt, studies the engineering sciences. And (Tweatle) who was wearing the suit, studies sociology and government structure. He's also our coordinator."

"And you?"

The Professor paused for a minute, and said, "My specialty is non-sentient races."

"Non-sentient races!" Croft exploded.

The Professor put a webbed hand on Croft's leg. "Now, now, Clifford. To be fair, when I was sent to study you, we all clearly agreed that your race was semi-sentient, and this was outside my area of study."

"Why?" Croft asked. "Why were you sent to study something outside your area? Don't you have an expert in semi-sentient races?"

"I quickly built up a subexpertise in semi-sentients," said the Professor quickly.

"There's something you're not telling me," said Croft. "The Capybara, the one who was killed, was his expertise semi-sentient races?"

"No, his expertise was astro-geology," said the Professor.

"What about this other Capybara?" said Croft.

"What other?" said the Professor.

"You said there used to be 11 of you. Two are out on study. One is dead. There's still one unaccounted for. What was the area of specialization for this other Capybara?"

The Professor looked Croft in the eyes and wiggled his whiskers.

"You're very bright, Clifford, for a (tweatle tweatle) semi-sentient. I think that's why I always liked you."

"Your flattery is bowling me over," said Croft dryly. "Now, the answer to my question, please."

The Professor sighed. "They won't like it if you find out. They don't like it when we talk about him, especially to a (tweatle tweatle) outsider."

"Then we won't tell them," said Croft.

The Professor hung his head. "The answer to your question, to your real question, is that yes, the missing member of our study group was a specialist in (tweatle tweatle) semi-sentient races. He was sent to study your race, among others. After a while he (tweatle tweatle) crossed the line."

"Crossed the line?"

"Got involved," said the Professor. "This followed the loss of our previous (tweatle tweatle) associate. We feared that if he got involved, the same thing would happen not just to him, but to us as well."

"You're so powerful, with your mighty spaceship. Can anything or anyone really touch you?" said Croft.

"Oh, most certainly, Clifford. We don't like to talk about it, but we're hardly invulnerable," said the Professor. "Not from the lesser species, certainly. We have nothing to fear from your (tweatle tweatle) Insectoids, for example. But there are certainly others out there who could do us harm if they wanted to. We feel that by invoking neutrality and non-participation that it keeps us safe. Our colleague was (tweatle tweatle) informally banished and warned not to get involved again. Since his last posting was with the humans, one of his sharpest critics was sent, not only to study you, but also to study the (tweatle tweatle) effect you seem to have on us."

"Sharpest critics... you?" said Croft.

"Are you surprised?" said the Professor. "Yes, I was one of his sharpest critics and strongest believers in non-intervention. Quite frankly, I held your race in a great deal of (tweatle tweatle) disdain. I believe you had willfully (tweatle tweatle) corrupted our associate. While I cultivated a friendly demeanor during my first few years among you, inwardly I was not feeling so (tweatle tweatle) charitable."

"And do you still feel that way?"

The Professor looked around, as if he especially feared that what he might say next might be overheard and misinterpreted. "No. I have grown moderately fond of your race, in a detached, (tweatle tweatle) scholarly sort of way. I have written several papers on it for my colleagues, describing it as what you might call the 'pathetic puppy' syndrome.."

"Pathetic puppy?"

"You humans are so helpless, but so eager to get up and do for yourselves, like a young puppy first learning to bound around. I think it unintentionally inspires the (tweatle tweatle) paternal or maternal instinct in us," said the Professor. "I look upon your species somewhat favorably now. But that doesn't mean that I share the views of my former colleague about (tweatle tweatle) getting involved."

"But you did get involved," said Croft. "Some years ago, in the palace at Sarney, when you saved the lives of me and my friends. Or don't you remember?"

The Professor waved a webbed paw dismissively. "Oh, I (tweatle tweatle) a few guards on my way home. That's not intervention, Clifford."

"Ah ha," said Croft. "And this other Capybara. Have you heard from him? What happens if you find him interfering again?"

"We've already talked about this too much, young Clifford. If the



others discover what I've told you, it will greatly reduce your chances of (tweatle tweatle)." The Professor changed his tone of voice. "Come! It is time to return. Let us walk back."

They walked in silence for a while. Then Croft said, "You're an expert in semi-sentient races, right?"

"A subspecialty for me, but yes," said Croft.

"Then tell me about the Insectoids. How did they get their hands on all this technology? Who built it for them? If they're your enemy, why did they put their spacegate so close to your planet?"

The Professor smiled mirthlessly. "They didn't place what you call the spacegate near us; they simply came to use the one near us."

"It was always there?"

"For a long time," said the Professor. "The ones you call the Insectoids had absolutely no idea how to use this (tweatle tweatle) technology. They were helped, by the (tweatle tweatle) Screen."

"The Screen?"

"A race of the third or fourth wave who instructed them--"

"Third or fourth wave?"

The Professor sighed, and tweatled. "It may surprise you to learn that most of what you see around you, this city, our ship, what you so quaintly call the (tweatle tweatle) spacegate, was not built by us. It was built by a very old and advanced race, what I believe you refer to as the Chent."

"The Chent may not have been the oldest race, but they were very old, comparatively, and much of what they (tweatle tweatle) thousands of years ago persists today. After a time, the Chent disappeared from the scene."

"Why?"

"You are only making a long story longer," said the Professor. "After the Chent disappeared, a group of younger races, what we refer to as the first wave, made use of the Chent technology. They were almost as (tweatle tweatle) as the Chent, learning to replicate the technology, and in some ways they even figured out how to improve the technology and build upon it."

"Many years later came the second wave. Those races were much like the (tweatle tweatle) first wave, but their striking feature was that they only were able to learn how to replicate and repair the Chent technology, but the ability to improve upon it (tweatle tweatle) eluded them."

"Then came the third wave. These groups of races were classified by their ability to use Chent technology, and make some repairs, but they didn't have the (tweatle tweatle) ability to make improvements, and they largely lost the ability to replicate the technology, certainly in (tweatle tweatle) ways that matched the original models."

"And finally came the fourth wave. They had no idea how to replicate or improve on the existing Chent technology, and only a limited understanding on how to maintain or repair or even (tweatle tweatle) use certain aspects of it. There are fourth wave races who have ships as mighty as ours, and yet have only a fraction of an idea how to use them to their full potential."

The Professor cleared his throat. "The Screen, a reptilian race of aliens who are aiding the Insectoids, are fourth or at best post-third wavers. They are the ones who guided the Insectoids to use the (tweatle tweatle) spacegate technology, but even the Screen barely have an idea how to use them."

"And humans, where do we fit in on this wave theory?" said Croft.

"Ah, you are, ah, post-fourth wave," said the Professor, trying to be polite.

"I suppose that's what makes us cute, like pathetic puppies," said Croft dryly. "Why are these Screens helping the bugs?"

"It's very complex, but to oversimplify it they believe that aggressive militaristic cultures are the best vehicle for societal rule."

"In even simpler terms?"

"They are helping the Insectoids take over the galaxy, and hope to rule through them."

"My simple mind can grasp that," said Croft.

"I didn't mean to insult you, Clifford," said the Professor. "As you know, I'm very fond of you."

"Bow wow," said Croft sarcastically.

They returned to their starting point, a tall building where Croft had met the other Capybaras. "I think it would be a good idea if you spent some quality time with my colleagues."

"Why?" said Croft suspiciously.

"We are, after all, scholars, and we want to learn everything we can-"

"Don't tell me that Lab Coat Capybara wants to learn everything he can about primitive, post-fourth wave human science. Or that Doctor Capybara wants to learn about our latest medical treatments," said Croft. "What's this really about?"

The Professor looked embarrassed, lowering his snout and looking up at Croft. "As you know, there will soon be a judgment on your fate."

"And?"

"I've done some preliminary polling. The results have inspired caution."

"Inspired caution," said Croft. "That's a phrase I'll have to remember."

"Others don't see your value as I do. I was hoping perhaps if you mingled with them-"

"Plead for my life so I won't be dissected?" said Croft.

"Don't be so melodramatic, Clifford," said the Professor.

"Dissection is highly unlikely. We are fully versed with your race's anatomy. At worst, you would be permanently interned, or gently put to sleep."

"Or gently put to sleep," Croft repeated hollowly.

"I'm hoping I can argue for an internment," said the Professor.

"But if you want to do any better, you need to establish a relationship with the others."

"Ah ha," said Croft.

"The decision will be by majority vote."

"How many votes do we have to set me free so far?"

"So far, by my informal polling?"

"Yes."

"None," said the Professor.

"Not including you, of course."

"Of course," said the Professor.

"So I need three more votes to set me free," said Croft. "All right, where do I begin?"

"Go away, human!" chirped the voice, as soon as Croft stepped through the door.

Croft found himself in a very futuristic lab. The lab coated Capybara was apparently hard at work.

"Hi," said Croft. "I just came by to-"

"I'm very busy," said the Capybara, studying a readout. "If you need to groom yourself, there's a (tweatle tweatle) delousing station several floors down."

"Ah, thanks, but I'm fine," said Croft. "I just came to say hello-"

"Hello."

"-and to see what you were working on."

The officious Capybara looked up at him. "I'm studying how (tweatle tweatle) Tloran particles interact with positively charged accelerated particles in discrete pockets of the fifth dimension. Do you have any comments?"

"Uh, no."

"Then goodbye, human."

"Uh-"

"If you are here to plead for your life, be aware that each additional second you spend here reduces by 5% the chance I will vote in your favor."

"What are the odds of your voting in my favor to start with?"

"About 2%."

"Then I don't have much to lose, do I?"

The lab coat Capybara glared at him. "I do have a choice between voting for permanent confinement and dissolution, you know."

"Oh. Nice seeing you," said Croft, heading for the door.

"Thanks for dropping by."

The Professor was waiting just down the bend in the corridor. "You didn't handle that well at all."

"He wasn't very predisposed to me in the first place," said Croft. "I think even if I came in with a new kind of Torin particle he still would've given me the boot."

"Tloran particle."

"What?"

"They're called--never mind," said the Professor. "Let's hope you have more luck with your next visit."

"Ah, the Clifford Croft animal," said Doctor Capybara. "I was just (tweatle tweatle) thinking about you! Come in, come in."

Croft came in. Suddenly he found himself floating in midair, and he came to a landing on an examination table. Straps appeared out of nowhere and clamped down on his arms, legs, and head.

"It's so fortunate that you've chosen to come of your own accord," smiled the Capybara. "Did you know that not only do I have medical training, but I also have an advanced degree in (tweatle tweatle) veterinarian studies? There's something I'm curious about that I need to resolve."

Doctor Capybara pressed a button and a large machine lowered over Croft's face.

"What are you doing?" Croft cried.

"This will be so quick that you won't feel anything," the Doctor promised.

"What? No!"

But Croft was unable to speak more as two clamps dropped down from the machine and pried his mouth open. A bright light shined down, and Croft felt and heard a whirring drill descending into his mouth, almost making contact with his tongue.

Croft screamed, as he felt a slight nick on his tongue. The thing had already started to drill into him!

Just as suddenly the drilling sound stopped, the machine retracted, and the restraints were removed.

Croft cautiously felt around his mouth as he sat up. He felt a very slight abrasion in one corner of his tongue.

"What did you-"

"Just needed a small tissue sample," said the Doctor. "I'm writing an article about comparative tonguework in (tweatle tweatle) lower species, and I needed a fresh sample for my research. Now that

didn't hurt, did it? My my, for such a simple and painless procedure, your race certainly does (tweatle tweatle)." Doctor Capybara chuckled.

Croft got off the table. "You might have told me what you were planning."

"Why?" said the Doctor, looking puzzled.

"I didn't have any idea what you intended," said Croft.

"Why, what did you think, that I would dissect you?" said Doctor Capybara. "Human, we are civilized beings here. We have laws against cruelty to semi-sentients. Dissection or infliction of intense physical pain is out of the question."

"How comforting," said Croft, dabbing with his tongue. What little soreness he had felt was all gone now, and he was starting to feel foolish.

"Psychological and stress tests, however, are permitted," said Doctor Capybara. "Like my colleague (tweatle), I too am fascinated by your race, but not precisely in the same way. Have you come to volunteer for a (tweatle tweatle) experiment or two? It would help further the cause of science."

"No, I'm afraid not," said Croft.

"Then you must have come to plead for your life," said Doctor Capybara. "How pathetic," he harrumphed, turning away.

"Well, it would be really nice if you voted to let me go," said Croft.

"A lot of things would be nice," said the Doctor. "If a year's worth of research were suddenly completed when I got up in the morning, that would be really nice as well."

"Ah," said Croft, not quite sure how to answer that one. "Is there any thing I can say or do to convince you to change your vote?"

"My vote is not yet decided, animal," said the Capybara.

"It isn't?" said Croft, feeling a ray of hope.

"No," said the Capybara. "I haven't yet decided whether to vote to have you dissected, or merely (tweatle tweatle) permanently interred."

"What?" said Croft. "I thought you said you don't dissect semi, ah, humans."

"Not live ones," said the Capybara. He walked up to Croft and pressed his snout against him. "But there's no rule against doing so for semi-sentients who have been (tweatle tweatle) put to sleep," he said softly.

"Maybe this isn't helping," said the Professor, as he walked along the corridor with Croft. "You seem to (tweatle tweatle) alienate them."

"How did I alienate the last one? By walking into the room so he could immediately start torturing me before I could say a word? Say, how did he lift me up like that?"

The Professor harrumped but said nothing.

"It's nothing I'm saying or doing, it's their perspective right from the start. They see me as a lab rat, a gerbil to be disposed of," said Croft. "Why don't you try talking to them?"

"I already have," sighed the Professor.

"Maybe if I could somehow show them that I'm more than an animal," said Croft.

"How could you possibly hope to do that?"

"I don't know, challenge them to a duel, or something."

"A duel? You would lose."

"Well, maybe a contest, of knowledge-"

"You would lose-"

"Or ability-"

"You would lose-"

"Or something. The point is, I have to do something," said Croft. The Professor considered. "I don't think that would help. Listen, you have only irrevocably alienated two of my colleagues. There are still four more to go. Give it another try."

"Ah, human, come in, come in (tweatle tweatle)," said Mayor Capybara, looking sharp in his four piece suit.

"I imagine you know why I'm here," said Croft.

"Of course! To beg for your life," said the Mayor.

"Before I get the chance to alienate you, may I know what you have against me?"

"Oh, I have nothing against you," said the Mayor, smiling broadly.

"You're not like the others," Croft said. "You're not instantly hostile." He considered. "You're a politician."

"I study political systems, to be sure," said the Mayor. "I don't usually study the systems of (tweatle tweatle) semi-sentients, but I know enough about yours to understand why your government fell."

"Really?"

"Really. You allowed everyone to vote."

"It seems you do too here."

"Yes, but everyone here are of a superior mental ability. Even among your semi-sentient race, there are those of you who are (tweatle tweatle) intellectually superior above the others. And yet everyone has an equal vote, and the unqualified masses guide your politicians and thus your policy. The amazing thing is not that your government fell (tweatle tweatle), but that it lasted as long as it did."

"Ah ha," said Croft, trying to be polite.

"The Screen aren't much better, by the way. They support military dictatorship, absolute rule from the top," said the Mayor. "That only works if the dictator himself is (tweatle tweatle) intellectually superior. But all military dictatorships tend to do is conquer, and where's the elegant (tweatle) statescraft in that?"

"You have a point," said Croft encouragingly.

The Mayor smiled broadly, showing his teeth. "In your own simple way, you're trying to curry favor with me! It's really astounding, like a parrot trying to imitate a sentient. I find it most (tweatle tweatle) entertaining."

"I'm glad I'm entertaining you," said Croft, giving a watery smile while suppressing his rage. "Is it working?"

The Mayor pad-padded over to Croft. "Human, I like you."

"Thanks," said Croft, thinking that like a politician, he didn't answer the question.

"I would really like to support you-

Here goes.

"-and if a consensus forms to do so, then you can be sure I will."

"What does that mean?" said Croft.

"If you can command a majority, I'll vote with them."

What use was that?

"It's good politics, you see, to be in tune with the majority."

"I see," said Croft. "But there are seven of you. What if there's a three-three split?"

The Capybara took a deep breath. "I don't like three-three splits."

"So I got a maybe," said Croft. "Two no's and a maybe."

"Your record is improving, young Clifford."

"Will you stop calling me that? I'm several centuries old," said Croft. He didn't look it, of course, not with his anti-aging

vaccinations. Which reminded him... his next shot would be due in a few years....

"You're young compared to me," said the Professor.

"What is existence?" asked the Capybara with the robe.

"Uh, you tell me?" said Croft.

"There are many interpretations," grinned the Capybara. "We could spend a lifetime debating it."

"That we could," said Croft, not sure where this was going.

"Unfortunately, your lifetime would be quite insufficient, if what I'm hearing from my (tweatle tweatle) colleagues is correct."

"Really?"

"Really," said the Philosopher Capybara. "You quite irritated (tweatle) and (tweatle); both are now committed for voting for your dissolution."

"I never meant to offend them," said Croft.

"Oh, you're incapable of offending them," said the Capybara.

"It's your mere existence that they object to. Hence the appropriateness of our debate."

"But the debate isn't over yet," said Croft. "I have the Professor on my side, and Mayor Capybara."

The Philosopher Capybara looked blank. "Oh, you must mean (tweatle) and (tweatle). But I think it is premature to say that (tweatle) is on your side; he always likes to say that he's on everyone's side."

Croft guessed that he was referring to Mayor Capybara.

"Still, not enough members have arrived at a firm consensus, so I suppose I could be generous enough to allow you a few moments to (tweatle tweatle) for your life."

"How generous of you."

"I always like to think that I'm being open minded."

"Then consider this," said Croft, feeling his pulse pound. "It is morally wrong to kill someone simply because they stumbled into your region of space."

"Why?" said the Philosopher.

"Because I'm a sentient being that has done no wrong."

"A semi-sentient."

"A sentient."

"Can you (tweatle tweatle tweatle tweatle)?" asked the Philosopher.

"I'm sorry, none of that translated very well," said Croft.

"Exactly; you don't even have the words in your language for such concepts," said the Philosopher. "You're a semi-sentient. We would not be more likely to be concerned about terminating you than you would about stepping on an ant."

Croft licked his lips. He was no Steven Quick or Norman North; how was he to outthink this Capybara?

"My advice for you is to accept (tweatle tweatle) dissolution. Look at it as a new experience--"

"What about the bugs?"

"The Bugs? Oh, you mean (tweatle). What about them?"

"They're my enemy; they're also yours. Shouldn't we band together against them?"

"They're not our enemy," the Philosopher Capybara chuckled. "We barely notice them."

"What about... what about the Screen?" said Croft.

The Capybara stiffened. "What about them?"

"Aren't they your enemy?"

"They are a childlike race, not much above what you call the Insectoids... vapid fourth wavers at best," said the Philosopher

Capybara.

"Once they finish with us, how do you know they won't turn their attentions to you?"

"They wouldn't dare," said Croft.

"But what if?" said Croft. "What if they locate some more technology, or get some help from a first or second waver. They'll come after you next."

"And what would you say is the solution?"

"Let me go. I'll work to defeat the Insectoids. Without them, the Screen will be greatly weakened."

"Hmmm..." said the Philosopher Capybara. "Not a very philosophical argument."

"But a very practical one."

"We don't fear the Screen."

"I never said you did."

"But perhaps there might be merit in allowing you to go free."

"Thank you," said Croft.

"Do not thank me yet," said the Philosopher Capybara. "I said I am thinking that way; that doesn't mean I may not yet change my mind."

"I'll leave you be," said Croft, anxious not to say anything which would sway him back the other way. "Bye!" he added, quickly leaving the room.

"Much better," said the Capybara.

"I think we've got something here," said Croft. "I'll use the enemy of my enemy argument in my next meeting too."

Ten minutes later Croft came out of the Engineer Capybara's room.

"Well?" said the Professor.

"He just laughed at me and told me to go away."

"Even after made your new argument?"

"He said he didn't fear the Screen, but if I kept wasting his time, he would vote to turn me over to them," said Croft. "So where do we stand?"

"Three against, one for, and two more possibly for," said the Professor. "That leaves one left."

"That's not the best score, but at least I'm still in the running," said Croft. "You now, I'm starting to notice a pattern. I do badly with the hard scientists--the mathematician, the doc, and the engineer--while I do better with the social scientists--the politician, the philosopher, and you."

"I am not a social scientist," said the Professor.

"Well, you're special," said Croft. "Anyway, I've lost track. Who's our last call?"

The Professor looked glum.

"What? Is it another hard science specialist?"

"No," said the Professor.

"Then why are you looking so glum?"

"The last one to see is (tweatle)," said the Professor.

A few moments later, Croft understood.

His fate lay in the hands of the Pink Beret Capybara. The same Pink Beret Capybara who had reacted so negatively towards Croft when he had first arrived.

"If it isn't the (tweatle tweatle) animal!" said Pink Beret. Her room was filled with all kinds of images of paintings and sculptures.

"Hello," said Croft.

"So I hear your life is in my hands," the Capybara said, working vigorously with an electrobrush, as she painted on a screen.

"Looks like it."

"What would you do to stay alive?"

"Actually, I'd like to be let go as well."

"So what's in it for me?"

"What would you like?"

"I'm an artist," said Pink Beret. "I'd like to be entertained.

Bark like a dog."

Croft grimaced.

"Bark like a dog!" Pink Beret commanded.

"Woof, woof," said Croft.

"Louder! Again!"

"WOOF WOOF!" said Croft.

"Now pant."

"What?"

"Pant," said Pink Beret. "Stick out your tongue and gasp. I've read up on animals you call dogs. They (tweatle tweatle) pant."

Checking his anger, Croft stuck out his tongue and started panting.

"Now, I'm going to say two numbers," said Pink Beret. "And when I do, I want you to say 'ruff!' the number of times equal to the sum of those two numbers. For example, if I say 'one' and 'two' I want you to 'ruff' three times. Are you (tweatle tweatle) ready?"

"No," said Croft.

"20 and 8!"

"No," said Croft, approaching Pink Beret.

"No? Don't you want to live?" said Pink Beret.

"Somehow I don't think my participation in this charade is going to make the slightest difference in how you vote," said Croft.

"It might," said Pink Beret.

"It will only debase me further. What reason will you have to vote for me if I'm already an object of ridicule?"

"It's impossible for you to be debased further, animal," said Pink Beret. "You might as well (tweatle tweatle) entertain me while you still can."

"Ah, so now we get to your real agenda," said Croft. "You're supposed to be an artist, correct?"

"I study art," said Pink Beret. "And yes, I dabble."

"Kill me and my race, and its art, will be wiped out."

"What does the scribbling of a semi-sentient species matter to me?"

