

1. Elvene

‘Marauders approaching from Sector 7. Twelve minutes 25 seconds and closing.’ This was the second iteration of the warning by the ship’s computer and Elvene was beginning to have that awful feeling of impending doom that is perversely sexual, when the brain seems to confuse fear with another primitive survival instinct. She was literally watching death approach and she had no means to impede it. Her mouth was dry and her stomach churned to the point of nausea. She had a feeling of defeat before the fight had even begun. Not that she was in a position to fight with marauders, anyway.

Elvene was familiar with marauders, as was everyone in the Space Corps. They didn’t negotiate, and they didn’t bargain, their whole modus operandi was to seek and destroy, the most effective killing machines yet devised by man. Alone in space, out of contact; it was the perfect environment for them to pick off a lone ship. And space was the marauders’ environment: it was the one they were best adapted for. They were built like modules, no bigger than humans but pyramid shaped. They used a collective mind system and trawled through space in packs, with the same abilities as any space-faring ship. Her ship only had a passive defence system, but even with weapons, it would not have been a match for a pack of marauders who could spread out and surround her with enough weaponry to destroy a war ship, let alone her modest craft. In fact marauders were so feared that her ship was enabled with a suicide command, should she choose to use it.

‘How many did you say?’ she asked the computer. But she was stalling, when stalling was not an option she had.

‘A pack of six, from what I can detect.’

From what it can detect, she repeated to herself. They had used stealth to get within striking range, so there could be more, just out of range, but that was unlikely. Neither could

she outrun them; if she tried she would buy some time but eventually they would encircle her before delivering the inevitable death blow. With marauders there was no point in running unless you had somewhere to run to, and they were light weeks from any system with a known landfall.

‘Eight minutes 15 seconds and closing.’

That was how long before they would be within missile launching range. A distinct disadvantage of having an onboard computer was that it kept telling you how many minutes and seconds you had before you were about to die. Nothing like a countdown to your own execution to keep your mind focused. If she started thinking like the computer she knew she would die.

She wondered where they’d come from and how long they had been following her. Her mission was reconnaissance and this was an uncharted sector. She wondered if she had inadvertently stumbled into a nest of marauders without knowing it, or if they’d been following her ever since her warp point. Either way it pointed to a hole in the Corps' intelligence. But she could ill afford to puzzle over these questions when they were of no assistance to her survival.

‘Are we in a position to warp?’

‘No, we don’t have enough time to create the nodes.’

It was a stupid question but she had to ask it. Warping was not a pushbutton affair. Creating a self-replicating wormhole without knowing where it was going to end was a very dangerous enterprise indeed. She’d prefer to be blown to smithereens than starve to death in an unknown corner of the universe without a return passage.

Previous experience told Elvene that fear was an ally if you knew how to focus it. While you have fear the mind keeps looking for escape. If she had been calm and serene in this situation she would already be defeated. It amazed her that her brain could analyse her fear

even while she was trying to use it, but basically she was just looking for positives in a very negative situation.

‘Four minutes 12 seconds and closing.’

‘Shut up,’ she said in a burst of frustration. ‘Okay.’ She started talking to herself. ‘I have the emergency escape module, but they will destroy it as soon as it leaves the ship.

‘Besides they can detect life on board if they get close enough.’ She imagined the irony of the scenario with them destroying her in the escape capsule and then leaving Alfa, her ship, untouched.

Then it hit her. ‘But that’s it. I’ll use it as a decoy.’

But they would still be able to detect me on board, she thought. Not if I’m in hibernation. They won’t be able to detect any life signs unless they come on board, and that’s most unlikely. Elvene was gambling that they would destroy the capsule on impulse without checking its contents. But she was also banking her life on an untried hypothesis: that once they’d achieved their objective, which was to kill her, they would leave the ship intact.

‘One minute 10 seconds and closing.’

‘Okay, Alfa, you need to do three things in the sequence I command you. You must put me into hibernation. You must break a quantum distress signal. And you must eject the emergency escape module at maximum velocity in a direction away from the approaching marauders.’

‘I understand all your commands and they will be done in the sequence you request.’

‘Oh, and one more thing. I won’t be in the emergency escape module.’

‘If you were, madam, I wouldn’t send it.’

‘That’s very thoughtful of you, Alfa, now let’s do it. The command is: “Abandon Ship”.’

Elvene knew that her plan held no guarantees. She knew that the marauders would attempt to interrogate Alfa, irrespective of the outcome with the capsule, and if they failed they would then attempt a tractor beam. But the ship had its own inbuilt defence against tractor beams, and ships were often booby trapped following abandonment. Alternatively, they could just destroy the ship anyway, but that was the gamble she had to take. Besides if they did destroy the ship, she was never going to know because she would be dead. It seemed like a good choice.

She lowered herself into the hibernation couch and watched the lid close; against all her resolve, it made her think of a coffin.

‘Six seconds and closing’ was the last thing she heard.