

# Predator

by Fred Saberhagen

Talavera sometimes thought that being on this kind of a patrol was in some ways a lot like hunting, walking the woods with a sporting weapon under your arm. But of course there were many other ways in which this business was a whole lot different.

Talavera was a radioman-gunner, and occupied the rear seat of the two-man recon ship. Whenever he raised his eyes from his own display panel and controls, he could look over Captain Colby's shoulder, and when Colby happened to turn round in his combat chair, Talavera could see the captain's face. At the moment, their small craft was a good many light years from Earth, trying to spy on a bigger Vasudan military vessel.

As it happened, Talavera's instruments were the first to pick up the mysterious object, at a range of almost a thousand kilometers, and he called the captain's attention to it at once. A minute later, the main detectors had locked on, and the onboard computer had matched the unknown object's radar profile with that of a known type of Vasudan lifeboat.

"I'm going to get a little closer," said the captain tersely.

And when Colby had maneuvered to within ten kilometers of the object, there was no longer any doubt that what they had found was indeed a Vasudan lifeboat.

"Can't have come here by itself," Colby muttered on the private intercom.

"No sir," Talavera agreed. It was obvious that a sizable enemy ship, almost certainly the one they had been looking for, was somewhere nearby, or had been recently.

The Terran recon craft was prowling on the outskirts of a solar system devoid of naturally habitable planets. But interspersed with the system's lifeless planetary children were several thick belts of asteroids, many of the orbiting bodies not much more than dust particles. With this kind of configuration, the system offered endless opportunities for ships of any size to hide. The Vasudans were known to have done some mining here, for certain rare and important minerals, and a big part of the Terran recon mission was to learn more about that operation.

Now, at Colby's orders, Talavera worked with swift delicacy to establish subspace radio contact with their home base, exchanging signals with an effective speed many times that of light. Breaking radio silence was always somewhat risky, though coding and carefully beamed transmission minimized the danger. But the discovery of an enemy lifeboat seemed to offer such a special opportunity that the captain considered it necessary to inform the people back at base, even before investigating further. The war between Vasuda and the Galactic Terran Alliance had now dragged on for almost fourteen standard Terran years, and by now each side was in some ways well known to the other; but the actual capture of any substantial amount of hardware was an uncommon event. And the fact of a lifeboat suggested the possibility of being able to take prisoners, and prisoners were always valuable.

Presently, the decoded voice of a Terran operations officer sounded from a speaker in the recon ship's cabin. "You have to investigate, of course. But watch yourselves. Could be some kind of a booby trap, or trick."

"Yeah, thanks for nothing," Colby muttered aloud, to Talavera and to himself. Then, opening for transmission again, he responded officially: "Acknowledge, Base. Preparing for EVA."

Moving at the captain's orders, Talavera put on his space suit, armed himself with a handgun--the only portable weapon available-- and went out through the airlock. A minute later he was approaching the

enemy lifeboat, a stubby cylinder about ten meters long. As far as Terran instruments could tell, it wasn't emitting any kind of beacon. There was no visible lock on the outer door of its airlock, only a simple handle by which, he supposed, it could be opened.

Using tightbeam communicator, Talavera reported on the situation to the captain, who was of course also watching through a small video camera mounted on the radioman-gunner's shoulder. Colby had the recon ship's modest armament focused on the lifeboat from a couple of kilometers away.

The next step, of course, was to look inside it. Talavera got his orders.

Pistol drawn, he went in. He could tell when the inner door of the lock opened that there was comfortable gravity inside, and the interior, virtually all one compartment, was nicely pressurized. But he kept his helmet on, and its airmikes picked up the sound of ragged breathing, from a single pair of lungs.

The cramped space he had now entered was dimly lit, and seemed to be almost filled with bunks. But only one of them was occupied. Talavera pointed his handgun, then slowly lowered it again.

There was only one Vasudan in the lifeboat, and he was badly wounded. There were bloodstains, some old, some fresh-looking, on the clothing and the bunk. The figure in the bunk had two arms, two legs, two eyes and a mouth, arranged in a basic body plan not too different from that of Terran humanity. But, as was normal for his race, the Vasudan's skin was the texture of leather, mottled brown, and his four limbs appeared to be all bone and sinew where they protruded from its clothing.