"Have you seen our paintings? Our electroart? Our sculpture? Our literature?" said Croft.

"No," said Pink Beret. "I assumed you didn't have any."

"Wrong," said Croft. "But if you wipe me out, you'll never get to see it."

"Well, you place a great deal of importance in yourself, don't you?"

"The Insectoids know me well and fear me," said Croft. "And I'm the first human to get to your planet."

"The first living human, yes," said Pink Beret. "But that will be remedied tomorrow."

Croft felt a pit in his stomach. He had nothing left to lose, now. "You're a coward!" he hissed.

"Am I?" said Pink Beret.

"You hide behind your technology while millions die and suffer. Without it you'd be hunted just like we are. Whatever you may think of me, a mere 'semi-sentient', as you call me, I have more guts than all of you put together. I've risked my life on a daily basis more than any of you ever have, and I'm fighting for a higher principal, to save my people, than any of you can ever appreciate. You're nothing but a bunch of dirty, spoiled, cowards!"



Pink Beret Capybara dropped her electrobrush. She walked over to where Croft was standing. The tension in the air was explosive, as if a match could set it off.

The Capybara looked Croft hard in the eye. She looked primed for violence.

Croft held his ground, matching her glare.

Then Pink Beret burst out laughing.

She laughed, and she laughed, and she laughed.

Croft, in a fury, sped from the room. He knew this moment might come, and had scouted around for a back door exit for just such a contingency.

Croft headed out of the building, through another, down a moving slideway, and into a lift that took up upwards.

Up, to where a mighty Chent ship was docked....

He had no intention of waiting around for a verdict to be cast.

Croft boarded the ship. He almost didn't know where to begin.

Almost.

For Croft had been inside a Chent ship once before. It hadn't been a pleasant experience, but he had learned a few things about it.

The control room would be in the forward section.

It took him nearly an hour of walking to get there. This ship was BIG! He kept waiting for a Capybara to intercept him, but all was quiet. Perhaps they were so confident that he was a dumb animal that they didn't possibly think he could escape on his own.

Croft reached the control room and found himself floored by the row after row of unfamiliar control panels. Well, if the Professor could figure out how to fly one of these things, so could he.

He was just reaching out to press a button in his first trial and error experiment when a holoimage of the Professor appeared on the screen. "Clifford, it won't work."

Croft pressed a button. Nothing happened.

"(Tweatle) and (Tweatle) have been sent to detain you. This isn't helping your case."

"I don't seem to have much choice." Croft pressed another button. An unknown indicator jumped, and he felt a minor trembling. Good. Was he getting closer to getting the ship to lift off?

"Even we, who are familiar with this technology, took years to decipher enough on its use."

Croft pressed another button. Other gauges jumped.

"All you'll end up doing is killing yourself."

"It doesn't seem like I can do much worse," said Croft, still pressing buttons.

"Ah, there you are. Please be gentle with him."

Croft turned to see the Doctor and Lab Coat Capybara trotting in the room.

"Human, do you realize how much inconvenience you have caused?" said Lab Coat Capybara.

Croft tried to run, but he found himself rooted to the spot where he was standing in mid-step. He was frozen at an odd angle, and would have fallen if something weren't holding him up.

"Why don't we just dispose of him now and be done with him?" said Lab Coat Capybara.

"Because we abide by our laws and we must have a vote," came the voice of Professor Capybara.

"Oh, very well," said Lab Coat. He touched Croft with his snout. Croft immediately fell to the floor and started to lose consciousness. The last thing he heard was Lab Coat Capybara saying, "I still say we should dissolve him now. After all, it's just a formality..."

Munch munch munch.

Croft blinked, opening his eyes. He was in the room where the first hearing was held. All the Capybaras were there, munching on their peanuts.

Mayor Capybara chewed thoughtfully. "After we resolve this pending issue, we must take a vote on whether these peanuts are better shelled or chewed whole."

"Don't let me stop you," said Croft. "Feel free to vote on that matter first."

Mayor Capybara smiled slyly at him. Swallowing to clear his mouth of peanuts, he said, "And now for the matter of the semi-sentient Clifford Croft. I think we're all decided. Does anyone wish to speak before the (tweatle tweatle) vote?"

No one spoke. But Croft raised his hands.

"Yes?" said Mayor Capybara.

"I just want to say that there may be other things you like from August besides our peanuts. Kill me and doom our rebellion, and you may never find out what those things are."

"Like what?" said the Mayor.

"Other foods, arts, perspectives, anything," said Croft.

"They do have quite an interesting little culture, for (tweatle tweatle) semi-sentients," said the Professor.

"You would say that," said Engineer Capybara.

"Then let us vote," said Mayor Capybara. "How do you each vote?"

"Freedom," said Professor Capybara.

That was one in his favor.

"Dissolution," said Lab Coat Capybara.

That was one against him, to one for.

"Imprisonment," said Doctor Capybara.

That was two against him, to one for.

"Ah, point of order," said Mayor Capybara. "Perhaps we should limit this vote to only whether we should permit the human to go free or not. Then, if we decide not to release him, we can hold a second vote on what to do with him."

The Capybaras voiced their approval. Obviously they supported their Mayor's keen insight and leadership.

They started over.

"Freedom," said the Professor.

"Non-Freedom," said Lab Coat.

"Non-Freedom," said Doctor Capybara.

They were back to one in favor, and two against.

"Non-Freedom," said Engineer Capybara.

Now it was one in favor, three against. All it would take would be one more vote to trap him here forever, or worse.

The next person to go was the Philosopher Capybara, who had said he was leaning towards supporting Croft, if had nothing changed his mind since Croft had spoken to him. Had Croft's escape attempt changed his mind?

"Freedom," said the Philosopher Capybara.

That meant two in favor and three against. One more vote could still sink him.

The next one to vote was the Pink Beret Capybara. Croft had the sickening feeling that her vote would be the one to kill him.

Pink Beret grinned at Croft, relishing her power. She said, "Is it my turn to vote?"

"You're the last one, other than myself," said Mayor Capybara.

"Then I vote... I vote..."

"Please don't delay and tease, we have to deal with the issues of the peanuts and other matters next," said the Mayor.

"Then I vote in favor of the human, for freeing it!"

There was a collective gasp among the Capybaras. Clearly, this

had been unexpected.

The vote was three to three. It was now up to the Mayor.

Clearly, the Mayor Capybara was uncomfortable with this position. As he said, he clearly preferred to vote with the majority. But there was no majority and however he voted he would alienate a substantial minority of his fellow Capybaras.

He paused, looking first at Croft and then at the other faces.

"I vote...."

Croft held his breath.

"To free the human. The vote to free the human is carried, four to three. Now, let us turn to more important issues. Has anyone else noticed that this latest mutation of peanuts are more crunchy but less tasty than the last batch?"

As the Capybaras started talking among themselves the Professor trotted up to Croft. "You did it, Clifford!"

"Yes," said Croft. He got up and walked to the Pink Beret Capybara.

"Why?" said the Pink Capybara, anticipating his question before he spoke.

Croft nodded.

"I don't know," said the Pink Beret Capybara. "Maybe I'm a little curious about your culture. Maybe I don't want to see you all wiped out. Maybe I enjoyed it when you showed a little spunk, or tried to steal the ship--(tweatle), what did you call it?"

"Pathetic puppy syndrome," said the Professor.

"Yes," said Pink Beret.

"Ok," said Croft, turning away. He muttered, mostly to himself, "I never thought I'd say this, but I think I'm starting to miss the Insectoids."

"Then let's get you home then, Clifford," said the Professor.

Before Croft had a chance to say or do anything, he felt the Professor's warm snout pressed against him, and all went black.

## Chapter 8: A Visit To The June Directorate

Croft blinked, opening his eyes. Were his eyes open? Gradually, he figured out that they were. He was just in a room that was almost totally dark.

He stumbled towards the doorway, the source of dim lighting from the corridor outside. When he emerged, he was made a very startling discovery.

He was in the undercity. He was back in August.

He also felt unusual... bulky. He realized he was wearing his Insectoid suit. It was a good thing they had brought that back with him-

-Brought him back? How? From the other side of the galaxy? How had he gotten back? How long had he been gone?

Even if the Capybaras had sent a ship through the spacegate, it would have taken at least a few weeks to get back to August. But Croft, feeling his clean shaven face, felt that no more than a few hours at most had passed. Unless they had held him in suspended animation, how had they brought him back so quickly?

He trundled down a corridor, feeling reasonably secure in his Insectoid costume. Once he reached a main subjunction, he realized where he was. He wasn't far from Sarney Sarittenden. The spaceship hideout should be nearby.

The gang was all surprised to see Croft. He made sure to take off the suit's helmet before entering the hideout, to avoid the risk of encountering any jumpy trigger fingers, like the Silencer's.

They were all delighted to see him.

"We had gotten a broadcast from the ship, that said they left without you," said Yaney. "How did you get back?"

"It's a long story," said Croft. Speaking to them, he confirmed what he already knew: based on the date he had left August and arrived at the spacegate, and accounting for the time he had spent on the Capybara planet, his return had only taken a few hours. How had they accomplished that?

"I've located the enemy spacegate," said Croft. "Now we just have to figure out how to knock it out."

"We have bigger troubles," said the Silencer. "Just two days ago the bugs started using a new tactic. Sniffers."

"Sniffers?"

The Silencer showed him a video from one of their broadcasts. They looked like they were half-insects, half dogs.

"They can smell us at quite a distance. No amount of electrical jamming works, obviously," said the Silencer. "So far they've uncovered and executed a bunch of our resistance fighters. The resistance in the west is crumbling and moving north, but even that won't help for long--spring is coming and the bugs can go north as well."

"Why haven't you picked up and left?"

"I'm about to get to that," said the Silencer. "So far they haven't used any sniffers around here. They mostly seem to be using it in western and northern August where the resistance is strongest. The reason that we're still here is because your friend," he said in a certain way, meaning Levi, "believes he has a way of defeating the sniffers, but you have to go to meet our other friend," meaning Inglorious, "for more details."

"All right," said Croft. "Where's my helmet?"

"You need something called zeroscent," said Inglorious. "Lay it down like a powder around your compound and the sniffers shouldn't detect anything."

"Will it also destroy our sense of smell?"

"No, it doesn't work that way," Inglorious sighed, as if he were speaking to an idiot. It made Croft briefly feel like he was back on the planet of the Capybaras.

"Where can I get some?"

"It's not used much on August anymore. There are a number of planets that use it, which I'll get to in a moment. I have an equally important message to tell you from Levi."

"What could be equally as important as stopping the sniffers?"

"Only a means for killing the Insectoids."

It had been one of Levi's secret projects he had alluded to Croft during their argument about constructing a supervirus that would kill the Insectoids. Levi, it seems, had come up with a viable weapon that could be used against them.

"Let me show you a working model," said Inglorious. He reached over to a lab bench and brought an apparatus. It looked like a blue bulb surrounded by a wire mesh. Inglorious flicked a switch and the bulb light, casting a blue light.

"What is that, a bug light?" said Croft.

"Yes," said Inglorious.

"So what?" said Croft. "Wait a minute. That's no ordinary bug light, is it?"

"No," said Inglorious. "It's been retuned to attract Insectoids."

"Attract them! We don't want to attract them."

"It overrides their cognitive functions," said Inglorious. "When they see the light, they drop whatever they're doing and start walking straight for it.."

"No, come on," said Croft.

"It's true. Levi's even tested it."

"How could he-"

"He's been given license to create pleasing light shows for the Queen. She's even given him a trooper to experiment on. That's how we know," said Inglorious.

"Well, that is really crafty....."

"A few words of caution," said Inglorious. "One, it only works on line of sight,"

"Obviously."

"Two, before we start using them, we'll have to get Levi out of there, because it won't take them long to figure out he's the source of this invention."

"Good point."

"And three, we don't have very many of the special fluidic bulbs needed to construct these."

"Where do we get them?"

"I've done a search for planets which have both Zeroscents and fluidic bulbs. One planet that has plenty of both is June."

June, the capital of the June Directorate, just as August was capital of the League. It had been Steven Quick's base of power, before he had died in a freak accident years ago.

"But, well, June is probably as equally ransacked as August."

"I've established contact with the resistance there. They can get us the supplies we need if we can get there to pick them up."

"Now that's very interesting," said Croft. "I didn't even know that there was a resistance on June, much less how to contact them. How did you?"

"It's hard to explain," said Inglorious.

"An image appeared in my head-"

"A towel-"

"More like a sheet, but yes, perhaps-"

It seems Mr. Towel had discovered Inglorious.

"Mr. Towel!" said Croft. "Mr. Towel! Come out, come out, wherever you are!"

"Yes, Clifford," came the voice. A wavy sheet appeared in front of him.

"Inglorious, can you excuse us for a few minutes? I need to have some quality time with Mr. Towel."

Inglorious muttered something about checking some instruments and left the room, closing the door behind him.

"Good. Now we can have some privacy. How're you doing, Mr. Towel?"

"I was going to contact you shortly, Clifford. How was your journey through the spacegate?"

"Very revealing, Mr. Towel. I could say I'm surprised to learn that you knew I went through the spacegate, but I'm not. I went to the planet of the Capybaras, Mr. Towel. Does that ring a bell?"

"Capybaras?"

"Sure, you know, short, squat, webbed feet, you must have seen them before."

"I may be familiar with that race," said Mr. Towel.

"I thought you might be," said Croft. "They told me a lot of interesting things, Mr. Towel."

"Like what?"

"Like one of their members was expelled, for getting involved with the human race. You wouldn't know who that would be, would you, Mr. Towel?"

"No," said Mr. Towel.

"I should have figured it out from the beginning. Your voice,

before you remodulated it, sounded familiar, and it was only later I figured out why--it sounded a bit like my old friend, Professor Capybara. But it only came together when I was being questioned by the Capybaras, and they wanted to know where I learned about the spacegate from. Suddenly, our conversation popped into our head, the one where you said you had to stay hidden because the others might find out. At first, I thought the others might be your enemies, but when the Capybaras were questioning me, and I learned about their laws against not interfering, I realized that they were trying to find out if I had any connection with you."

"This is all conjecture," said Mr. Towel.

"I'm hearing the final evidence I need right now, Mr. Towel. You can modulate your voice, and you can edit out your tweatle tweatles, but you can't stop yourself from leaving blank spaces when you talk. Can you hear yourself? When you just said 'I realized that they were (pause) trying to find out', that pause and others like it were your tweatle tweatles. You could edit out your tweatle tweatles, but you couldn't make your sentences flow smoothly."

There was a deep sigh. "I was told you were an extraordinary human."

There was a shimmer in front of Croft, and he found himself staring face to face with a Capybara.

A bright, blue Capybara.

It looked like a Capybara in every way, except that was bright blue. And it was wearing a black bow tie. Croft was shocked; he hadn't thought the Capybara was actually in the room with him!

"What did you tell them?" said the Capybara.

"Nothing, of course," said Croft. He quickly gave a short summary of his adventures. "But why are you blue? Did they...."

"They didn't banish me," said the Capybara proudly. "I banished myself. I turned myself blue to set myself apart from them. Do you know what they call me?"

"No."

"It roughly translates to 'Meddler'."

"The Meddler Capybara," said Croft. "It's catchy, and it fits."

"I can't act openly because it may endanger their lives. Also, if I do so, they may act against me," sighed the Meddler. "In a way, it's a relief. You're only the third human I have revealed myself to."

"The third? Who are the first and second?"

"We don't have much time, your associate will come back soon," said the Meddler Capybara. "You must destroy the spacegate."

"Good idea. Work on a plan while I gather the blue light and zeroscent materials."

The Meddler Capybara sighed. "Very well. But if you must go to June, be careful."

"I will," said Croft, as Inglorious opened the door and returned.

"Who are you talking to?"

Croft looked around. The Meddler Capybara was gone.

Getting to June was easy enough. Croft took only the Silencer with him. They stole an Insectoid shuttle and carefully docked inside the Nautilus. The Nautilus crew was very surprised to see Croft again, but Croft didn't reveal any details of his miraculous escape. "Full speed to June," said Croft.

When they arrived at June they left in the shuttle. The only risk at either end is that a sharp bug watching the sensors would suddenly see a shuttle appearing out of nowhere, as they left the Nautilus, or disappearing, as they entered the Nautilus.

When they got out of the shuttle the Silencer, wearing a slave collar, went first, followed by Croft, in an Insectoid suit,

brandishing a blast rifle.

June, as the capital of the June Directorate, was a little like August, only smaller. The planet had not yet congealed into one, enormous city, but the cities there were grand and spread for miles in every direction.

But the occupation had also taken a toll here. Croft could see the burned out and abandoned hulks with his own eyes, as well as the hive-shaped new buildings that the Insectoids were creating, to remake the planet in their own image.

No one paid him much attention as he marched the Silencer on the streets of the city. It wasn't until they got underground that Croft handed the Silencer his blaster. June's undercity was not nearly as extensive as August's, but it was big enough. They reached the rendezvous point, a dead-end in a corridor on a sublevel, and waited.

"There's something not quite right about this," said Croft, as they waited.

"How do you mean?" said the Silencer.

"I don't know," said Croft. "But something I can't quite identify doesn't strike me as right. We haven't heard a peep from June in 20 years, and now all of a sudden they have a resistance."

"Interplanetary communications haven't exactly been regular during this time."

"No they haven't," said a new voice, as a side of the wall opened up and men with blasters peered out. "And if you hadn't been talking, we would have shot you dead for the bug you look like. That is a human being inside, correct?"

"That's right," said Croft, raising his hands.

They blindfolded both of them and took them for a long walk. Obviously the meeting point wasn't their hideout.

When the men took off their blindfolds, Croft looked around appreciatively.

He was in a very well lit and well equipped room. It didn't look like some temporary piecemeal hideout but a very well maintained operations center.

"Can you take off that helmet, it's very disconcerting," said a bald man.

Croft removed his helmet.

"That's better," said the man. The weapons that were trained on them were lowered. Croft was very conscious of the fact that his and the Silencer's weapons had been taken. But they didn't know about his reserve gun inside the suit.

"If you'll remove the suit please," said the man. "We'd like our techs to have a look at it."

Our techs. This resistance was growing by the minute. They had well-lighted and maintained rooms and techs? What kind of resistance was this?

"My name is Bildin, Shiro Bildin," said the man. "I take it you're Clifford Croft and the equally infamous Silencer."

Croft nodded.

"Glad to have you here. We haven't heard much about the resistance on August. How have you fellows been holding up?"

"As well as can be expected," said Croft. "What about you?"

"Doing as well as can be expected," said Bildin. "The bugs discovered two of our underground bases last week using sniffers, so we had to switch to backups, like this one."

"This is a very well supplied backup," said Croft. "Exactly how big is your resistance?"

Bildin gave a smile. "Now Mr. Croft, that's on a need to know basis. I know of your reputation with the Agency, but here at Internal Security we also have our protocols."

"Internal Security," said Croft suddenly. "You mean Directorate Internal Security survived the invasion?"

"Yes," said Bildin. "Most of our infrastructure survived intact, and we have extensive link with the ground military--"

"Your ground forces survived intact?"

Bildin frowned. "Of course, we've taken losses, but yes, we survived as a cohesive unit. Hasn't yours?"

"No," said Croft dully. "Our military was all but wiped out, as was our Agency infrastructure. It was the sudden surprise of the attack that knocked us off balance," he said. Changing the subject, he said, "About our supplies?"

"We're gathering the equipment and chemicals you requested," said Bildin.

"It isn't a problem?" said Croft.

"No, we can get you as much as you like, given a bit of time. But your shuttle space is mighty small. Would you like us to arrange a transport to ship the goods?"

"A transport," said Croft. "How do you intend to get a transport--"

"An Insectoid transport. They've been using human laborers for some time for loading, unloading, and in-flight maintenance. We have a network inside the Insectoid network and can ship anything almost anywhere. As long as we're discrete, of course."

"Of course," said Croft. "Then why am I even here?"

"We... we wanted to see you before starting this arrangement," said Bildin. "We only recently heard of your exploits from Mr. Sheet--"

"You mean Mr. Towel."

"You call him Mr. Towel? That's funny. Well, we just wanted to see you for ourselves before sending the goods, as evidence that your resistance exists. Excuse me for a moment."

Croft looked at the Silencer. The Silencer looked back at Croft.

During their trip back to August they had a lot to talk about.

"Well," said Croft, "It seems they've handled the invasion quite well."

The Silencer nodded.

"So well, in fact, that they make us look like incompetent boobs."

"What are you thinking?"

"Well, it could be that their military and spy network is ten times better than ours."

"Which you don't believe," said the Silencer.

"It could be an Insectoid trap, in which case they would have sprung it immediately upon our arrival, since we top their most wanted list."

"Another possibility shot down."

"Or... they were a lot better prepared for this invasion. It looks to me that they must have spent years preparing for it."

"Meaning?"

"Unlike everyone else in the Alliance, the good people of June knew it was coming."

Time passed. As the June network supplied Zeroscent to the occupied worlds, the resistance started to use it to protect themselves. The sniffers, who had had great success in ferreting out resistance fighters, suddenly milled about aimlessly, without direction.

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Queen Zsst was enraged when Levi entered her presence.

"Why is this happening, Lev-I?"

"What, my Queen?"

"Our sniffers are no longer ferreting out the humans! My scientists conjecture that the humans are using some kind of agent to neutralize their scent."

"If you say so, My Queen."

"Why is this happening?"

"I do not know, my Queen."

"I think you do," said Tsarina, Zsst's new chief of security, stepping out from behind the throne.

Levi felt his blood run cold. "I don't understand."

"You are an expert in taste and smell issues," said the Queen. "You should be able to figure out why this is happening and devise a counteragent."

Oh.

Levi allowed himself to exhale slowly. "My Queen, if your scientists cannot help, I'm not sure what I-"

"Interesting that the human, who prides himself on being so useful, refuses to help us," said Tsarina.

"I am not refusing," said Levi. "I will be happy to attempt to help, if I can."

"See that you do," said the Queen.

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In the months that followed, the resistance began to build a supply of blue light devices. But they didn't use any of them, not until they had built a sufficient number. Levi had warned them that the Insectoids would eventually construct countermeasures, so it would be best if they used as many blue light devices at once in their initial attack, before the Insectoids could react. And of course, there was the small matter of extracting Levi before the devices were used.

Croft spent time with the Meddler Capybara, planning how to destroy the Insectoid Spacegate.

"A frontal attack wouldn't work," said Croft. "We simply don't have the ships. In fact, except for the Nautilus, we don't have any ships. What if we planted a bomb on the spacegate?"

"You wouldn't scratch it," said the Meddler Capybara.

"What if we blew up the control platform?"

"You'd put it out of commission for a few weeks until they built another," said the Meddler. "The critical technology is in the spacegate, not the platform."

