THE DARK WHEEL

Robert Holdstock

Elite: The Dark Wheel

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ELITE
The Dark Wheel

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CHAPTER ONE

From the moment that the trading ship, *Avalonia*, slipped its orbital berth above the planet Lave, and began to manoeuvre for the hyper-space jump point, its measureable life-span, and that of one of its two-man crew, was exactly eighteen minutes.

The space station gently span away into the shadows and the small Ophidian class vessel shuddered as its motors angled it round towards the Faraway jump. The planet Lave, below, rotated in blue-green splendour. There were storms moving across the Paluberion Sea, six great whorls of pink and white cloud. They were approaching the continental mass that was FirstFall, and promising a bleak and wet few days to the swathes of forest and the deep, snaking valleys that cut through the rugged land. The cities of both Humankind and Lavian glittered among the verdant blanket below, like bright shards of glass.

Watching the lush world from his seat at the astrogation console, Alex Ryder expressed an audible sigh of regret that he had not been allowed down to the world itself. Next to him, fingers moving expertly over the keys of the trader's ManOp console, his father grinned. Jason Ryder knew well enough the frustration of only being allowed to observe a rich and fabled world like Lave from orbit. He had been planetside once, an unforgettable experience . . . But the rules and regulations of the Galactic Co-operative of Worlds were strict—and sensible. Lave, like any other planet, was not a holiday resort, not a curiosity. It was a living, evolving world, and there were folk down below to whom that world was everything that Old Earth had once been to the Human race. Protection. Mother. Home.

Another time, another year, Alex thought. You *earned* your visit to Lave, and he had hardly begun his professional life. He still had so much to learn.

The Ryders had been a trading family for three generations. It had begun with Ben Ryder, who had traded almost exclusively using shot-up pirate ships. Ben had lived life on the edge, and one day, one night, one star year, he had not returned. Out in the void between the stars his grave was as remote as it was private, and would probably never be found. His son, and his grandson—who was Jason Ryder—had followed the family business. Alex would soon have to make the final

decision: whether to sacrifice his life to shuttling cargo between the worlds of the Galactic Co-operative, or to train for a different profession.

Let's be clear about trading. Trading between worlds is no game for a youngster with ideas of getting rich quick. You can spend a lifetime carrying food, machinery and textiles, and at the end of that life you'll have enough saved up to buy a patch of coastal land on an Earth-type world, and spend the rest of your days in quiet, isolated comfort.

That's all.

A lifetime of sweat and combat for an orbital shuttle, a home, and the clear blue of an alien sea at your doorstep. If you want more, there are ways of getting it: narcotics, slaves, zoo animals, weapons, political refugees . . . trade in any of these things and wealth will tumble around you.

And corsairs, and privateers, and pirates . . .

And the police.

The strain of the years of honest trading was already telling on Jason Ryder, but he had invested wisely, and this small, cargo-carrying pleasure yacht was his pride and joy. He could get away from the trade-lanes for a while (although he always respected the trader maxim that 'an empty hold means an empty head', and never travelled freight-less; today he was carrying thrumpberry juice, an exotic flavouring). He could show his son what space was really like, and whet the lad's appetite . . . or let him see that a life in hard vacuum was one of the hardest lives of all.

For his part, Alex Ryder would need a lot more convincing. He was a tall, fair-haired young man, wiry and athletic. He was atmo-surfing champion on the Ryder's homeworld, Ontiat, and very bright. Like all young men of his age he was reluctant to switch his status from that of student to professional, with all that that meant in terms of settling with *one* particular girl, *one* job, and beginning to plan for when, eventually, he would buy his own land.

He still had a year to decide, a year of surfing, free-fall baseball, cloud barbecues, hi-falling, partner selection and Sim-Combat.

He was in no hurry.

Except that he loved space. Loved the flash of sun on duralium hulls, the clutter and confusion of the space ports.

Loved the idea of other worlds, of exploration, of path-finding.

The voice of SysCon, which controlled all traffic flow in Lave's orbit-space, murmured softly, '*Avalonia*, make a four minute drift-flight to Faraway jump point.'

'Understood,' Alex called back, and adjusted the auto accordingly. His father sat back and smiled, his job done for the moment.

SysCon said, 'Enter Faraway jump along channel two seven, at forty-five orient.'

'Affirmed,' Alex said, and his father rolled the ship along its central

axis, ready for the dangerous hyperspace transit.

Everything looked good.

On the rear monitor, where the planet shone brilliantly as it slowly moved through the heavens, a dark shadow drifted into vision: another ship, lining up for the Faraway jump.

It was quite normal. Alex took no notice, more concerned about the impending transit through hyperspace. His father scrutinised the other vessel for a moment, then relaxed.

He had no way of knowing that he only had fourteen minutes left alive.

Making a Faraway jump in a system as complex and crowded as Lave is no simple business. A hundred eyes are watching you for the slightest mistake. Make a mistake in orbit-space and the next time you go to dock at one of the world's Coriolis space stations a big NOT WELCOME sign might flash in the vacuum before you.

You slip your C-berth under the instruction of Station Space Monitor. Perhaps twenty ships are doing the same. You go when it's safe. You rotate, accelerate, decelerate and spin to the absolute second, both of time and arc. That way you get clear without two thousand tons of duralium trader rammed into your hyperspace jets.

It isn't over.

Now you're under the supervision of HSA, Home Space Authority, and they'll jockey you safely about among the traders, and the yachts, and the ferries, and the shuttles, and the star-liners, and the arrow-shaped police patrol ships. All of these vessels slip and slide about you, streaks of silver in the darkness, flashing green and blue lights, sudden walls of grey metal that pass across your bows, winking yellow warning beacons.

You move through this chaos and a new voice begins to call for attention. Now you're with the Faraway Orientation Systems Controller; FOSC—or SysCon—sets you up for the big jump. You're going to cover maybe seven light years in a few minutes, and you might think that's a lot of space to get lost in, but that isn't how it works. Faraway is a tunnel, like any other tunnel. Inside that tunnel is the realm called Witch-Space, a magic place, a place where the normal rules of the Universe don't necessarily work. And every few thousand parsecs along the Witch-Space tunnel there are monitoring satellites, and branch lines, and stop points, and rescue stations; and passing by all of these are perhaps a hundred channels, a hundred 'lines' for ships to travel, each one protected against the two big dangers of hyperspace travel: atomic reorganisation, and time displacement.

Jump on your own through hyperspace, across more than half a light year, and you'll be lucky to make the same Universe, let alone your destination.

You might emerge from Witch-Space turned inside out (which is not

a pretty sight).

You might be stretched in all the wrong angles, and although the ship keeps travelling, that jelly mass of broken bone and flesh inside the cabin is you.

According to legend, you might come through okay and breathe a sigh of relief, only to go into Earth orbit and wonder why that big lizard, with the teeth and the long tail and the green scales is roaring up at you, and warning you off of his nice Jurassic patch of prehistoric desert.

To go Faraway is a killer, unless you obey the rules.

So for a few minutes, on that fateful day, Alex Ryder was content to let the robot voices of SysCon guide his family's ship through the space lanes, towards the jump point for the planet Leesti. He relaxed, beside his father, and watched the bussle of the space port.

The shadow behind them, the ship that was following their path towards Faraway, was a Cobra class cargo freighter.

No-one knew how or when the designation of space-going vessels had been linked to the names of snakes. The Ryder's own vessel was a relatively harmless Ophidion, capable of two hyperspace jumps, armed very basically, set up, really, only to destroy imminent dangers, like asteroids, meteoroids, or 'crazy craft', the name given to vessels that were out of control, or ridden by juveniles out for kicks.

The Cobra was a bigger vessel by far.

A common trading ship, most Cobras are buried beneath the weaponry and defences that their hard-bitten, tough-talking captains have accrued. And with good reason . . .

To be a trader is to be two things: dangerous, and at risk. Dangerous because to survive as a trader you have to know your weapons and how to use them in space combat; you need to be able to recognise a pirate, or an anarchist, or a Thargoid invader, or a police trap when you might be carrying any one of the thousands of prohibited materials.

And at risk for the same reason. A juicy Cobra, weighed down with minerals, or rare textiles, or furs, or ore, is as tasty a target for a freebooter as any in the Galaxy.

To be a trader means to shoot first and pray that you've read the warning signs alright, and that your victim *was* a pirate.

Make a mistake and not even two shells of time-stressed duralium and a belly full of missiles is going to save you from the vipers.

Vipers. Police ships. Small, fast, deadly. And most particularly, tenacious. The pilot is a man, certainly, but kill the man and the ship will keep coming at you. Kill the ship and its missile will keep coming at you. Kill the missile, and watch for the shadow.

When a viper bites, it clings.

Eleven minutes . . .

'There's a sight you'll not often see . . .'

His father's words broke through Alex's silent, concentrated study of the planet they were leaving. To the right, running a parallel course towards the Faraway tunnel, was an odd-shaped ship, with powerful lights flickering on and off. It was catching the sun and Alex could see how it was slowly spinning about its central axis. Fish-like fins opened and closed. Across its sleek hull a rapid pattern of coloured lights rippled.

A *Moray*. A subaqua vessel, designed for both space and undersea voyaging. The Moray was a rare ship indeed to see in space, especially about to undertake a hyperspace transit. On worlds like Regiti and Aona, where the only land was the tips of volcanoes, rising above the oceans, the Moray was both freighter and public transport, a vital ship-link between the undersea cities that were developing in such hostile environments.

The Moray's frantic colour signalling ceased. Alex noticed that his father was watching the animalistic display (the coding had beer developed from the signalling of a terrestrial aquatic creature, the squid) with a frown on his face.

'Something up?'

Jason shrugged. 'Not sure. Probably not.'

Alex watched the Moray with renewed interest, then turned back to the rear view, where the Cobra had nudged a few kilometres closer.

'Shall we warn him to stay back?'

Jason shook his head. For the first time Alex realised that his father had been as aware of the trader as he, and had been studying it curiously for some minutes. There was a tension on the *Avalonia*'s bridge that was unusual, and unpleasant.

Something wasn't right. Alex had no idea what, but he sensed it powerfully.

Something was not going according to routine.

Then the go-signal for entry to the Faraway tunnel flashed on, accompanied by a gentle audio prompt.

And as it did so, the *Avalonia*'s life expectancy had shrunk to just nine minutes.

Around the entry point to Witch-Space is always to be found the biggest cluster of transit vessels, most of them moored in groups at orbital buoys while mechanics and repairmen crawl over them, checking and servicing their external systems. At such a point in any advanced system like Lave you'll see every ship of the line, every type, subtype and artificially mocked-up version of every snake-ship ever built.

As they approached the jump, Alex practised ship identification, a crucial talent in any space-faring profession. The unarmed, unmanned orbit shuttles were easy enough to spot, as they ferried cargo all around the system. He noticed two Asps, Navy ships, small, manouevrable and

deadly, well protected against attack, and with highly advanced military weapons systems. He also saw a single Krait, the so-called StarStriker, a small, one-man ship much favoured by pathfinders and mercenaries.

To his right, space-docked and still unloading her passengers, was the immense, cylindrical mass of an Anaconda, a massive freighter that had been adapted to passenger transport. It was an ugly ship, and its yawning ram-scoop gave it the appearance of being a squat, blind creature with its mouth disgustingly agape.

The catalogue was endless. Boa class cruisers; Pythons; the bounty hunters' favourite, the Fer-de-lance, packed out with weapons, and no doubt decked out inside like a palace; landing craft called Worms; Mambas; Sidewinders . . . large craft and small, all winking brightly and reflecting sunlight in brilliant blue-grey sheens.

And of course, there were advertising Droidships, their catchy light displays blinking out information about ROHAN'S REAL EARTH ALE WITH HONEY, or KETTLE'S CLONE-YOUR-OWN FUNGAL CURES. Or even offering the 'last real food before Witch-Space', small restaurant ships designed to dock and supply instant nourishment (PRIEST'S PERFECT PROTOPOLYPS, TUTTLE'S TASTY THERAPSABLADDERS) to space-weary travelers.

'Here we go . . . Hang on to your seat . . .'