The figure turned its head and looked at Talavera, and raised one empty hand in a feeble gesture, that might have been intended as a greeting.

Being taken prisoner was not necessarily the worst thing that could happen in this war--certainly not, if you were a Vasudan.

Moments later, the man in the bunk spoke to Talavera. "I have been trying to reach you. To reach your ship." The Vasudan's voice came through clearly, processed into crisply enunciated Terran Standard by the little translator he was wearing, part of which was visible in the form of a small microphone projecting near his mouth. The translated and reprocessed mechanical voice sounded incongruously strong and healthy. "I have a message of transcendent importance for all your people."

"Sure you do," said Talavera immediately. He knew that the Vasudan translating devices worked both ways, and as soon as the words had left his mouth, he wondered if they would be rendered to his prisoner as a sincere expression of agreement, the exact opposite of his intention. But on second thought he supposed it didn't matter in the least.

"Take it easy," he added. "I'll be right back." Nodding to the Vasudan in what he hoped was a reassuring way, he turned and went back to the airlock, because he thought that from there it would be easier to confer with the captain. Their exchange of words was brief.

It would have been ideal if the recon ship could have towed the whole lifeboat home, but that was obviously impossible. Talavera hastily scanned the lifeboat's interior for any small objects that might be of military value, but could identify nothing.

"Of transcendent importance," repeated the Vasudan when Talavera came back to him. Then he added: "Our former modes of conduct are inadequate."

Whatever. "All right, buddy, I'm not going to hurt you. Not as long as you admit that for you the war's all over." And Talavera helped the wounded prisoner get his space helmet on before he tried to move him.

He was able to leave the translator in place.

"The war is over for us all," the crisp mechanical voice responded, between intervals of ragged breathing. "The cleansing force of the ancients comes upon us."

Well, the translators weren't perfect, Talavera reminded himself, after pondering that last remark for a moment. At least he didn't think it sounded like anything a man would say who was determined to go on fighting.

The prisoner made no objection to being moved to the Terran ship, and the transfer was soon accomplished, the abandoned lifeboat left behind. Atmosphere and gravity inside the Terran ship were close enough to Vasudan standards for the prisoner to feel as comfortable as his wounds would let him.

While Captain Colby remained in the pilot's seat, ready to take immediate action at the first sign of renewed enemy presence nearby, Talavera got the prisoner established in his own bunk, brought out the medical kit, and set about trying to bandage the worst of the alien body's wounds. Terran and Vasudan were biologically similar in many ways, but also different enough so that Talavera didn't want to attempt any additional treatment. If it had been an Earthman he was patching up, he wouldn't have been optimistic about the patient's chances for survival.

While Colby concentrated on getting his ship moving again, the Vasudan continued the conversation--actually it was more of a monologue--he had begun when he first laid eyes on Talavera. He kept talking, despite his injuries, and what must have been additional pain induced by Talavera's clumsy treatment. He introduced himself as Tak--at least that was the way his name sounded, coming through translation. And he kept reminding the two Terrans that he had surrendered deliberately--at least that was how he saw the situation.

"Why did I do that? you must be asking yourselves."

"Because you had no choice?" asked Colby over his shoulder. In spite of all the other demands on his attention, maneuvering the ship and watching for the enemy, the captain was trying to listen with half an ear to what was going on in the cabin behind him.

Tak ignored the comment. His attitude, even flattened out and helpless as he was, seemed to say that he hadn't come their ship to listen to them, but to preach. "And the answer is this: because there is something of overwhelming importance that must be explained to all the Terran people, on all their worlds. I come before you as the Hammer of Light."

"What was that?" asked Colby, frowning. "He comes before us as what?"

"Don't know what he means, sir." Talavera had now returned to his own combat chair, sitting before his own controls and panel display. As gunner and radioman, he had plenty of things to keep him busy too. "Sounded like 'Hammer of Light.'"

Time passed while Tak, strapped into Talavera's bunk, kept gibbering about some great new Galactic force, before which all other beings must bow down. The "ancients," whoever they were, had known about this entity, but modern races had forgotten. Talavera was sure he heard the word "Shiva" once or twice. All his own memory could connect with that word was a vague image of some ancient Earthly god.

"Does he have a fever?" Colby asked his crewman, after a while. "The way he's babbling."

