

"Space is really big." Gallagher thought to himself at the moment he found himself floating about with only an environmental suit, a severed life-support tether, and his confused thoughts to keep him company.

Seconds earlier, Gallagher had been trying to repair damage to an external solar panel while humming the tune to some annoying advertisement he had been unlucky enough to see one too many times on his pad. He stretched an arm out, straining to reach a sheared off bolt after a rather precarious journey through an asteroid field. Those micro-meteorites did significant damage to the more delicate exterior portions of the ship. That was when all hell broke loose. All hell, at least, for Major Cormac Gallagher. One instant he was going about his task, and in the next, he was bobbing along, untethered and all alone in empty space.

"Damn," said Gallagher.

Less than a minute earlier onboard *The Avenger*, Navigator Arvesp Erth shouted "Uh... Captain!" while staring in disbelief at her console. Annoyed at being interrupted from his own task, the Captain, a strong and rather sizable specimen of

his species, twisted in his too small command chair toward the voice of the Navigator. He had been dozing off a little as he sat there. The recent mission they were on had been less than exciting, and Ziqna was just bored.

Glad for the distraction, he looked at the navigator. "What?" Captain Ziqna asked in his usual gruff voice. "What..." he started to repeat as an alarm on his console began beeping. "Navigator, why are we..." Klaxons began sounding from the cramped bridge, interrupting the Captain as the star field in a nearby window changed from a static array of stars to a jumble of blurred colors. "Emergency! All engines stop!" he said as everyone on the bridge began frantically scanning information on their own pads and workstation consoles.

"I have no control over the navigation computer," said Arvesp. "Most sensors are offline, controls not responding." Her fingers moved from one panel to another, attempting to regain control.

"Captain, we had personnel outside the ship when..." Security Officer Zika Uku stated more matter-of-factly than would be expected in such a crisis.

"That is not the worst part," mumbled Arvesp to herself as she turned to face the Captain. "The indicators says we haven't moved at all," she announced to the room, "yet, according to my readings, we are inside a gravity well!" *The Avenger* had been traveling in empty space preparing to engage the FTL drive.

"What? How is that...shut off those damn alarms" roared Ziqna, holding his hands over his ears to block out the blaring noise and the loud voices of his crew. "Everyone calm down. Let's assess what happened."

Security Officer Uku moved to his station while the bridge crew attempted to figure out what went wrong. Loud sounds emanated from somewhere deep below decks as the view outside went black, muting the stars. Everyone gasped as the lights and gravity blinked out as well. Silent black weightlessness engulfed Arvesp as her zero-g training kicked in.

The deck of the bridge was swallowed in darkness. "No, not entirely dark," she thought as she drifted in a controlled movement toward the emergency grip on the nearest bulkhead. Grabbing on, she almost spun out of control at her

excitement as she gripped the handle a little too hard. Her body hit the wall as she tried to identify the origin of light. Everyone stopped talking when the illumination went out, but now a small stirring of voices could be heard from the other side of the cabin. Arvesp allowed her body to rotate as she searched for the source of the dim glow.

"There!" A small indicator light flashed from her station. Dread seeped in as Arvesp realized with sudden rapidity what exactly the light meant. Even with a near total loss of power, the emergency backup systems always provided power to this particular warning -- an intruder.

Major Cormac Angus Gallagher floated in space for what felt like hours, when in reality only minutes passed. After a moment, the surrounding stars went from blurred lines to pinpricks in the darkness. He scanned the area around him for any sign of *The Avenger*. Nothing. He checked his arm controller for any information it relayed. Too low for comfort, his oxygen level slowly dropped. He had been about to finish his spacewalk when things got weird. His communications unit showed no vessel or person in range, and yet his sensors detected an enormous source of gravity nearby.

"That's odd," Gallagher said to himself, "a gravity well...from what?" He detected no nearby planets or asteroids behind his sun visor. At least three standard units distant, the star in this system shone dimly, so that wasn't the source.

"Could it?" Gallagher had been trained in various scenarios for being in danger outside his ship, so he began a routine, visual grid search of nearby space, using the markings on the inside of his visor to help him. He was midway through searching the area of space 90 degrees to his right when he noticed a shimmering in space. "Oh boy," Gallagher thought. "Not good...a cloaked ship."