"Well, you're the Capybara, you tell me what to do."

"Sabotage," said the Meddler. "The spacegate can be set to overload, if someone knows how to use the controls on the platform."

"Great," said Croft. "Know anyone who does?"

"As a matter of fact, I do," said a new voice.

Croft turned to see Inspir. "I take it you two are acquainted?"

"We have met," said Inspir, nodding to the Capybara. "I think I will accompany you on this mission."

"Hey, that's great!" said Croft, and he meant it. "What can possibly stop us?"

"Wait," said the Meddler. "There's a complication."

"What?"

"According to my sources, the Insectoids have recently sent massive reinforcements through the spacegate. If we destroy the spacegate, we will prevent further reinforcements from arriving, but the Insectoids may have enough ships to destroy the fleet."

"The fleet," said Croft slowly. "That's the first time you've used those words. What fleet?"

"All right, Clifford," said the Meddler. "There's no avoiding telling you now. There is a human fleet that survived the attack of the Insectoids. They have been husbanding their resources and planning a counterattack."

"Really? Where are they? How many ships--"

"You don't need to know that," said the Meddler. "What you need to know is that in order for them to have a reasonable chance of success, we have to persuade a quarter to a third of the Insectoid ships to head back through the spacegate."

"Well, that's easy enough," said Croft. "We'll just ask them nicely to go home."

The Meddler shook his head. "It would have to be a domestic threat, something that threatened their homeworlds."

"Well, we don't have anything that could threaten their homeworlds," said Croft. "Wait a minute. You're not thinking what I think you're thinking, are you?"

"My people could put forth such a convincing threat," said the Meddler.

"Great," said Croft, seeing immediately where this conversation was going. "Go and have a nice chat with them."

"I dare not," said the Meddler.

"All right, then send Inspir. This is his line of work anyway," said Croft.

"No," said the Meddler. "He will be seen as a threat to them. You are obviously no threat."

"But they're a threat to me," said Croft. "What makes you think I can do anything?"

"You have established a rapport with them."

"Rapport? Is that what you call being only one vote short of a dissection?"

"Clifford, do you know the last time that they let a semi-sentient come to our planet and leave?" said the Meddler. "Let's just say that it was a long, long time ago."

"Listen to me very carefully," said Croft. "They don't care about humans. And they don't like to interfere. They don't even like it when you interfere. There is no way I can persuade them to interfere."

"You needn't persuade all of them to interfere," said the Meddler.

Inspir was going to arrange "speedy transportation" for Croft, which meant he had to be knocked out again.

"You obviously have some very quick means of personal transportation across the galaxy," said Croft. "The only question is, why can't I see it?"

"There is some knowledge that is too dangerous too soon," said Inspir.

"Did you think of that line yourself?" said Croft.

"We will move into position in the Nautilus," said Inspir. "We will wait the designated two weeks, then will board the platform and do whatever has to be done."

There was something, something odd in the way Inspir was saying this, something that prompted Croft to ask, "Am I going to see you again? Assuming I survive, I mean."

Inspir looked troubled. "Probably not. The mission will be dangerous."

"Dangerous? No one can touch you!"

"That is, of course, not true," said Inspir. "But even if I survive, I am needed elsewhere."

"Elsewhere? What about us?" said Croft. "Don't you want to see this thing through?"

"Quite frankly, no," said Inspir. "My philosophy is not to fight other beings' wars, but only to level the playing field, so the oppressed have a fair chance to fight on their own. Once this task has been done, the playing field will once again be level, and my work here will be done. You will not be guaranteed victory, but you will have sufficient forces to win if you fight hard enough for it."

"I get the feeling that everybody in the world knows more about this human fleet than I do," said Croft.

"No; just a select few," said Inspir, as Croft started to lose consciousness....

## Chapter 9: Attack on the Spacegate

"Clifford, Clifford," said a voice, pushing him with his snout. Croft, groaning, opened his eyes.

He was back on the planet of the Capybaras, and the Professor was looking at him with a rather worried expression on his face.

"What in the world are you doing back here, Clifford?" said the Professor. "If the others (tweatle tweatle) find out--"

"I'm not here to see the others," said Croft. "I'm here to see you."

Croft rapidly explained the situation. "Our fleet only has a chance of surviving if we can draw some of the bug ships back across the spacegate."

"And you expect me to attack the Insectoid homeworlds to lure their ships back here?" said the Professor. "Clifford, how could you have (tweatle tweatle) misjudged me so badly to think I would do such a thing?"

"Professor, listen to me. My people are going to be defeated unless you help me," said Croft.

"I can't help you," said the Professor. "We don't get involved."

"But you did get involved," said Croft. "Unless you were planning to walk down that dead-end in the palace, you went out of your way to get involved! Don't deny it, you went to save me."

"Clifford, that was a small thing," the Professor whispered. "You are asking me to do a big thing."

"I'm not the only one asking," said Croft.

"What do you mean?"

Croft held up a small device. Pressing a button, a holoimage of a familiar Capybara appeared.

"You!" said the Professor, staring at the image of the Blue Capybara. "I never thought you would show your snout here again."

"I will do whatever is necessary to save the humans," said the Meddler Capybara.

"Do not let the others hear you," said the Professor. "Do you know what they will (tweatle tweatle) if they find out you are interfering?"

"It's a risk I'm willing to take," said the Meddler. "We're talking about punishment for one (tweatle), versus the fate of an entire race. How can it compare?"

"Do you know what (tweatle) said before (tweatle tweatle)?"

The Professor shook his head.

"I was there," said the Meddler. "He (tweatle tweatle tweatle tweatle)."

"Really?" said the Professor.

"Yes," said the Meddler.

The Professor bit his lower lip. "I can't (tweatle) the (tweatle)."

"We're not asking you to."

"What precisely are you asking me to do?"

Twenty minutes later they were aboard the mighty Chent ship and taking off. As soon as they lifted off one of the communications screens crackled.

"They've discovered us," said the Professor fearfully, as the image solidified.

"(Tweatle), what are you doing?" came the image of Mayor Capybara. "And what is that human doing here again?"

"I am taking the ship on a little cruise."

"(Tweatle), don't (tweatle) me," said the Mayor. "Return at once."

"I have no intention of violating the charter," said the Professor. "I will take no aggressive action against the (tweatle)."

"Then what are you doing?"

"Taking a cruise."

"I'm sending (tweatle) and (tweatle) over," said the Mayor.

"I don't think so," said the Professor. "I have disabled the (tweatle) on this end. I'll call when I get back." He closed communications.

"Can they come after us?" Croft asked.

The Professor shook his head.

"I can imagine how painful that was," said Croft.

"You can't imagine the consequences of what I've just done," said the Professor slowly.

"You're doing the right thing, Professor," said Croft.

"Let's just get on with it," said the Professor. "This will take a lot of preparation if it's to be done right."

For the next four days the huge Chent ship headed deep into Insectoid space, orienting towards their homeworlds. The Professor barely spoke to Croft as he worked feverishly at the controls.

Their presence seemed to be alarming the Insectoids; Croft could hear frantic comm traffic chattering about that back and forth. Well, they would only have more reason to become concerned soon enough.

Finally, the Professor was ready. The Chent ship was stationed on the outer edges of one of the most populated Insectoid solar systems, near a nebula. Insectoid ship traffic steered well away from them, but the ship was clearly within scanner range of the bugs.

"Ready?" said Croft.

The Professor nodded. He pressed a button.

The Professor had been telling the truth when he said that the Screen only knew the most common and direct applications of Chent technology. The Screen would be easily able to pilot and use most of the weapons of a ship like this. But there were a lot of subtle features of the ship that the Insectoids and even the Screen didn't know about. It was one of those more subtle features that the Professor was about to utilize.

The giant Chent ship sped out of the nebula, trailed by one ship, two ships, five ships, ten ships... shortly an entire fleet trailed it.

A fleet of human ships. Battleships, cruisers, destroyers, carriers, every major variety of human ships. The ships sped towards the Insectoid planets. They transmitted a message ahead, in Insectoid, warning the Insectoids to abandon their planets.

Then, just as suddenly, out of the nebula came an Insectoid fleet, equally as large and mighty as the human fleet.

The human fleet immediately turned around to face the Insectoid fleet, and the battle began.

Ships flared and exploded; pieces of transmission from both sides showed glimpses into the scenes from individual ships; cruisers

attacked destroyers, battleships attacked battlecruisers.

A handful of human ships were destroyed, but for every one that was blown up, ten or more Insectoid ships were destroyed. In less than an hour the last Insectoid ship was blown up, their scattered cries suddenly cutting out on the comm.

The human fleet turned and headed back into the nebula, followed by the giant Chent ship.

"Do you think they bought it?" said Croft.

The Professor listened to the comm traffic from the planets.

"They certainly seem very agitated. Long range scans of the ships and intercepted comm traffic should be (tweatle tweatle) convincing. The only discrepancies, of course, are that there will be no battle debris, and they may have trouble tracking down precisely which of their ships were destroyed, but given the size of their fleet as well as their paranoia, it just may (tweatle tweatle) work."

"I didn't realize this ship could do such things."

"It's only a few of the things this ship can do," said the Professor. "Are you ready to return?"

Croft turned away, his hand sneaking down to touch something on his belt. "What will happen to you?" he said, turning to face the Professor again.

"I will return and face judgment," said the Professor.

"Will we ever meet again?"

"Almost certainly not," said the Professor.

"Then come with me," said Croft.

"I can't," said the Professor. "Like it or not, I am a member of my group and I have to (tweatle tweatle) face the consequences."

"You're just going to let them kill you?"

The Professor smiled mirthlessly. "They do not kill. Let's just say that I might be taken out of circulation (tweatle tweatle) for a while."

"Is that kind of future preferable to coming with me?"

"Yes," said the Professor. "Despite what you would believe, I am not a renegade like (tweatle). Perhaps by going back I can convince them that their position is wrong... eventually." He cleared his throat. "It's time."

He reached forward and touched Croft with his snout

Croft woke up in the undercity. Getting up, he reached down and stared at something small on his belt, actually built into his belt. Satisfied, he pressed the hidden button to turn the device off. There would be time to investigate his findings, later.

Croft idly wondered what would happen to the Professor. He also wondered what the Meddler Capybara had said to the Professor to convince him to help.

As Croft surreptitiously made his way to the surface, he realized it was night outside. Staring up at the stars, he knew it was all out of his hands now.

The subship Nautilus, carrying the elite sabotage team, closed on the Insectoid spacegate.

Mongo, in cramped shared quarters in a tiny compartment, was unhappy. Not only did he not have nearly enough personal space for comfort, but no one was listening to him.

No one ever listened to Mongo, no. He tried to tell Red Sally not to go on this mission. He tried to tell her there was danger.

"What kind of danger?" she had asked.

Danger from fire, Mongo had said.

"I am fire," Sally had responded scornfully. "You've been making a cottage industry out of wrongly predicting our deaths. According to

you, I should be dead ten times over already. I'm not going to miss the action now."

Then he had tried to warn the one called Inspir. Inspir at least turned and listened to him with respect.

"I sense the same thing you do, my friend," said Inspir. He called Mongo his friend. No one had ever done that before. "But this is something I have to do. Can you tell me any more specifics?"

Mongo didn't know about specifics, but he did know about possibilities. After talking to Inspir, Inspir called the Clapper over, and had a whispered conference with him. Everyone else in the cramped compartment looked curiously over at them. What could Inspir possibly want to talk about the Clapper about?

When they were done the Clapper nodded and attempted to clap his hands, which had been tied together at the request of the other members of the compartment.

"I'm counting on you," said Inspir, quietly squeezing the Clapper's shoulder.

"Now I know we're in trouble," Red Sally groaned.

They arrived at the spacegate and waited, sitting outside the dust field at the far edge of the system while fully cloaked. The waiting was making Sally crazy.

"Do you think Croft and the rodent will pull it off?" she asked the Silencer.

The Silencer shrugged.

It was only in their second day of waiting that they noticed the change.

A larger than usual stream of ships was heading through the spacegate. Warships--cruisers, destroyers, and more.

Then, over the next few days, the stream became a flood.

Warships of all sizes, including the mightiest battleships, flooded through the gate. The spacegate seemed to be operating near continuously, stopping only when necessary to recharge.

On the bridge Captain Hollister gave a low whistle as he studied the gleaming parade of ships lined up to jump. "Look at all those ships. Croft's plan worked."

"Yes," said Inspir nodding. "And soon it will be time to do our part."

They wanted as many ships as possible to cross over before they blew the spacegate, but they didn't want to wait too long, in case the Insectoids started shifting ships back. So when the flood of ships became a stream and then a trickle again, they decided not to wait for a next wave of returnees, if any more were coming.

Action stations were sounded as the Nautilus went back into the nebula to a nearby rendezvous point. A hijacked Insectoid merchant ship, courtesy of their friends at the June Directorate, was there waiting for them. The strike team transferred over to the merchant ship, which emerged out of the nebula again and headed towards the orbital platform.

The orbital platform broadcast a challenge; the pilot of the merchant craft, Bildin himself, wearing Croft's Insectoid suit, gave a suitable response. They were docking to provide parts and equipment.

The duty officer on the platform said that there was no scheduled arrivals expected.

Bildin responded in Insectoid that it was a sudden diversion, caused by the emergency, and if they wanted to refuse, that was acceptable, but that they would have to answer to their regional commanders. Bildin's people had done some upgrades on the suit so that it could transmit in fluent Insectoid.

After a pause, the duty officer told them to dock.

The combat team went first, 20 handpicked sharpshooters, ex-army, marine, and jump troop selected by General Arkik. They stormed the station, shooting their way through any resistance. The Insectoids were taken completely by surprised. Within minutes they had secured a path to the control room as well as the control room itself. The platoon leader, one Howard Taylor, signaled for the sabotage team to enter.

Inspir, accompanied by the Silencer, Red Sally, the Clapper, and Mongo emerged from the merchant ship. They made their way to the control room wordlessly. At every junction a pair of soldiers stood guard.

"We have secured this part of the station," said the platoon commander, saluting Inspir.

"Sufficient," said Inspir. Then a shadow crossed his face. "We must hurry."

He went to the controls and started looking about. He seemed lost for a moment.

"Don't you know how to use these things?" said Red Sally anxiously.

"I have never seen them before," said Inspir. "But I know how they should work."

He studied the controls some more. Then he pressed one button, and then another. They started to hear a hum.

Looking out the window, they saw the spacegate begin to charge up, as bolts of energy from the sun hurtled towards it.

"That's the easy part," said Inspir. "Now to make it overload."

He pressed a few more buttons, but frowned.

The spacegate seemed to be forming normally.

Then Inspir found a knob, turned it all the way to the right, and then repressed some of the buttons he pressed again.

The bolts of energy started to intensify. The spacegate started to crackle.

"That's done it," said Inspir. "Now we need to get away from here before-"

He stopped in midsentence. A few seconds later there was a scream in the corridor. Then another, and another.

Inspir turned to Lieutenant Taylor. "Recall your men to the ship, now!"

"But what about us?"

"You may still have a chance to save some of your men," said Inspir grimly.

Lieutenant Taylor radioed the evacuation order.

Inspir stared at the door as if death itself was about to walk through. They all felt a wave of fear engulf them.

Lieutenant Taylor started for the door, went through it even as Inspir cried, "No-"

and Taylor came sailing back into the room, crashing into the wall.

"No," said a hooded figure, appearing at the doorway. "The rats won't be leaving this ship." The figure took off its hood to reveal the reptilian features of Rugani.

"I think this time it will have to be a final end, for one of us," said Rugani, glaring at Inspir.

"I think so too," said Inspir, his face graver than any had ever seen it before.

Rugani took a step forward and-

the Silencer attacked, blaster blazing, Red Sally sent a stream of fire blazing at Rugani, the Clapper huddled in a corner; and Mongo tried to hide behind Lieutenant Taylor, who was looking dazed and struggling to sit up.

Rugani actually smiled as blaster shots impacted on his head and

chest; with a lazy wave, he sent the Silencer smashing against a wall, and his blaster flying through the air.

A wall of flames reached out and torched Rugani. But as quickly as they hit Rugani, they backdrafted and headed in a straight line for Red Sally. She was quickly engulfed by the flames, and screamed as she started to burn.

Inspir launched an energy bolt of some kind at Rugani. Rugani fired back, hitting Inspir with a bolt of his own.

And so the battle began. Rugani and Inspir circled each other slowly, each firing energy bolts or balls of light. Sometimes they would dodge out of the way, and miss; sometimes they would hit, causing expressions of pain, but they always noticed that Inspir seemed more pained by the hits than Rugani was.

The light from the window outside grew brighter as the spacegate started to overload.

They traded blasts back and forth. The others just tried to huddle out of the way. Mongo had taken off his jacket and was rapidly flapping on the flames engulfing Red Sally. Mongo was huddled in a corner; the Silencer was either knocked out or dead; and Lieutenant Taylor was just sitting in the corner, watching the spectacle unfold, afraid to move or do anything

The light from the spacegate was very bright now, and they started to feel small tremors. It could blow at any time, and it would undoubtedly take the platform with it.

"You are weak," said Rugani, as he sent another blast. "You could have been more powerful than me. Instead you wasted your effort trying to understand, trying to be artistic."

Inspir stumbled as he was hit by a blast. He sent an energy ball towards, Rugani, but Rugani deflected it. "You only learned one thing, maximum force using a frontal attack," said Inspir. "You never learned the true nature of power."

They both launched blasts again. This one made Inspir stagger. His own energy burst went past Rugani's shoulder.

Rugani laughed. "You cannot even aim properly! What else is there, besides a strong frontal attack?"

"Overconfidence is another one of your weaknesses," said Inspir. And then everything happened in slow motion. Rugani started to leer at this false bravado. Inspir started to sit up from where he had stumbled. At that moment, in slow motion, he seemed to simultaneously lock glances with Mongo and the Clapper. Then he launched another energy bolt, stronger than the others. It went in a wild trajectory past Rugani, a few feet past his left shoulder. Rugani ignored it as he prepared another bolt to finish Inspir off-

And Inspir's bolt turned in midpath, and hit Rugani square in the back.

Rugani looked down in disbelief, to see a large hole in his chest. He looked up at Inspir, who, gasping, said, "Everything for front defense, nothing for the rear."

Rugani fell to the ground.

The Clapper rushed over to Inspir. "Good work," he rasped.

Violent tremors shook the station.

"We must leave... now."

"They've probably already left," said Taylor, activating his comm.

There was a burst of static and his number two responded, "We're still here, Lieutenant."

Inspir walked unsteadily over to Red Sally. Her body was charred. Mongo wept silently.

"There is no time!" said Inspir sternly. "What of the Silencer?"

Taylor reached to feel for a pulse, but the Silencer came awake



at that moment, grabbing his hand before it got there. "I'm all right," he rasped, getting up, as he felt the bump on the back of his head.

They ran for the merchant ship.

The spacegate was glowing now as burst after burst of energy infused the actual structure to an overload point. Bolts of power burst out of the spacegate at random, one of them hitting the station just as they were nearing the docking port. They staggered against the wall, falling to the floor.

"Hurry!" Inspir cried.

They entered the merchant ship and cleared the moorings, as bolts of power flickered around them. The other Insectoid ships were also fleeing. How far did they have to go to reach a safe distance?

No one knew; but they found out, just over five minutes later, when the spacegate exploded.

An energy shock wave expanded, immediately breaking the spacegate to pieces, ripping into the orbital platform a second later, and expanding outwards. They watched the shock wave closing on the screen, closing, closing....

The ship was shaken violently as the wave hit. The lights went out and everyone except for Mongo thought they were going to die. But this wasn't the same wave that had torn the platform to pieces; every second the wave traveled and expanded, it dissipated in strength. By the time it caught up to the ship, some screens burned out and the ship suffered minor damage. But the shockwave caused no additional casualties on the ship.

"We did it!" said one of the soldiers.

"Mongo know," said Mongo softly. "Mongo always know. But do they listen to Mongo? No."

Taylor looked over to Inspir. "You don't look so well," he said.

"Don't be concerned about me," said Inspir. He took a deep breath. "When we dock with the Nautilus, I will stay behind."

"Why?"

"I... need to take this ship elsewhere," said Inspir.

And they couldn't get any more out of him.

Inspir managed to avoid collapsing until the others had debarked on the Nautilus.

Hollister watched the Insectoid merchant ship just sitting there, unmoving. "Do you think we should go back for him?"

"There's your answer," said his XO, pointing to the screen. The Insectoids were returning, to investigate and conduct a mopping up operation, no doubt. They were on the very edge of the nebula, and if they didn't leave now, their trail could easily be detected, if any ship were close enough to notice it.

"We have to get underway," said Hollister.

When they returned to August and met up with Croft, he immediately wanted to know what happened. He was ecstatic to hear that the spacegate had been destroyed, and, according to their partial count, close to 200 ships were now stranded on the other side of it.

"Do you know what this means?" said Croft. "We finally have a shot at winning this war!"

"Yes," said the Clapper dully.

It was then that Croft noticed that Red Sally was missing, and Inspir too. He asked about them.

"Inspir was badly wounded, we don't know what happened to him after he left us," said the Silencer. "And Sally was, well," he was at an unaccustomed loss of words.

"Burned to a crisp," said Mongo. "Tried to warn her I did. But does she listen to Mongo? No, never listen-"

Croft's hands found themselves around Mongo's throat, squeezing.

"No, no!" he cried.

"Stop! Clap!" said/clapped the Clapper. "He tried to put out flames! He tried to warn Red!" He clapped again.

Croft released him. Mongo felt his throat and whined, scampering into a corner.

"They saved us," said the Silencer.

"Who?" said Croft.

"Those two," said the Silencer. "Mongo predicted what would happen, and Inspir used the Clapper to redirect a bolt which killed the reptile."

Croft sat down to hear the whole story. When it was done, he looked at the Clapper with admiration. And he actually went over to apologize to Mongo.

"I'm sorry, Mongo, I didn't know the whole story."

"Mongo used to being persecuted," said Mongo.

"Well, if we ever get out of this alive, I'll have them make a statue to Mongo."

"Really?"

"Really," said Croft, not giving a second's thought to how unwise it would be to shine such a public spotlight on a Gamma Operative.

"And a park for the statue, named in Mongo's honor?"

"Well, Mongo, you only helped destroy the spacegate, you didn't win the entire war," said Croft.

"Oh." Mongo looked crestfallen.

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"Where are you going?" said Tsarina sharply.

"Down to Aridor," said Levi. "I have to check on some crops. The Queen knows."

Technically true, but he had been avoiding the Queen for days, ever since news of the destruction of the spacegate had put her in a near-continual rage.

Tsarina buzzed menacingly. Levi shrank back. He knew that she would like nothing better than to kill him, right then and there.