"Damned if I could tell, captain. If he was an Earthman, I'd say no. Skin didn't feel that hot."

The Terrans were not bothering to restrict their talk to private intercom, and some of what they were saying to each other must have come through to the prisoner. He began to speak more slowly now, with pauses as if for thought, as if to refute the charge that he was babbling. But whether what he was saying actually made more sense was hard for Talavera to tell.

But presently, what Tak was telling his captors began to sound like important news indeed. He said his wounds were not the result of combat against another Terran ship, nor of an accident.

Now Talavera was paying attention to every word, though he kept his face turned toward his panel. Now and then the captain's head swiveled round, and he glanced back at the occupied bunk. Unless Tak's whole story was indeed a fever dream, it began to sound like there had indeed been serious mutiny aboard the Vasudan. A mutiny connected with, triggered by a dispute over, the same matter of overwhelming importance that Tak kept talking about. The immediate cause of rebellion had been the failure of some of the men on board--including, it sounded like, the spacecraft commander and most of the officers--to see and acknowledge the glorious truth that the Hammer of Light proclaimed to them.

Captain Colby turned his head again, caught his crewman's eye, and made a gesture indicating that he wanted to communicate on intercom. When they had both switched over to throat mikes and headsets, and the prisoner, and the prisoner's translator, would presumably be unable to hear their conversation, the captain said. "Talavera, this could be very big news. Better get on the horn to Base again."

"Yessir." With every reason to believe that a powerful enemy was somewhere near, normal procedure called for maintaining radio silence. But the information now being conveyed by the prisoner sounded important enough to make the risk of signaling worthwhile. Whatever the true nature of Tak's transcendent force of Light might be, whether any such thing actually existed or not, the report that some Vasudan spacers were ready to mutiny over it was news of the first significance.

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"I don't think you understand, Base. So far, getting him to talk has not been a problem. Getting him to shut up might become one, if he keeps jabbering like this."

"Are you recording what he says?"

Colby glanced back at Talavera, who shook his head. "Negative, Base. We haven't been, so far. We're both of us already trying to do about three things at once."

Just flying the ship, in this locale so thick with dust and rocks, was anything but routine. Before Colby could dash for home with his prisoner, he had to maneuver to the proper subspace node, and that meant some groping and jockeying in normal space; his autopilot could accomplish most of this maneuvering, but the captain had to keep an eye on the process. Talavera was fully alert also, but while going through the routines of his job he had time also to talk to the prisoner.

When Talavera felt able to look away from his panel for a little while, he turned his head and asked the prisoner: "So, tell me again, Tak, what happened on your ship? I'm not sure I understood you the first time. How'd you get hurt?"

The wounded man seemed to be trying, and what he said was at least consistent with his earlier story. Not all Vasudans, apparently, were willing to see the Light, obvious as its truth must be to all right-thinking beings. Some kind of mutiny had indeed flared up on his warship--the Hammer of Light rebels had been in a distinct minority, and had failed to take over the vessel. The most they had been able to achieve had been the freeing of one of their number in a lifeboat, to carry on the work of spreading the

all-important message.

Seeing that he had the full attention of one of his captors, at least for the moment, Tak kept emphasizing, trying to pound the point home with feeble gestures, that this transcendent Galactic force--Shiva, again--foretold by the Ancient Ones, was even now present, or very near.

"You mean near us in space? Near this ship, this very moment?"

"That is what I mean. But the fools on my own ship would not believe me when I tried to warn them." And there Tak had to pause for a spasm of ragged breathing.

At the captain's urging, Talavera attempted some interrogation on what seemed to the Terrans to be more practical matters. But questioning Tak about the size of the Vasudan vessel from which he had escaped did little good; it was like pulling teeth to get him to discuss its type, armament, or its original mission. His conversation was almost totally confined to one subject. But virtually everything he said confirmed, at least indirectly, the existence of serious conflict dividing the crew of the Vasudan warship.

Tak himself was a fanatical member of what seemed to be a religious-philosophical sect, calling themselves something that translated as the Hammer of Light, that had to some extent broken away from the rest of the Vasudan race.

And again and again that mysterious name kept coming up: something, or someone, whose name came through the squawker in translation as Shiva, or the Shivans. The position taken by the extremist, Hammer of Light heretics was that the Shivans should not, must not, be resisted.