The presence of a hidden craft might explain his sudden untethered spacewalk. It wouldn't explain the location of *The Avenger*, though. He had a more pressing problem. Who in this region of space possessed cloaked ships? Gallagher prayed he was wrong.

On the darkened bridge, Arvesp's eyes adjusted to the small amount of available light. She could now make out the forms of the other members of the crew. Ziqna kept trying in vain to seat himself back in his command chair. One or two other crew members, one human and one Gathung, like

herself, held on to similar hand rails along the far side of the bridge. Startled, Arvesp caught the furtive movements of the nearby Security Officer, Zika Uku. Arvesp wasn't sure, but she thought she glimpsed him trying to open the door to the outer passageway.

"Why would he do that?" she thought to herself. "We have no idea what is out there." She launched herself from her hold toward the Security Officer. Zika was unaware of her presence as she grabbed a hand hold next to his substantial, almost elongated head.

The Gathung are a rather tall and inelegant species. Originating from the planet Gathung'l in a region of the Milky Way called The Orion Arm, most Gathung are from one of two major continents. As the most southern continent on Gathung'l, inhabitants of Sumor tended to be stockier and have darker skin than their northern neighbors on Naomor. Most inhabited worlds in the galaxy had only one dominant species of bipedal creatures, except for Gathung'l. Two distinct groups of bipeds evolved. The planet's dominant species, the Gathung, are divided into two classes, The My, and the Ly. The My (all

males), had elongated heads, long, almost reed-thin arms, and are covered in various shades of fur. The Ly (all females), had a similar build as The My, but are completely bare of all hair or fur. To decorate their bodies, most My wrapped themselves in colorful dresses, called My'un. Almost every member of the crew of *The Avenger* were Gathung as most other sentient races could not stand their stench. Humans, having a much weaker sense of smell than the Gathung, didn't seem to be bothered by the aroma, and so would willingly serve with the much more odorous species.

"Zika...what are you doing?" whispered the Navigator. Startled, Zika turned toward her. Arvesp observed with shock the blastgun unholstered and in his hand. Without thinking, she released her handhold and pushed off the wall with her strong legs. Too late. A brilliant bolt of amber light shot out of the blastgun. The bolt missed Arvesp's neck and whizzed off, hitting the opposite wall in a shower of sparks and melting electronics. Everyone on the bridge turned their heads toward the sound of the blaster bolt hitting the wall, missing the scuffle between the navigator

and the security officer. Without warning, gravity and lights returned to the deck and everyone landed, most of them unharmed, on the floor of the bridge.

Arvesp remembered the intruder alert lighting up her panel at the same instant that another amber bolt shot from Zika Uku's blastgun, hitting her in the left leg. Too weak, the bolt failed to penetrate her tough skin. Nevertheless, the searing nerve pain caused Arvesp to cry out. Noticing his failure, Zika stood, pressed a small button next to the still closed exit and rushed through the open door leading off the bridge, running down the corridor while randomly shooting his blastgun behind him as he fled.

One or two beings jumped out of his way as he ran, a few uttering angry shouts in his direction. Arvesp, limping but still functional, raced down the corridor after Zika. She was unarmed, and so she avoided the bolts flung in her direction by his careless firing. He came upon a larger human who entered the corridor and slammed headlong into the taller man. The human, a civilian engineer named Corey Hodges, grabbed the security officer and wrestled the depleted blastgun from his grip.



Cormac Gallagher was born and raised near Los Angeles, on Earth. Born a little over eighteen years before the Cathari made their first appearance in the sky, he was among the first generation of humans to answer the age-old question that plagued so many generations before, "are we alone?"

Gallagher spent his early years with his parents in a small house in Riverside, California. The previous decade had been tumultuous for the planet as a whole but this particular area of the country had been ravaged by economic disasters that left the area impoverished and full of violence. The middle of the twenty-first century had seen escalating conflict after conflict. Now it seemed as if the whole world was either on fire, bone dry, or starving. Then, the real fun began. The Cathari made their first appearance shaking most of the planet to its core. Gallagher's family decided it was way past-time to leave the area and moved farther north, as far away from packed population centers as possible.