Jason Ryder always said this, and Alex always fell for it. He tensed up as if the ship was about to plunge over a gravity-roller. In fact, the entry to Witch-Space was accompanied by an almost negligible accelerative surge, a moment's dizziness, and then the spectacular sight of the stars brightening, spreading out and suddenly streaking in multi-coloured circular patterns, so that the ship seemed to be passing down a spinning tube. Almost as soon as the surge of acceleration had come it had gone. The ship drifted in 'Witch Light', in the non-place in space and time. It was crossing the void between stars in seconds, but for those seconds it was in a twilight world whose existence was beyond imagination.

They say that Witch-Space is haunted. Maybe that's why they call it 'witch'. Time turns all around, and atoms turn inside out, and gravity waves billow up, and things *move* there, lifeforms, or shadows, or atoms, or galaxies, who knows? No-one has ever stopped and gone outside to find out. Only robot remotes exist there, switching stations, monitors, rescue Droids and the like. Whatever lives in Witch-Space, in the Faraway tunnels, will remain a mystery always.

But there are ghosts there. The ghosts of the early ships that went *in* to Faraway, and didn't come out again.

Ghosts . . .

And shadows.

The shadow of a snake. A Cobra . . . Rising over them . . .

'What in God's name . . .?'

Jason Ryder had gone whiter than white light.

Trapped in Witch-Space, there was nothing he could do to out-manoeuvre the other vessel. Alex said, 'He doesn't know the rules. Perhaps it's a rookie pilot—'

'Perhaps,' his father said. Jason Ryder's eyes never left the scanners. His face had beaded with sweat. Alex watched the shadow of the Cobra . . .

Well-equipped . . . a fuel-scoop, missile silos, extra cargo holds, the squat dome of an energy bomb housing . . . a rich ship indeed and a deadly one . . .

'They can't be intending to attack us.'

'The hell they can't!'

Three minutes . . .

And they came out of Witch-Space!

Immediately, Jason's hands began to fly over the key console. The *Avalonia* surged forward, rotating on its long axis. The planet Leesti was a small, greenish disc in the far distance. Alex saw his father arm the two missiles that the *Avalonia* carried, then reached to rest his hand on the multiple laser-trigger.

It was a pirate, then. And as Alex came to accept the inevitability of combat, his mouth went dry and his mind sharpened. He had never been in combat before, not for real, only in the SimTrainer. He had heard his father talk about it, of course. And combat did not sound glorious . . .

A pirate ship, disguised as a trader, pursuing its victim into Witch-Space itself . . . for their cargo of . . .

Thrumpberry flavouring?

An uneasy voice whispered in Alex's mind. This was untypical behaviour for a freebooter. They normally waited at the edge of planetary systems, watching for their prey with long-distance scanners, picking and choosing carefully. Pirates could be found everywhere, of course, though rarely in space around Corporate State worlds, or Democracies (the police were too efficient). Planets run by anarchistic or feudal governments were a pirate's favourite haunt.

This behaviour was wrong . . .

Not a pirate.

Alex looked from the slowly rotating planet to the grim, grey features of his father. They were a long way from safety. 'What the hell are we up against?'

'Put on a RemLok and get to the escape pod,' Jason Ryder murmured. *'Do it!'*

'I'll stay and fight.'

'The hell you will. *Do as I say.*' As he spoke, Jason thrust a small, black face-mask—the remote-space locator—at his son.

The first missiles struck the *Avalonia*'s shields, and Jason punched the

launch buttons on his own defences. The small ship veered and strained as he looped it in an escape run, activating its ECM as the Cobra launched a second wave of missiles.

The rear screen exploded with light . . .

But through the brightness the sombre grey shape of the killer came on . . .

It happened so fast, then, that afterwards Alex was uncertain as to what exactly *had* happened. The duelling ships span and circled in towards the planet. Space around them blazed silently as their weapons struck and were deflected.

Then the whole Universe rocked. Air screeched into the void. The lights in the *Avalonia* blinked and dimmed. Warning lights shot on across the console: lazer temperature in the red, screens down, energy low, cargo jettisoned, cabin temperature dropping . . .

In the same moment of the *Avalonia*'s death, Alex Ryder found himself being struck by his father, the remlok mask forced into place about his eyes, nose and mouth. Then his whole body was physically manhandled into the escape pod.

The ship shuddered and screamed. Fuel spilled into the void.

Father and son faced each other for a last moment, each watching the other through a mist of tears and confusion—

'I don't understand . . .' Alex screamed above the noise of the dying ship, meaning: Who's trying to kill us?

'Raxxla!' Jason said. 'Remember: Raxxla!' Then, as he pushed Alex back into the cramped escape pod, he shouted, 'Remember me, Alex! I wouldn't have wished this on you. *Raxxla!*'

The escape pod was jettisoned. Alex tumbled. The sleek shape of the *Avalonia* was above him, and then just white light—

White heat.

Cold space!

In a second it had gone, the ship, his father, a part of his life—obliterated by a single burst of fire from the hovering shape of the pirate.

And as Alex watched, so a yellow tongue of fire licked towards the tumbling escape pod. He felt heat, then pain, then cold . . .

The tiny survival vehicle was blasted apart, sparkling fragments falling towards the green world of Leesti.

Alex hit space, arms flailing, mouth opened, consciousness and life draining from him with every second . . .

CHAPTER TWO

In space, *everyone* can hear you scream . . .

As long, that is, as you're equipped with a RemLok survival mask.

An instant after Alex Ryder hit the hard vacuum, a skin of plasFibre had been shot across his body from nozzles on the face piece, keeping him warm against the cold, tightening and protecting him, securing him against the void. The oxygen flow in his body was cut off to all but his heart and brain. Needle-doses of adrenalin and somnokie were held ready, just within the skin area of his mouth, ready to alert or depress his body functions according to circumstances.

And the RemLok screamed through space for help.

It was a standard survival device, an instantly recognisable distress call indicating that it was being sent out from a small, remotely located, dying body. The alarm screeched out on forty channels, shifting wavelength within each channel four times a second. One hundred and twenty chances to catch attention . . .

A cumbersome Boa class cruiser, loaded down with industrial machinery, slowed its departure run from Leesti and turned to scan space for the source of the signal . . .

Two police vipers came streaking from their patrol sector, near the sun, scanning for the body in trouble . . .

An adapted Moray Starboat, a vast glowing yellow star on its hull—the sign of a hospital ship—came chugging out of the darkness . . .

Messages from ships to both the planet and its ring of Coriolis stations were abruptly broken as the split second message came screaming through. TV programmes were interrupted, the screen dissolving into a permanently recorded display of the space-grid location of the RemLok. Every advertising space module changed its garish display to flash, in brilliant green, the same information.

In the orbit-space around Leesti, a million heads turned starwards. That split second of panic, that moment's cry of distress, was a sound they knew too well to ignore, and were too frightened of to take for granted.

Within twenty seconds, two autoremotes, tiny vessels just big enough to carry an hour's oxygen, one dose each of forty drugs, and a variety of other stimulants, were hovering around Alex Ryder's spinning body. One of them shot out a stabilising cable and dragged itself to his corpse. Blinking through its solitary monitor, it hovered over his face like a squat, legless dachsund hound and pumped adrenalin, oxygen and glucose into his bloodstream. Alex opened his eyes and panicked slightly. The autoremote calmed him down with a quick pumpsurge of tetval.

The robot's voice whispered in his ears, 'Brandy? Scotch? Vodka? I am equipped with a full range of miniature stimulants to make the waiting easier.'

'What . . . happened . . . ship? . . . *Avalonia* . . .' he gasped through the tight face mask.

The autoremote blinked at him sympathetically, 'Brandy, then,' and hit Alex with two shots of Qutirian SynCognac.

An hour later he was aboard the Moray hospital vessel, in parked orbit above the green-grey face of the world of Leesti. Burns to his hands and face had been taken care of. Minor blood vessels that had ruptured in his skin had been knitted back together. He was bruised, stunned, but essentially fit physically.

The image of the ship exploding had begun to haunt him, however. He stood by the wide, sloping window of his hospital room, staring out across the bright of space to the slowly rotating world below, watching the flash and tumble of shuttles and small freighters as they either glided up from worldDown, or struck the atmosphere on their descent, leaving brief, brilliant flares of red in the thin planetary atmosphere.

Wherever he looked he could see the shadow of the Cobra, rising up in the Witchlight, a great, killer beast, closing on its prey.

And his father's face . . .

The sudden alarm, the sudden anger, and yet . . . and yet Jason Ryder had *known*.

His grieving, mind-stunned son just *knew* that his father had been more aware of the danger than he had let on. It had been in his face, in the tension in the cabin, in the slow, deliberate words that he had spoken during the approach run to hyperspace.

Jason had known that his life was in danger. He had been ready for it, ready to save his son in the event of attack . . .

It made no sense. But for the moment Alex felt only loss, the loss of a man he had loved. Both his parents were gone, now. His homeworld would seem an empty, uninviting place.

Behind him, the door opened softly and the grey-suited figure of a nurse appeared. She reproved him mildly for being out of bed, but seemed pleased by his apparently calm mental state.

There followed what seemed like a constant stream of visitors. First the doctor, scanning him for tension and psychic repression. The medic was not pleased. He more or less said, 'Young man, your father is dead and it would do you no harm to shed a few tears. It's all there, all the grief, all the sadness. It'll do you no good to deny it.'

'I'll grieve for my father,' Alex said back angrily, coldly. 'I'll grieve among the ashes of the pirate that killed him. And not until.'

'Will you indeed.'

'Yes,' Alex stated defiantly. 'I will. Indeed.'

After the doctor had gone, the man from the Galactic Medical Co-operative came, fussily checking up on Alex's medical insurance, making sure that he was covered for all aspects of the treatment, including his Faraway transit home.

Then the police, two lean-faced men, wearing the grey cloaks and silver waistcoats of the Narcotics Investigation Department. What cargo had the *Avalonia* been carrying? Why would a pirate be so interested in him as to follow him to a Corporate State world? Had his father ever transported drugs? Firearms? Slaves? What about alien substances: Manjooza, fear glands, Marswurt? What was said in the moments before destruction? Would he recognise the ship again? What were its markings?

Alex told them everything he could remember. Everything he'd seen. Everything he'd heard . . .

Except for the fact that his father had clearly known the danger.

And except for the word *Raxxla*.

The police left. They were not satisfied. Alex had just received his solo pilot's licence, so he could make his own way back to his homesystem, but he should notify them of what route he was taking.

Raxxla . . .

Alex watched them go, their Viper a slim, evil-looking ship as it rolled and sped away from the hospital vessel. His mood matched the dim-lit room, matched the gloom-grey of the storms that were building up on the world below. Leesti's oceans looked wild and cold, now, its clouds great charcoal coloured swirls of anger above the ragged, mountainous land.

Raxxla.

What could it be? What could it mean?

At midnight, still resting and recouperating (care of the Leesti Medical Authority), a small green light winked on in his room. Alex, still awake, frowned then realised that he was being monitored.

'What is it?' he asked the empty room, and a nurse's voice whispered, 'There's a holoFac message coming through for you. They've requested a tightbeam. Will you receive?'

Alex sat up in bed. No-one knew he was here. Did they? He frowned, and said, 'Sure.'

'Will you accept the charge against your CR?'

Curiouser and curiouser. Since he was broke, and without credit until he sorted out his GMC insurance, it was easy for him to say, 'Yes.'

In the middle of the room the air suddenly shimmered white, small bright particles flying off in all directions around the gradually defined shape of a man. He was tall, but slightly stooped. As the whiteness of the image resolved into colour, the whiteness of the man stayed. His hair was long and snowy, his beard ragged. His face had a touch of colour. His eyes were small, gleaming points among the wrinkles. He

was smiling. He wore a tattered trader's uniform, and one arm hung limp by his side. Even his boots were worn down, and the toes were split. The handlaser at his side had seen the same better days as the rest of his equipment.

'You the Ryder Boy?' this apparition of run-down age asked. The voice creaked, a gruff, battered tone, the voice of a man who had breathed hard vacuum.

'That's me. Alex Ryder. And you?'