"Do you know, Terrans, anything of the ancient legends of my people?"

"Not a whole lot," admitted Captain Colby, cautiously.

There was nothing Tak wanted more than to educate his captors on that subject. Pausing now and then for a sip of water, he talked on. Talavera and the captain learned of the fatalistic legends, the stories of the Ancient Ones. Much of what the Vasudan said was obscure to his audience, and remained so even when Tak tried to explain. But one idea was coming through more or less clearly now: that of an avenging power or force, by which the Galaxy sought to keep its subspace levels free of intruding vermin. "And Shiva is very near. Shiva was almost upon my ship when I left it."

"The vermin is us, I suppose?" Colby asked over his shoulder. "Terrans in general?"

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And now, the area of most dangerous maneuvering within the system had been reached. "The node is near now," muttered the captain. "Just a little farther--"

And that was the point at which the Vasudan ship attacked. As the captain feared, they had probably been waiting in ambush at the node.

Talavera thought the Vasudan vessel was almost certainly the one from which Tak had defected; but whether it was the same or not made little difference, as it came hurtling out of a dust cloud's concealment toward Colby's ship.

For just a moment before the enemy struck, Talavera could hear it coming. The sound of a ship's passage through airless space might be heard aboard another ship, through the medium of the wave of virtual particles that a passage at such speed evoked.

The interior of the little recon craft was suddenly filled with slamming impacts, deafening noise, the blinding flare of weapons, brutal acceleration despite the buffering effect of interior gravity. Colby fought his ship as best he could, Talavera used skillfully such weapons as he had available, but in moments it was obvious that they were about to be overwhelmed by superior Vasudan force. At least there was only one enemy ship, and it must have been weakened somewhat by internal combat, that had cost it at least part of its crew. But it was still too strong for the lightly armed Terran recon craft. Nothing that Talavera or Colby could throw at the Vasudan made a dent in its defenses.

Again, the great, slamming impacts of near misses and minor hits.

The Terran's hull had been breached once, and Talavera could feel a trickle of blood coming down his forehead. It was lucky for him and for the ship that he did not lose consciousness, because fragments from the same blast had injured the captain too. Colby was slumping in his seat.

Fortunately, the hull was self-sealing, and the ship still functional. They were not dead yet, though they were very near it.

Colby, before passing out, managed to break contact with the enemy, but he couldn't get far away enough to hide, and his situation was now hopeless.

"Captain. Captain?" Talavera tried for a while on intercom, and then gave up.

Seeing that the spacecraft commander had been seriously wounded, Talavera was able to activate an emergency set of dual controls, and from his gunner's position assumed command of all ship's systems. Colby, still strapped into his combat chair, was drifting in and out of consciousness, but part of the time he could at least watch what was going on.

On his screens Talavera could see the enemy, the Vasudan destroyer, once more coming after them for the kill.

In his desperation, Talavera manipulated his subspace radio equipment in such a way as to broadcast freespace vibrations, at top volume and all across the available frequency spectrum. The recon ship was letting out the loudest howl that it could utter.

Colby had regained consciousness in time to observe his radioman's action. "What the hell are you doing, Talavera? Give me back the con--" And by using the master switch that was on his panel, the controls of course were his for the taking.

But the captain's protest was in vain, his action came too late to interfere with what his crewman had just done.

Moments later, just as the little recon ship was about to be destroyed, a ship of a kind that neither Terran had ever seen before responded, bursting out of subspace through what appeared to be a red hole in the fabric of reality. The captain was on intercom again, shouting something, but Talavera didn't know what, he couldn't listen. All he could do was watch, as the incredible shape went pouncing--there seemed no other word for it--on the lesser Vasudan predator that had been about to blast the Terran recon vessel out of existence.

Talavera might be temporarily paralyzed by what he saw, but Colby wasn't. He had now reclaimed command, and the stranger's miraculous intervention gave him the second or two he needed to microjump in intra-system distance, getting to a node that allowed him to escape at interstellar speed a few moments later. In moments, the strange conflict they had glimpsed was billions of kilometers behind.

Colby slumped again.

Talavera got the controls back. This time, since the captain's override had already been used once, it was necessary for him to stumble his half-dazed way over to the captain's position and flip the main switch back again.