Gallagher and his family spent the next several years moving from one small town to another. It took Gallagher's father more than a year to find a job he felt was suitable. Even the nagging of Gallagher's mother and the sad accommodations they found didn't spur him on as fast as the family hoped. Eventually, they settled in the extreme north of California. Gallagher's father, a lawyer by trade, set up shop in a tiny store front and finally decided that they were home. Gallagher and his two younger sisters enrolled in the local schools, and everyone tried to forget about aliens.

After Gallagher graduated from High School, life presented him with two opposing opportunities. He could serve in the US Army, or go to prison. He fell in with a bad sort during his last year of school and stole an air transport as part of a senior year prank. Naturally, he got caught. His parents were devastated by his behavior and local law enforcement wasn't too happy about it either. His lawyer negotiated and got the charges reduced but only if he would agree to serve at least four years in the military. Gallagher felt sure he did not want to join at a time of war, but he surely didn't want to

spend those same four years locked in a cell. He agreed.

Joining the military changed his life. He learned discipline, honor, and self-respect. A natural athlete and brilliant in mathematics and linguistics, he rose through the ranks and at the end of his mandatory four year stint, he opted to re-enlist. Toward the end of his second enlistment, the Cathari re-emerged after having been gone for ten years. The first appearance by the Cathari had resulted in planet wide chaos. The second appearance of the Cathari was just after the planet wrapped up a successful attempt at unifying. Humans were not fooled by the reappearance. It was generally believed that the strides the planet had made toward peace was the motivating factor in their re-emergence. Most of the soldiers Gallagher knew and worked with showed deep apprehension of the visitation but Gallagher happened to be intrigued by them.

“If ya’ll think those aliens are here to make friends, you must get your head examined,” said a bunk mate of Gallagher to his buddies one evening. “They only came to enslave us.”

“I don’t think an advanced alien race would travel all that distance only to come and steal our skin or whatever it is you think they want,” said Gallagher.

“I don’t know about any of that, but I’ve seen enough on TV to make me think.”

“TV?” Gallagher laughed. “How would TV have any idea what is *really* out there?”

The two men argued back and forth for a bit. Gallagher finally shook his head and got up to leave.

“We have a review in the morning gents. We should hit the bunks.”

When the Cathari offered to train humans on Cathar Prime as part of their attempt to introduce the planet to the wider galactic community, Gallagher jumped at the opportunity and within six months he found himself studying off world.

His superiors in the Army recognized his aptitude and willingness to engage with the Cathari and before they agreed to ship him off planet, they gave him orders that made him none too happy. The US Army, now a branch of the United Nations Peacekeeping Force, ordered Gallagher to report back on everything he

witnessed and experienced on Cathar Prime. Of most primary interest to his superiors was the military readiness of the Cathari. Military leaders on Earth suspected there was more behind the Cathari Alliance than they were led to believe, and they did not want to be unprepared. Humanity didn't understand the so-called peaceful ideals of the aliens and suspected far more sinister motives behind all this friendly exploration.

Gallagher didn't believe there were any bad intentions on the part of the Cathari, but he agreed to report back. The morning he was due to leave Earth, he gathered as much as he was allowed to bring with him and made his last calls to his family. Even though he did not expect anything to happen, this was space travel after all, and he was a little nervous.

He reported to the launch site and was amazed at the size and scope of the Cathari lander. It was twice the size of any space going vessel Gallagher had ever seen. It was most definitely larger than anything Earth had ever launched. Even the ships that carried colonists to Mars weren't nearly this big. Gallagher expected to be strapped down and in a space suit. When he entered the craft, he was

led to a spacious seating area and given a short briefing on the trip.

It would take them less than three days at faster than light speed to travel from Earth to Cathar Prime. Gallagher was assigned temporary guest quarters and ate lunch with a dozen other volunteers. The ship blasted into orbit so smoothly that no one among the humans even realized they were en route until a voice came over a loudspeaker to inform them that there would be an almost imperceptible shift from natural gravity to artificial gravity.

The first time Gallagher saw deep space he was overwhelmed by not only the enduring beauty but also the absolute abyss of it all. The ship traveled to its FTL injection coordinates and as it did so, Earth vanished and all he could see were innumerable stars. As the ship made its way to Cathar Prime, Gallagher and the other humans learned about interacting with their new hosts, gained some history of the planet, and were drilled in manners and action that would either please or sorely offend the Cathari people.