Alex climbed out of bed and went to stand before the life-sized holoFac. The old man watched him, and chewed. Then he spat. The gobbet of stained spittle seemed to fly straight towards Alex's shoulder and he winced and jerked slightly to one side, before realising that nothing could travel into real space from the holo.

'You don't remember me,' the old man said. 'That's clear enough. But I remember you.'

'Give me a name.'

'Rafe Zetter. Trader of old. Traded with your father for many years, till we parted company on account of a certain issue which, you might say . . . caused a difference of opinion between us.'

'Slaves,' Alex said quickly. He remembered Rafe, now. But what had happened to the man? He was old before his time. He was the same age as Jason Ryder would have been, but looked twenty years more.

'Slaves is right,' Rafe said. 'I ran my life on the edge of a Viper's sting . . .' trader parlance for 'one jump ahead of the law'. 'But by the time I indulged that little whim, my ass was hard iron. I somehow made it to hell 'n back. That's where I am now.'

'In hell?'

'Broke.'

Alex nodded, picking up slowly on the trader slang. An 'iron ass' was a ship that was well enough defended—shields, missiles and lasers—to make a skim run through any system at all, even an anarchist's paradise like Sotiqu. All hell and then some would come at you if you tried to trade in such a chaotic system. 'Hell 'n back' meant that Rafe had tasted the good life, bought with the profits of his illegal trading, but that it had all gone wrong.

It always went wrong.

Rafe said, 'I was damn sorry to hear about Jason. A good man. A good friend of old, and a man I still respect.'

'It didn't happen but eight hours ago,' Alex said coldly. 'How the hell do *you* get to hear about it.'

Rafe Zetter chuckled, then spat again, and again Alex couldn't help ducking. The spittle vanished at the holoFac's edge, and Alex felt a chill of irritation. 'You got your father's temper, young Alex. Maybe you've even got some of his skills.'

'Answer my question, old man. How do you manage to know about

my father? How did you find me?'

Watching him from the holo, Rafe chewed, smiled and considered. Alex tensed, waiting for the next high velocity spit-transmission.

Rafe said, 'I repeat, Alex. I had great respect for Jason Ryder. For what he was, and what he was doing.'

'He was a good man,' Alex said. 'And an honest trader.'

'He was a damn sight more than that,' Rafe said loudly, and spat. Alex dodged. The ghostly holoFac image shimmered and blurred slightly.

'What does that mean?'

Rafe Zetter leaned forward so that his grizzled features seemed almost able to kiss the younger man. 'He was a combateer, Alex. One of the best. No way should he have died like he did . . .'

'My father was a trader, not a combateer,' Alex said, startled and disturbed by what Rafe was implying.

'Guess again, sonny.'

'But it sickened him to fire shots in anger.'

'Maybe,' Rafe said drily. 'But it didn't stop him. How else do you think he made it as a trader all those years? Dammit, Alex, even if your cargo is sour-cream and pickles there's *someone's* going to try and take it from you. Your father was a combateer of the highest calibre . . .?'

Alex swallowed heavily, staring at the quizzical features of old Rafe Zetter. 'The highest calibre . . .?'

Rafe nodded. 'That's right, Alex,' he said softly. 'You can be deadly, you can be dangerous, and you can end up as pet food in orbit around a dog's ass-of-a-world like Isveve. But if you're *élite*, and you die, then there's a reason for your death . . .'

What was this old man saying? Elite? An *élite combateer?* Alex's head span. He knew all about the space pilots who'd earned that title, of course. Few of them did. To be élite in combat was to be . . . well, as near invincible as made no odds. A great many pilots were 'dangerous'; you didn't last long as a trader if you weren't. Many more had earned the classification 'deadly . So had a lot of mercenaries. So had a lot of pirates.

But *élites*. Few and far between.

And his father, Jason Ryder, had been *élite*, and none of his family had known!

'Jason was one of the very best. You probably never saw his ship, but it was like a fortress. He traded places that most of us would have had nightmares about.' Rafe shook his head admiringly. 'One of the best. A man of the highest calibre . . .' His gaze hardened on Alex. 'The question is . . . Can you be the same?'

'What makes you doubt it?'

'Jason never said anything about you. I guess he was trying to protect you. The trouble is that it gives me nothing to go on: you're going to avenge your father's death—I can tell that from the look of you, and

your tone, and your anger—but for all I know, that'll just mean one more Ryder will be stardust before he even manages to target a missile.'

Not liking Rafe Zetter's tone, Alex said bitterly, 'I've done hours of SimCombat. I score highly . . .'

Rafe laughed and spat voluminously, then became serious.

'Alex, there's something I've got to know. Maybe you're going to end up—'

'Pet food in orbit around Isveve!'

'Yeah. Maybe that. The only person who knew your talents was your father. Tell me, Alex, and tell me true, now . . . Did he say anything to you . . . you know . . . in the moments before he died? Did he indicate anything, or say anything?'

'He said a lot,' Alex murmured, and felt a strong pang of grief as he remembered the look in his father's eyes, the greyness of his cheeks, and his desperate words, *remember me, Alex* . . . 'I think he knew he was going to die. The last thing he said was the word Raxxla. I don't know what that is. An alien, I guess . . .'

Rafe smiled, shaking his head. Suddenly there was a brilliant sparkle in his eyes: 'Raxxla's no *alien*, Alex. It's a ghost world. A planet. A legend . . .' He hesitated, staring quizzically at the younger man through the distant link between them, 'Jason really said that to you?'

Alex nodded. 'Moments before . . . It was the last thing he said.'

'Then he knew,' Rafe said with a nod. 'And that's good enough for me. Alex, get your frail shell to Tionisla and take a visitor's shuttle to the orbital cemetery there. Say you've come to see the grave of Starpilot Fleischer. And take a *good look around*. You do that, boy. Tomorrow. I'll be waiting for you.'

'Waiting to do what?'

Rafe chuckled. 'How're you going to hunt a Cobra? You going to hitch-hike? Or use a big stick? You'll need a ship. Hunt like with like. Get to the wreckplace at Tionisla. I know just the vehicle you need. Don't speak to anyone. Just get to Tionisla.'

'But—'

'Au'voir, Alex!'

And Rafe Zetter spat for the last time before the holoFac faded.

Alex didn't flinch. Something whistled past his ear and struck the wall behind him.

CHAPTER THREE

The best way to see the wreckplace at Tionisla is to approach it from the Sun (a reasonably safe thing to do since Tionisla, being a Democracy has few pirates in its system). Tionisla itself is a bright yellow world, and the cemetery is always between the planet and its star. As you fly close, the whole strange graveyard seems to be expanding from the circle of the world behind.

The first thing you see is a shimmering, silver disc, a double spiral of tiny bright points. It slowly turns: it's a galaxy in miniature, with the same intense blur of light at its centre, because here is where the biggest tombs are to be found.

Come closer and soon you can see that the stars in this galaxy are markers, great lumps of metal, heavily inscribed with the words and symbols of a thousand religions. The cemetery is a bizarre and moving sight. The markers are rarely less than a thousand feet across. There are chrome-alloy crosses, titanium Stars of David, duralium henges, and all the strange symbolic shapes of the worlds, and the minds and the faiths that have come to die in this Star traveller's special place.

Tethered below this vast, rotating mausoleum is the dodecahedral shape of a 'Dodo' class space station, the home of the Cemetery Authorites. Here you go through security checks and get your visitor's visa. And as you stand in the queue, staring up through the translucent ceiling of the Customs Hall, you can see the battered, broken ships of many of the dead, still attached to the silent tomb that contains the body.

It's a good enough reason to come to Tionisla. There are pickings aplenty among the wrecks. The treasures of centuries might be revealed by pressing the right panel on the right cube of black, alien metal as it floats silently by.

Or maybe not treasure, just the tomb's defences . . .

A pit with a laser.

A robot guardian with knives where its hands should be.

A hyperspace vacuum that sucks you in and throws you out into another time.

You tread carefully among the wrecks in orbit about Tionisla. The creatures buried here—human and alien—had money enough to buy these prized resting places, and more than enough wealth to protect their property after death from the mercenary fingers of bounty hunters.

Formalities completed, his newly issued pilot's licence checked, Alex Ryder was given a small tour-ship, an oddly shaped and cumbersome vessel. He drifted quickly among the tombs, seeking the resting place of Starpilot Fleischer, following co-ordinates on the ship's cemetery plan.

He soon found what he was looking for. Whoever Fleischer had been,

he was monstrously egocentric: his tomb was a great crystalline structure, a puff-ball of diamond-bright needles, literally hundreds of feet across. His body, dressed in the red uniform of an élite combateer, hovered in stasis at the centre of this great construct, illuminated by focused light from the sun.

Tethered to the simple monument of the grave next to this was the battered, blistered shape of a Cobra class ship, its insignia still proudly displayed, but all its vital equipment, its fuel-scoop, its extra cargo bays, its aft missile and laser banks removed.

Alex stared at it. It looked nothing like the Cobra that had destroyed his father's ship. That vessel had been bristling with all the extra things that good money could buy, to defend and to attack, and to make the trading game an easier prospect for the élite trader.

A light on the Cobra winked at him.

Alex blinked, then looked again. Sure enough, a small, red light was flashing on and off, a brief sequence of code.

LAND ON DOR PL

'Land on the dorsal plate'—That was clear enough.

Alex manoeuvred his tiny craft above the arrow shape of the Cobra, and touched it gently onto the heat-blistered hull. He looked around guiltily. Touching monuments wasn't permitted and the cemetery was patrolled by Kraits, small and deadly security craft, with instructions to blast away any man, woman or child seen tampering with a mausoleum . . .

But the graveyard was huge, and the shadows of the great tombs transferred this miniature world of the dead into a place of hide-outs, and shifting, occasional safety.

An entry port opened, and a green light quickly blinked the message 'Come aboard'. Alex flew the tour-ship into the hull space and when he got the 'pressure green' signal stepped out and walked cautiously towards the main control area. He opened the sliding door and blinked for a moment at the bright control displays and scanners. Ahead of him, the main screen was wide, and filled with a view of Fleischer's crystal tomb.

Silhouetted against the gleaming brightness of the crystal was the shape of a man, wearing full space suit. One hand rested on the navigation console, the other hovered above the laser button.

'I'm aboard,' Alex said, and walked up behind the silent pilot. The man made no movement, said nothing.

For a moment Alex stood beside him, staring out into the wreckplace, at the slowly shifting monuments, at the stars glimpsed in the background.

Then he turned to greet his host.

And nearly died of shock, taking a quick, horrified step backwards!

It was the drawn, mummified face of a corpse that half looked up at

him from behind its visor, the rictus smile of death stretching wide across its lips.

'Do you think we should take him with us?' a voice asked from across the cabin. Alex started again with surprise and watched the figure which emerged from the shadows. 'As a sort of totem. A lucky charm.'

Alex tried to smile, but neither relief nor the new arrival's charming grin could relax him enough. Too much had happened too fast, and he stood rooted to the spot, watching as the woman came over to him.

She was quite small. Her skin was olive, her eyes dark. She wore her hair in a fashionable series of spikes, like a porcupine. Dressed in the light green coveralls that most traders sported, she seemed swamped by clothes. Her hand-touch was cool and confident, and she kept the contact as she looked up at Alex Ryder, still smiling disarmingly.

'So you're the man that Rafe has chosen. Well, Alex. So far it seems that star-riding with you is at least going to be *quiet*. You do . . . er . . .' she frowned. 'You do have a speech function?' She turned him slightly and felt up his back for the switch. 'Or are you one of the early 'semaphore and gormless grin' models?'

'Sorry,' Alex said. 'You took me by surprise.'

'Oh God,' the woman said. 'Where's the off-switch? I think I prefer you silent . . .'

'Who *are* you?' Alex asked, irritated by her levity and keen to find out why Rafe Zetter had summoned him here? Where *was* the old man?

'Trader Fields', she said, and touched the heel of her right hand to her left shoulder by way of salute. 'My given name is Elyssia. Elyssia Fields.' She smiled again. 'My brood mother's little joke. She discovered Greek mythology at age 9 when she was incubating her first cluster.'