Then the wounded gunner moved unsteadily over to his bunk, now stained with Vasudan blood, and looked down at the wounded occupant. "You were right," he said to Tak. "Shiva was coming for us. Shiva came. I watched it take your ship."

"Blessed be the Light," breathed Tak.

"But," said Talavera, "Shiva's not getting this one." He put out a hand and grabbed a nearby stanchion, to emphasize which ship he meant.

Tak looked at him. "Then why did you call it?" And at the same time, the voice of the wounded captain sounded from behind him. Colby had managed to rally one more time.

"Talavera. What the hell did you think you were doing there, sending a beacon for them? I saw that transmission, high-volume, in the clear. I could charge you with treason. Mutiny."

Talavera dragged himself back to his own seat, where he slumped down wearily. "I wasn't giving up, captain. I was hoping to get help. Didn't figure it was much of a chance, but it was the only chance I could see. And I think it worked."

Colby was looking at him blankly.

The gunner sighed, and tried again. "Ever spend much time out in the woods, captain? No, not where you come from. I have, though." He paused, letting his gaze drift around the cabin, looking for the words he needed. "Small animal, hunted by a big one. Almost always the little one keeps as quiet as it can, the same as it tries to stay out of sight.

"But when it knows it's almost caught--I mean right at the last damn moment, when the pearly gates are yawning--or the big pearly teeth--then there's just one more move that it can make. That's when it gives up on keeping quiet, and saving breath, and lets out the loudest scream it's got.

"There's a reason it does that: there just might be an even bigger predator somewhere near; and if there is, and the big one hears the scream, it knows there's game on hand. And if the big one comes on the scene before the screamer's dead--well, it's a whole new game, and just maybe the little screamer can

get away.

"Captain, after what our guy here told us, about Shiva and all that, I thought there was a fair chance that we had a bigger predator nearby. Well, maybe only a small chance. But better than none." And he looked at his commanding officer hopefully.

But the captain was not going to understand, though his eyes were open and he looked thoughtful. With a chill running along the back of his neck, Talavera realized that the captain had just died, before his radioman could learn whether or not his explanation had been believed.

As for the Vasudan . . .

Turning his gaze in that direction, Talavera found it practically impossible to read emotion on the alien face, any more than he could hear it in Tak's voice as it came through the translator. Tak drew a deep breath and asked him: "Where is this ship now?"

"On its way home," Talavera said, and watched another indecipherable change spread over the dying Vasudan's face.

Eventually he did manage to raise home base again on subspace radio, and let them know what had been happening. Again, he went through a brief explanation of his survival maneuver.

After a pause, the operations officer at the other end commented: "Evidently your tactic worked."

Talavera wondered if they were only humoring the distant victim of injury and battle shock, speaking to him soothingly. In imagination he could hear the dialogue in Operations: Agree to anything he says. He said he had a head wound. Just get him to bring the ship back to base. After turning the transmitter off he repeated to himself: "Any chance is better than none."

"It's finished me," said Tak's translator, into the quiet cabin, and fell silent. Talavera got up and went to look over the Vasudan, and made sure that he too was dead.

Turning his body awkwardly in the cramped space, he made his way back to his combat chair. Controls in hand, he could feel reasonably confident that he was on his way home.

Of course neither he nor Colby had ever got around to recording anything their prisoner had said. Bringing in a dead Vasudan would offer some support for Talavera's story. Not nearly as much, of course, as he might have got from a live witness, an intelligent being who could have given corroborating evidence, preaching his gospel of surrender.

Now Talavera could only hope that he would be believed when he got back to base--if he got back to base, for it was by no means certain that his damaged ship was going to make it. And he could only hope that if he lived to get there, they wouldn't put him in the ward of raving psychos. Because he was going to have to stick to his story, and the story was that something else was out there in deep space, something large and terrible, powerful enough to crunch up tough Vasudan battle craft like pretzels.

Shiva.

If the Terran Alliance was going to survive, its leaders were going to have to believe Talavera, when he came to warn them. What they would be able to do then, how they might try to deal with Shiva, Talavera couldn't guess. But before they did anything they would have to be convinced.

If only some other Terran spacer, somewhere else, could also catch a glimpse of Shiva's face, and bring home the word . . .

*The End.*