On Cathar Prime, he experienced wonders few other humans have ever seen or imagined. He met

dozens of representatives from other species, learned about space exploration, extra-planetary naval tactics, star ship engineering, and he experienced first hand the vastness of the galaxy. The next two years while he studied at the Imperial Academy was going to be amazing.

As he had been ordered to, he dutifully reported back all his observations and his superiors rewarded him with ever-increasing rank and subsequent access to secret intelligence. Gallagher learned of his planetary leaders working with another alien species that held similar militaristic views as Earth did. As part of their collaboration with the Gathung, Earth began developing the technology to cloak an entire planet. Earth already independently developed the ability to cloak its space going vessels, but this goal superseded everything else. If successful, Earth and any other planet with the technology could literally hide from the outside universe.

Now a Major, Gallagher graduated from the Imperial Academy, and he received orders to report to his new station onboard *The Avenger*. His public role was determined to be Second Engineer. He would retain his rank of Major but this placement

was a civilian placement so his rank would play no role other than as a formality. His superiors on Earth instructed him that his real job was to keep an eye on the development of the planet cloaking tech. Earth wanted to make sure that not even the Gathung, their supposed friends, would be able to steal the technology. They wanted it first, and they wanted to be the only planet that employed it.

First Engineer Hodges screwed up his face in puzzlement. Seconds ago while sipping his hot coffee, he mentally prepared himself for the day ahead. Each day he began by reviewing any action items his team of engineers compiled from the previous day's work. A ship like *The Avenger* needed constant upkeep and maintenance to keep in tip-top shape. He assigned his engineers to specific job functions and at the end of each day, they would record a log of everything that had either been completed or was still in progress. The frequent trips between Earth and Gathung'l taxed the ships systems.



Hodges checked off this list of action items as the star field outside shifted and then went black. Setting down his coffee, he stood from his work station when he saw the system status monitor change from green to yellow.

"What in the world..." he began as he skimmed through the information displayed. According to his reports, several deck plates showed a "needs repair" status indicator. Chief Engineer Hodges glanced around the Engine Room. He appeared to be alone. Ten minutes earlier, after a short meeting of all his staff, he sent them on their way to perform their daily functions. Grunting in mild annoyance, Hodges grabbed a pad, rose from his chair, and left the Engine Room.

Hodges checked the location of the damaged deck plating and headed in that direction. On the way, he recalled a rather terse conversation with his Second Engineer, Major Gallagher.

"I need you to repair some solar panels that have been damaged." Hodges said earlier that morning.

"You mean grunt work?" Gallagher said in response. "My assignment has been to get the new security reactors up and running."

Annoyed and not terribly interested in what Gallagher thought about work assignments, Hodges replied, "not grunt work. Today it is your work."

"Can't someone else do it? I don't like space walks," said Gallagher.

"Just do it Gallagher," Hodges said before returning to his review of the logs.

"Okay boss. Whatever you say," Gallagher responded sarcastically before heading off to the airlock prep room.

Arriving at the first damaged deck plate, Hodges bent down and examined it. He grew concerned because the deck plating had tight tolerances with the other plating and an observer shouldn't see any gaps without the proper instrumentation. This deck plate looked like it had been lifted and then placed back down haphazardly. Scanning the corridor, he detected a few other plates skewed.

Hodges experienced a sinking feeling, and he began to repair the deck plating when he heard shouts coming from the entrance to the bridge. To his shock, the Security Officer, the Navigator and the Captain chased each other down the corridor to where he currently crouched. Zika had his blastgun

out and repeatedly fired it behind him, though not well as he missed anything important except some now scorched interior panels.

Hodges tripped Zika as he attempted to pass, then eyed the others. Zika fell to his knees, his blaster tumbling from his hands.

"Hey, what is all this about?" shouted Hodges as he grabbed a hold of Zika.

Arvesp, by now caught up with the security officer, replied "He shot me!"

Hodges glanced down at Zika as more crew from the bridge came into sight, accompanied by the Captain. "Why are you shooting? Arvesp isn't a threat to you!"