Brood mother? Greek? Incubating clusters? That meant that Elyssia Fields was from Teorge, the so-called 'clone-world'. Alex struggled to remember what he'd been taught about Teorge . . . an inhabited world . . . settled by two colony ships that had proceeded to clone a select few of the crew and colonists, killing the others. For centuries Teorge had been a world apart, cut off from the normal flow of trade and commerce, and banned from sending representatives into space.

Elyssia Fields was clearly a fugitive.

'I'm Alex Ryder,' Alex said.

'I know,' the woman said back, breaking the gaze with which she'd been fixing him. She patted the corpse on the shoulder, an oddly affectionate gesture. 'This is—or rather was—Space Trader Henry Bell. We're going to purloin Mister Bell's coffin. Of all the people who are going to object, he's going to be the most objectionable. This rust bucket is set up with holo-projections of our man here, warning of dire consequences for invading his sanctity. I've turned most of them off, but I expect I've missed a few.'

'We're going to steal this ship?' Alex said quietly, checking the

flickering control display panel. Witchlight fuel registered enough for a 0.1 light-year jump, hardly sufficient to clear the Tionisla system.

Elyssia stared at him, a half smile on her lips. 'We could pass the time chatting if you'd prefer. Plant some flowers, clean the tomb up . . .'

'I *meant*,' Alex said drily, 'How the hell are we going to get away with it?' He found himself staring at the pert features of the humanoid female. The shadow of gloom and grief that had haunted him for the last few hours seemed to fade a little. The girl interested him. He added, 'And just why are you helping me, anyway? Where's Rafe?'

With a quick laugh, Elyssia said, 'Funny thing about Rafe. Wherever you go in the galaxy, he's always there, a shimmering white holo-Fac . . . but where he *really* is . . . that's something you're about to find out.' She glanced up at Alex. 'Why am I helping you? Who says I am. We'll be helping each other, in fact. You have a father to avenge. I have some things to avenge too. Maybe I'll tell you about them one day. But without you I cannot fly this ship.'

Surprised, Alex said, 'Cobras were made to be flown by a single pilot.'

'But I'm a single *Teorgeon*. I'm not supposed to be here. I can fly this bucket with my eyes closed, but your *face* fits. Listen, Alex, this craft wouldn't survive the first attack by a pirate with a peashooter, no matter *how* good we are behind the laser button. We need shields, missiles, defences and cargo space. How d'you think we're going to get them? They don't grow on silvery moons, you know.'

'Trade for them,' Alex said gloomily, and the vista of his family's long life trading through the stars swept before his eyes.

Elyssia was right. He couldn't go hunting a Cobra without the proper equipment, and it would take too long to sort out his inheritance, bearing in mind the circumstances of his father's death.

He felt utterly overwhelmed with frustration. A part of him wanted to kill right now. A part of him wanted to rip out onto the space-lanes, and hunt his father's killer. But the best part of him knew that would be a recipe for disaster, that patience was called for, that a tactical appraisal of how he would set about the hunt was essential . . . and that a protected ship was the barest necessity!

'I've got a hundred credits in all the world,' Alex said, referring to the Galactic Emergency Services loan that he had been given to get him home.

'It's a start,' Elyssia said. 'It's a start in the trading business. As Rafe would say, we'll give this old lass an iron ass.' Her face darkened, though the flickering lights from the console were bright in her eyes. 'Then we'll go to a place that I suspect only Rafe Zetter knows, and we'll watch a lot of heartache burn up courtesy of some fine shooting by the both of us. 'We'll get the ship that put an end to your father. It's a ship that has a lot to answer for . . .'

But she would say no more than that.

For anyone reckoning on beginning a space trading career from scratch the hardest task is finding a ship. Each planetary system has its floating junk yards, its second-hand craft, its impounded vessels, eventually auctioned by the police. Most places advertise for co-pilots, to work without pay for four years with the guarantee of a ship at the end of it—if they're still alive.

But ships are expensive, even if they're from the scrap heap.

Alex was impressed and startled by the audacity of the theft that was being proposed. In response to Rafe's plan, the fugitive, who had been hiding out in the dead craft for nearly a year, had managed to accumulate the fuel, food and power to make the brief hyperspace jump to the interstellar junk yard. All that had been missing was the right co-pilot, someone who could actually do the trading without arousing suspicion.

They hauled the mummified body of Henry Bell to the small tour-ship and set the craft adrift.

'Whatever happens now,' Elyssia said as they took positions at the bridge consoles, 'You're going to get an "offender" status tag. But Rafe thinks if you respect the body they'll just post it at Tionisla itself. Destroy the body and they'll probably notify most worlds in the vicinity, and we can't afford that. Here goes . . .'

On the screen, the small tour-ship drifted away, and the crowded monuments of the cemetery swung past in a dizzying array of bright and shadowy surfaces. Alex studied the scanners and monitors carefully. They had only tiny energy supply to fore and aft screens. A blast or two of laser power. No missiles, of course. The craft was still locked on to the Dodo space station, whose position was shown by the darting bright point in the tri-axial grid map

Slowly the Cobra turned, and began to move gently, silently towards the edge of the spiral grave-field.

The scanner scanned, and Alex watched it hard, alert and apprehensive for the tell-tale wink of its moving green light. The duller-colours of the tombs and stationary craft crowded the scanning screen, moving slowly past.

'There's something I ought to tell you about uncontrolled Witch-Space jumps . . .' Elyssia said, and Alex felt a moment's irritation.

'I already know. Thanks. Besides, wherever we're going we're only going a tenth of an LY. And that's reasonably safe.'

Elyssia sniggered. 'What god or goddess do you believe in?'

'Randomius Factoria . . .' Alex muttered.

'Me too . . .'

They looked at each other.

Alex laughed and said, 'Repeat after me: Lady of Fate, we adore you . . .'

'Get us to Rafe's, we implore you . . .'

The monuments and monoliths drifted by. The star field widened ahead of them.

'Nearly there,' Elyssia breathed. 'Get ready for the jump . . .'

Alex watched the scanner.

And two bright points of light appeared, moving rapidly towards them.

'Company!' he said, and Elyssia swore loudly.

'We've not got much laser power,' Alex said.

'Use our laser, and *any* chance of trading goes. Those are police. They may not be Vipers, but they're police nevertheless. Damn!'

Ahead of them the starfield was almost clear. The two security craft veered apart, to close in from the sides. Elyssia began to count down, finger resting on the simple trigger that would dispatch them Faraway. 'Ten seconds . . .'

The Cobra vibrated and whined, unused to activity after many years in stasis.

'They're closing—fire coming in!'

'Five seconds.'

The Cobra screeched as a laser shot glanced off its hull. The shield energy, low as it was, vanished! The attacking craft overshot. It's colleague fired and missed, manoeuvring with difficulty around a large, henge monument that slowly revolved at the edge of the cemetery.

'Three . . .'

'Lining up . . . fire coming in!'

The two craft were together again. Their laser fire played in the void around the Cobra.

'Two . . .'

There was a strike, a scream of pain, the vessel almost rocked out of control. And then—

Star tunnel!

Elyssia flopped back in her chair. Alex cheered. When he looked at the woman he saw that she was drenched with sweat. When he reached a hand towards her, his fingers were shaking uncontrollably.

CHAPTER FOUR

'You've got a ship,' said Rafe, 'You've got money. You've got a co-pilot who's a better shot than you, but not for long I hope. Now it's up to you, young Alex. And one thing more. If Jason were here he'd have this to say. In time of trouble, forget common sense, forget the force. Do what

you goddam feel like. If it don't work, one thing's for sure. *You* ain't going to be around to regret it.'

Seated at the astrogation console of the Cobra, Alex watched Rafe's home on the forward screen. It was a much modified, and quite bizarre-looking, Anaconda cruiser, its cargo bay dented, its fuel-scoop ripped open, its hull lights blinking not so much with meaning as with disrepair.

Rafe had not invited him aboard. At 0.1 light years from Tionisla he was safe from detection, and here he stayed in the cold and silence of interstellar space, collecting ships, fuel, food and weapons. Three Mambas—small fighters—were tethered to the service bay on the Anaconda's hull, robots crawling all over them as they patched-up the shot up vessels. Unlike humans, robots could work without arc-lights.

When the graveyard ship had arrived at Rafe Zetter's private system, Rafe's holoFac had appeared in the cabin.

'It takes a lot of effort and a lot of wile to get supplies for the sort of mission you're about to go on. I'll fuel your ship enough to get you to Isinor. But from then on you're on your own. You're going to need missiles, operational lasers, an energy bomb, a fuel scoop . . . a whole bunch of other things.'

'An iron ass,' Alex muttered with a smile.

'That's right. And I don't want to hear from you again until you've scalped that Cobra that killed Jason.'

'Why are you doing this for me?'

'I'm doing it for Jason,' Rafe said. 'And for others besides. And listen Alex. Don't you go worrying about Raxxla. Not yet. That comes in time . . .'

'But why did he say it?'

'To let *me* know he trusted you. Your father reckoned you have it in you to become one of the Elite. That's good enough for me.'

Alex's head span. What was this old man saying *now*? Not just that Jason Ryder had been an élite combateer, but that he'd seen the same potential in his son?

In SimCombat Alex had often built up a success and survival score that had awarded him the simulator's highest accolade: a victory roll over the mock-up of the old Earth city of London. But he had never thought that in real life he would ever achieve a combat status higher than 'dangerous'.

To be *élite* . . .

A dizzying prospect. And a nerve-racking one, with all that it implied of not just fighting off free-booters, but of spending time as a bounty hunter, deliberately hyperspacing into dangerous planetary systems and waiting for pirates to come to you; *looking* for trouble, in other words, boosting your combat status to the maximum by advertising yourself to killers, and outgunning them.

'One thing's for sure,' Rafe went on drily. 'Unless you get there, unless you become *élite*, you'll never get to Raxxla. And you'll never know exactly what your father was searching for.'

'I don't understand.'

'Were you aware of his involvement in The Dark Wheel?'

Shock after shock! The Dark Wheel was a semi-legendary space unit, star-riders who made it their business to seek the truth behind the plethora of myths and romantic stories that filtered back from all corners of the Universe: fabulous cities, parallel worlds, time travellers, even planets that appeared to be the old 'heaven' of Earth legend. The Dark Wheel was as mysterious and as mythical to the traders of the Galaxy as King Arthur might have been to the first spacemen.

'It's not possible,' Alex breathed. 'He would have told us . . .'

'The hell he would,' Rafe said, staring at the younger man from the shimmering holoFac on the bridge. 'The ship that killed Jason was no pirate. He was killed because he'd found something. Something that certain parties were deeply unhappy that he'd found.'

'What exactly?'

Rafe laughed. 'Listen to the boy! Look at me, Alex. Do I look whole? I do? Well I ain't. One leg, some of my liver, a few brain cells—all that's left of the *real* me. The rest is just bionic. Trying to do what your father did, I got shot to hell'n' back. I was *élite* once. Now it takes me ten seconds to decide to spit. He didn't tell me because I'm not part of it anymore. Not to that degree. But I watch and I listen, and I do what I'm told. And as sure as there's gold-flake on the skin of a Geretean, Jason Ryder told me to get you ready to follow in his footsteps.'

Coming so soon after his father's death, with the memory of Jason's murder so vivid in his mind, it was almost too much for Alex. He didn't know whether to glow with pride, or shake with apprehension. He slowly sat down at the astrogation console and played his fingers over the controls of the Cobra.

After a while he smiled, and shrugged away the confusion and the sadness he was feeling.

'Right. If that's what my father wanted, then I shan't disappoint him . . .'

CHAPTER FIVE

Out of Witch-Space: the dizziness, the slight shudder, the brief disorientation. Ahead of them, the distant, red-blue disc of the planet Xezaor was only slightly brighter than the gleaming field of stars around. The planet's sun was dim and very close by. It glowed red. A dying star, as the world ahead of them was a dying world, a cooling world, a world whose wealth and industrial development could not hold back the process of Galactic ageing. Xezaor was a world where luxuries and warmth meant everything, now, and *Shanaskilk* fur, with the multiple heads still intact, would fetch a high price.