"You are a waste of resources, an abomination," Tsarina buzzed.

Levi said nothing, willing himself not to react.

Tsarina buzzed more loudly.

"If you delay me, the Queen will have to be informed," said Levi.

"I'm expected back in a few hours to prepare dinner."

Tsarina hissed, and settled for giving Levi a push in the shoulder. "Then go!"

Levi, rubbing his sore shoulder, left.

In the Queen's chamber, the Queen said, "Are you really convinced he is the source of the unauthorized data accesses?"

"Yes," said Tsarina.

"Even though you have consistently failed to link these accesses to Lev-I's terminals?"

"He is a sly one," said Tsarina.

"And now you claim he is going to meet his contact on August."

"We will soon hear," said Tsarina. "The listening device is secure."

The Insectoid shuttle touched down on August. As always, Levi's escorts waited on the landing pad while Levi went into the lodge. He went inside, down a stairwell, where he saw Croft.

Quickly putting a finger to his lips before Croft could say anything. He picked up a microdetected and scanned the room, and then himself. He raised an eyebrow when the needle jumped in the area of his

shoulder. Levi took off his jacket and put it on a chair. Then he picked up a pocket player and pressed the play button. Sounds of Levi humming to himself and walking around could be heard.

Levi motioned Croft to another room, and closed the door.

"It's getting too dangerous," said Levi. "Almost didn't get out this time. They getting even more suspicious."

"Then don't go back," said Croft. "You've done enough."

Levi shook his head. "I can't, I have go back."

"Why?"

"Have listening device in Queen's chamber."

Croft eyes widened at Levi's audacity. "Don't they sweep-

Levi waved a hand dismissively. "For conventional bugs, yes. Listen, Queen very angry about destruction of spacegate."

"That's nice."

"But frequent reference to backup plan."

"Backup plan?"

"Not know what it is. All know is that it soon be online."

"Backup plan," said Croft. "Could be reinforcements, or new technology, or something else."

"Precisely," said Levi. "Need know. So must go back. Here." He pressed a small box into Croft's hand.

"What is this?"

"Bioweapon."

"What?" said Croft, staring at the small box.

"Harmless to humans, not to worry."

"I thought you said you couldn't develop a bioweapon against the bugs, that their biology was too complex to devise something that would hurt them but not us," said Croft.

"All true," said Levi. "Must release anywhere on eastern edge of Aridor, near breeding farms."

"You're not going to tell me what this is, are you?" said Croft.

"Once you release, I must flee Insectoids within three or four months," said Levi. "If I stay any longer, they will surely discover."

"What exactly is this?"

"Also, if you plan to use blue light technology before that time, warn me and I will get out sooner."

Levi hurriedly looked at his watch. "Must go. Will try to find out backup plan and get back to you." He hurried up the stairs.

Croft watched him go. Then, because he was curious, he opened the small box.

He found several dozen tiny ball shaped objects inside. What in the world had Levi given him?

## Chapter 10: Whatever Happened to War Admiral Norman North?

From the log of War Admiral Norman North, 18 years 5 months and 5 days after the Invasion.

Those silvery eyes.

I never thought I would see them again.

It's been a long, hard struggle. Many of the finest officers and sailors I have served with are dead. A little less than two thirds of the ships and men we had started off with are dead.

When the Insectoids ambushed our fleet at Vitalics, I gathered up what ships that survived and headed out into deep space. We were to search for ancient Chent technology that would help us defeat the Insectoids. Hopefully, once we had gotten out of range of Alliance space, the Insectoids would consider it more trouble than it was worth to pursue us.

I was wrong on just about every count. We never did locate Chent technology, not anything useful in battle, anyway. We were harassed by hostile aliens. And the Insectoids pursued us relentlessly, slowly whittling down our numbers over the past 18 years, attacking with one overwhelming force after another. It's amazing that we survived at all. Most of the crews would credit my skill with their survival, but it was really a team effort.

But then at the end our luck seemed to run out. We were attacked in overwhelming force, several days ago. And then, out of the blue, comes another fleet, an allied fleet, the first fleet of humans we had seen since the disaster at Vitalics.

A human fleet! Here, years away from Alliance space, an entire fleet had been mustered, to get ready to fight for the day when we would retake Alliance space.

I know now that this fleet was under the command of one of my late friends, Steven Quick. Quick was the absolute dictator of the junior partner in our Alliance, the June Directorate. He was a veritable genius. When you would start a sentence, Quick could usually finish it, and respond, and anticipate your next sentence, and several more after that. Quick pretty much knew how conversations would end before they started. He was always thinking several steps ahead, and I never met anyone who could think more quickly, and more rationally than he.

Then he had to die in a freak accident several years before the invasion.

Or so we thought.

It turns out now that his death had been faked, because after years of mystery, years of struggle, War Admiral Norman North found himself in the same room with his old friend.

Some people were put off by the silvery eyes. It was a rare birth defect, and before Quick came to power, he used to wear colored contact lenses to put people at ease. Later, as he accumulated power, he stopped wearing the lenses; nor did he have the problem chemically corrected, leading some people to think that he wanted them to feel ill at ease.

"About time," said the War Admiral, as Quick entered their room while his deputy, Kalin, simultaneously left. They were safe and secure underground on a planetoid that served as their hidden base, deep in unknown space.

"My friend," said Quick, extending a hand to the War Admiral, who paused, staring at Quick, before extending his own. They shook as Quick sat down opposite him.

"You have a lot of questions," said Quick. The silvery eyes didn't stare at him.

"Someone doesn't need your level of intuition to know that," said the War Admiral.

"Let me start by saying I'm sorry," said Quick. "There are probably three questions burning foremost in your mind, what happened, why, why not, and who." He looked at North briefly to see if elaboration was required; it wasn't.

"As to your first question, what happened, well, I wasn't on the ship that exploded. It was arranged by my associates," said Quick. "They came to me and warned me that the Insectoids and others were planning to assassinate me. I was always nudging the Alliance to take a hawkish view of defense issues and they, the Insectoids and their associates, felt it would be easier to lure the Alliance into a trap if I were not around to counsel caution."

"My associated had heard about the attempt to blow up the ship I was going to be travelling on, and realized that while they could save

me from this attempt, they might not be able to save me from all subsequent attempts," said Quick. "So we arranged to let the Insectoids and their allies think that their attempt had been successful, that I had been killed."

The War Admiral moved to open his mouth.

"Why didn't I warn the Alliance of the trap to come? The Alliance already wasn't listening to me. With the election of the peace faction I had very little influence. If I had been around, the best I could have done would have been to keep my ships away from the massacre at Vitalics, which my successor did, and beef up general defenses, which still wouldn't have changed the outcome," said Quick. He wet his lips. "That was the hardest part, really. Abandoning my people. I wanted to stay, I wanted to fight. But they told me if I stayed that I would have ended up dead, and my people would be conquered anyway. At least, this way I could live to fight another day."

Quick paused, then looked directly at the War Admiral. "I wanted to warn you, to take you with me, but they thought it would be too suspicious, if two of the biggest enemies of the bugs disappeared. And they held me incommunicado until we got here, so I didn't exactly have much choice."

"I have answered the question 'what happened', and now I will answer why. To gather our resources. As you may already have figured out, the bumbling incompetence of our military industrial complex after my death was in appearance only. In reality we were cranking out as many ships as possible without attracting attention. Ships that were recalled for "design flaws" were also sent here, as well as ships prematurely retired. Sailors came with them. Remember the Tantrus disaster, where a large number of our ships apparently blew up at our largest military base?"

"I figured that one out myself," said the War Admiral.

"I figured you would," said Quick, his eyes gleaming. "So we were building up our forces for our return. But forces weren't enough. We have a single shipyard set up here, but that's not enough to create enough ships to give us numerical superiority. We've sent out emissaries far and wide to help us develop new weapons that can help us defeat the bugs."

The War Admiral opened his mouth.

"Yes. We were doing the exact same thing you were. The only difference is that they didn't know we existed, so we weren't being watched. And now we've done it," said Quick. "We've developed a new technology which can help us defeat the bugs. I can give you all the details later, but it's a new kind of beam weapon that can slice through their shields like they don't exist."

Quick took a breath. "Now I've answered 'why', we turn to the emotionally difficult question of 'why not'. Why didn't we intervene when you were slowly being killed, year after year after bloody year? It's a question heavy on your mind, and it's weighed heavily on me too."

"The answer is that we weren't permitted to. If we had intervened, the bugs and their allies would have found out. They would've searched for us and found us before we were ready. As it is they are on the brink of finding us, because of the help we've provided."

Quick looked away. "For years I lobbied them to help. I even threatened to break with them if they didn't do something to help you. That's when they started sending you those supply ships. Finally, at the end, I tipped the balance and finally persuaded them to send the fleet to your aid. But if we hadn't finished developing the beam weapon, I don't think even I could have convinced them."

Quick looked into his eyes. "I'm sorry, Norm, sorry for all the

years of bloodshed. But as long as they were looking for you, they weren't looking for us. We always anticipated that some of the Directorate home fleet might survive and make their way to us, and we hoped that you would survive and link up with them. But I was personally pained every time I read a battle report. If there had been any other way, if I had had control-" Quick rapidly clenched and unclenched his hands, uncharacteristically showing emotion.

Quick took a deep breath, and calm was restored. "Now for your last question, 'who'. You want to know who our allies are. My answer is, I can't tell you," said Quick. "THEY won't let me. THEY feel it's enough just allowing you to come here, and to find out what I've told you. In truth, THEY finally realized that they need you; your crews have had more battle experience over the past few years than any of ours have had in the last 20. They want to spread your crews out over the new fleet to give them the benefit of your battle experience."

Quick paused. "They're aliens, Norm. They're on their side for their own reasons, but they're mostly good ones. It seems there are a bunch of different older races out there, each with their own philosophies. One such race, the Screen, is a race of reptiles that are helping the Insectoids. They believe in might through strength. We've got a few of the older races on our side, but they don't want the Screen to know they're involved. One of our allies was almost wiped out by the allies of the Screen a few generations ago and if the Screen knows they're involved, they'll come back to finish the job. Another one of our allies isn't afraid of the Screen, but his people are, so he has to keep a low profile."

Quick paused, then looked up, as if someone had interrupted him. "If I can't tell him who you are, then you shouldn't mind my telling him at least that much." Quick paused, as if he were listening to a voice that the War Admiral couldn't hear. "Sorry you didn't like what I had to say. I often don't like what YOU have to say."

Quick turned back to the War Admiral. "And that's about it."

The War Admiral sat quietly. He drummed his fingers on the desk, but there was a lot more than that going on inside.

Quick sat silently as well, as if in waiting.

Finally, the War Admiral finished wrestling with this thoughts. He spoke. "Much of what you've already said... has occurred to me. But it doesn't make any of it any easier. Not the abandoning of our fleet. And certainly not the abandonment of the Alliance. Do you know how many millions, how many billions, have suffered, died, and been enslaved over the past two decades?"

Quick hung his head. "It wouldn't have been the way I would have planned it. They said that our societies had rotted to the core; that our cultures had grown too effete to defend themselves. They said that if they had gotten us through this crisis, we would've been conquered by something else sooner or later."

The War Admiral's eyes flared. "I agree that things were going downhill. The society that once supported the military merely tolerated it; and then gradually even tolerating us became an inconvenience. News of battles were 'unsettling' only if they had the potential to interfere with their pleasure. But was the enslavement of our culture the answer to this malaise? To me, that's a rotten solution."

"I didn't have control," said Quick. "Just think. What would have happened if I had stayed around and warned President Marshall that Mitterand's armistice was all a trap. Do you think he would've listened?"

The War Admiral mumbled something.

"You know he wouldn't have. He and I never saw eye to eye on anything."

"You could have warned me," said the War Admiral.

"And what would you have done? Staged a coup?" said Quick.

"I don't know," said North. "In retrospect, knowing what I know now, surely."

"But then you only knew what you knew then. Would you have staged a coup merely on my say-so?" Quick paused. "This has been a difficult time for both of us, especially for you. The point is that I didn't have unlimited control; I wasn't in charge of the Alliance, and neither were you. Neither of us had the resources of my allies. I did the best I could... and so did you."

The War Admiral looked up, and he understood the point that Quick was making. Only half his rage was directed at his old friend.

Finally, taking a deep breath, the War Admiral said, "So what now?"

"We need a leader for our combined fleet," said Quick. "Someone who's survived constant battle against the bugs and won against overwhelming odds again and again. Do you know anyone who meets those qualifications?"

"...so it won't take 20 years to get back to Alliance space, more like a few weeks," said Quick, indicating a diagram. "You'll use our recently constructed particle cannon to project you back to Alliance space."

They were at a combined meeting of the most senior officers of North's and Quick's fleet. The secret of Quick's existence was still a secret, even from most of his own people.

"We've mounted the new beam weapon on nearly three quarters of the fleet," said Quick. "When we've finished refurbishing the rest, we'll shoot you back into the thick of things. "

"What about my ships?" said the War Admiral.

Quick tried to look diplomatic. "Many of your ships have sustained serious damage, War Admiral. And we're going to need to disperse the rest of your crews among the fleet to give them the benefit of your experience. Every surviving captain will have his or her own ship to command. All your remaining Commanders and half commanders will be field promoted and captain some of our newest light cruisers and destroyers. We'll make similar use of your other officers."

"What about the Glory?" said the War Admiral.

"The Glory has sustained serious damage," said Quick. "However, its value as a command carrier and battleship can't be lightly discredited. I've had my engineers do a preliminary look, and I think we can do enough repair work on the Glory, the Blue Luna, and a handful of fast attack destroyers and perhaps one of the cruisers. We'll also be needing all your Wildcats and Defenders, of course. But repairs must be completed in the next five days. Whatever's not ready in five days stays behind."

After the meeting, Quick indicated he wanted a private session with the War Admiral. In a side room he said, "Norm, my people have looked over your ship."

The War Admiral nodded.

"It would be a kindness to bury the Glory now. We could easily accommodate your remaining fighters on the other ships."

The War Admiral shook his head.

"I understand your feeling, but my people tell me that repairs will be patchy at best. Especially your power system. I'm told that without a thorough overhaul it could give under the slightest strain."

The War Admiral shook his head again.

"I understand the need to have the ship as a symbol of your years of resistance," said Quick. "And I won't deny that your appearance, and your ship, has had a dynamite effect on morale. You're a living legend."

But I say, take the ship, but assume command from one of our sturdier ships, like, say, the Majestic, or the Sierra Oak."

The War Admiral shook his head again.

"Norm, I'm warning you, this is not a good decision. You're letting emotion cloud your judgment," said Quick blandly.

"It may be a bad decision," said the War Admiral. "But it is my decision."

"So everyone thinks we're heroes," said Battle Major Iday Took, commander of the Glory's starfighters, as he ate in the officer's mess. "Evidently everyone has been tapping into the intel on us, and they think we're incredible, for having survived for so long."

"I guess so," said his friend, Half Commander Kato Obe. A third pilot, Ken Pilot 04, ate silently next to him.

"And their local media--did you know they have their own press?"

"So you tell me," said Obe.

"Their local media wanted to interview me," said Took.

"It must have been thrilling," said Obe.

"They wanted to ask me about the War Admiral," said Took. "Oh, that was before they learned who I was. Then they wanted to ask questions about me, too, naturally."

"Naturally," Obe frowned.

"Buddy, is something bothering you?"

"Gee, I don't know," said Obe. "We've been wandering around for almost 20 years getting pecked to death while our buddies here have had it nice and warm and safe, sitting back and reading about how we were slowly dying off."

"The War Admiral said it was all part of the plan."

"All part of whose plan?" said Obe. "The aliens behind the curtain who are manipulating us? They seem to show more regard for a head of cattle than they do for our lives."

"Listen," said Took, licking his lips. "None of this has been what I would exactly call ideal. But last week none of us thought we were going to live to see this week, if you know what I mean. The way I see it, we're getting an unexpected shot at kicking out the bugs and avenging all our dead buddies. This isn't something we thought would be possible last week."

"That's another thing that's worrying me," said Obe. "Even with these beam weapons, how well are we going to do when we're outnumbered two or three or four to one? And what happens if or when the bugs adapt to our new weapon?"

"I don't care, Obe," said Took. "Listen, we're going home! It's been 20 years. Don't you miss home? Did you ever think we'd see it again?"

"I do miss home," Obe nodded. "I just hope I live to see it."

Took was spared the need to respond when his wrist comm beeped. It was Half Commander Kearse. The War Admiral wanted to see him immediately, at a very senior meeting.

"We're about to go into battle," said the War Admiral, staring around the room at his senior offices. "But before we do, we have a vital issue to deal with. As you may have heard, most of our ships are too badly damaged to be sent into combat. Except for the Glory, the Blue Luna, and two other ships, the rest are going to be decommissioned."

"What's going to happen to us, War Admiral?" asked one Captain.

"Admiral Dulin is going to be given command of our largest carrier group," said the War Admiral. "Admiral Harkness will be given command of a battleship group."

"I'm not giving up the Blue," said Harkness, referring to his



beaten up pocket battleship.

"No one is asking you to," the War Admiral smiled, remembering a similar argument he had had with Quick about the Glory. "Admiral Dajya will be given command of a battlecruiser group."

"And what about the captains and crews of all those decommissioned ships?" a Captain asked.

"All captains of decommissioned ships will be given commands in the new fleet," said the War Admiral. "In fact, all commanders and half commanders will also be given field promotions, and be given commands of their own in the new fleet as well. Only the Glory's command structure will be largely unchanged, with Captain Wren and Half Commander Kearse, now Full Commander Kearse, running the show. Many of our lieutenants and ensigns will be field promoted to half commanders and lieutenants and sent to other ships, as will their crews."

"Begging your pardon, Captain, but how do the other crews feel about this?" asked a captain.

"They're fine with it," said the War Admiral. "While they've been building ships over the past few years, they haven't been building new crews, so they're already short handed. As for the officers that will be displaced, we've all agreed that it makes sense. We've seen more battle action in the past 20 years than many of them have seen in past 100. They're relying on us for our expertise in dealing with the Insectoids. You'll be receiving your assignments shortly. Are there any questions?"

There wasn't, but there was a lot of murmuring. As Took got up to leave, the War Admiral wagged a finger at him. He wanted to see him in private.

When they were in the War Admiral's office, he said, "I heard that interview they did with you, Iday."

Was the War Admiral upset with him? "Sir, I was just--"

"They seemed favorably impressed with you," said the War Admiral, sitting down behind his desk. He grinned. "Of course, they don't know you yet as we do."

"What are you getting at, sir?"

"We need a starfighter commander," said the War Admiral.

"Sir, are you removing me as starfighter commander of the Glory?" Took asked.

"Not exactly," said the War Admiral. "We need a starfighter commander for the entire fleet. You have heard of that practice, haven't you?"

It was then that Took understood the enormity of what the War Admiral was saying.

"We only have a hundred Wildcats and miscellaneous fighters left," said the War Admiral. "With over 500 additional fighters in the fleet, it would be a crime not to give the rest the benefit of your experience."

"Sir, there must be spaceforce colonels out there who outrank me," said Took.

"There are," said the War Admiral. "That's why we'll have to make some adjustments to your rank, General Took."

"General? Me? Sir, do you know how ridiculous that sounds?"

"I know Iday, but with luck, we can keep the others from finding out," said the War Admiral. "You have the most experience. I need someone running the starfighters competently so I can concentrate on the capital ships."

"We tried something like this once or twice before," said Took.

"And we're going to do it again," said the War Admiral. "I know you want to be in a cockpit. But this is war, and we don't all have the luxury of doing what we want to do. Tell you what; if we survive, when the war is over, I'll bust you back down to Major and send you back to

your cockpit. How does that sound?"

"It sounds like I have no choice."

"I'm giving a briefing to the senior naval officers of the entire combined fleet in an hour in landing bay one," said the War Admiral. "Simultaneously, your new pilots are going to be gathering in landing bay two. Better start thinking of what you're going to say, General."

Took turned to go.

"Oh, almost forgot. Catch!"

Took caught two shiny objects. General's stars.

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Took stood on the wing of a Wildcat as he watched the assembled pilots. He had checked the stats and had already started to configure a table of organization. He felt very uncomfortable in his general's stars, as if he were an imposter and at any moment someone could call him out.

The pilots, most of them unfamiliar, filed in.

"It looks like they're expecting to see a general, Obe," Croft whispered to his friend, who stood nearby for moral support.

And then Obe said something that put the entire galaxy in perspective. "Relax, Iday. If you mess this up, what's the worst that can happen? You get demoted down back to captain? Just think of it as one of your holobroadcasts, and have some fun."

And then Took was his old self, stars or no.

"Greetings!" said Took, speaking into a tiny electrobroadcaster. "I'm Iday Took, and I'll be your host for our rampage through bug infested Alliance space. Now, before we begin, I want everyone to introduce themselves to whoever is standing on their right. Come on, don't be shy...."

After the meeting, Obe found Took studying details on his pad.

"That went well," said Obe.

"Really?" said Took.

"Well, I thought trying to come up with a battlegroup theme song on the spot was a little over the top, but that's just you," said Obe.

"Oh," said Took.

"What're you doing?"

"Studying our assets. We have about 100 Wildcats left, and a handful of Defenders and other ships. Everyone else, however, is flying Trobadores."

"Trobadores," said Obe. "Those are standard Directorate fighters. Those aren't bad."

"But they aren't Wildcats, buddy."

"They'll do," said Obe.

"So I figure we'll have 51 squadrons on 8 carriers," said Took.

"51?" said Obe. "I thought we had exactly 600 fighters. Where did the extra 12 fighters come from?"

"It's actually 601," said Took. "I'm designating the Ken Pilot as a squadron all by himself."

"Oh. Makes sense," said Obe.

The ships, nearly 200 in all, lined up in a formation in front of the particle cannon. It was a massive formation, the largest of any Alliance formation since their loss at Vitalics. Before they launched, North took one last holomessage from Quick, who was staying behind on the planet.

"Remember, you have to strike them hard and quickly. Eventually, they will figure out a way to negate your new weapon; you have to use that time to your maximum advantage," said Quick.

"Understood," said the War Admiral.

"My, ah, intermediaries have informed me that a massive revolt is being planned on a number of occupied planets. The joint attack should help to overwhelm their defenses."

"What's life back there like?" said the War Admiral.

"Not good," said Quick. "Most of the population has been enslaved. I put into place the infrastructure for a vibrant resistance movement on Directorate planets, but your worlds were much less prepared. Nonetheless there is a growing resistance movement on your planets. You might even recognize the image of one of the senior resistance leaders on August." He transmitted a still holo.

"Clifford Croft!" said the War Admiral, recognizing the image immediately. "I should have known. If anyone would survive, he would."