"She attacked me first!" yelled Zika. "I merely defended myself!" Everyone paused for a moment, then several voices started shouting and exclaiming at the same time.

"He had his blastgun drawn when the gravity and power went out!" said a visibly angry Arvesp.

Growing in anger himself and having had enough of the nonsense, the Captain roared "Enough!" Startled, everyone in the corridor fell silent and turned in his direction. The Gathung among the group kept their eyes down in

submission. Hodges looked on with a look of curiosity on his face. Ziqna motioned to two nearby security personnel. "Put them in holding," he said, pointing a finger at Zika and then at Arvesp, "and secure that blastgun!" Arvesp started to protest but a fiery look from the Captain silenced her. Turning angrily toward Hodges, he asked, "Engineer, why are you in this corridor? Your station is three decks down"

Hodges calmly reflected for a moment before responding. "Captain, I was repairing some misaligned deck plating when all of you ran down the corridor"

Hearing Hodges continue speaking while being shoved away into a lift, Arvesp muttered something unintelligible. No one heard the rest of her protest.

Shaking his head, the Captain peered down the hall. "Everyone back to work." He motioned in the general direction of the holding cells. "Follow me Hodges." Ziqna strolled in the opposite direction as the rest of the bridge crew. Hodges picked up his tools and followed.

Captain Ziqna ran headlong into several members of the crew as he huffed down the hall toward the holding cells. Even though the majority of the crew onboard *The Avenger* was Gathung, a smattering of humans and other species served on board. As part of the mission of the Cathari Alliance, diversity among the various crafts of the fleet ranked among the top priorities when choosing who or what to fill each of the many roles with. *The Avenger* was no exception.

What the Captain and his superiors did not realize was that among the various races of the crew, three members, two Gathung and one human, were strategically placed in the ranks. These crew members did not work toward fulfilling the Cathari Alliance's objectives. In fact, the mission of *The Avenger* itself did not align with the long term plans of the Alliance. Earth and Gathung'l were working together on a top secret security project that they would prefer their Cathari colleagues to not know about. Zika Uku was a spy, placed onboard by the D'lai Authority. He had been ordered to watch and report back to D'lai leadership on events onboard *The Avenger*. As

part of his association with the D'lai, he understood what the power loss earlier meant, being privy to some top secret intelligence on how the D'lai interact with other civilizations. Zika had one fatal flaw, however. He was a bit of a coward. A coward afraid of being caught.

Zika Uku also happened to be a criminal -- at least in the eyes of the D'lai. The D'lai took criminality to extreme heights. If a being had parents, grandparents, cousins, etc. who offended the D'lai, every member of that family would be branded a criminal. Zika's grandfather fought in the resistance and been executed by the D'lai. They used this to recruit Zika and press him into service. In fact, while the D'lai left Gathung'l, they still very much operated on the planet. Many Gathung became trapped by this and served The D'lai Authority.

"Sit!" barked Ziqna as he entered the small and sparsely furnished holding area. He motioned to two good sized chairs near a porthole. Arvesp glanced at Hodges, who then stared at Zika. When no one took claim to the only two chairs in the room, the Captain grunted and pointed at Hodges. Taking the hint, Corey Hodges sad down and

waited. The Captain took the only other remaining chair near a too small desk.

Looking at the Security Officer, the Captain said "Why are you firing your blastgun on board my ship?"

Zika fidgeted nervously, which made Hodges react by covering his nose and mouth with his hands. When a Gathung was nervous he emits an odor that is utterly unpleasant so the other Gathung in the room didn't react to the malodorous Security Officer. They stared at him, waiting for a reply.

"I thought there was an intruder on the bridge," lied Zika Uku hopefully. "I was protecting..."

"An intruder?" interrupted the Captain skeptically. "An intruder from where? How would they have gotten on the bridge with no power to the doors?"

"He's lying" said the Navigator. "He tried to get off the bridge."

Chief Engineer Hodges shifted in his chair. The only human in the room, he grew more uneasy. If a Gathung stank when nervous, the room became even more stinky with three of them.

Earlier, Ziqna read recent reports from Earth and Gathung commands of odd behavior of star ships in other sectors of the galaxy. He was well aware that something was going on. What exactly that was, he only guessed at. The behavior of his Security Officer set his mind roiling with the possibilities.