Routine. A routine trade run. Elyssia dozed, Alex punched co-ordinates into the auto-pilot and prepared to pass the time of the long run-in to the world.

Routine, a routine which Alex was by now well used to.

Out of Witch-Space and then the slow approach until the Coriolis station came on target—

Nothing to do . . .

Nothing to see . . .

The Cobra rocked and a sound like the screech of metal being bent apart echoed through the bridge!

'Company!' Alex said loudly, and Elyssia blinked awake. She must have assessed the situation in an instant. She remained where she was. Alex was at the console and there were only seconds available for thought.

Alex had been taken by surprise, not because he hadn't been paying attention, but because the attack ships had been so *close* to the egress point from hyperspace. With their tiny hulls between him and the glowing sun, they had not been visible for an instant, and they had been performing a 'tumbling' routine, mimicking slow-moving asteroids.

Alex had half noticed them and half ignored them. They had got the first shot in, then overflown the Cobra.

Now, they grouped behind as Alex punched up maximum speed, and scanned space for them.

'Here they come . . .'

The shields screamed as laser fire played off them. Beam lasers! Those ships were well equipped. But then, so, now was the *Nemesis*, the dramatic name that he and Elyssia had given to their ship. Alex checked the rear monitor and lined up the firing window. He stabbed out two bursts of fire from the newly installed aft-laser. The pirate ships veered apart, one of them struck.

As he had them on the screen, he targeted a missile. A missile from one of the attacking craft began to weave towards them, and his

screen flashed with warning. Alex operated the *Nemesis's* ECM, and after an agonisingly long few seconds the incoming missile vanished in a burst of heat and light.

The hull screeched and Alex dived. He noticed that the shields had begun to put a drain on the first energy unit.

Elyssia sat calm and quiet while Alex handled the situation. Ahead of them, the planet edged closer, rising and falling and spinning in a dizzying way as Alex fought for a better combat position.

Then, instinct took over. He looped the Cobra a full 180 degrees and raced head-on at the pirate vessel that had been behind him. Now he could see that it was a Fer-de-lance, a sleek, fast ship that was probably loaded down with sophisticated navigational and defence equipment that had been installed by the original owner. Or maybe not . . . such equipment took cash to maintain, and this ship had seen battle service aplenty.

As pirate and Alex closed, Alex took a chance. They had only four missiles and one was targetted. He punched for fire and the Cobra jolted as the deadly sting shot across space.

It reached its target and the Fer-de-lance literally disappeared.

Had it hyperspaced? No.

When Alex activated the rear screen, he saw the spreading ash cloud, a silvery glimmer against the stars . . .

'Good shooting!' Elyssia said enthusiastically.

Through the cloud of metal and ash came the other ship.

Alex looped again. A laser strike depleted the aft shield even more. But now that the enemy knew that its prey had an anti-missile system, it was going to try and dogfight Alex to destruction.

The ship was a Cobra too. It's fuel-scoop gaped, ready to suck up the cannisters of precious *Shanaskilk* fur from the wreckage of the shattered trader.

Alex had other ideas.

Again, Xezaor was ahead of them. Rear-shooting, Alex ducked and darted towards safety, and the pirate weaved a snaking pattern against the star-field behind. Alex targeted a missile—

'Save it if you can . . .' Elyssia breathed.

'I know,' Alex said. 'But we can afford a replacement . . .'

'We won't afford the fuel-scoop then,' Elyssia reminded him, and they both laughed. At a time like this, worried about their shopping list!

The space station, and the safety it afforded with its own fighter defences, was too far away. Alex veered sharply sunwards, and dropped his forward velocity dramatically. The pursuing ship copied the first movement precisely, but took a few seconds to orientate to the second. It overshot. Before it knew what was happening it was no longer the hunter but the hunted.

'Go, Alex, go!' Elyssia shouted, as Alex shot off pulse after pulse of

laser fire. The Cobra on the screen ducked and weaved, but Alex was equal to it, hardly thinking, just reacting. The temperature of his forward laser began to rise dangerously. The Cobra ahead of them launched a missile at them and Alex *shot* it, not even bothering to program the ECM.

Elyssia gasped at the cheek of that, and glanced at the young man in whose hands her life was being so capably held.

A moment later it was all over. The pirate exploded, his screen energy finally exhausted. Alex saw the wink and flash of a jettisoned escape pod and for a second—

Remembering the beam of fire that had destroyed his own escape craft, remembering the savage destruction of the Avalonia . . .

— he was tempted to go in pursuit. His better judgement prevailed. Around them, cargo cannisters tumbled like sycamore seeds.

'And us with no scoop to pick them up!' Elyssia muttered.

Alex grinned. 'We claim two. That's quite a bounty.'

Elyssia looked down at him as he sat and guided the ship towards Xezaor. 'Alex, you're a natural. It's an honour to ride the stars with you.'

No-one had said a word, neither of them commented on it: the fact that this had been Alex's first solo combat!

CHAPTER SIX

They had been trading now for three standard months, and their Cobra craft, the *Nemesis*, was scarcely recognisable as the battered tomb-place of Trader Henry Bell. With new insignia, new welding, new colour and the pods and swellings of the armaments housings, it began to look like a fighter.

Three months a trader. And not for one hour of one day of those months had Alex forgotten the reason behind this way of life. Something—someone—disguised as a trader had killed his father, and done its best to kill him. His father had led a double life, and accordingly to the oldest relic in the Galaxy, had deputised his son to follow in his star path.

Alex Ryder was not about to fail his father in that wish.

There were so many questions, so much grief, so much anger. And for Elyssia too, although the Teorgian woman rarely showed the emotion that Alex sensed was bubbling just below the surface of her cool, wise-cracking exterior.

They were facing a task together, a task of growing, of becoming

strong. There would have to be a time of waiting, and both were accepting that time with as much silent patience as they could muster.

But it was not easy, not easy for either of them.

And for Alex, with blood on his hands at last . . . not easy at all . . .

The skirmish with the two pirate ships had scraped the paint a little, and loosened several hull plates, necessitating a trip to a service satellite where, because of their bounty hunting, the work would almost certainly be performed free of charge. Though this had been Alex's first solo combat, it had not been their first battle. Elyssia would have qualified for 'dangerous' status had she been eligible for a rating. As it was, her rating—on the evidence of the *Nemesis's* skirmishing—had been assigned to Alex. Now, for the first time, Alex felt he had taken a substantial step towards proving that he genuinely deserved that particular classification.

Still at the astrogation console, he guided the ship to within a thousand kilometres of the surface of the dying world, so close that the planet filled everything in the forward vision screen. At dead slow approach speed he finally looped around and there, slowly spinning before them—a glittering metal cube—was the space station, its access bay a wide, rotating mouth.

'Oh for a docking computer . . .' Alex murmured as he began to match rotation and slowly approached.

'Waste of money . . .' Elyssia chided. 'If you can't dock without losing your paintwork, you shouldn't be in space.'

Alex was a great flier. But snaking neatly into the reception bay of a Coriolis station was his greatest weakness.

He made it, though, and once inside the vast hanger space, magnetic traction drew the *Nemesis* slowly to a vacant berth. AutoCom links snaked out and clamped to its hull. Alex watched the bustle in the great, brightly-lit void, the customs ships, the police Vipers, the advertising modules, the repair modules, all moving slowly in the cube-space, touting for business. Elyssia hid in the escape pod as usual. Alex declared his cargo, and received confirmation of his bounty killings, and notification of his bonus: thirty credits!

That exactly covered the cost of a new missile.

When all the check-ins, log-ins and identity verifications had been run, Elyssia emerged from hiding. The escape capsule had been their first priority, and they had bought one second-hand for four hundred credits. They didn't intend to use it anyway, except to screen off Elyssia's unfortunate and unwelcome origins.

Now began the routine of business. Selling, then deciding where to trade next, and what to buy to take with them.

Trading is very much a hit and miss profession. With certain high demand, high turnover products, a small profit can usually be guaranteed—foodstuffs, textiles, simple machinery, simple luxuries.

But the ship's running costs, and an occasional space skirmish, can soon eat up such profits, making the whole exercise essentially worthless. There is no way of knowing trade prices at other systems. Each planetary state jealously guards its stock-market information, and there are heavy penalties for Faxing the market prices of *any* item beyond orbit-space.

Prices change, too. Speculators lurk in every system, no matter how poor. That tonne of frozen bladderlash that would have fetched eight credits a month ago at Ceinzala, against a buying price of three from its homeworld Reorte, will suddenly be worth only two. The demand for bladderlash had not lessened. The speculators have made a secret killing, and fixed up the market.

Hit and miss.

Alex and Elyssia had been lucky so far. They had carried Vargorn mind-silk between Rexebe and Inera and doubled their intitial hundred credits. They had ferried the gold-flake scales of Geretean reptiles and only just covered their costs. They had supplied twenty tonnes of sunflower seeds to the grotesque amphibioid inhabitants of Bierle, to whom sunflower seeds were a particular delicacy, only to find that a mass, mind-induced mutation had occurred throughout the entire planetary population, changing their taste buds . . . The search was now on for the new delicacy to delight the palates of the Bierleans. Lubrication oil had come close, and lavender scented tissue paper. But somewhere there was a *real* profit to be made. One day. One year.

Moving machinery from high-tech worlds to middle-tech worlds was also unexpectedly profitable, and demand for luxuries was always high on evolving industrial worlds. But on Xezaor the *Shanaskilk* furs (bought at thirty galactic credits the tonne) were likely to be their best bet yet. Alex nervously called up the buying price at Xezaor.

He whooped with triumph as he saw that he and Elyssia had tripled their money.

This time, in the hit and miss game, they had hit lucky.

They sold the furs without trouble. Then Alex called up the price list at Xezaor of ship and armaments equipment. The new missile was the standard thirty credits. He ordered one and a small robot scuttled off to fetch the permitted weaponry. Beam lasers were one thousand credits, and the temptation to invest in one was strong. The price of the fuel and cargo scoop which the *Nemesis* so badly needed was extortionately high, at five hundred and twenty-five credits. But an energy bomb cost nearly twice as much!

Of course a fuel scoop could be used for salvage, as well as topping up their fuel banks by sun-skimming, so it was a good investment, even at one hundred credits over the odds.

Alex ordered one. Delivery and fitting would take twenty hours, a standard day. Alex fuelled the ship, next, and stocked up with

Xezaorian delicacies.

They had three hundred and twenty galactic credits left with which to buy trade stock, an uncomfortably low sum. On the other hand, their ship now had extra defensive shields, four-directional targeting of lasers and missiles, an anti-missile system and a fuel scoop.

They were more than half way to becoming a battle cruiser.

Elyssia scanned the planet's market list with Alex. For all that Xezaorians *liked* exotic things, they had precious little to offer. Two narcotics were available—arcturan burstweed and, strangely, tobacco—and Alex thought hard about them.

'Surely we could get away with tobacco . . .'

'Uh-huh.' Elyssia murmured. 'No way. Nicotine is deadly, even in low doses, to many races.'

'If we carried it to a human world?'

'Still too risky.'

Minerals were on offer, but were pricy. Durassion—one of the ores that could be refined and 'time-stressed' to give duralium for ship's hulls—was available at eight credits the tonne, and that would sell exceptionally well at Lave . . . but Lave was many light years away, now, and any dura-ore could bottom-out on a standard day when a richer ore was found.

Too risky.

Gemstones? There were maroon and silver spectonals for sale, and red-green emeronds. A pirate convoy would smell such booty from two light years away.

As for the curiosity market there were two hundred fossilised Dironothaxaurian life-bones on offer, at forty credits each.

'Ever heard of them?' Elyssia asked.

Alex said, 'I've seen one. And heard one. In a museum on my homeworld. They sing. They're over forty million years old, and still they sing; waiting for something, a hatching, or a change of climate. They're bones from the pelvic region, so they could be incubation pods. Nobody knows . . .'

'Are they valuable?'

'Very. Exactly by how much I don't know.'

'Check it for restrictions . . .'

Alex did so. There were no known import restrictions, or potential legal violations involved in trading in these fossilised animal bones.

'Better than food—' Alex said.