"He help put their spacegate out of business, and he's doing a lot more for us," said Quick. "When you get to August, you might give him my regards."

"I will," said the War Admiral."

"Good luck," said Quick. His silvery eyes gazed into the War Admiral's for a moment, and then the communications channel closed.

The War Admiral returned to the bridge to take his chair next to the Captain.

"20... 19... 18..." the sensor officer counted down.

"You almost missed the fun," said Captain Stacy Wren.

"15... 14...."

"I've never been shot through a particle cannon before," said the War Admiral.

"12... 11... 10..."

"First time for everything," said Wren. "War Admiral?"

"Yes?"

"7... 6... 5..."

"I'm getting tired of war. Let's win this one."

"Agreed."

"2... 1.... now!"

The particle projector opened, and the crew were pushed back into their chair as the ship accelerated wildly. On their sensors they could see star systems passing by in seconds as they traveled faster than they ever had before.

And yet the ships stayed tightly in their precise launch formation.

As the dozens of lightyears that formerly took days and weeks to traverse peeled away in mere minutes and hours, Wren, still pressed to her chair said, "This is the only way to travel!"

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The Insectoid fleet orbiting the planet June, the former capital of the June Directorate, was on official standby. Something big had happened, but no one knew what. For several months deliveries to and from the homeworld had simply stopped; but no one in the high command could provide any explanation.

Admiral Kyss had her own opinion, but kept it to herself. Her battlefleet consisted of 85 top of the line ships, one of the largest groupings in the former Alliance.

Which is precisely why War Admiral Norman North's fleet, still in formation after travelling thousands of lightyears, dropped into normal velocities right in front of this fleet. It was as if they had appeared out of nowhere.

The Insectoids were so unused to opposition that it took several seconds to identify the ships as hostiles, and even then they spent several seconds wondering if what their sensors were telling them was a

mistake. After all, how could the humans possibly be here? And where had they gotten so many ships?

And then the War Admiral's fleet started ripping into the surprised Insectoid ships with their new beam weapons, and they realized this was for real. They were under attack.

Admiral Kyss had all ships raised their shields, but that didn't effect the results of the battle in the slightest.

Admiral Kyss felt the ship rock with an internal hit. "What's happening?" she buzzed. "I told you to raise the shields!"

"We did!" a senior officer buzzed. "They're cutting through out shields like they're not even there.

It took a few more precious moments for Admiral Kyss to fully realize what was happening. Her ships were fighting back now, but their blasts were hitting enemy forcescreens. They wouldn't last long enough to batter down the enemy forcescreens if their own shields weren't working!

Admiral Kyss tried to raise the nearest fleet to warn them. But all long ranged communications were jammed.

When half her fleet was destroyed Admiral Kyss gave the order to flee. The humans, anticipating this move, had left ships guarding the perimeter of the battle plane, and now those swoped in, hunting each down with a vengeance.

When all was done, all of Admiral Kyss's ships had been destroyed, and only two Alliance ships had even been damaged.

"A resounding victory!" said the War Admiral over interfleet, as they watched the scattered debris of what had once been the Insectoid fleet. The bridge crew cheered in response, as they did all over the fleet.

## Chapter 10 Levi's Last Stand

Several months passed. The resistance continued to grow in strength. But their secret weapon, the blue light device, they still kept hidden, preferring to build more and more units for the day when they decided to make an overwhelming attack. But that day was coming soon.

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The eastern coast of Aridor was devastated. The Insectoids had clearcutted the land and planted hundreds of hatcheries, as well as grove after grove of grubfruit to feed them. Grubfruit was vital to their existence; it was virtually the only food the young Insectoids could digest, in the vital days before they reached maturity; and even fully grown Insectoids had difficulty adapting to other foods.

The eastern quarter of Aridor was now filled with these hatcheries and grubfruit plantations. New Insectoids slithered out of their hatcheries daily, crawling the short distance to the grubfruit trees, which were always planted nearby.

But something different was starting to happen. Tiny white moths were starting to appear, and they were eating the grubfruit too. They multiplied rapidly; these moths could mate and reproduce every ten days. For now they were few in number, and not yet noticed by the Insectoids, but their numbers were increasing rapidly....

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"We need more support!" came the Queen's voice.

"Calm yourself," came a second voice.

Levi, listening in his earpiece, assumed it was Baracki. He had

bugged the Queen's chambers some time ago, using an ingenious method unlikely to attract attention, an organic listening device planted in some of the food he deposited there. While a risky maneuver, it was one of his prime sources of intelligence. He was listening

"Where did all those ships come from?" came the Queen's voice. "That irritating human never had so many ships!" Levi didn't know it, but the Queen was studying a map of formerly Alliance space. Most of the area was red, but an angry blue splotch was growing in the middle of it.

"We don't know either," said Baracki slowly. "It seems somehow that the humans have been amassing new forces, somewhere outside in the fringe."

"This is getting out of control!" said the Queen.

"Calm yourself!" said Baracki, this time more sternly. "You still have more than enough ships to defeat them."

"How? They have some kind of new weapon."

"What do we know about it?"

"Nothing! So far no one has survived to report any details."

"Then that must change," said Baracki. "Send another fleet to engage them, but hold two or three ships back to conduct scans."

"Another fleet? They will be destroyed like the others!"

"Yes, but we will gather the necessary information," said Baracki. "We also need to discover how the humans have been obtaining information about your fleet movements."

"Tsarina is looking into it. She thinks she is close to the answer. We think the humans are altering some of our transmissions to send a message of their own."

"What is the nature and origin of these messages?"

"We don't yet know," said the Queen. "Tsarina is investigating, as I've said. We are also unsure if the messages are being altered here or on one of our orbital relay satellites."

"What about the human, the cook?"

"I don't see that it can be him," said the Queen. "We have him under constant surveillance."

Baracki glared at the Queen. "Then you may have someone else on board, a spy or saboteur."

"We will get to the bottom of the matter quickly," said the Queen.

Levi put down the earpiece and hid it, and then pressed the button that allowed the live feed from the holocameras monitoring him to resume, taking the place of the doctored feed he used in such circumstances. He didn't have much time.

There were now so many ways in which he could be discovered. The blue light technology could fall into the hands of the Insectoids, and they knew he had performed light experiments. Additionally, the Insectoids would soon discover the butterfly infestation on Aridor and trace them back to him. They knew he had done experiments with butterflies, ostensibly for culinary purposes, but they would remember nonetheless.

And then there was Baracki. Could he read minds? Levi wasn't sure. He had tried to stay as far as possible from Baracki and hope for the best.

Either way, his position was very tenuous. The safest thing to do would be to leave.

But he still hadn't found out the details of the backup plan. From what he had heard in past conversations, it seemed to be almost ready.

Maybe he had done enough; he had already provided the resistance with enough information to win this war, and now the fleet was back.

The downfall of most spies was sticking around too long.

What to do? Levi agonized for a moment. He stared at a photo of Mindy, who was safely hidden on Aridor. He knew what she would want him to do. But there were more lives at stake.

He had to get out of here soon, that was for sure.

Levi decided to take a risk. The answers to the questions he sought should be available on the Queen's secure top-level terminal in the throne room. All he had to do was to go in and try to tap into the system from there. Regardless of whether he got the information or not, he would immediately flee and leave the ship. Levi made plans to do it the following night.

"What?" said Croft. He was standing in a basement in western Concord, and he couldn't believe his ears.

"Some of our people transporting components got grabbed," said Yaney.

"Components," said Croft. "Hmm, by components, you don't mean 'components for our top-secret blue light technology', do you?"

"Yes," said Yaney.

"So they know about it, and if they haven't figured it out already they soon will, which means they will start working on countermeasures, which means that we have to move up the attack."

"To when?"

"To yesterday," Croft snarled. "Get me the comm unit. I have to reach General Arkik immediately, as well as our off-planet contacts."

As Yaney ran out of his presence, another thought hit Croft like a lightning bolt.

Levi.

Once the Insectoids figured out what they had, they would be coming after Levi.

He must get a message to Levi. And then Croft checked the day on his wrist chrono, and realized that Levi wouldn't be expecting the next static burst message for another three days. There was no time!

Yaney came back with the communications equipment.

"Drop that and get me the Silencer, the Clapper, and Mongo, on the double," said Croft.

Yaney dropped the equipment and started to run.

"No, cancel that," said Croft. There was no way he could take them into an Insectoid stronghold. "Just get me my suit."

Croft closed the comm and started to struggle into his Insectoid costume. It was all set. The attack would begin at dawn tomorrow. He had that much time to steal a shuttle from a nearby base and fly to the flagship. He just hoped he would be in time.

"What are you doing, Clifford?" said the image of a towel.

"I thought we were beyond the hiding stage, Mr. Towel," said Croft, rapidly suiting up.

"You're in a public area," said the voice of the Meddler Capybara. "Anyone could walk in at any time. Besides, I'm not on-site right now."

"Just how far can you project?" said Croft.

"You're going aboard the flagship, aren't you?"

"You have big ears," said Croft, activating the suit's internal systems.

"This will be very dangerous," said the Meddler Capybara.

"Danger is my middle name," said Croft, grabbing his helmet and walked to the door.

"You are needed to lead the resistance. You are taking too big of a risk," said the Meddler.

Croft turned and abruptly faced the shimmering towel. "Listen

here, Mr. Towel, Levi's done more to fight the bugs than anyone else. He's given us the information, he's given us the technology, and we owe him. I owe him. Maybe for you everything is a cost/benefit analysis, and friendship and debt doesn't enter the equation, but it does for me."

And he stomped off without waiting for a reply.

That night Levi walked into the outer chamber. It was empty He looked calm but his heart was racing. If he ran into an Insectoid, he could offer the excuse that he was going into the Queen's chamber to remove food trays; but if they caught him at the Queen's personal terminal, there would be no excuse.

Levi walked into the inner chamber, the Queen's throne room. As he expected, it was empty. He immediately ran over to her terminal, and started tapping. He had never broken her encryption code before, but if it was anything like the others, it shouldn't take him long.

As he tapped keys he periodically looked at the door. All was quiet.

Levi worked feverishly for several minutes, before he finally broke the code. Instead of trying to do a word search for backup plan, for that's surely not what it would be called, he simply pulled up a chronological list of the Queen's most recent files.

He found it quickly, it was mentioned all over the place. And then Levi, working out the translation in his mind, whistled to himself.

This was some backup plan.

The Insectoids were building another spacegate. Had been building it, in fact, for many years. Evidently they hadn't felt comfortable relying on one spacegate, or else it wasn't capable of handling the volume of traffic they wished, because they definitely were building another, and it looked like it was just about complete.

With another spacegate, they could bring in tremendous reinforcements. The new spacegate had to be destroyed before it became operational.

But where was it located?

Levi tapped feverishly, looking from one file to another. Why didn't they mention anywhere-

Levi heard the door to the outer chamber opening. Suddenly, there in front of him he saw it. The location! There, there it was! Levi flicked off the terminal and ran over to a long table where trays of food lay. He was just reaching for one when Tsarina stepped in, flanked by two of her guards.

Levi looked up. Now he knew where the Spacegate was. All he had to do was live long enough to tell someone.

"Human," said Tsarina. "I have learned something about perception. Would you like to hear it?"

Levi, holding the tray, froze and said nothing.

"You can glance at something, and see the same thing, over and over, no matter how many times you look at it," said Tsarina. "And yet, when you look very closely at it, you discover some things, things you never would have learned when you glanced at it, no matter how many times you looked. And these things one discover usually lead to other things, so in the end, the object you're looking at looks completely different from what you first thought it was, and you wonder how you could ever have missed what it really looked like."

"That's really interesting," said Levi, picking up another tray and moving to leave the room. "But I have to return to-"

"Let me give you an example of what I mean," said Tsarina, blocking his way. "We recently came across some humans smuggling some devices with blue bulbs in them. At first, we didn't know what they

were; but when we activated these bulbs, our troopers became transfixed. They were obviously weapons."

"I had to think about this for some time," said Tsarina. "It took me several full hours before I recall that you had experimented with light as well, to provide pleasing light shows."

"So?" said Levi, trying to bluff it out. "I don't make weapons."

"And if you had, how could you have transmitted this information to the humans?" said Tsarina. "After all, we have you under constant surveillance in your quarters, and you know it. But, operating on the assumption that you had, I took a closer look at the surveillance logs, running them through comparative analysis. And did you know what I found?"

"18% of the time your image was performing the exact same motions, over and over, in 10, 20, or 30 minute loops. Exactly the same! What are the odds of that?"

Levi said nothing.

"It was then I took an even closer look at your terminal, and discovered what you have been doing, all these months, all these years." Even Tsarina's translated voice ran cold. "Do you know the kind of torture and execution you're earned?"

Levi turned his back to Tsarina and put his hands in his pockets.

"Your hands, where I can see them! Now!" Tsarina rasped.

Levi turned around, revealing a fine white powder in his hands.

"What is... ah..." said Tsarina, feeling her senses buffeted by a very, very powerful odor.

Levi let the powder slip from his fingers onto the ground, and Tsarina and her guards gazed down at the ground, captivated by the very pungent odor. Transfixed by the powder, Levi slowly edged his way to the door. He made his way to the outer chamber-

-where he ran right into Queen Zsst, flanked by her personal bodyguards.

"Lev-I, you have betrayed me, Lev-I," said the Queen, almost sadly.

Levi was held securely by several guards.

"I gave you a good life, better than any of your kind had a right to expect," said the Queen.

Levi stood silent. The powerful scent had been swept away, and a glowering Tsarina stood guard with the rest.

"Why?"

Levi was silent.

"Why!" the Queen persisted.

"Are you asking for an explanation?" said Levi slowly.

"Yes," said the Queen.

"You offered me the life of a well-pampered slave, and said I had no right to expect any better," said Levi slowly. "But the way I see it, I did have the right to expect better. The life of a free man." He took a deep breath. Now he could speak freely. "You can kill me, Queen, but I have already killed your occupation."

"Do you think this pitiful blue light will bring us to our knees?"

"No," said Levi. "It was always my expectation that you would devise a countermeasure at some point. That's not what I'm referring to."

There was silence for a moment.

"Well?" demanded the Queen.

"You'll see," said Levi.

"Let me brainscan it, Queen," said Tsarina. "Brainscan, then the slowest, most agonizing torture I can devise."

"Yes," said the Queen. "Yes, send it-"



Suddenly they heard loud buzzings from the Queen's outer chamber.

"What is it?" said the Queen, pressing a comm to her outer office.

"There is an unauthorized being here who says it has information concerning the humans pending attack. But it has no valid identification. It claims to be a special undercover--"

"Send it in," the Queen snarled.

An Insectoid walked in the chamber.

"Who are you, and why have you failed to go through proper channels?" said the Queen, quite prepared to disembowel the trooper if its information wasn't as vital as it claimed it was.

"Bzzz. bzzz bzzz..." said the creature softly and indistinctly.

"What?" said the Queen. "Speak up!"

Instead, the trooper came closer, making the same, almost random, bzzzing sound.

"Can't you communicate properly?" glared the Queen, on the verge of ordering this trooper to be taken away for interrogation.

The trooper leapt forward, and aimed a blaster at the Queen's head. "You bet, Queen," came a muffled but very human voice from inside. "No one move or you'll be looking for a new Queen!"

The Insectoids all froze. The safety of their Queen was their prime directive.

While holding the blaster at the Queen's head one hand, the other hand reached up and appeared to pull the creature's own head off. Revealing the very human features of Clifford Croft.

The Queen recognized him immediately. "You!" she cried.

"I'm glad we're on a first name basis," said Croft dryly. "Now, if you'll be so kind as to have your bugs release Levi, we can keep this amicable and be on our way."

"Fool," said the Queen. "Do you really think you can get out of here alive?"

"I've done it before," said Croft lightly. He looked around the room, and despite the tenseness of the situation, said, "You know, I really like what you've done with the place. Did you get a decorator who specializes in Early Arachnid, or did you just do it yourself?"

The Queen didn't respond, but tried to arch her head out of the way.

"Don't move!" Croft shouted.

"Do you know whom you're addressing!" said the Queen, barely containing her rage.

"The Queen," said Croft. "And if the Queen doesn't want a decorative hole burned through her ugly head, she'll order Levi released, NOW."

"Why certainly," said the Queen sarcastically. She turned to her troopers. "Guards--" And then she let forth a piercing scream, one that caused everyone, humans and Insectoid troopers alike, to grab their ears. Without thinking Croft dropped his gun, and before he could scoop it up again, another Insectoid grabbed it and pushed him against a wall.

"Now we will have two brainscans," said the Queen. "I'm sure there's a wealth of information you can tell us about your contacts and operations, as well as your plans for attack. We will use that information to destroy your pitiful resistance!"

Croft gulped but said nothing.

"But don't worry, you will live long enough to see it. I will give you to Tsarina's tender care. She will make sure you stay alive, more or less," said the Queen. "What's wrong, human? Are you expecting someone to come and save you?"

"He isn't, but you are going to (tweatle tweatle) release him," came a new voice.

The Insectoids looked around. Where had that voice come from?

The door to the Queen's inner chamber opened. But there was no one there, aside from a solitary guard who was nowhere near the entryway. And then the entryway closed.

Suddenly the air in front of the door shimmered and who should appear but-

-the solid blue form of the Meddler Capybara. The lights from the Queen's podium twinkled off his black bow tie.

"You!" said the Queen. "A coward from a race of cowards! Your race does not interfere!"

"Obviously, you haven't been reading the news lately," said the Meddler Capybara. "Or were you unaware of our assistance to the human fleet in your region of space?"

"We learned of your subterfuge, regrettably after the bulk of our ships had arrived," said the Queen. "There was no human fleet there, and there never was. And that's the crux of the issue. You never get involved, not in a real, tangible sense. That's according to your own rules, is it not?"

"It is," said the Meddler.

"What will your people do to you when they learn that you have interfered here? What incarceration or punishment will they inflict?" said the Queen. "You see, I do know something about your race."

"Not enough, apparently," said the Meddler. "I will not allow you to brainscan these two. I will not allow you to hold them captive."

"You will not allow me!" the Queen was incredulous.

"I'm giving you one last chance to release them. Cut your losses, and live a little longer," advised the Meddler.

"Or what?" said the Queen.

"You claim to know my people," said the Meddler, changing the subject. "If so, have you ever seen or heard of a blue version of one of us before?"

"No," said the Queen.

"Do you have any idea why I'm blue?" said the Meddler.

"No," said the Queen. "I presume it's the result of a local mutation."

"I turned myself blue in protest against my people's policies," said the Meddler. He spoke in a soft voice. "You speak of my people and their rules. But what you don't realize is that I'm a renegade; I don't feel at all bound by them."

The significance of what the Meddler was saying quickly sunk in. The Queen suddenly realized that she was standing next to an extremely powerful being that was not held in shackles by self-imposed rules, a being that could kill her in the blink of an eye. The Queen gasped and involuntarily recoiled. She started to bark a command when-

All of the Insectoids in the room but the Queen were flung against the wall. They hit with a splat, and green fluid pasted the walls behind them. It seemed like a giant wave had pushed them, and yet Levi, and Croft, standing between to guards that were pushed back, were untouched.

"We're leaving," said the Meddler. He turned to the Queen, who was still staring, speechless. "You need a time out," said the Meddler, and the Queen slumped in her chair.

"You should have killed her," said Croft viciously. He picked up his helmet and prepared to go.

Suddenly, they heard the sound of alarms. The guard in the outer chamber, or someone else monitoring the Queen must have sounded the alarm.

"There wasn't a need to," said the Capybara. "Now, grab my tail and let's go."

"What?"

"Grab my tail!" said the Capybara, indicating his short stubby tail. "But gently, please."

Levi and Croft grabbed the Capybara's tail, and they started walking to the door.

"This is too slow-" Croft started to say.

"Quiet!" the Meddler said. They walked into the outer chamber. The guard there pointed its gun in their general direction, but seemed to be looking past them. The guard suddenly went splat! against a wall.

They exited into the corridor. The sound of alarms were louder here. A squad of Insectoids headed straight towards them. The Meddler pressed against the wall.

The guards ran right past them, as if not seeing them, into the Queen's chamber.

"What-"

"Quiet!" hissed the Meddler.

Croft suddenly realized that they were invisible, like the Meddler, as long as they held his tail.

They made their way slowly to the landing bay. The only sound was made once was by the Meddler, who said, "Ow!" once when Levi stumbled and accidentally pulled on his tail.

"Sorry," Levi whispered fearfully.

They made their way to a shuttle and took off.

"There's no sign of pursuit," said Croft.

"Naturally," said the Meddler. "They know something has happened to their Queen, but they don't know what, as long as she is unconscious, so they don't know that there is a (tweatle tweatle) escape in progress."

"Why did you come after me?" said Croft. "I thought you were afraid of getting openly involved."

"I decided it was time," said the Meddler.

"Aren't you worried what the other Capybaras will do to you if they find out?" Croft asked.

"As you humans say, (tweatle tweatle) let them eat cake," said the Meddler. "I'm frankly quite tired of being referred to as a human washcloth."

## Chapter 11: The Glory's Last Battle

"A spacegate," said the War Admiral, frowning. He was in his quarters, having a holocommunication on a secured line.

"Yes," said the Meddler Capybara, on the other line. "You must destroy it immediately before it becomes operational. I'm sending you the coordinates. As with the first (tweatle tweatle) spacegate I told you about, this one is also located in the Coranna Nebula."

"Coranna," said the War Admiral. "My battle group is only a few days from Coranna."

"You should use all your forces. The enemy is sure to have it heavily defended."

"Can we even destroy that thing from the outside?" the War Admiral asked. "From what I've read in the intel reports, those things are Chent technology and very hard to destroy."

"Normally you would be correct," said the Meddler's image. "However, our intelligence indicates that this spacegate was constructed using (tweatle tweatle) local materials, and is considerably less powerful. Indeed, it may not even work at all. The Screens do not have the skill to faithfully reproduce Chent works. You might call it a (tweatle tweatle) 'cheap knockoff copy', if I use the term correctly."

"You do," said North. "But we can't rely on bad engineering to

keep us safe; do they have the knowledge to make the thing workable?"

"The Screen have only a tiny understanding of the magnificence of what you call the Chent technology," said the Meddler. "But perhaps, if they play around and try enough variations, they can produce a toy with a fraction of the (tweatle tweatle) power and capability-"

"I'll take that for a yes," said the War Admiral. He paused. "If I go in now with my battlegroup, I can get there in four days. If I wait for the rest of the fleet, it will be a week." The War Admiral had split his forces so they could do more damage more rapidly. Since the Insectoids still hadn't figured out how to deflect their new beam weapons, they could take on and win battles against even overwhelming odds.

"You should wait until you have all your forces gathered together," said the Meddler.