"Leave the bridge...to go where?" said the Captain. "Wouldn't the bridge be the precise place for a Security Officer during an emergency?"

Zika again appeared uncomfortable and ignored the groans of Hodges. "Yes...sir," said the Security Officer. "I panicked."

"Panicked!" said the Captain. "Enough. I don't have time for a panicked security officer. You will be confined here until I have time to sort this whole vdwat out." He pressed a button on a console, stood and walked to the door. "Hodges we need to talk. Arvesp, go to your quarters."

The Navigator swiftly left the room. Ziqna gaped at his Security Officer with a look of distaste, then motioning to Hodges to follow, strolling out of the room as two junior security officers entered. "Lock him in a cell." He stomped down the hall, shaking his head. A passing Scree crew member squeaked



and flattened itself against the bulkhead. Ziqna didn't even notice.

Still floating outside, Gallagher was examining the shimmering outline of the alien ship. He recognized from experience that only a few sentient races had crafts capable of cloaking. His own planet perfected the technique only recently, but it was improbable that a human star ship would be this far out into The Orion Arm. Humans tended to be mildly xenophobic and only the most adventurous of humans ventured beyond their own solar system. Gallagher, being one of them, left Earth the moment he was legally allowed to and headed off into deep space aboard a Cathari frigate.

He had been among the first humans to have been accepted into the Imperial War College on Cathar Prime, one of the nearest inhabited systems to Earth. The Cathari were members of an interplanetary alliance spanning two dozen inhabited systems. Earth had been invited to join

the alliance upon achieving a single world government, but the leaders of the planet, in an extraordinarily close vote, declined the invitation. The Cathari, unconvinced by humanity's xenophobia, established an embassy in London, the new capital of a united Earth. Over the next few years, other planets, including the Gathung, would send embassies as well, allowing Earth to maintain loose contact with the galaxy at large.

Gallagher wore on his tool belt an emergency tether, and he now decided it was time to attempt to reel himself into the unknown vessel. He took aim at an area he thought might be near an external hatch, and fired. The magnetic head of the tether latched on to the cloaked vessel, and after depressing a button on his controls, he was whisked toward the surface. He slammed into the hull and if not for the tether he would have tumbled backward into space.

"Now what" thought Gallagher. He found the hull, but how would he get inside? The answer was not long in coming, as a light flared from nearby. It was disconcerting to see light emanating from nothing, but Gallagher was moderately relieved that someone inside detected his presence. A being

covered head to toe in an environmental suit similar in size and shape to his own emerged from the light. Gallagher didn't recognize the markings on the suit as the being moved in the zero gravity of space toward his location. The alien grabbed the head of the tether with one arm, depressed the release mechanism of the strong magnet, and attached the tether to himself. The unknown space walker then moved back toward the light source and pulled Gallagher inside.

After a few moments, the airlock pressurized and Gallagher watched the unknown rescuer remove its helmet. Gallagher stepped back in surprise to find the alien seemed very much like a human with one frightening exception. The alien's skin was a mottled gray and absolutely no hair at all on his bulbous head.

"Whoa..." Gallagher said in surprise. "What's up with your skin buddy?"

The alien peered quizzically at Gallagher and said, "I could ask you the same thing, buddy."

Gallagher was surprised that the alien spoke Standard as well as he did. Having met dozens of races in his time outside the Sol system, he almost always used a translator device attached behind his

left ear to understand other beings. This guy spoke his own language.

The alien seemed to sneer at Gallagher over before replying further. "Remove your helmet, human."

Gallagher hesitated, then he shrugged and pulled his own space helmet off. He figured that if this alien wanted to harm him, all he needed to do was release the tether and let Gallagher continue floating in empty space. Gallagher breathed the air a little hesitantly, sniffed a little at the odd odor, then looked around him at the cramped but efficient airlock chamber.

"So, what's up with this ship? Why is it cloaked?" Gallagher asked.

The alien smiled and responded. "We didn't want the others to see us."

Gallagher attempted to get more out of the alien, but he motioned for Gallagher to follow him out of the airlock and down a short corridor. Gallagher did as he was instructed and followed behind the strange alien. The two of them entered a small, windowless room that contained nothing more than two chairs and a small desk. The alien took up

a seat behind the desk and pointed at the only remaining seat.