'Any day,' Elyssia agreed.

'So we go for it . . .'

'I suppose so.'

But as Alex began to key into the trade-centre to purchase the goods, the console flashed the words, 'Incoming message . . .'

'Rafe!' Alex said. And Elyssia too seemed excited at the prospect of

seeing and talking with Rafe Zetter again.

But it was not the wizened, crusty old space trader who appeared on the screen as Alex accepted the call.

Nothing like.

It was a human being, and not a humanoid alien that faced them. But what had happened to its face was beyond description. There were many ways to change ordinary human looks to nightmarish caricatures of the same: flying too close to certain stars, being exposed to the interstellar vacuum too often, working in certain ore and mineral mines . . . But Alex, as he stared at the lumpy, grey swellings that swathed this person's flesh, could not imagine what grotesque disaster had befallen the caller.

Lips like quivering gossamer wings trembled in the grey flesh. A hand, skeletal and crippled, shot through with bright red blood vessels, touched the wispy ginger hair that grew in a bizarre floral circle around the deformed head.

'Are you Ryder?'

The voice, at least, was normal. And male.

'Identify yourself, caller.'

Ignoring the question the other man went on, 'What're you trading in this time? Minerals? Specialities?'

'What's it to you?'

'Whatever it is you're thinking of buying, I can do you a better deal.'

'I wouldn't trade with you if I was running hot from a supernova.'

The human grinned (or so it seemed).

'Rafe Zetter would. How come you're so fussy?'

'You know Rafe?' Alex asked, perturbed and puzzled by the grotesque man's invocation of the friendly name.

'Me and half the Universe.' The deformed man leaned closer to the monitor. His features filled the screen totally. 'Parasites.'

'I'm sorry?'

'These things. This . . .' tapping his face. 'Parasites. Spider worms. I did a stint in the pen. on Dykstra's world, and the little buggers took a liking to me. These are the larvae, about two million of them. They'll hatch out in about ten years, and that'll be the end of me. I sort of hope I'm at a dinner party with someone I don't like, at the time, but you can't plan for these things. I don't blame you for not trusting me . . .' Pale eyes glittered from beneath the heavy, pulsating folds of grey flesh. 'But don't judge by appearances. Alex—it is Alex, isn't it? I mean, for hell's sake tell me if I've got the wrong number . . .'

'I'm Alex Ryder.'

'And I'm Patrick McGreavy. I'll say just two things to you. The first is this: when you kill the snake, you'll lay a ghost that's haunted me for more than five years. I'm not a flier. What I am doesn't matter. There are more people like me than all the sunflower seeds you've traded in your

life. People who need vengeance. People who can't do it for themselves. Kill the snake and you'll do a service to us all.'

Alex couldn't help the wry smile that touched his lips, even though he had rarely felt less like smiling. He felt as if he was being manoeuvred, manipulated, like a robot ship, an autoremote, programmed to fly in endless, mindless circles. What the hell was going on? He was Jason Ryder's son, and until three months ago his best combat experience had been in a SimCombat trainer. His pilot's licence had hardly dried. And somehow, despite all of this, he had been chosen as nemesis to exact a savage vengeance from a ship that was certainly far more than a simple—and simply deadly—pirate.

There were people watching him, and waiting on him, their fingers crossed, their breath held.

Why him? Why *him*? (And Elyssia . . .)

'Okay,' he said quietly. 'I get the message. You said "two things".'

'Right. Rafe told you to trade in *Shanaskilk* fur, as soon as you could afford it. Am I right?'

He was right. It was one of Rafe's last pieces of advice to Alex, and Alex had not forgotten it.

McGreavy went on, 'When Rafe told you to do that he was sending you to me. You've got to get an iron ass. You've got to trade in something really worthwhile. Unship and fly across to South City, to the private traders' centre in the Magellan Building.'

'I've already got an "iron ass",' Alex said.

'You think so, do you? Do it anyway. Take a chance. Make your way to the Magellan building, South City . . .'

After a moment's hesitation, and with a glance at Elyssia, who just shrugged and nodded, Alex agreed.

A Coriolis station is nothing less than a vast city built on six planes and spread, around the wide empty sky of its interior, facing inwards. From South City, the roof on the world is North City. At night, the lights that glow above your head are the lights of streets and buildings.

Alex checked out of the ship's berth and took a sky taxi across the void. The tiny automatic ship slid delicately and smoothly between the incoming and outgoing ships. Alex watched in fascination as the towering buildings of South City dropped away below and the grey sky edged closer. To his left, he could see the pattern of streets and parklands on the inhabited plane known as Commander City. Facing the entrance to the station, on that particular level lived the high ranking officials and various planetary envoys and ambassadors. They enjoyed a landscape which included lakes, rivers and ski-slopes with real snow.

Below him, the *Nemesis* became a tiny dart-shape on the broad landing pad. Above him, the towering offices and living blocks reached down towards him like geometrical stalactites.

There was an abrupt moment's disorientation and suddenly the roof was the ground and now the *Nemesis* was a single, winking light in the heavens. The taxi dropped swiftly to street level, between the grey and black monolithic structures. Lights of different colours blinked and shone, and when the atmosphere began, a strange dusty shimmer seemed to envelop the city.

The streets were crowded here and it took Alex only moments to realise that the South City of this particular Coriolis station was the 'down town' area. Illegal trade abounded, in narcotics, robots, slaves, sensuastims, prostitution and frozen organs. Spacers walked slowly, cautiously, most of them still wearing near-full suit, a certain sign that this was the rough quarter. Hookers, of all sexes (the Galaxy counted seventeen at this time) and races, but mostly humanoid, solicited from hovering platforms, ready to escape fast from any over-welcoming, unwelcome client. Advertising hoardings here were almost completely devoted to proclaiming the illicit pleasures which were available in South City. Police cars and remotes roared overhead, as did med-ships. The streets were alive with noise and bustle and filth.

The Magellan building, a dark, squat cube, sat amongst this confusion like a great, brooding monster. It had no visible windows. Lifts rose and fell on its outer walls, slow-moving green lights that gave it an uncanny sense of being alive.

Alex had come without a hand weapon, and now began to regret it. Practically everyone—and everything—he saw carried a gun, in contradiction of orbit-space law. He walked cautiously through the crowds of reptilioids, cloaked amphibioids, armoured insectoids, squat, bristling felines, and the grotesque robo-tanks in which things that looked like giant molluscs, or worms, or branches of heather, moved within the safety of their own environment.

He entered the Magellan building and noticed the stench for the first time, the combined body odours of a thousand alien life-forms; surprisingly some—those who drank raw methane gas—managed to excrete sweat that smelled as sweet as apple blossom.

But most did not.

The private trading centre was a vast hall, surrounded by the entrances to offices and warehouses. What was sold in this crowded, noisy place, was anything that was considered too risky, or bizarre, or commonplace to sell on the open market. The trader who loaded up his cargo bay from a private purchase had better check with the planet's export monitoring system before leaving, or his reception, at the other end, might be a little more violent than he'd expected.

Alex scanned the high walls for a hint of McGreavy's warehouse. As he did so he found himself standing behind two tall, violent-looking insect-forms, their bodies armoured in light grey, their facetted eyes swivelling to stare at him as they talked together, chelicerae clashing

and clacking in their peculiar mode of communication.

Alex stepped away, heart beating, blood rushing to his head. Compound eyes, jointed limbs, head antennae, double cutting jaws . . .

Thargoids!

Here, on a space station!

Thargoids were deadly. Thargoid spacers had their fear-glands removed, and were considered to be the most effective and potent of humankind's enemies. The bounty for killing a Thargoid was huge, and for capturing and delivering the juvenile form, the Tharglet, to any Space Navy research centre, even greater.

What were they doing here?

The Thargoids chatted together and watched Alex coldly. Alex noticed that each had an appendage resting on its thoracic plate, where they holstered their hand-lasers.

'Back off,' a voice whispered, and Alex turned. McGreavy stood there blinking through his deformities. Alex had not grasped how short the man was; he only came up as far as Alex's chest.

'Thargoids . . .' he whispered.

'Bullshit,' McGreavy said, and dragged Alex away. 'They're Oresrians, and the one thing that can make an Oresrian deadly is being confused the way you've just confused them, with their deadly enemies the Thargoids. Check the thorax markings and the shape of the fourth joint on each hind leg before you jump to conclusions again . . .'

Alex followed McGreavy gratefully, away from the whispering insects.

McGreavy's warehouse was small, cramped and smelly. Alex followed him through into the dimly lit interior, and felt a pang of discomfort as the grotesque little man closed the doors behind them. In several large, transparent crates, peculiar creatures shuffled and murmured, excited at the sudden disturbance.

'Are these what you have to offer?' Alex asked in a low voice. McGreavy chuckled. He walked over to the nearest crate and brought up the light, to illuminate more clearly the odd creature within.

Alex stared. The creature was vaguely familiar, but the memory refused to come. It had a thick shell, patterned neatly, and limb holes at regular intervals around this bony house. For the moment the beast was securely hidden within its protective environment.

'What are they?'

'Mymurths,' McGreavy said. 'If they seem familiar it's because they're astonishingly like an animal of Old Earth: the tortus, as I believe it was called. These things have two heads, four legs, and two anterior organelles that seem to serve no purpose. They're named for the planet of their origin. Mymurth. But you'll be shipping them to Cirag. The Ciragians have a special relationship with the Mymurth.'

'They eat them?' Alex guessed.

They *worship* them,' McGreavy corrected with a twitch of his flimsy lips.

'Worship?'

McGreavy nodded. 'To the Cirag race, the Mymurth are the reincarnations of gods. A particular sort of god, called an 'avatar'. The animal *form* of a god. The Mymurth look very like the legendary avatars of Ciragian religion and mythology. They're from another world, of course, and have no connection with Cirag at all. But any Ciragian family will give a small fortune to have a living Mymurth in its temple.'

Alex was fascinated and intrigued. The bulky creatures moved sluggishly about, their fleshy pink limbs emerging from the shells to propel them through the slush that filled their cages. 'How much is a small fortune?'

'Each of these will fetch a hundred credits. Maybe more. And I have twenty-eight. Twenty-eight hundred credits. That'll buy you all the shields and weaponry you need . . .'

'Why not trade them yourself?'

McGreavy laughed sourly. 'With my record? You must be joking. No thanks. It takes me half a standard year to get a pen full of these things, and Rafe Zetter usually has a customer for me, someone like yourself who needs credit fast, to perform a certain act . . . of violence . . .'

Alex found himself staring at the bright eyes of the hideous face before him. He was no longer overly conscious of the deformities, or of the pulsating life that existed just below the man's skin. He was aware only of the fact that he wanted—needed—to trust this acquaintance of Rafe, and yet didn't.

'Make me an offer I can't refuse,' McGreavy said, and hard reality hit Alex again.

He said, 'Three hundred.'

McGreavy chuckled and shook his head. 'The idea is that *you* make the profit. You won't do that offering me three times what you're likely to make for a Mymurth.'

'I meant . . . three hundred for the lot.'

For a second McGreavy stood in silence, staring at the younger man. 'Is this a joke?'

'No joke. I have three hundred credits in the world. You've got the wrong boy, McGreavy.'

'You just sold a cargo load of *Shanaskilk* fur!'

'And bought weapons and a fuel scoop. I bought the furs at a loss to begin with. I'm no trader, McGreavy. I'm a combateer. I did tell you.' Alex looked down at the Mymurth. 'I'll buy eight off you. How's that?'

'I sell the lot, or not at all. I want fifteen hundred credits for them. Rafe said you'd come through . . .'

'Rafe was wrong. Shift them through some other sucker . . .

Alex turned to go. McGreavy's whimper of panic was almost funny to

hear. 'I save these things up for Rafe. Who else is going to trade in Mymurth?'

'I'll take ten off your hands, for three hundred credits. The more you stall, the less I'll offer.'

Alex was enjoying this.

'I need to shift the lot. To Cirag.'

Where *was* Cirag, Alex wondered. It was not a name that rang any bells.

'Then you'll have to trust me,' he said. 'Like you trust Rafe. I'll give you a down payment of three hundred against one third of what I get at Cirag. I'll come back and pay you off.'