"The longer we wait, the more they can reinforce it," said the War Admiral. "And what if they go online? How many ships can they slip through in three days?"

The Meddler Capybara was silent.

"Thanks for your advice, but I'm going in," said the War Admiral.

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The revolt launched simultaneously on nearly all the Alliance worlds. Resistance fighters bearing blue light weapons attacked Insectoid guard posts, bases, and industrial facilities. The Insectoid guards, who were poised to attack at the first sign of trouble, suddenly froze when they saw the blue light; then they uniformly dropped their weapons, and meekly walked towards the blue light, so powerful was the lure.

Usually they would be gunned down before they reached the light; but in some of the larger blue light units, the resistance fighters removed the protective mesh around the devices and obligingly let the Insectoids walk right into it, where they were instantly zapped by the electricity coursing through the device.

Suddenly, the situation changed over night. The Insectoids were on the run, and the rebels were racking up impressive victories. In a matter of weeks the Insectoids had lost control of half of Concord, and were losing ground rapidly.

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The Glory and its accompanying 43 ships sailed out of the Coranna Nebula's dust into another open pocket of space. This solar system was not unlike the one where they had found the first spacegate, but this time the defense was stiffer.

62 ships awaited them, the usual mixture of battleships, cruisers, and destroyers.

"This should be simple," said Commander Kearse. They had already won battles with less than 3 to 2 odds before.

"Shall I give the order to attack?" said Captain Wren.

"No," said the War Admiral, studying the Insectoid formation. He pressed a button to magnify the image.

"What do you see?" Wren asked.

The War Admiral was silent, studying the formation.

"War Admiral?"

"They've devised a defense to our beam weapons," said the War Admiral. "Send a signal to the rest of the fleet."

"Sir?" said Wren. "How do you know?"

"Just look at that formation, it's as plain as day," said the War Admiral.

"It looks like the other defensive formations we've encountered," said Wren.

"Yes," said the War Admiral. He picked up a pointer. "But notice these battlecruisers here and here instead of there and there? And notice these heavy cruisers in these positions? They're trying to project weakness to pull us in, and then close the jaws around us."

Wren didn't see it, but she implicitly trusted the War Admiral. "What shall we do now."

"First let's change the script a little," said the War Admiral, hefting the pointer in his hand. "General Took, I want you to launch several Trobadore squadrons here, while we sent a cruiser squadron there--"

The fleet went into battle. Very quickly, it became apparent that the War Admiral was right--their beam weapons no longer cut through the Insectoid shields. Somehow, they had quickly learned to remodulate their shielding.

But the Insectoids only had a 3 to 2 advantage. In Norman North's calculations, that wasn't even very challenging.

But a victory wouldn't be easy. North expertly directed his ships, always outflanking the Insectoids. Instead of rushing to make attack runs on the spacegate, North took his time, setting up small encounters between ships, engaging if the odds were in his favor, pulling back if not. It was like a large game of three dimensional chess, and North was watching all pieces of the board at once.

Meanwhile Took was using his fighters to maximum advantage. They already had a numerical superiority over the Insectoids in fighters, and they quickly whittled down the enemy to smaller numbers.

When the enemy had lost a third of its fleet, with only one of North's ship's crippled and five others severely damaged, he decided not to play into the Insectoid's delaying tactics anymore and ordered half the fleet to attack the spacegate while the other half defended against the remainder of the Insectoid fleet. Obviously the Insectoids were trying to buy time in the hopes that reinforcements would arrive, but that was not a game that the War Admiral would play.

As the ships fought towards the spacegate they saw that it was crackling with energy, sucking up bursts from the nearby sun. If they had seen the first spacegate they would have realized that this one was smaller, only half the size of the first one, that it was made of vastly different materials, and that it took much longer to charge up and much more energy to operate.

The fighters opened fire on the rim of the crackling spacegate, but the War Admiral could see that their shots were having little effect. He redeployed them to hold off the remaining Insectoid fleet and sent several more capital ships to engage the spacegate.

A few well aimed laser blasts took out the orbiting platform, but by then it was too late; the space inside the spacegate grew static, and then clear, and inside they could see not the sun behind it, but an unfamiliar star pattern. And suddenly, they could see tiny dots, growing larger from the other side.

The spacegate was operational. Other ships were about to come through.

Cruisers and destroyers were pounding the spacegate, but so far they seemed to be having no effect. Admiral Harkness directed his battleship group to break off from static defense and engage the spacegate.

"But the Insectoid fleet is still firing on us."

"Either way, this is all going to be over in the next two minutes," Harkness growled.

The battleships turned their attention to the spacegate, pounding away at it while the Insectoid ships pounded away at them. The dots inside the spacegate became silhouettes, and then the images of small

ships.

One of Harkness's battleships blew up under the fire of enemy vessels, and another's shields started to fail. "We can't take much more of this!" he heard over the comm.

"Maintain firing!"

"This is Glory," said a new voice. It was the War Admiral. "Concentrate all fire on the part of the spacegate closest to us. Focus all your fire on that point."

The battleships concentrated their fire. The spacegate started to glow.

But it still wasn't enough. They could see the first of the Insectoid ships starting to come through. It was a massive battleship. It was just seconds from the spacegate.

And then the Glory came into play. Quite often both friend and foe alike forgot that in addition to being a heavily armored command carrier, it was also a fully armed battleship. The Glory started to pound away with its giant forward laser turrets, adding to the efforts of the other battleships.

The segment of the spacegate glowed brighter, then turned red-

The Insectoid battleship started to crossover-

And then that segment of the spacegate exploded! It was a small explosion, but enough to break the spacegate to pieces.

And then, to the Insectoids' horror and the human's delight, they saw the fate of the ship that had been crossing over at the moment the spacegate cut out.

The ship had been split in half, at precisely the point where it had been crossing the spacegate. The front half of it was on this side of the galaxy, and the other half was on the other side.

The front half, out of power and virtually dead in space, floated by their viewscreens. A cheer rose up in the Glory as the War Admiral quickly turned his attention to cutting their losses and beating a hasty retreat back to the dust cloud. There was no need to continue the battle now.

But a new enemy emerged from the cloud--three more Insectoid fleets that had been racing there to guard the spacegate. Their numbers were overwhelming.

The War Admiral immediately rallied the strongest battleships in a defensive formation while the other ships escaped back into the dust cloud. The Glory stood with the battleships, retreating slowly while firing its massive laser guns.

The battleships and the Glory sustained a number of hits. The Glory's power dimmed after one hit, before restoring.

"Maintain firing!" said the War Admiral. "The bulk of the fleet is almost in the dust cloud."

"Engineering says we have reactor damage, all power has been cut 50%," Commander Kearse reported. "Forcescreens are down 70%, and we have reports of fires in the hull."

The Insectoid fleet closed on them with guns blazing, eager to avenge the loss of their vital installation.

"Maintain firing!" said the War Admiral.

They wouldn't have to hold out much longer. And then, the bulk of the fleet was in the cloud.

"Let's go!" said the War Admiral. The Glory and the other ships headed full speed into the Nebula. The Insectoids fired a few parting shots, and the Glory shuddered again as it was hit, but the ship kept moving.

The dust from the nebula didn't make scanning impossible, but it greatly reduce the scanning range. The fleet was kept in a close formation for close to an hour, trying to avoid contact as much as possible with the Insectoid fleets, who had split up in an attempt to

intercept them, when all of a sudden an explosion rocked the Glory, and all power went dark.

At first everyone thought they had been hit; for the scanners were dead and they couldn't see outside the ship. But the explosion was not followed up by other attacks, and when emergency power was restored they heard from engineering.

"-reactors one, two, and three down," Yurgi Arkasian, the chief engineer, yelled through the background noises of sputtering circuits. "Overload, lucky the whole thing didn't go."

"How soon can you restore power?" Captain Wren asked.

"How soon? No way," said Arkasian. "All kaput. Reactor four already destroyed, you know."

"Can't you do anything?"

"May be able to do something with R One, that's the least worst off, but will take at least 20 hours, maybe more," said Arkasian.

"We don't have that long," said the War Admiral. He looked over at Wren, and nodded slightly.

"Evacuate," said Wren without hesitation. She looked over at Kearse. "Can you get any of the other ships on comm?"

"Yes Captain."

"Signal them to dock with us and to take on as many of our crew as we can."

Normally, a ship would have evacuation pods. Most of the Glory's evacuation pods had long since been destroyed, and in any event were never designed to hold the entire standard crew compliment of over 5,000. Fortunately, there were only a little over 2,000 crewmembers aboard; the years of fighting with the Insectoids had taken their toll, and some of their more experienced crewmembers had been transferred to the other carriers.

The War Admiral did some rapid calculations, his mouth moving silently. "With two battleships docked simultaneously, each can take on perhaps 300 crewmen, and each pair will take at least an hour to dock and board... we're talking more than three hours here." He looked at Wren knowingly.

Chances are the Insectoids would arrive in sooner than three hours.

Took ordered the Wildcats and Trobadores to land in the other ships and refuel there, and then head out on continuous space combat patrol. Wren oversaw the docking of the first pair of battleships, while Commander Kearse took charge of the evacuation..

"All crew, all hands, report to sections 2 and 84," said Kearse, pulling up a schematic of the ship. "All hands prepare to evacuate."

The battleships loomed large on the screen as they prepared to dock.

"You should be the first to exit, Admiral," said Wren.

"A Captain is supposed to be the last off his ship," said the War Admiral.

"You forgot, you're not the Captain," said Wren.

"This has always been my ship," said the War Admiral. "I want you to go to Section 2 and take the first wave across."

"No sir," said Wren. "I will not leave my ship while crew is still on it."

He matched glares with her for a moment. Then, saying nothing, he got up and went to his office. When he came out a moment later he held a disk.

"Commander Kearse?"

"Sir?"

"Here are my logs. Head for Section 84. I want you on the first wave across."

"Sir, I'm not leaving-"

"We need someone from the senior staff to go across," said the War Admiral. He bit out his words. "Those are your orders, Commander!"

Kearse's face went blank. "Yes, War Admiral." He took the disk and headed for the exit, only turning back to say, "Good luck, sirs."

The War Admiral nodded and Wren stared after him.

The War Admiral turned to Took. "You too, General."

"Can Admirals really give generals orders?" said Took. "No way, Admiral."

"There is no reason for you to stay here," said the War Admiral.

"I'm not leaving you, sir," said Took.

"Are you going to disobey a direct order?"

"What are you going to do, demote me?" said Took. "Go ahead."

At that moment they received a signal from the Blue Luna. It was Admiral Harkness.

"War Admiral," said Harkness. "The Majestic and the Vanguard are taking the first wave of your people on board. I suggest you evacuate by shuttle to the Luna."

"We're not leaving until everyone else is off," said the War Admiral.

"What kind of garbage is that?" said Harkness.

"Excuse me?" said the War Admiral.

"We don't have time for this," said Harkness. "The bugs will find us at any minute."

"If they do, and if they appear in overwhelming force, your orders are to break contact and rejoin the rest of the fleet," said the War Admiral.

"Nuts to that," said Harkness.

"You have your orders," said the War Admiral. "I expect you to survive, and to bring my crewmen to safety."

"You're impossible," snorted Harkness, cutting communications.

"I always thought he was too blunt to be promoted to the admiralty," said Wren.

"In most navies, that probably would've been true," said the War Admiral.

The evacuation continued. The first pair of battleships took on as many crewers as they could, and then a second pair docked. It was at that moment that a pair of Insectoid cruisers attacked.

They bore down on the helpless Glory, which was docked with the other two battleships. They scored several hits, shaking the ship, before they were driven off by other battleships, supported by fighters. First one, and then the second cruiser was destroyed.

The Blue Luna opened communications to report on the developing situation. "We think we got them before they radioed our location."

"You think?" said the War Admiral.

"We usually try not to," said Harkness grimly. "I'm ordering the ships to pack them on as tight as possible. The second wave is docked right now; at this rate we'll be lucky if we're not overwhelmed by the time the third pair of ships dock. I think our only chance of getting all of you off is to squeeze you all into three waves, even if people have to be crouching together in the cargo hold."

"Agreed," said the War Admiral.

The second pair of battleships pulled away, to be replaced by a battleship and a battlecruiser (they had run out of battleships). They docked. The War Admiral turned to the remaining bridge crew. "You're dismissed. Get to the boarding zones now." The crew filed out, leaving only Took, Wren, and the War Admiral.

"I don't think they're going to get them all off in three waves, not if one of the docking ships is only a battlecruiser," said the War Admiral.



"I have a suggestion," said Took. "There just happens to be one shuttle left in landing bay two. When the fourth wave starts to leave, and it looks like everything is going ok, I think we should take it."

The War Admiral considered, then nodded. "That will be acceptable."

While the third pair of ships were docking they were attacked again, this time by an Insectoid battleship, four cruisers, and two destroyers. The Glory was rocked again by several more hits. After some fierce ship to ship battles, the Insectoids retreated. But they clearly knew the location of the crippled Glory now. It wouldn't be long before the entire Insectoid combined fleet would be breathing down their neck.

"Admiral," said Took, as the two ships undocked from the Glory, and a fourth pair of ships, both battlecruisers, prepared to dock. "I think we should go, now. We may not get another chance."

The War Admiral looked at Wren. She bit her lip, and nodded.

"Very well," said the War Admiral, getting up from his seat-- And then the combined Insectoid fleet appeared on their screen.

The War Admiral quickly signaled Harkness. "Get out of here, now!"

Harkness considered. The enemy fleet outnumbered and outgunned him four to one. And six of his ships were packed with excess crewmembers--if they were lost, the casualties would be tremendous. If they left, at least they would have saved most of the Glory's crew.

"How many of the Glory's crew were left behind?" he asked an officer.

"Estimated 150."

So they had saved 95% of the crew, and staying would put them at risk. Reluctantly, Harkness nodded. "All ships, retreat, retreat. Cruisers, and fighters, cover the battleships, cover the battleships." This arrangement was opposite the usual practice, but those capital ships carried valuable cargo.

The Insectoid ships traded fire with the fleet as it sped off into the dust. Some gave pursuit, while others circled the Glory. They didn't fire on the Glory.

"I wonder what they're up to," said Wren.

"That shuttle's still available, if we hurry," said Took.

"I don't think we'd get very far," said the War Admiral, pointing to the screen.

A massive wave of transports were launching from the assembled ships, heading for the Glory's landing bays.

"Attention all hands in sections 2 and 84, what is your status?" said the War Admiral.

He quickly learned that approximately 140 crew members remained.

"The Insectoids intend to board us," said the War Admiral. "It looks like they are concentrating on landing bays one and two. If you intercept them as they land you will be able to inflict maximum casualties," he said calmly. "Once they overwhelm you, retreat to the interior of the ship in small three and four man teams and try to inflict as many losses as you can. And... good luck."

The War Admiral glanced towards the computer interface. With the reactors down, he wouldn't be able to trigger the self-destruct. Well, if they were going to take the Glory, they would still pay a heavy price for it.

"I estimate 40 transports," said Wren. "If we assume 30 to 40 troopers in each one--"

"About 1,500 of them, to our 140," said the War Admiral.

"Lovely." He stood up, heading towards the entryway. "Come on."

"Where are we going?" said Wren.

"Landing bay two," said the War Admiral. "We're going to have to join the party sometime."

The "party" was already heavy and strong when they made it to landing bay two. A few dozen crewmen were attempting to hold off several hundred Insectoid troopers. The laser and blaster fire was flying thick, and the bodies of Insectoids were everywhere. The crew tried to set up defensive positions behind crates, and at first they mowed the Insectoids down as they emerged from their ships.

But more and more ships kept landing, and the crew was slowly overwhelmed by the opposing force. They were starting to retreat even as the War Admiral, Wren, and Took reached the bay.

Took tried to poke his head around the corner to fire, but the laserfire was so thick that he couldn't even do that. Then crewmen in groups of twos and threes started to retreat down the hall, and the War Admiral motioned them to follow.

"That was quick," said Took. "We barely had time to take a peek."

"They're vastly outnumbered, and many of the remaining crew are technical specialists, not jump troop," said the War Admiral. He started striding towards engineering. Perhaps they could hide there.

The Insectoid commander stepped out of her shuttle as she landed in the Glory's landing bay. The battered and crippled Glory was a poor substitute for saving the spacegate, but hopefully it would be enough to prevent her from being dismembered. She knew her chances of survival would be vastly improved if they could take the human War Admiral alive. He, even more than this dreaded ship, symbolized their resistance.

And so the Insectoid commander ordered a temporary pause in the attack, and gave a new order.

Meanwhile in engineering...

"We may be able to last an hour or two here," said the War Admiral, ducking behind some large engineering consoles.

"An hour or two," said Took, gripping his blaster tightly. "That sounds like a great plan."

The War Admiral glared at him.

"Well, since we have this quality time, any chance of getting another interview?" said Took. "I could conduct the interview, you know, and jettison it in one of the remaining escape pods."

"Remaining escape pods?" said the War Admiral. "Do we have any left?"

"A few," said Wren. "I saw a report on that just before we left in the particle cannon." She closed her eyes, and tried to concentrate. "I think there was one on deck 20, section 2, or maybe section 3."

They looked at each other. Chances were that the escape pod would be detected and destroyed or captured shortly after launch. But it was the best chance they had right now. They got up and started heading for the door.

Suddenly, Wren started to feel light headed, and she fell against a bulkhead.

"Stacy, what-" said the War Admiral, and then he felt himself falling too.

Took, blinking slowly, started to ask what it was all about, as he found himself falling on top of them as well....

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Six beings sat around a table. One of them was Steven Quick, one was the Meddler Capybara, present only in holographic form, and the other appeared to be very plain looking humans or humanoids.

"They've captured the Glory, and the War Admiral," said one of the plain looking humans, speaking oddly accented English. An image of the War Admiral and the surviving crew briefly appeared within the

holoimage.

"Do we have confirmation?" said Quick.

"Holorecords only, but-"

"Holorecords can be forged," said Quick. "But an analysis of the situation, based on the report of Admiral Harkness, indicates a truthfulness probability of 80%."

"They're saying they're going to execute the War Admiral in seven solar days," said one of the humanoids.

"Why the wait?" Quick asked.

"Our intel indicates they are towing the Glory to August, where they intend to detonate it with the War Admiral and the remaining crew onboard. "

"Ostensibly to attack our morale," said Quick.

"The real purpose-"

"Real purpose is to lure us into a trap, to prompt us to attempt to use massive force to attempt a rescue," said Quick. "I understand. What is their estimated disposition of their forces, and our estimated chances of success?"

One of the humanoids said, "They are believed to have between 200 and 250 ships of all classes on this side of the spacegate. Given our losses, we have 183 ships operational. They have counteracted our advantage, and it is conceivable that they could have worked up new advantages of their own."

"That would mitigate against making a rescue attempt," said Quick. "That means less than even odds, possibly with some surprises thrown in. Pure logic suggests that they will intensify their fleet around August and wait for us. Logic suggests we wait for them to disperse and attack their fleet in smaller chunks."

"But we're not just talking about pure logic here," said the Meddler Capybara, speaking for the first time. "The War Admiral and the Glory are our most potent symbol of our rebellion. If they are destroyed, it will severely hurt morale."

"But at least we will be alive and capable of having morale," said Quick. He blinked, as if thinking for a half-second, then said, "I believe if the disposition of forces are accurate, that we would have a 75% chance of prevailing in battle, assuming the Insectoids do not have substantially new reinforcements or an added technological edge."

"That last is unlikely," said one of the humanoids. "But it is possible."

"The advantage to attacking now is that we could destroy the Insectoids once and for all," said Quick. "Who knows what other projects they are working on that they could turn against us. If we could be assured of victory now, I would support a full attack. On the other hand, our resources are finite; we have no ships to replace these."

"It's not like you to vacillate," said the Meddler Capybara.

"This is a very big decision," said Quick.

"What do the other admirals say?" asked one of the humanoids.

"They want to attack."

"Irrelevant," said Quick. "They are guided by emotion, to save the War Admiral."

"Aren't you?" said the Meddler.

"No," said Quick coldly. "My decision will be based on pure utility, as always."

"The War Admiral was a good friend of yours."

"We have no idea whether he's even alive, much less whether he'll be in the Glory off of August," said Quick.

He turned away for a moment. The others continued to debate among themselves. The babble behind him grew louder, and louder. Suddenly he swiveled his chair back.

"We attack," he said simply.

"Why?" said one of the humanoids.

"It's a risk, but a risk worth taking," said Quick.

"Additionally, I have figured out an additional asset we can bring to bear which will increase our probability of success 7 points, to 82%."

"What asset is that?" a humanoid asked.

"Me," said Quick. "I will command the fleets."

"You?" said a humanoid.

"I may not have as much experience as some of the other admirals, but I think much more quickly," said Quick. "Our success will depend on speed of analysis and reaction to the situation. I can simultaneously analyze and direct ten different battlegroups. Is there anyone else here or there who can, with any speed even close to approaching mine?"

The room was silent for a moment.

"If you reveal yourself, it will be a great rallying point to the troops," said the Meddler Capybara. For thus far, only the most senior of Quick's officers knew that he was still alive.

"But if you do so, it may reveal our role in all this," said one of the humanoids.

"We all have to take risks," said the Meddler. "I certainly have. We have too much invested in this now to be timid. They already know that North had help. The appearance of Quick is not going to point any more directly to you."

The humanoids conferred among themselves. "Perhaps you are right. Very well, we agree."

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The resistance on August and other Alliance planets were doing well, pushing back the Insectoids and inflicting heavy losses by using the blue light bug zapping technology.

But one day, just a few weeks after the campaign began, the Insectoids struck back.

They appeared on the streets wearing large bulbous goggles over their visual multiplexes. And the blue light technology no longer had any effect on them.

The human resistance, which had been pushing the Insectoids back, now began to be pushed back by the Insectoids again.

In one encounter, Smiley walked out on the streets, just casually strolling into a murderous crossfire between resistance fighters on one side and Insectoids on the other. "Hello, my friends," he waved.

Resistance fighters watched in surprise as bolt after bolt hit Smiley; but he didn't seem affected in the slightest. One of the fighters ran over, and using Smiley as cover, began to shoot around him.

"What's going on here?" said Smiley, smiling broadly as laser bolts continued to hit him..

"This is bad, Levi," said Croft, looking out from inside a building in central August, close to the very fluid frontlines.

"Predicted this would happen. Worked to a certain degree, to put bugs off balance," said Levi.

"That's really great, but what do we do today, and tomorrow?" said Croft. "They're already starting to push us back."

"Just wait," said Levi.

"How can you say that?" said Croft. "They're breeding a mile a minute."

"No," said Levi. "Not anymore."

"What do you mean?"

"Bugs need grubfruit to survive."

"Yes," said Croft. "So?"