"Sit down, please," the alien said.

Gallagher was surprised by the pleasant tone in the alien's voice. If he had been in this other guy's shoes, he didn't know if he would be quite as pleasant. As he sat down, he examined the grey-skinned alien more closely. He detected significant differences between this alien's appearance and the typical human's skin-color. The alien had much larger than average eyes, a huge almost rounded head, and where a nose should be, Gallagher only saw small holes. He rubbed his eyes, remembering stories from childhood and a shiver ran down his spine. The alien busied himself with a small pad on the desk, an eyebrow arching in an unnervingly human-like gesture before proceeding.

"What were you doing outside your ship, human?"

"Gallagher."

"Hmm?" asked the alien, puzzled.

"My name. It's Gallagher."

Staring at Gallagher, he continued. "I asked what you were doing outside your ship, not what your name is... Gallagher."

Gallagher returned the stare. "Most humans don't like being referred to as 'human'. We kinda like our own names."

The alien nodded in a gesture decidedly unlike a typical human nod and waited for a response to his query.

Gallagher sighed then responded, "I was repairing a solar panel."

Seeing Gallagher was not going to volunteer any more information, he continued with his questioning. "And what made you deploy a tether?"

Gallagher snorted before responding. "Well, if I hadn't, I'd still be floating out there wouldn't I?"

Unperturbed by Gallagher's sarcastic tone, he continued. "Yes. Why did you deploy your tether into open space?" he persisted.

"It wasn't open space. I could tell there was something cloaked."

The alien nodded, again in that inhuman fashion.

"Listen, if you're gonna ask me nonsense questions, I'd rather be left alone," Gallagher said. "Maybe let me go back to my own ship."

"What is your position aboard *The Avenger*?"

This last question seriously concerned Gallagher. "Um. Hmm," was all he got out as his mind whirled. While he was technically an engineer, he was assigned other more secretive duties he really didn't want this alien, or any alien in fact, to know.

The alien looked up and waited for a response.

Gallagher frowned but responded as he didn't want to upset his unfamiliar host, "Second Engineer."

"Why send a second engineer out to repair a solar panel?" asked the alien.

"I don't know...maybe ask the First Engineer," Gallagher said.

Frustrated at the responses, the alien sighed before continuing. "Fine." He pushed a button on his pad and the chair Gallagher was sitting in speedily and without warning cuffed both of his arms and both of his legs. "Hey that's a little tight!" protested Gallagher before the alien responded further. All at once the alien stood and strolled from the room without a word.

"Damn," Gallagher said for the second time in less than an hour.

The D'lai was perhaps the most mysterious species in the known galaxy. No living sentient had ever knowingly seen an individual D'lai. The D'lai always appeared in flowing robes that hid everything, including their faces. Among the various planets, however, no one feared the D'lai more than the Gathung. Approaching two hundred years prior, when the Gathung first began venturing into orbit around their planet and explored their home system, the D'lai swept in and seized control of the Gathung'l system.

Thousands of ordinary Gathung died in the purge that followed. Any individual found to not be in top genetic form had been killed or sterilized and put into work camps. Others who opposed the brutal rule of the D'lai were blinded, mutilated, and often executed -- all publicly. Needless to say, any public resistance died down fast and the Gathung began a century of enslavement to the D'lai Authority.

After almost one hundred years of rule, the D'lai vanished from the system overnight. Unconstrained and without the harsh rule of the D'lai, the Gathung broke out into clan wars which



threatened to destroy the vestiges of society that remained. After two years of almost constant fighting, a Ly called Kwiu Zig rose to power on the Naomor continent and rapidly consolidated his authority and military strength. His clan warriors overnight seized control of the southernmost continent of Sumor as well.

The enslavement by the D'lai Authority reeked havoc on Gathung culture, but it was not without its benefits. One such benefit was a planet-wide infrastructure of rail systems, ground and air travel the occupiers built out of necessity. Using this transportation network, Kwiu Zig had been able to overtake even the most remote regions of the planet. He easily installed himself as First Dictator, a job he made up, and he harshly consolidated the remaining Gathung people under one rule of law.