McGreavy stared at him in silence; the man's breathing was laboured. 'One third will hardly cover my outlay. Fifty percent.'

'Forty percent,' Alex said. 'And no further bargaining.'

The Mymurth shuffled anxiously. McGreavy shrugged with defeat. He summoned the vid-witness, and the two men signed the agreement. Twenty-eight Mymurth for sale to Cirag, forty percent of the proceeds to be returned to Pat McGreavy at South City, Coriolis 7, Xezaor.

If McGreavy was right, and the money was forthcoming from the religious nutcases on Cirag . . .

Where *was* Cirag?

. . . the *Nemesis* could be equipped with beam lasers, extra missiles, extra shield energy units, *and* an energy bomb, and the hunt could begin in earnest.

Alex returned to his ship to report on the day's trading.

CHAPTER SEVEN

They had been set up, of course.

And in a way, they went into the set-up gamely. Alex checked up on the planet Cirag and discovered that it was not listed with the Official Planetary Register. That was the reason for its unfamiliar name. Not to be registered was not in itself unusual. Only inhabited worlds were listed. There were millions of inhabited star systems of use to miners, traders and explorers, which could only be located by reference to the Galactic Gazatteer of Worlds.

But Cirag *was* inhabited by intelligent beings.

That meant just one thing: Cirag was an independent world, had refused Federation status, was dangerous, probably deadly, most likely the haven for freebooters and criminals, and almost certainly a system

in which the general principle of 'laser first, talk second' was applied.

'We've got to be crazy . . .' Elyssia said.

Alex agreed. 'Could Cirag be *Raxxla*? Could it be the world my father mentioned before he died?'

'No way. Cirag is Cirag, and Raxxla—if it exists—is in another Galaxy; you know the legends. Cirag is just a hell-hole of a world, by the sounds of it. Give the guy his turtles back. Let's trade life-bones.'

But Alex said no. Something about the whole deal, about the way he felt manipulated, *guided*, had whet his appetite for this venture. There was good money to be made, and the *Nemesis* could finally equip itself to perfection.

And the hunt could begin. Vengeance could begin.

'It's hit or miss, right? And in Rafe's eloquent language, we'll not know a goddam about any failure.'

'We've got to be crazy . . .' Elyssia repeated.

'Let's not talk to any strangers, at least . . .'

Out of Witch-Space.

The planet Cirag floated before them, a pastel yellow world, the dark markings upon its surface—mountains, probably, or deserts—forming a pattern that reminded Alex of bones. At nineteen light years from Xezaor, the *Nemesis* had made two refuelling stops, and as they came into System Space they had energy enough for a two-light-year jump only. The nearest world, Alex knew, was more than twice that distance away.

No matter. With their new fuel scoop they would simply transit the sun's corona, and recharge the fuel cells.

Cirag's sun was a large, yellow star, old, but with much life left in it yet. It was active, too. As Elyssia—at the astrogation console—turned towards it, so two immense streamers of fire were erupting from its surface, whirlpools of plasma that were spectacular when seen through the *Nemesis's* polarising filters.

'Let's catch some of that heat,' Elyssia said, and punched for top speed. The *Nemesis* surged forward.

But they flew for no more than a minute.

'Holy Mother of the Stars!'

Alex stared at the scanner screens and felt his stomach turn over. The bright marks there were so large that they could only be Boa or Anaconda class cruisers. They had formed an attack pattern, four large ships, surrounded by the darting points of light that was its fighter escort.

On the viewscreen, against the glowing sun, the assault group were dark smears, rapidly closing.

'Boas,' Elyssia said. 'They're set up as fighter cruisers, by the look of it. At least they're slow. Hang on . . .'

Alex gripped his seat, then grimaced as he fell for the same trap that

his father had always set for him. But this time it was as well that he secured himself. The universe shifted; his body organs did somersaults. Elyssia feigned an escape loop, and the fighters—Mambas by the looks of them—broke formation and went into the scatter mode that meant pursuit. But Elyssia completed the loop to come full back against the looming pirate craft.

She sailed under the belly of the leader with as much calm and cheek as you please. It belly-shot at them, and she rolled the Cobra so that she could side-strafe back. All along the Boa's under-belly, shards and sparks flew brightly where the shields were lowered around the laser housings.

'Markings are unfamiliar . . .' Alex said. There had been black and green flags with bright sunbursts on them, and non-terrestrial ideographs on the sides.

'Intentions *very* familiar . . .' Elyssia breathed. Behind them, two of the Mambas were closing fast. Pulses of laser fire made eerie streaks in the dark circle of space around the glowing sun ahead of them.

The huge ships had turned too, and were accelerating towards them. Elyssia made it clear, without speaking, that they'd never reach the star and have time to refuel. Alex, never taking his eyes from the scanners, knew as much.

Elyssia rolled the Cobra and turned to fight. She targeted a missile and dispatched it on the turn, and the nearest fighter became a glittering dust cloud. The other streaked fire across the forward shields, and the *Nemesis* shuddered and whined. Two stabs of her finger on the side-fire button, and the second Mamba tumbled, its shields still up, its pilot disorientated by the unexpected hit. Elyssia closed in for the kill . . .

Killed.

One of the Boas loamed large from the darkness. It was rolling slowly and beams of light played from its spike nose. Elyssia targeted a missile. Sweat ran freely from her face, and her hands were white with tension. Alex, feeling helpless, gripped the sides of his chair, leaning forward, jumping and starting in sympathy with every sudden movement, every avoiding action.

The Boa ECM'd the missile before it had gone a tenth of the distance between the two ships. The *Nemesis* slid smoothly along its belly and again turned side on, strafing the sensitive underparts as it matched the giant's slow roll.

And then it happened. From somewhere, out of nowwhere, pulsing laser fire made a direct aft hit on them. The *Nemesis* shuddered and stuttered and was forced into a rapid, dizzying roll. Alex swore, feeling his body wrenched by the seat harness. The shock had nearly taken his head off. He straightened up, assessing the situation: there were two Mambas behind, and they were closing rapidly on the maw of an Anaconda; it hovered there in the void, like a giant net waiting to

swallow them.

'Let's see you get out of this . . .' Alex said loudly, and glanced at Elyssia to see why she was running so straight.

She was slumped in her chair. Blood flowed freely from her scalp and nose. Her eyes were closed. She must have had her seat belt too loosely fastened, and had struck the console when the Cobra had bucked.

Alex leapt from his co-pilot's seat and literally wrenched the woman free, throwing her to the floor. This was no time for courtesy. He buckled in, stabbed fire at the Anaconda's ram-scoop, then overflew, dodging laser and outrunning a missile, which then closed on him with alarming speed before he was able to destroy it.

The planet Cirag was ahead of them once more. He began to run for safety, and then thought an alarming thought: what guarantees did he have that the Coriolis network *would* protect him if he got in range? He had no such guarantee. The space stations were as likely to be against him as the ships that pursued him.

But if he could let them know what he carried, if he could communicate that he carried their god creatures, perhaps they would send their fighters to keep the freebooters at bay.

To his right a Mamba appeared out of nowhere. He rolled the *Nemesis* and shot from his rear laser, then slowed speed, span and strafed the killer vessel from his port gun, watching the Mamba tumble out of control, not destroyed, just dead.

If only he could *release* the cargo, jettison the cannisters containing the Mymurth life-systems, perhaps the pursuit would end. He and Elyssia would be out of pocket by three hundred credits, but so what? Neither he nor Elyssia were élite, yet. He might *feel* like an élite combateer, but faced with this sort of—

A Mamba strafed him. Shields screamed. He targeted a missile, but used side-fire to battle with the attacker . . .

—faced with this sort of pressure, neither of them could survive.

Elyssia came round, staggered to her feet and stared, through blood-encrusted eyes, at the combat. Cirag came closer. A tiny spinning point of silver light winked and beckoned to them, but the sight of it did not fill Alex with joy.

'There must be more than Mymurth in those cannisters . . .' Elyssia said quietly.

'Let's discuss it later,' Alex retorted, as he rolled and veered to escape the fire coming from the closest of the big ships.

The woman left the bridge. Hanging on for dear life, she went down to the cargo bay . . .

And suddenly the attack finished.

Alex nearly jumped with surprise. One moment his tail had been hot, and his port laser almost at exploding point. The next: nothing. The heavy lights of the massive pirate ships dropped away into the

background. Two of the Mambas continued to dog his tail for a moment, firing last, optimistic bursts of fire. Then they vanished, streaking away into darkness, away from the sun.

Alex slowed the *Nemesis* and checked damage levels. They were not seriously hurt, but two missiles were gone, and energy levels were low. Their cargo was intact, however, and if the pirates had backed off, this close to the world, it could only mean that Cirag *would* defend its visitors.

Elyssia came back onto the bridge, holding the small, black box that was a Thru-Vis camera. 'They look like turtles. They stink like turtles. They're as boring as turtles. But I've taken a couple of Thru-V shots, just to see if anything else is hiding in there . . .'

'Good idea. Let's see?'

'Two or three minutes . . .'

She placed the camera down, sat back in the co-pilot's seat and looked at him. 'You okay?'

Alex nodded. 'Shaken. How about you?'

'Bruised, bloody but unbowed. We in the safe zone?'

'Looks that way.'

The Coriolis station span gently before them, bright with sunlight, casting its shadow on the patchy grey and yellow of the huge world below. Several ships were tethered to buoys close by. They looked safe enough. Lights flashed on the Station. Everything gleamed, everything welcomed.

Alex sailed gracefully past the immense flying city, then turned to face the entrance.

But there *was* no entrance. 'What in God's . . .?'

He sat there, motionless in space, rotation matched with the Coriolis, facing blank metal. By zooming in he could see the shape of the entrance, closed, now, protectively.

'Afraid of strangers?' Elyssia suggested.

'We need fuel badly. They'd better not be *too* afraid . . .'

Then the crackle of an audio message coming in. On the screen, only the space station, with stars and the sun behind.

'Identify, identify. This is Craig Orbit Space.'

'Cobra class trader, the *Nemesis*,' Alex said. 'We have a cargo of Mymurth. Open the gates.'

There was silence for a while, though the channel remained open because it continued to hiss and crackle. Then:

'Attention, *Nemesis*. Mymurth trade in Coriolis stations is prohibited.'

'What?'

'Release your cargo before coming aboard. Release cargo. You *will* be compensated.'

Alex glanced at Elyssia. 'What the hell do we do?'

'Sounds unprofessional to me,' the woman said. 'Sounds a little fishy . . .'

She picked up the camera and removed the developed and printed film. Staring at the two prints for a moment, she suddenly seemed to realise what she was looking at and gasped.

'Oh my Sweet World . . .' she said slowly, and passed the prints to Alex.

On the screen, the entrance to the space station began to open slowly. Two lights shone there, like eyes, tiny in the dark void space beyond.

Alex looked at the Thru-V pictures, and for a second couldn't comprehend the grotesque sights he saw. Looking *through* the bodies of the Mymurth, the camera had picked up the spider-like life-forms that were living *inside* the shuffling, harmless turtle-forms. The sight was discomforting. Jointed legs seemed to be reaching out into every limb, and every body space. The central black body was shiny, and from it peered a number of bloated, faceted eyes. Two long, bristly tendrils stretched into the Mymurth's brains from each of these hideous parasites.

'What are they?' Alex whispered, and Elyssia said,

'Trouble. They're immature Thargoids'

Alex felt his heart quicken. Tharglets! He was transporting Tharglets, the larval forms of one of the most deadly life-forms in the known Galaxy!

Set-up? Being set-up hardly *began* to describe the way they'd been duped on Xezaor!

No wonder the pirates had closed so ravenously . . .

'There's good bounty on Tharglets. The Navy pay well, for research purposes.'

'They're also deadly; and they make ideal mercenary fighters if trained and developed. We've been carrying fighters for Cirag. Pirate fighters. No wonder they want to destroy us. They won't want any evidence left of this . . .'

Alex stared at the space station. For a moment Elyssia's words just went in and didn't register. He was thinking of the pirates who had attacked, and who had been beaten back . . .