"Moths you released."

"Moths? You mean those little balls?"

"Moth eggs," said Levi. "Moths eat grubfruit. Grubfruit disappears, bugs starve to death, bugs disappear."

"Whoa," said Croft. "How are a handful of moths going to eat the entire grubfruit supply?"

"Genetically engineered to reproduce rapidly," said Levi. "Also made sure that they only eat grubfruit, not harm environment."

"Well, that's really swell, they're eco-friendly," said Croft. "Meanwhile, we're getting killed here."

"Now several months since moths released," said Levi. "I predict not enough food now for new bugs; by this time next year, not enough food for existing bugs."

"Well, if true, that's a positive development," said Croft. "But what's to stop them from importing food from other planets?"

"I provides eggs to other resistance," said Levi. "But even if can import, would require huge shipments of food. And bugs busy fighting Alliance."

"So all we have to do is hunker down and wait?" said Croft.

"Mature bugs can eat other things," Levi. "But no more replacements, and many existing bugs will die."

Even as he spoke, moths were inundating the eastern side of Aridor. New Insectoids were coming out of their hatcheries, reaching for the grubfruit--but the grubfruit were gone! And the grubtrees were filled with thousands upon thousands of flying white moths..... the bodies of starved Insectoids already littered the ground.

The good news is that there would be no more replacement troopers.

The bad news is that there were still millions of Insectoids on August, and they had rations that would last them for months.

"Isn't there anything else we can do?" Croft asked.

"Yes," said Levi. "But to do, need air and space superiority."

"Well, fat chance of that happening, until the fleet comes."

"Then must wait for fleet."

## Chapter 12: The Climatic Battle Over August

"Attention, please," said the calm voice, speaking over interfleet.

The man was sitting on his flagship, The Quick.

"This is Steven Quick of the June Directorate."

There was a total silence over the comm channels. 99.99% of everyone listening had thought that Quick had been dead for more than 20 years.

"This will come as a surprise to most of you, but I am alive." How else to say it?

"I can tell you now that I played a role in engineering our comeback," said Quick dryly, leaving the exact side of his role to their imagination. "As you know, our legendary leader, War Admiral Norman North, has been taken captive by the bugs while successfully completing a vital mission. We are going to August to retrieve the War Admiral. We expect nearly the entire bug fleet to be there waiting for us. They expect us to walk into a trap."

"Instead they will walk into ours. Those of you who are Directorate officers know of me. Those of you who were League officers have at least heard of me. I don't make idle boasts. If we win this battle, we will win the war," said Quick calmly. "And we will win this

battle. I anticipated something very similar to this battle 10 years ago, and proved, mathematically, that we would win it. I will be commanding the fleets today, working in conjunction with your admirals. Fight hard, and always remember this day," said Quick. "Quick out." He closed communications, but left the receive button open. He heard a babble of voices.

"He's alive!" "Was that really Quick!" "If we have Quick on our side, we can't lose!" "It's really him!" they said excitedly, before Quick closed the channel.

"Did you really predict this battle 10 years ago?" said Administrator Kalin, standing by his side.

"Something close to it, as a possibility," said Quick. "I had a lot of time on my hands," he added.

"What are you thinking about right now?" Kalin added.

"Administration, logistics, and military, problems we'll be facing over the next five to ten years," said Quick. "The present rarely interests me. For me, it's already happened."

"Well, I hope you give it enough attention to win the battle," Kalin said nervously.

Quick nodded, his silvery eyes gazing forward.

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"Where is my ship?" Zsst raged.

"It is on its way," said Baracki.

"Will it get here in time for the battle?"

"No," said Baracki.

"How can you be so calm?"

"I have helped you defeat their technological advantage," said Baracki. "You have more ships than they do. You have their chief strategist."

"But our advantage is not overwhelming!"

"No," Baracki frowned. "It will be a more or less even battle, though you will have a small edge in ships. Why does that frighten you?"

"Because we could lose!"

Baracki hissed.

"I backed your cause because you said your people had a strong warrior spirit," said Baracki. "I helped you overcome the humans, giving you every advantage. Instead, you show one weakness after another. Now, at the end, you fear a fair fight."

"Don't tell me it's been a fair fight," said the Queen. "They have received outside help as well!"

"But nothing approaching the help we gave you," said Baracki. "We were the ones who helped you wipe out their fleet, and occupy their worlds. You had twenty years to build up your base. Instead you have squandered it. I begin to wonder if we have backed the wrong species."

Zsst felt her circulatory fluids flow faster. "What do you mean?"

"The humans have repeatedly shown courage, against overwhelming odds. What do you show, with odds that are even or favor you slightly? Cowardice and fear!"

"We will win!" said Zsst. "But I want my ship!"

"Although we have allowed your beings to pilot it here, it is not 'your' ship," said Baracki. "And it will come when it comes. I expect that it will only be used to hunt down the remainder of the human fleet that escapes your victory at this battle."

"Of course," said Zsst.

At that moment a human entered the chamber, flanked by two guards.

"I have waited for this moment a long time," said Zsst.

"I'm sure you have," said War Admiral Norman North.

"I have beaten you, the great War Admiral!" said Zsst with satisfaction.

"You never beat me," North snorted. "You beat the politicians. You got my government to drop its guard and destroyed most of our fleet. I wasn't even there. All I had was a small sliver of our fleet, and I kept beating you again and again for 20 years."

Baracki, standing in the shadow, eyed North with appraising eyes.

"And yet you are beaten."

"So are you," said the War Admiral.

"You think so?" said Zsst. "Our intelligence reports that your fleet is gathering to attack us here on August. But our entire fleet is waiting for them. We will destroy them."

"That remains to be seen," said North coolly.

"And you will not be at the helm of your fleets to save them! Who can guide your fleets as well as you?" said Zsst.

"You'll see," said the War Admiral, unmoved.

"I just wanted to reassure you that you and your surviving crew are being treated well," said Zsst. "They are all in confinement on your ship."

"How nice of you."

"In twelve of your hours, or whenever your human fleet arrives, whichever comes first, we will detonate the explosives we have placed aboard your ship. You and your ship, the symbols of resistance, will be destroyed. We will crush the morale of your navy just as the battle begins."

"You overestimate my importance," said the War Admiral.

"And you underestimate yours," said Zsst coldly. "Only you could have eluded destruction for all these years, defeating fleet after fleet I sent against you. Now matters are at an end." Zsst turned to the War Admiral's guards. "Return him to his ship."

As North was taken out, Baracki shook his head. He couldn't help but admire the War Admiral's fortitude. Zsst, by contrast, was simply obsessed with petty gloating. Had his people made a tremendous mistake and backed the wrong side?

The War Admiral was secured inside a portable forcefield set up in the center of the bridge, away from the control panels. With him were Stacy Wren and Idaho Took. Zsst, attentive to every detail, had ordered the holoscreen set up so that half of it showed the surviving crew, under confinement on one of the hanger decks, and the other half showed the assembled might of the Insectoid fleet. At the bottom showed a timer, counting down.

"They have a lot of ships," said Took. "It's hard to count them, but I think they have more."

The War Admiral said nothing.

"It looks like we're the bait in this trap," said Took.

"Quick will never fall for it," said the War Admiral.

"Quick?" said Took. "You don't mean Steven Quick, do you?"

The War Admiral nodded.

Took gave a low whistle. "I thought he was dead. So he's the one running the show?"

"One of them" said the War Admiral. "But he rules by logic, not emotion. It's my hope that he won't come for us. Even if he gets here in time, they'll blow us up the minute he gets here."

"So this is it, then," said Took, looking at the clock. "How ironic."

"What?" said the War Admiral.

"I'm in this spot because I was promoted to general," said Took. "I should have known better. If I had stayed a major I would've been in a Wildcat when this all happened and I'd be safely somewhere else right

now. Next time I'll know better than to accept a promotion."

Stacy Wren gave a small smile. She reached out to hold the War Admiral's hand. He stared into space, saying nothing.

Several hours passed. They saw the crew sitting restless behind a forcefield in the hanger deck. It was a wideshot view, but it looked like at least 80 or more of them had survived. Not that it mattered.

Took looked at the clock ticking down. There were now only three hours left.

"War Admiral?"

"Yes, Took?"

Well, at least he wasn't calling him General any more. "Since we're all about to die, I was wondering if I could make a final request."

The War Admiral smiled. "The final request is usually made of the executioners, but all right."

"One last interview?"

"An interview?" said the War Admiral. "How can you record it? Who will possibly see it?"

"I can remember it and transcribe it later," said Took. "And as for who will see it, well, I prefer to always think optimistically."

"Very well. Ask your questions."

"I really have only two. Where did we all go wrong? Was it all futile?"

The War Admiral paused. "It's a matter that I've given a lot of thought," he said finally. "My conclusion has always been the same: we, the military, never went wrong, but our society was. They were so sick of war, even though it barely touched their civilian lives, that they elected the most dovish and gullible set of politicians in the history of the League. When Hov Marshall and Mitterand negotiated that awful treaty, and set us up for slaughter at Vitalics, I should have acted, either to try and expose the trap at Vitalics, or to overthrow the government."

The War Admiral looked at Wren. "We had some discussions of it at the time. But we weren't sure it was a trap, and the idea of overthrowing our own government if there was any possibility that we were wrong was too difficult for us to face. If we ever get free of the Insectoids, I hope the population, which has spent a wearying two decades under their rule, will have learned something from all this, so we won't have to go through all of this again at some point in the future."

He paused, considering Took's other question. "As to whether all this was futile, most certainly not! I still think we have an excellent chance of victory. Admiral Dulin or Harkness or any several of the others can ably-" he stopped in mid-thought.

"What?" said Took.

"Just a thought," said the War Admiral. "An unlikely one. In any event, it was worth it. At least some of our crewers survived. And the experience of our crewers, scattered throughout the fleet, may help our forces destroy the bugs."

"I just wish we were around to see it."

"So do I," said the War Admiral.

"Well, are you just going to sit there and wallow in a pool of self-pity?" asked a new voice.

They looked around the bridge. There was no one they could see.

And then, right in front of their eyes, Clifford Croft, wearing a conventional spacesuit, materialized out of nowhere.

"Croft! Is that you?" said the War Admiral. "How did you--where did you come from?"

"That's a long story," said Croft. He started tinkering with the



forcefield controls. In a few seconds it was down.

"We have to free the crew in the hanger deck," said the War Admiral.

"You guys can do that," said Croft. "We have to get down to engineering and get rid of that bomb."

"Why?" said the War Admiral. "The Glory is immobilized. We'll have to abandon ship anyway."

"We have a use for that bomb," said Croft. "It's all part of your friend Quick's plan. Now get your crew free and suited up in spacesuits."

"Quick!"

"Yes, and quickly," said Croft.

Croft headed down to engineering. He was stopped short by a forcefield.

"What now, we go around?" said Croft, speaking to empty air.

Suddenly the screen flickered, as an outline of a medium sized animal briefly appeared in the field. A second later, the field was deactivated from the other side.

"You'll have to teach me how to do that sometime," said Croft.

They continued until they found they found the bomb. It wasn't that big--just four feet high, and two feet wide. There was a console on top of the bomb.

"That doesn't look so big, could that really have destroyed the ship?" Croft asked.

"Yes," said a nearby voice. Suddenly, the Meddler Capybara materialized out of nowhere. "The bomb had a motion detector and other failsafes; if we try to move it, it will detonate. I'll have to disarm it first.."

"Want me to take a crack at it?" said Croft.

"No, this is Screen technology, beyond your abilities," said the Meddler, studying the console.

"Oh. Well, I'll just sit here and play with my marbles, then," said Croft dryly.

The Capybara hummed and hemmed for several minutes, broken only by an occasional tweatle tweatle as he tapped several keys on the control console.

"Well?" said Croft.

"It's a very complex interdisciplinary locking mechanism," said the Capybara.

"The Screen can make something that you can't figure out?" said Croft. "I thought they were fourth wave dummies?"

"Post-third wave, actually," said the Capybara, still tapping the keys. "But they have picked up a few tricks here and there. Perhaps they should be reevaluated to see if they classify as third wave."

"You can hold the symposium later; can you deactivate it?"

"Yes," said the Meddler Capybara, pressing a final key.. The console beeped twice, and then went silent. The Meddler grinned at Croft and adjusted its bow tie slightly. "You never had any real doubt, did you?"

Croft looked at the bomb. "How are we going to lug this thing to the airlock?"

The Meddler sighed. "Come along, Clifford."

Croft started walking. As he looked back he saw the explosives, floating in midair, as it obediently followed the Meddler down the corridor.

They ran into the War Admiral on their way to the airlock. His eyebrows raised when he saw the capybara, and the floating explosives behind him.

"No time for introductions," said Croft. "Are your people all suited up?"

"Yes," said the War Admiral.

"Head out through section 84. You won't see anything at first, but there's a rope that seems to be floating in space. Follow it and it will lead to a cloaked sub."

"A cloaked sub!"

"How many are there of you?"

"94," said the War Admiral.

"It will be a very tight fit, but you should all be able to squeeze in," said Croft. "It's a small ship but we made space for you. There's only a skeleton crew of eight aboard. You'd better get going."

"What about you?" said the War Admiral.

"We've got some other business to attend to, and will join you shortly."

The War Admiral stared at the blue Capybara.

"There isn't time for this," said Croft. "Say hello to the blue Capybara and head back to your crew."

"Hello, blue Capybara," said the War Admiral.

The Meddler flapped his tail slightly by way of greeting. The War Admiral nodded, and headed back to his crew.

Croft and the Meddler reached the airlock. "Are you sure you don't need a spacesuit?" Croft asked.

The Meddler sighed. "I didn't need one before on our way here; why would I now?"

"We were in space for less than two minutes, I figured you held your breath," said Croft. "We're going to be in space for longer than that, I just thought you might need some air."

"Don't worry about me, Clifford."

"All right," said Croft. He pressed the button to depressurize the airlock.

As they emerged from the ship Croft grabbed onto the explosives, as did the Blue Capybara. Croft saw themselves becoming invisible.

Slowly, he started using his jetpack to propel them to the Insectoid flagship, several miles away.

It was unlikely that the Insectoids would detect the small spacesuited figures abandoning the Glory, especially since they were doing so on the far side of the ship that didn't face the flagship. But there was a better chance that the flagship would detect the close approach of Croft, the Meddler, and the explosives, so they stayed together to utilize the Meddler's ability to be invisible. Croft only hoped that they were invisible to sensors as well.

But moving by jetpack was slow. It would take an hour to get there, not giving them enough time to get there and back before the attack began. The Meddler Capybara must have realized it too, for suddenly Croft found himself thrust through space, as if someone had given him a great push. Croft wondered how the Capybara managed that.

The flagship loomed large ahead of them. It was big, larger than any of their battleships. It was bristling with weaponry, and was easily the match for any two of their best battleships. They jetted towards the engine section.

They landed gently on the hull, and the Meddler started securing the explosives and then tapping away at some keys on the console.

How did he live without oxygen? Come to think about it, how did he prevent himself from exploding in the vacuum?

Croft wouldn't get answers to either of these questions that day. After a moment, the Capybara was done, and, grabbing Croft, they headed back.

They reached the Nautilus with mere seconds to spare. It was so

crowded that they could barely make their way to the bridge. Croft lost track of the Meddler as soon as they landed; he seemed to simply disappear.

"You're just in time," said Captain Hollister, when he reached the bridge. "Our fleet is coming into range."

On The Quick, Steven Quick made his last minute deployment orders.

"I notice you are spreading out our ships in small groups," said Kalin. "That's not standard procedure."

"I expect the bugs to have a surprise or two in store for us," said Quick. "If you recall, they used some sort of energy dampening field to disable the fleet at Vitalics. All our ships were conveniently massed together for such an attack. They never used such weapons since, meaning they were in limited supply, but I'm hypothesizing that if they have any such weapons left, they will use them now. Hence I am keeping the fleet spread out so that no more than a few ships can be taken out at the same time."

"So you decided to attack, even though you knew the bugs may be using this superweapon?" said Kalin. Quick's actions didn't make sense. If he thought the bugs might have such a weapon, that was an even stronger reason not to have taken the bait and attacked now. Did Quick know something he didn't, or did he have another reason for launching this attack?

Quick raised an eyebrow, but didn't respond.

Admiral Harkness sat on the bridge of the Blue Luna, eager for it all to begin. He knew the Directorate people had cheered when they heard that Quick was taking over. Harkness knew that Quick was a certifiable genius, but did his brilliance extend to military matters? He eyed the loose, smaller formations that Quick had aligned them into. He had no idea what Quick was doing. If Quick appeared to be clueless, he, Harkness, would attempt to take command in the middle of the battle. It wasn't a prospect he relished, but after everything that had happened, from Vitalics on forward, he was no longer inclined to sit back and just let things happen.

But maybe Quick could pull it off. Harkness certainly hoped so. He eyed the Insectoid fleet on the screen. He activated intraship. "Attention all hands, get ready, this is it!" he growled.

The two fleets closed on each other, and the battle was quickly joined. The Insectoids had 219 warships, lined up in an esoteric attack pattern. Quick's fleet had 177 ships, which meant the Insectoids had an edge.

Battle groups quickly engaged each other. Quick watched them all on a large screen, rapidly switching frequencies as he quickly gave orders to the different battlegroups. His own crew could barely keep up with what he was saying.

"Dayja, attack the group in sector 4-G," said Quick. Then, with a quick glance at the map he flicked frequencies. "Harkness, pursue and destroy the group in H-2." Then flicking again. "Dulin, the 2-B position is a trap, stay clear of it."

His mind seemed to be overclocked as he directed the battle. His bridge crew watched silently.

At first, the Insectoids seemed to be doing well. Almost too well. They hadn't yet used any superweapons, but they were pulverizing the fleet. The humans were slowly winning the battles on the periphery of the battlefield, but were not doing well in the center of the combat zone, where two dozen ships were stationed at the "front lines". They lost several cruisers and destroyers in the first few minutes. Some of

Quick's ships in the front lines were acting sluggishly and didn't even seem to be firing back. As the Insectoids closed around and pounded the front line ships, a new wave of ships came from behind the Insectoid lines.

Only these ships weren't Insectoid; they were human ships; 28 top of the line cruisers and battlecruisers, and they pounded into the center of the Insectoid fleet from the rear. The Insectoids, who were busy attacking the ships in front of them, took precious moments to readjust and turn around, and their formations were all in disarray.

"Where did those extra ships come from?" Kalin asked. "We don't have that many ships."

"Of course we did," said Quick, speaking in between issuing rapidfire commands. "Think of Norman North's fleet."

And then Kalin remembered. They had decommissioned most of the War Admiral's fleet, because they were too heavily damaged to be sent into combat. Suddenly Kalin understood. These were the ships in the front lines, all probably operating under remote control. They were the bait for Quick's trap!

Quick knew that the Insectoids had a good idea how many ships he had. Once they were confident they were all there, the bugs had made a straightforward attack. But by having the extra unmanned ships in front, that enabled Quick to siphon off two dozen of his best ships and save them for a surprise attack.

"Brilliant," Kalin breathed.

"I worked it out weeks ago," Quick shrugged.

Kalin didn't dare ask, whether, even in the height of the battle, if part of Quick's mind was focused on problems in the coming months and years.

The Insectoids' front lines started to crumble. And Quick's rapidfire reassessment of each part of the battle was rapidly improving the collective reaction time of the fleet. His hastily spoken orders enabled the entire fleet to act as a single unit, even when individual Admirals and captains were only focused on their battlegroups. Battlegroups didn't understand why they were being ordered to move to a certain position, or attack a certain target, but the only important thing was that they responded quickly when Quick ordered them to. Like a global game of chess, Quick was systematically denuding his opponent of her pawns, rooks, and knights.

The fighting among the fighters was fierce too. Wildcats and Trobadores were shooting and flying wildly in every direction. Space was so thick with the enemy that the Ken Pilot was destroying several enemies every minute. While they, like their capital ships, were slightly outnumbered, the experience of the Wildcat pilots and the Ken Pilot slowly helped them turn the tide, and despite taking losses, the Wildcats and Trobadores gradually established numerical superiority. The Insectoid fighters turned from attacking the human capital ships to defending themselves, and another tide was turned in the battle.

Suddenly the Insectoids brought their "Queen" into play, their massive flagship, flanked by several cruisers, to reinforce their center position. Quick nodded as the flagship closed on the battle, and then he pressed a button on his console.

There was a tremendous explosion. The flagship broke into two; the explosion send the surrounding ships careening out of control.

The center was clear. Quick cautiously sent ships in to exploit this weakness. But he still kept much of the fleet spread out.

So the Insectoids hadn't used any superweapons. That must mean that they simply didn't have any. Still, he took as few chances as possible.

However, within an hour it was apparent that the bugs had no surprises left to throw at them. Much of their fleet was destroyed;

many of their ships were damaged; and the rest were fleeing.

Quick ordered the fleet to pursue the fleeing ships, but not beyond the confines of the August system. He still felt odd, as if there were a trap waiting to be sprung. Perhaps the Insectoids wanted to lure them in smaller groups out of the system.

But if the Insectoids planned a trap, would they have waited until the bulk of their fleet had been destroyed to spring it? Unlikely.

But Quick continued to be cautious. Better to let some of the Insectoids escape than risk the fleet. They had accomplished their primary goal; to liberate August and destroy the bulk of the Insectoid fleet.

And, as he read the data on another panel, they had accomplished another goal as well... the War Admiral and his surviving crew were all safe.

It was another hour before the last shot was fired, but when all was done, the fleet had lost 14 ships, 24 more had been heavily damaged, and 40 more had suffered some degree of damage. And of course they had lost most of the War Admiral's abandoned decoy ships.

But the Insectoid losses had been much heavier. They had lost over 150 of their ships; and of their remaining 70 or so ships that had escaped, many were damaged or not fully functional. For the first time, they now had a numerical superiority of 2-1 or better in functional ships. If they continued to be careful, all that would be left to do would be to conduct a mopping up operation.

Quick opened up the interfleet. He spoke a few simple words. "We have liberated the space around August. We have avenged our losses at Vitalics. We have won," he said simply.

The wild cheers throughout the fleet in response lasted for several full minutes.

Levi heard the news in one of the resistance's northern bases.

"That's good news," said General Arkik. "But it doesn't help us here. There are still several million Insectoid troopers with goggles. We can't wait for them to starve, and they are pushing us back."

"Don't need to wait, now we have space superiority," said Levi.

"If you're thinking of using the fleet to bombard them, they're pretty well spread out," said Arkik. "I can imagine using them in a few specially focused battles, but-"

"No," said Levi. "Not what I mean. Now we can rid August of bugs, all at once."

Everyone in the underground command post was stunned.

"Well, speak, man!" said Arkik.