Another advantage of the D'lai occupation had been the technology to travel between the stars. A century earlier, the Gathung had barely perfected chemical propulsion systems when they fell under D'lai rule. Now, thanks to the slavery of the planet, the Gathung understood the workings of the FTL drives that bent space and propel a spacecraft faster than light. Gathung engineers had been

trained by the D'lai to repair their damaged ships, providing critical knowledge to the Gathung.

What puzzled the Gathung more than anything was the unanticipated and sudden disappearance of the D'lai. If not for the wisdom of Kwiu Zig, many of the ordinary Gathung would probably not have understood the value and importance of the discarded D'lai technology. First Dictator Zig promptly seized on what that technology meant and set about to prepare his planet in case the D'lai came back.

A long-lived species, the united Gathung began colonizing other planets in their system before venturing out into deep space. Dozens of light years from Gathung, the Cathari had already begun establishing its loose alliance of worlds. The Gathung, led by the First Dictator, joined The Cathari Alliance only seventeen years after the D'lai vanished. A species that never looked backwards, the Gathung plunged headlong into interplanetary politics and expeditiously emerged as an able if boring species.

Natural bureaucrats, the Gathung insinuated themselves in every level of The Cathari Alliance and soon assumed a major voice in any decision

made by The Alliance. As a result, they spread among the stars without realizing their former captors, the D'lai, still spied on them and waited.

The Gathung also began a campaign to find other worlds, aligned or not, that shared a similar goal of not just interplanetary cooperation, but planetary defense. Several years after the Cathari established its embassy on Earth, the Gathung began making secret overtures with the humans about their hopes and ideas for planetary defense. They had no intention of allowing the D'lai or any other unknown conquering species to create chaos for them again. The humans, for their part, eagerly got to work.

On board the D'lai ship *The Spector*, Negotiator Ret D'iash remotely watched the interactions between Major Gallagher and a security officer who brought him onboard. D'iash was furious at the security officer having revealed himself. She would deal with the officer later. However, since he was not D'lai, she had no fear of revealing her people's deepest secret. D'iash had rarely encountered a human before, so she was puzzled by the attitude of the man toward the being who rescued him from the vacuum of space. D'iash sat

back in her chair after the interrogation ended and tapped the edge of his desk in contemplation. D'ias had been monitoring the Cathari Alliance when her crew stumbled across *The Avenger*. The Gathung were not in the normal space lanes and so the Negotiator had decided to capture and inspect the much smaller Gathung vessel. Negotiator D'ias was curious as to why the normally predictable Gathung would be so far from normal routes, and she was determined to get to the bottom of it.

Already, she dispatched reconnaissance officers onto *The Avenger* after the capture. It was standard operating procedure for the D'lai to disable any captured ship by disrupting gravity, lights, and most power sources. The dispatched recon team wore magnetic boots which enabled them to walk in an almost normal fashion despite the loss of gravity. Each recon team member also wore a small shield which rendered them invisible in normal light. Their mission was to gather information from the Gathung data banks and get off before the D'lai would ordinarily restore systems and release them -- mostly unharmed. With any luck, the recon team's presence would go undetected. The D'lai

were preparing for war and Negotiator D'iash wanted any inside information on the Cathari Alliance she could gather prior to her arrival in the Cathari system.

All D'lai ships traveled using their cloaking technology. The technology enabled them to monitor galactic events without being directly or indirectly involved. The only time the D'lai involved themselves in planetary or galactic events was during their various conquests of newly discovered civilizations. The D'lai enjoyed keeping themselves mysterious as it made other planetary civilizations overly cautious and easy to manipulate.

"Negotiator?" a voice said from a pad near the D'iash. "We have retrieved copies of the data banks and our recon teams are back onboard."

"Good. Undock *The Avenger* and prepare to get underway," said the Negotiator.

"Yes Negotiator," said the voice.

A small rumbling vibration in the floor accompanied the undocking maneuver with the Gathung craft from the sizable hold. D'iash carefully considered what she would do with the human Gallagher and decided she would keep the

human as a valuable source of additional information.

"The human may require more intense interrogation," D'iash mused aloud as the warship hurriedly departed on course to Cathar Prime. "He actually thinks he has seen one of us...what a fool," she laughed.