He was thinking that the danger was over . . . they were at a Coriolis station, and the only danger now was illegal trading . . .

He was thinking *safety* . . .

He watched as the bright eyes slid forward, out of the space port. Behind the eyes came the bulky shape of the ship to which they were attached. Behind the ship came light, bright light, a gleaming yellow beam that cast the shadow of the ship across the *Nemesis* . . .

The shadow of a snake.

The Cobra!

He would have known that ship anywhere. It was months since he

had seen it, but not a night had passed when the shape of it, when the evil of it, had not infested his dreams.

The ship that had destroyed the *Avalonia* came slowly towards him, and he had no doubt at all as to its identity.

And nor had Elyssia.

She sucked in her breath and moved towards the console. 'I want him. Let me take the controls . . .'

'Sit down,' Alex said coldly, and Elyssia turned angrily on him.

'I have as much stake in this as you . . .'

'Luck of the draw,' Alex said. 'The pilot of that ship killed my father . . .'

'Killed my whole family! We were escaping from Teorge, and we asked that ship for help, for supplies. It took my sister and myself as slaves, and blasted my family's vessel to pieces. I escaped. My sister didn't. Alex, I *want* that bastard!'

'Too late . . .'

Fire blossomed from the front of the Cobra. The *Nemesis* rocked and rattled. Alex targeted a missile, then stabbed laser fire back. The energy spread over the Cobra's screens like a bright yellow flower.

It accelerated towards them. Alex accelerated too, but rose over the killer, and over the space station.

We can't fight it! We've not got the weapons, nor the defences. Not yet. Damn! What should we do?

On the rear screen, Alex saw the sombre shape of the killer rising above the Coriolis station. A flash of light presaged the warning INCOMING MISSILE, and Alex targeted the ECM to destroy it. As he did so, he turned. The two ships tore past each other, majestic metal galleons, raking each other with fire before turning and approaching again.

Twice they duelled in this way. The *Nemesis* groaned beneath the weight of the laser strikes on its hull; the energy in its storage cells began to drain away. In Alex's mind there was only confusion. The Cobra knew him, and wanted him, and wouldn't let go. And this was the ship *he* wanted to kill . . .

But he wasn't equipped to kill it . . . Not yet. Not yet!

So despite Elyssia's objections, Alex turned and ran for the sun.

The Cobra followed. The two ships manoeuvred and looped, slowed and speeded up. Whenever possible, Alex rear-lasered, and this had the effect of driving the pirate back a little. It targeted and dispatched three more missiles, and Alex shot them down. He was tempted to think that that represented the full missile load of the Cobra, but he wisely avoided such complacency. His own missile remained targeted, ready to fly, but he imagined that it would meet a quick and pointless fate.

The sun edged closer. It grew in size and majesty. The cabin temperature of the *Nemesis* rose. Immense arms of plasma curled out from the surface, like weird creatures rising above a molten sea. Alex

flew towards one, fuel-scoop ready.

The Cobra fired at him. Shields screeched.

The duelling ships entered the realm of the Inferno . . .

Alex said, 'It's working. Look . . .'

The fuel gauge was edging up as the scoop sucked in raw plasma and converted it to the energy form needed for Witch-Space transit. He skimmed the *Nemesis* along the edge of the great ocean of fire. The arms of the corona was millions of miles long, thousands wide, and curling round, like a whirlpool. At its centre, then, there was a calm place, a place away from the heat and danger.

Alex headed towards it. The cabin filled with an eerie brilliance in which shadows seemed to writhe and beckon. The sun was an unbearable glare. The temperature of the ship rose dramatically. Fire played about the hull, and the shields moaned and creaked.

'Not long,' Elyssia said. At last she too had come to realise that they were just not ready to fight the Cobra. They had to get out of here, and fast. The nearest star was six light years distant, their fuel gauge showed a jump capability of four, and rising . . .

In the calm sea, wrapped around by sunfire, the *Nemesis* hovered, and waited. Somewhere in the brilliant glow of the plasma arm the Cobra searched for them, but perhaps they were safe, now, safe from scanning, or from probing, since no electronic eye or ear could pierce the intense radiation field of the corona.

'Five light years and climbing. Get ready to go, we're already targeted . . .'

'I'm ready,' Alex said. He tried not to think of the consequences of such a long, unsupervised jump . . . In the first instance they would just jump small distances, but the hyperdrive mechanism wouldn't tolerate too many such feeble movements.

Alex turned the *Nemesis* so that it gently span in a circle, searching the flickering, shadowy fire for danger.

'Five point five light years. A minute more. Just sixty seconds . . .

'Just thirty seconds . . . we're filling up lovely . . .

The ship hummed. Alex dripped with sweat.

'Just twenty seconds more, Alex, and we can fly like star seed . . .'

On the scanners the merest flicker of light hinted at the presence of the Cobra. It was on the other side of the strand of plasma; a curtain of fire separated them. *Nemesis* and killer stood motionless in space, facing each other through the great erupting wave of sunfire.

'We're ready to go,' Elyssia said. 'Alex. Go! Now!'

Alex Ryder shrugged her off. 'No,' he said. 'Not yet . . .'

'Alex!'

He pushed the ship towards the fire. The flickering, ghostly image on the scanners moved too. Closing.

And with a sudden cry, Alex stabbed speed into the *Nemesis'* engines, and raced towards the veil of flame and plasma. All vision had gone. All he could see was his father's face; and the white ball of flame that had been the *Avalonia* . . .

All he could feel was grief, and anger, and hate . . .

All he knew was that he had a missile targeted on the Cobra, and that he had one last, desperate chance . . .

The ships closed. The distance between them was the distance of the plasma veil. It played on the hull of the *Nemesis*, and the shields screamed and complained. He could not go too deep . . .

Not too far in . . .

Too dangerous . . .

He fired the missile.

The tiny vessel sped into the sunfire, weaving and ducking as it homed on the Cobra. It didn't show on Alex's scanner. It didn't show on the Cobra's scanner. Not until it was too late . . .

The Cobra triggered its ECM. Alex saw the burst of brightness, the sudden detonation . . . and then he saw the great fireball that gyrated around the destroyed missile.

Momentum, heat, plasma, fire . . . all gathered together into a ball of death that swept from the corona and engulfed the Cobra.

No shield known could stand against such intense energy, the raw energy of the sun, stung and screaming, blown into a great tidal wave of explosive terror.

The Cobra bathed in light and fire. Alex watched the scanner, and suddenly . . .

The light was gone.

The Cobra was dead. Destroyed. Gone forever.

The *Nemesis* slowed and turned, went back to safety.

No-one on its bridge said a word. But in the bright light of the ageing sun, tears glistened on two faces.

CHAPTER EIGHT: CODA

The holoFac of Rafe Zetter gleamed and shimmered on the bridge of the *Nemesis*, as if with pride. Behind it, the full face of Lave was a welcome and relaxing sight. The last of the Mymurth and their precious parasites had been off-loaded into two Navy Asp-type ships. The final payment had not yet been agreed, but the figure would not be less than one hundred credits per creature.

'I knew you could do it,' Rafe said, chewing happily and stroking his wispy sidewhiskers. 'Had to be sure. But was confident enough to get you to Cirag before you were ready.'

'We could have been killed,' Alex muttered. 'That system was crawling . . .'

'But a good combateer, even an *élite* combateer, knows when to run, and *how* to run. I'm proud of you . . . you ran *and* scored.'

And as he spoke, so on the screen a message came through from the Galactic Police HQ on Lave Coriolis 6.

Congratulations to Alex Ryder, and thanks on behalf of the Galactic Co-operative of Worlds for your efforts and skill in destroying pirate vessels as documented by you, and verified by on-board V-film. We have pleasure in assigning to you the Combat Status of 'Deadly'. Your legal status of 'Offender' has been negated. Your new rating as Deadly will be lodged in the GalNetwork within a standard day.

'Select wisely in battle, and be strong.'

So there it was. Alex was not yet twenty earth years of age, had come within one step of being rated more highly as a combateer than most people would even dream about.

He was *deadly*; he had killed the Cobra; why the Cobra had killed his father Alex hadn't thought to ask . . . of the ship's pilot, at least. He had guessed that the ship and its bounty killer pilot had simply been earning a wage.

Instead, he said to Rafe, 'Did you know the ship was at Cirag?'

'Had a good idea of it, Alex. That's why we sent the Tharglets with you. Nobody, but *nobody*—if they're a tad evil—can resist booty like that. I knew it would bring every freebooter for a light year after you, but I reckoned you could handle them. Most importantly, I was damn sure that your cargo would bring out the Cobra.

'You fought well. You showed the sort of instinct for combat that I remember in Jason. He was right. You *are* the man to follow him.'

'Follow him where?'

Rafe chuckled and shook his head. 'You see, that's the big question. Your father was chasing the mythical plant Raxxla. Does it exist, or does it not? If it does, then on Raxxla there's an alien construct that's a gateway to other Universes, and all that's in those Universes in the way of bounty, and treasures, and aliens, and life . . .

'Jason Ryder was convinced that Raxxla existed. That's why he trained for, and became a part of, the Dark Wheel, the legend-seekers. I hadn't heard much from him or about him for some time until just before he died, when he told me he'd found evidence for the *real existence* of Raxxla. He came back from Deep Space to get a proper team together . . .' Rafe smiled bitterly. 'But just before he was due to go back, he decided to take a safe-worlds holiday jaunt with his

son . . . and an assassin was waiting for him.'

'But why?' Alex asked. 'Why kill him for finding Raxxla?'

'Because there are people on Raxxla already. This is only a guess, mind you, but from what happened to Jason I'd say it was close to being right. We've long suspected that a corps of *élites* lives there, and are exploiting the gateway. They're powerful, twisted men. Powerful enough to hire an assassin to kill the threat to their dominance.'

Rafe leaned a little closer to Alex, his bright eyes gleaming, an intense look on his grizzled face.

'I've put you through your paces, Alex, you and Elyssia both. The Dark Wheel needs you. Both of you. But believe me, what you've just been through is nothing to what you face now. You've got to become *élite*, Alex. And that means a lot of training, and a lot of fighting, and maybe a lot of months, even years. But then the Universe will open up before you in a way you never imagined possible.'

Alex stood silent, thoughtful, watching the old man. In the corner, half in shadows, Elyssia stood and watched too, frightened by what she was hearing.

'Has the grief gone?' Rafe asked, and Alex nodded. The old trader smiled.

'How does it feel to be rich?'

'Empty,' Alex said, and Rafe Zetter laughed.

'You'll do for the Dark Wheel, Alex. You'll do . . .

READ THE NOVEL/PLAY THE GAME

A BOY WITH STARS IN HIS EYES SHOOTING THE RAPIDS OF HEAVEN

On his inaugural flight as a 'harmless' combateer, Alex Ryder experienced the sharp divide between Sim-combat and live action in the fast lane of Witch-Space. Seated next to his father, the occasion (a celebration!) was suddenly jarred by the fatal laser fire of a fellow trader...

Emerging from unconsciousness aboard a Moray hospital ship. Alex's first impression was conditioned by a sleazy holoFac of Rafe Zetter (a friend of Alex's father who has blotted his legal status by trading in slaves). As Alex's mind grappled with his senses, his desperate questions seemed to provoke still more perplexing riddles from the old warrior.

What had the trader hoped to gain (their cargo had been almost worthless)? Why had Jason Ryder stayed to engage the attacker, when he could have bailed out with Alex? What had he meant by 'Raxxla! Remember Raxxla!', as Alex slid into his escape pod?

But,gradually, with Zetter's help, Alex began to assemble some pieces of the jigsaw. His father was no simple trader, far from it; he had been one of the few – an élite combateer. The marauding trader was no bounty hunter, but an assassin programmed to kill.

As a thirst for revenge spurred the fury of Alex's emotions, he understood that Jason's mission must now become his. To succeed, he too would have to prove himself worthy of –

THE ORDER OF ELITE
a fighting quality far beyond courage, macho and cool precision

---

'Elite: The Dark Wheel' is a novella written by Rob Holdstock and inspired by the intergalactic space trading adventure program, ELITE, by David Braben and Ian Bell.

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