"Use weather inverters," said Levi. "Now that bugs can't destroy them from orbit, use them to lower temperature. When temperature low enough, bugs die."

Scattered throughout Concord were giant towers, weather inverters that could be used to manipulate the local weather conditions. They had been mostly off-line since the Insectoids had invaded, given that the Insectoids hadn't thought much of Alliance technology, and Levi hadn't wanted to do anything to draw the Insectoids' attention to the inverters, when the bugs had the power to destroy them. But now was a different story.

Arkik immediately made plans and dispatched troops. If this was to work, they would have to occupy a majority of the weather inverters all over Concord. There were none on Aridor, but given the shortage of grubfruit there and the distances involved, they could afford to simply wait for the bugs there to die out on their own.

Quick, alerted to Levi's plan, diverted one of his carriers to

August to provide support. The Insectoids still had hundreds of fighter craft and gravitator platforms on the planet, but Quick's forces were stretched thin, and this was all he could spare, even for a planet as important as the capital of the former alliance.

The War Admiral resumed command of the fleet after boarding The Quick. But first he had a private meeting with Quick in a conference room.

"That was some battle," said the War Admiral. "I don't think I could have done better."

"Thank you," said Quick, giving a smile. That meant a lot, coming from who it did.

"They're on the run now. We should still be cautious, but I think we mostly have mopping up to do at this point."

"I agree," said Quick.

"I want to thank you for coming back for me," said the War Admiral.

"You're welcome, but you had nothing to do with it," said Quick.

"Really?" said the War Admiral. "As I understand it, you attacked on their terms, on their grounds, where they were the strongest, and even when there was a fear that they might use some sort of superweapon."

"I had all the variables under control," said Quick calmly.

"Including guilt?" the War Admiral asked.

Quick just stared out with his silvery eyes and said nothing.

The War Admiral paused, looking down. "I had a bit of time to do some thinking when I was on the Glory. It helped me gain some perspective. I see now in a way we were both in similar situations, powerless to prevent things from happening around us, myself at Vitalics, and you at your base." The War Admiral paused. "I just want to say one more thing." He looked up at Quick, and extended his hand. "I forgive you."

Quick, still looking expressionless, reached out and shook his hands, and their eyes locked glances, and for a moment something, best described as a mixture of respect and understanding, passed between the two strong men.

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Idaho J. Took was glad to be in flying again, even if he was only in-atmosphere. Admiral Dulin's command ship in orbit, the carrier Sierra Oak, had taken on a number of Wildcats, including Took's special Wildcat-X fighter.

He allocated one squadron to each of the spaceports on the vid map all the pilots were looking at. Then he said, "K, you there?"

"Yes," said the Ken Pilot.

"Can you take the south-central spaceport in grid 20 by yourself?"

"Yes," said the Ken Pilot.

"Then let's go!"

Took had reserved the Sarney Sarittenden spaceport for himself and Obe's squadron "A". They swooped down without warning, blasting the fighters, transports, and gravitators on the ground. A few were taking to the air as they arrived, and Took's fighters made short work of them too.

"Yahoo!" Took cried as he blasted a row of Insectoid fighters, sending a wave of Insectoids scurrying into a hanger.

"See how you like this, fellas," said Took, diving low to land a few accurate laser bursts through the doors of the open hanger before pulling up.

The laser bolts must have ignited fuel or armaments, because the

hanger blew up right as Took passed over it.

"That one's for Colonel Darley," said Took.

His fighters continued to cause mayhem as they ruled the skies over the spaceports. Took fired on more ground based fighters, and explosions rocked the spaceport. "And those are a few for Vitalics," Took added.

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"We're in position," Croft radioed. His squad had been air dropped by gravitator air support onto the weather inverter in central Sarney. This was necessary because central Sarney was still firmly in the hands of the bugs, and it was expected that resistance would be fiercest here, once the bugs figured out what was happening. After his team secured the upper levels of the building the tech team was dropped, and then the gravitators left, heading for their next dropoff point. Croft's squad was charged with protecting the tech team for as long as it took to get the weather inverter operational. Because this inverter was still in a heavily occupied area, Croft had called on his best people--the Clapper, the Silencer, and several others.

Croft had the regular commandos sabotage the elevators and stand guard at the stairwells. It was over 200 flights up, so it would take some time for the bugs to get here. The only other avenue of approach, from the air, he, the Clapper, and the Silencer, and a few troopers covered from the exposed walkway along the edges of the building.

They had destroyed nearly all of the Insectoid fighters, but not all the gravitators were stationed at the spaceports, and they could be used to stage attacks, once the Insectoids figured out what they were doing.

At first, it didn't seem the Insectoids didn't even know they were there. Croft could see them distantly buzzing about below.

But then the tech team got the inverter operational, and it started to get cold, fast. In the space of an hour, it dropped ten degrees, and the rate of temperature drop was accelerating. Then it dropped another ten degrees in another half hour.

Croft had the troopers break out the heavy clothing. Levi had estimated that only a few minutes of below-freezing temperatures would be required to incapacitate the Insectoids, and a day or two of such weather would be sufficient to kill them all.

Suddenly Croft heard a faint whine, and saw a gravitator climb within view. He blasted it, sending it spiraling down to the ground.

"All units, they're on to us," Croft throat miked.

Croft could hear the roar of more gravitators rising, and these started to fire back. Croft hit the ground as he fired, but he was exposed here; as two more gravitators crashed down, he retreated to the doorway, where he would at least have partial cover. He redeployed several of the troopers defending the stairwell to the outer walkways. Croft took one side of the building, the Silencer another, some troopers a third, and the Clapper and a few more troopers the fourth.

The gravitators were coming in larger numbers now. Croft was shooting them down as fast as he could while trying to avoid getting hit himself. The Clapper was sending gravitators smacking against the walls of neighboring buildings before they would plunge to the ground below. The Silencer was shooting them as fast as he could with his one good arm. The other resistance fighters were doing the best they could.

But they were being overwhelmed.

"Need some help here," said Croft into his throat mike.

"Just hang on," came Arkik's voice.

"Easy for you to say," said Croft.

The temperature was dropping fast, and even Croft was getting cold now. Surely it must be freezing already.

But the Insectoid kept coming fast and furious. Croft shot one, and the Insectoid hung there, suspended in mid-air by its gravitator; he shot another, and it went spinning down on the ground. But then a large group of gravitators charged his side of the building, led by several gravitator platforms.

"Need help!" said Croft.

No sooner had he said that than he saw a fighter streak through the narrow gap between the inverter tower and the building across the street. The fighter (Croft thought it was a Wildcat, but it went by too quickly for him to confirm), purposely flew close enough so that its backwash would cause havoc; indeed several gravitators cracked together, and two platforms flipped over, sending their occupants crashing to the ground.

But the Insectoids were still coming. The fighter made another pass, this time with lasers blazing. Insectoids and their gravitators burst into pieces in midair.

In a moment, the area was clear.

"Thanks for the air support," said Croft in the comm.

"Don't ever say I don't do anything for you," came Arkik's voice.

"Intruders in the east stairwell," broke in a new voice. "Coming from above and below-" the voice cut out.

Above and below? Some of them must have landed on the roof.

Croft rushed inside to the east stairwell. By the time he got there, all was silent; there were dead bodies on the ground, both Insectoid and human.

The guards had been overrun.

"Silencer, I need you," said Croft, running to the inverter's control room.

He heard sounds of weapons fire and he ran faster. When he arrived he saw a large number of dead Insectoid bodies, a terrified tech team, and the Silencer, coolly lowering his gun.

"Thanks-" Croft started to say, when the Silencer's gun whipped up again, firing two shots in his direction. Croft ducked down, spinning around just in time to see two Insectoids falling.

"We've taken some losses in the troops on the outer walkways," said the Silencer. "I suggest we withdraw our defense perimeter to here.

Croft nodded, recalling the remaining troops as well as the Clapper.

The Insectoids made another attempt to rush the building a few minutes later, but they repelled the attack.

It was getting colder and colder.

"Is it freezing yet?" Croft asked, his teeth clattering.

"Almost," said one of the techs, studying a gauge.

They stood guard, their guns aimed at the exits, and waited. There was nothing else they could do.

And then a few minutes past, and a few more, and then it was quiet. Cold and quiet.

All over August, Insectoids dropped in their tracks and huddled in the ground, trying to stay warm. In a few hours, however, they would all be dead.

When Croft finally ventured outside the control room, he looked down one of the stairwells, and saw several dozen Insectoids several levels below, huddled in a mass. They had been slowly climbing and planning an attack, but had been stopped just in time.

All over August the situation was the same. The Weather Inverters didn't provide coverage over 100% of Concord, and not all were functional, but enough were functioning to create an overlap even in



areas without coverage to instantly wipe out more than 95% of the Insectoid troopers. At Levi's direction the inverters kept the temperature cold for 48 hours, just to be sure. They would all be cold for a while, but it wouldn't kill them.

When they raised the temperature again and Croft ventured out, he looked out across August from the street level.

The streets were strangely silent. This part of the city had only yesterday held tens of thousands of Insectoids.

Now all that remained were their huddled bodies on the street.

Croft went over to several and kicked them, just to be sure. There was no reaction. Levi had been right again. They weren't merely in hibernation; they were dead. Only later did Croft find out that Levi had actually gone out during the cold and "sampled" some of the bodies to make sure they were dead before permitting the temperature to be raised.

After that there was still some mopping up to be done, in those isolated areas where a few troopers had survived. But essentially, the battle was over.

There was a celebration two days later on the Plaza of Heroes. General Arkik, Croft, and other senior resistance leaders were honored. Crowds cheered as medals were handed out. However, none of the officers of the fleet was present; they were too busy chasing down the remnants of the Insectoid fleet and providing air support on planets still resisting the invaders. But War Admiral Norman North did address the crowds by holovision.

"Working together, on the ground, in the air, and in space, we have all freed our worlds," said the War Admiral. "As most of you now know, most of the fleet was destroyed at Vitalics, but I took what ships that survived and fled to regroup. My small fleet was tracked and pursued for nearly 20 years. Our losses were heavy but we never gave up, we always persevered. We always knew that some day we would fight back and return."

There was a burst of applause from the crowd.

"You have demonstrated a similar commitment and endurance. You have endured 20 years of slavery, oppression, and death. Without external support and against overwhelming odds you have fought back," said the War Admiral. "It is truly your tenacity that has freed August, the tenacity of your leaders, General Arkik, Clifford Croft, and many others, as well as each and every middle ranking and foot soldier who fought this war. You should be praised with great praise!"

There was a tremendous applause from the crowd.

The War Admiral had to wait several minutes for it to die down. "But never forget the reason for your sacrifice. The political leaders let us down. They let us be lulled into ambush. It is because of their folly that we found ourselves in this situation. In the future, we should always strive for peace, but we should always, always be prepared to fully defend ourselves, whatever the cost!"

The applause was thunderous and unrelenting.

And then the awards were given out. Many of Croft's deeds, such as locating the first spacegate, distracting the Insectoid fleet, and rescuing the Glory's crew, were recounted, though the specific details were purposely kept quiet. Croft found himself fighting to keep back the tears as he was given the planet's highest award, The Champion of August. When he was given a chance to speak he said, "Thank you. You're giving me this award, but it really belongs to more than just me," said Croft. "It also belongs to the friends and allies who fought at my side," he said, naming the Silencer, the Clapper, Mongo, Preston, and Red Sally, "and many others, some of whom gave their lives so that we could be free. Thank you again," said Croft, his voice stammering a bit

at the end.

A cheer went up for several minutes.

Arkik seemed similarly moved when he received his award, and they both stood while others received lesser awards.

But not everyone was at the awards ceremony; Levi and the Silencer among them. Levi had pooh-poohed the idea of receiving a medal, even though he had played a greater role than most; he didn't want any special attention, unless it was to receive an award for his cooking.

"I get a medal, then I get people bothering me, what good that do?" Levi had said.

And the Silencer wasn't there either.

Both of them were deep in the palace, Sarney Sarittenden itself, in the heart of the secure rotunda.

Levi was typing away at a keyboard at a secure terminal while the Silencer stood quietly behind him.

"I think I found it," said Levi suddenly.

The Silencer leaned forward, but he couldn't read Insectoid.

"Where is she?"

"Long file.... wait... wait one moment...."

The tension was unbearable for the Silencer.

Levi rapidly scanned the file, knowing how anxious the Silencer was for news of his wife.

Finally Levi stopped, and looked up.

"Well?" said the Silencer.

Levi looked uncomfortable.

"Well!" yelled the Silencer.

Levi looked down sadly, and shook his head.

"No!" yelled the Silencer, staggering into a chair.

Levi put an arm on the Silencer.

"How? When?" said the Silencer.

"A few years ago," said Levi. "Complications during gene surgery."

"What?"

"They were trying to modify Graftonites, make them supersoldiers, part human, part bug. She died during complications of experimental gene surgery," said Levi, looking almost as upset as the Silencer.

"Annie!" the Silencer screamed, as the top of his lungs. He gave another, loud shriek, and then he broke down to the ground sobbing.

Levi put his arms around the Silencer, trying to comfort him, as he cried uncontrollably.

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The Graftonite home defenders finally overran the Insectoid compound on Grafton. At a great cost of lives and material effort, the Insectoids had established a four square mile beachhead near the coastline. But they had never been able to expand beyond that perimeter, and they always had to constantly send in reinforcements to secure what they had.

When the reinforcements stopped coming the Graftonites broke into the compounds and slaughtered the remaining Insectoids. The Graftonites were more than bitter; a number of them had been killed, or captured for experimentation. It was a relatively small number, compared to those taken or enslaved on August, but for Grafton, which had a small population, it was quite a pain.

So Insectoids were shot where they stood, even if they were trying to surrender, or shot in the back as they ran. And as the invading force penetrated deeper into the compound they found the

experimentation labs.

One patrol entered a lab to find a very young woman, sitting under a helmet that connected with wires to a machine. She seemed to be asleep. A Grafton resistance fighter unstrapped her and took her out, carrying her into the light.

Her facial features strongly resembled the Silencer's wife, Annie Oakley, only she looked much, much younger.

### Chapter 13: Revenge of the Insectoids

"Things seem to be going well," Quick commented.

"Yes," said the War Admiral, sitting in the conference room on The Quick. "We've virtually eliminated the Insectoid presence on all our worlds with temperature controls; and on the others planets the resistance is pushing forward, with our help. Since we can now supply our side and they can't, victory is only a matter of time. On the fleet level we continue to try and track down Insectoid ships, having destroyed several. But there have been no encounters in several days. It seems the rest are on the run. We've taken the fight out of them, so it seems."

"Good," said Quick.

"Have you given any thought to the shape of things once all is secure?" said the War Admiral.

"Yes," said Quick.

"Any suggestions?" said the War Admiral. "Most politicians from the last government are long since dead or gone. I think it's an opportunity to start fresh. We could go back to having the two major governmental systems, with you running your Directorate and we electing new leaders for the League, but I was wondering what you would think about combining all our planets into one-"

"That's an interesting idea," said Quick, cutting him off.

"Well?" said the War Admiral.

"If you're looking for my opinion, I won't be giving it," said Quick. "In fact, now that the situation has stabilized, I'll be leaving."

"Leaving?" said the War Admiral, stunned. "Where? You can't! You're the best administrator there ever was. How can you leave your own people?"

Quick smiled slightly. "You know, at first I missed it intensely. But when I was away from it for a while, I realized I grew tired of statescraft. It began to become the same thing, over and over. I need new challenges." His statement seemed prepared, as if he had rehearsed it often, as if he had anticipated the need to say it.

"Rebuilding our societies is a new challenge, if I'm not mistaken," said the War Admiral.

"As always, you strip aside my secondary reasons, always digging for the real reason," said Quick, smiling again. "That's what I always liked about you. All right, let me be direct. To put it simply, my allies have recalled me."

"Do they have that much control over you?"

"Not any more," said Quick. "I could stay if I wanted. But they presented compelling reasons for me to go. For one thing, if I stay, I as well as my allies will be looked for."

"Looked for? By whom? We've destroyed the Insectoids!"

"For another, there are more pressing long term issues I have to deal with," said Quick. He looked at the War Admiral. "I mean no disrespect when I say you're just the person to clean things up in the short term. I have confidence that whatever you decide will be right. But as for me, I have to go."

"But... I'm a military man, not a civilian administrator," said the War Admiral.

"Then find administrators that you trust and put them in charge," said Quick. "I'll be leaving tomorrow. I was hoping that we could have dinner tonight."

The War Admiral nodded, still a bit stunned.

The Blue Capybara was making similar goodbyes to Croft. They were alone, in a room in Sarney Sarittenden, and the Meddler felt free enough to show himself.

"I have to go now, Clifford," said the Meddler.

"You've got to stay one step ahead of the law, eh?" said Croft, giving a small smile. "Before you go, can you tell me one thing?"

"If I can."

"Do you know what happened to Professor Capybara?"

The Meddler Capybara shrugged. "I'm afraid not."

"Is that why you have to go, because you don't want the other Capys catching up to you?"

"Partially," said the Meddler. "But I'm also a wandering spirit, and I like to go where the action is. For what it's worth, Clifford, you've made a fine assistant."

"Assistant?" said Croft, his eyebrows raised.

"For a semi-sentient, of course," said the Meddler, adjusting his bow tie.

"Of course," said Croft, giving a small smile. "Will we meet again?"

"Given the fact that you always seem to go to the most dangerous places, it's certainly possible," said the Meddler. He reached out and extended a paw. Croft solemnly shook it.

"No need to see me out," said the Meddler.

"Of course," said Croft. "Goodbye, my friend."

The Meddler left.

Croft smiled. The Meddler didn't want him accompanying him because he didn't want Croft to see his secret method of transportation. Well, that was all right, Croft didn't need to. He tapped the minicam inside his belt.

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The first sign of trouble anyone detected was when they abruptly lost contact with a patrol over Whenfor. A cruiser battlegroup reported an Insectoid incursion, and that was the last anyone heard of them.

The Glory, which, at the War Admiral's insistence, was being repaired, still wasn't combat ready, so he took passage in the Sierra Oak with Admiral Dulin and a task force, ready for anything.

When they arrived at the Whenfor system their scanners detected the cruiser group in orbit around Whenfor. But the comm officer was unable to raise the ships.

"What about the planet?" said the War Admiral. Whenfor, a major trading hub, had been one of the first planets liberated, several weeks ago.

"Nothing," said the comm officer. "No transmissions, nothing."

"All stop!" said the War Admiral. He turned to comm. "Are you telling me that on a planet of several billion people there is not a single transmission?"

"No," said the comm officer.

"Do you think they're all dead?" Dulin whispered.

"No," said the sensor officer. "Even at this distance, we can still detect human life on the planet."

"What, then?" Dulin asked. "Some sort of virus that strikes

people dumb?"

"A possibility," said the War Admiral. "But that wouldn't explain what happened to our ships in orbit. Do sensors show any sign of battle damage to the ships? Are there any life signs?"

"We're too far out to detect lifesigns on the ships," said the sensor officer. "But zoom scans show no battle damage. It's as if they simply parked there."

The War Admiral's expression hardened. "Do we have towing equipment aboard?"

"Yes," said Dulin.

"I want two fighters prepped for launch immediately," said the War Admiral, giving a stream of instructions. "Is the Ken Pilot available?" he asked automatically.

"The Ken Pilot left," said Dulin.

And then the War Admiral remembered. It had been only a few days ago, but other matters had pushed it out of his mind.

\*\*\*\*\*  
Three days earlier:

The Ken Pilot entered the War Admiral's quarter. "A minute of your time, War Admiral?"

"I'm a bit busy, is it quick?" asked the War Admiral.

"Yes," said the Ken Pilot. "I just wanted to say goodbye."

"Goodbye?" said the War Admiral. "Why?"

"The shooting war has all but stopped," said the Ken Pilot. "I'm done."

"You look sad," said the War Admiral.

"I thought the war, killing them, would help me get over Amy," said the Ken Pilot. "But it hasn't. I don't feel joy at killing them; I don't feel anything."

The War Admiral nodded. "We've all had more than our share of grief over the years, but losing a spouse is perhaps the hardest thing to overcome. What are your plans?"

"I don't know," said the Ken Pilot. "I'm going to wander around for a while."

"Where? For how long?"

"Until I find a reason for living again, or not," said the Ken Pilot.

"Are you sure you won't reconsider?" the War Admiral asked. "You can still have a life, with us. You have friends here."

The Ken Pilot stared.

"Well, I know Took is fond of you."

The Ken Pilot extended his hand. "Goodbye, War Admiral."

North shook the proffered hand, looking him in the eye. "Good luck, David. May you find what you're looking for."

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"It's not fair, Obe," said Took, flying his Wildcat-X towards the Whenfor system. A small but sturdy wire trailed from the bottom of his fighter, connecting to Obe's fighter, who was flying several miles behind him.

They were flying in slowly, as per the War Admiral's orders, making a journey that should take minutes take several hours, and, as they got close to Whenfor and the lifeless cruisers, Took was restless.

"I mean, when it comes to investigating a killer virus, who do they send out first if not me, Obe?"

"The Ken Pilot?" said Obe.

"Don't bring up that name with me, Obe. Do you know he never even

said goodbye before he left?" said Took. "I had to find out about it afterwards, from a stranger."

"I'm not a stranger," said Obe.

"And why did he say goodbye to you but not me?"

"He didn't," said Obe. "I just saw him go. You have to let up on him, Iday. He's still depressed from the loss of his wife."

"We've all been under stress," said Took. "I was almost blown to bits a few weeks ago on the Glory. How's that for stress?" He frowned, studying his instruments, which were starting to flicker.

"Got something funny here," said Took.

"What is it, Took?" said the War Admiral, who had been monitoring his channel all along.

"My power levels were fluctuating," said Took. "Looks like they're all right now. Wait a moment-"

Suddenly his transmission cut off. His ship had totally lost power.

"Took? Took?" said the War Admiral. "Obe, swing around and get out of there!"

Obe turned his Wildcat around and accelerated; a few moments later there was a jerk on the line, and Took's Wildcat was pulled along with Obe's.

"-thanks buddy," came Took's voice again.

"Was it a power failure, Took?" said the War Admiral.

"Yes sir," said Took.

"Mark their locations," the War Admiral. "How close were they to the cruisers?"

"About 30 miles out," said the sensor officer.

"We'll have to figure out a way to rescue them," said the War Admiral. "They're undoubtedly still on the ship, as long as their oxygen holds out. But first, we have to make contact with the rest of the fleet."

"What is it, Admiral?" Dulin asked.

"It's the weapon they used against us at Vitalics," said the War Admiral. "The weapon we heard about for years but never saw. It's some sort of energy draining mist. And my hunch is that Whenfor is only the beginning. Raise the rest of the fleet now!"

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