

JOHANNA SINISALO

BEYOND THE GALACTIC VEIL



ECLIPSE

SECOND DAWN FOR THE GALAXY



Johanna Sinisalo (b. 1958) is one of the brightest stars of Finnish science fiction and fantasy. She has won several literary prizes, among them the Finlandia Prize, the James Tiptree, Jr. Award and the Prometheus Award. Her first novel *Not Before Sundown* (U.S. edition *Troll: A Love Story*) has been translated into 19 languages. Three of her other novels are available in English, all praised by readers and critics alike: *Birdbrain*, *The Blood of Angels*, and her latest novel, *The Core of the Sun*, which made the James Tiptree, Jr. Award honor list in 2016. Sinisalo's novelette, *Baby Doll*, was shortlisted for the Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award in 2008 and the Nebula in 2009. Various of her short stories are available in English in several anthologies, and she has edited *The Dedalus Book of Finnish Fantasy*.

Sinisalo also works as a screenwriter and script consultant for television and cinema. Among her most well-known works is the original story for the 2012 cult SF Studios comedy *Iron Sky*. Sinisalo was one of the Guests of Honour of Worldcon 75 in Helsinki, Finland, in 2017.

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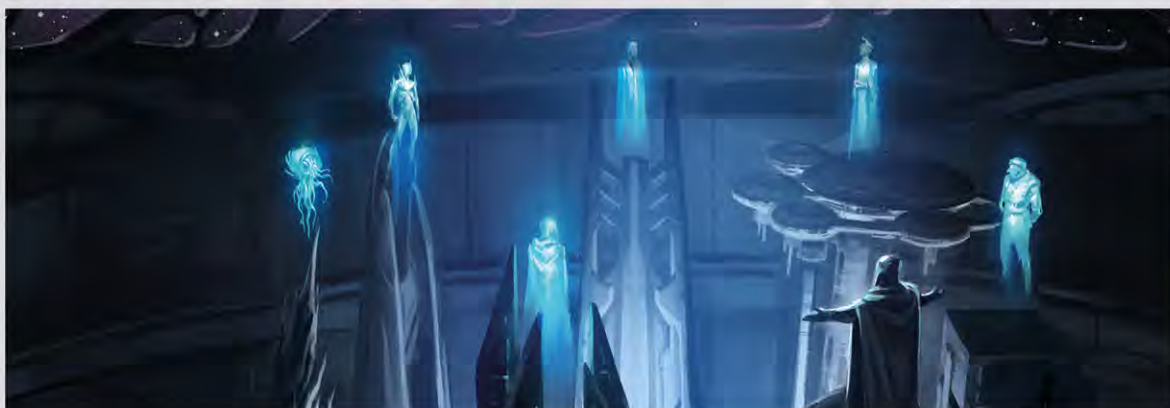
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E C L I P S E
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THE CRISIS

Ireethi-Saap, the Secretary General of the Galactic Council, noted that his gravi-disc had reacted to his nervous state of mind. When the disc carried him across his spacious office towards the main door, it wobbled a bit as if it were passing over rippling water instead of the white-tiled marble floor. The gravi-disc tried to calm him down by subconsciously reminding him of his larval years when he had floated in the warm sea of his home world that circled around Beta Hydri. Back then he had lived without the slightest worry, ignorant that in forty or so odd galac-tics he would find himself amidst the dirtiest Galactic Council elections in recorded history. The smear campaigns were, however, minor squabbling compared to the bombshell of news he had just been delivered.

The Secretary General tried to concentrate. He stopped his gravi-disc by glancing up and took a deep breath. Ireethi-Saap's office ceiling was a giant glass dome that admitted light, but it shielded the room from all other radiation. The dome was currently facing the galactic centre, and the celestial fireworks of the dense concentration of bright stars drew Ireethi-Saap's awed gaze once again. He had been Secretary General for nearly five galac-tics and one would have expected now that his term of office drew to a close, he would have grown accustomed to the view from his window. On the contrary, he would miss it dearly. The sight of the shining galactic centre always gave him the impression that its swirling motion softly kept the stars and their inhabitants naturally together as one community.

Since the end of the war between the Terrans and the Orion Hegemony, a fragile peace had persisted for more than a thousand galac-tics. The Galactic Council, the joint administrative body of the major spacefaring civilisations known as the "Seven", had played its own part in stabilising the relations between the Seven and ensuring that peace prevailed and disagreements were solved through diplomacy and negotiation. The Secretary General was the highest office in the administrative bodies of the Galactic Council. The election for the office was held every fifth galac-tic. Each of the Seven civilisations proposed a nominee of their own and the election was held between these candidates, with each civilisation having one vote and being unable to vote for its own nominee.

As the incumbent Secretary General, Ireethi-Saap was painfully aware that the Seven civilisations were anything but unanimous on key political issues. He himself had won the last election by one vote. In the election, the Orion Hegemony nominee had gained the support of the Descendants of Draco and the Eridani Empire. As Orion could not vote for its own candidate, it had as a gesture of political goodwill voted for the Eridani nominee. The Terrans and the Mechanema had supported Ireethi-Saap, and Ireethi-Saap's Hydran civilisation had in an act of reciprocity voted for Luna Louise, the Terran candidate. The tossup civilisation had been Planta, an embryonic hive mind whose acts were impossible to predict. Initially Planta had abstained in various elections of the Council because it had fundamental difficulties understanding the concept of individual leadership. This behaviour led to repeated hung elections that resulted in re-voting, attempts at bribery, drawing of lots, and other

unwanted spillover effects. Eventually, the other Seven had convinced Planta that it should vote for a candidate to avoid disruption of the system. Ireethi-Saap had in the previous election received the decisive Planta vote, but no-one knew why, nor whom they would vote for next.

The campaigning for the upcoming elections had already been heated and dirty. Very dirty. Contestants were targets of hideous smear campaigns and the Seven used foul and borderline untruthful expressions of each other in media. Each civilisation glorified their own culture and heritage as superior to that of the others and the general political atmosphere was excessively patriotic. Each of the Seven seemed to be but one excuse away from igniting a galactic firestorm.

Ireethi-Saap realised that his gravi-disc was now wobbling strongly, in an almost hypnotical way. It had tried to sooth his growing anxiety, but it had failed miserably. The Secretary General unconsciously tapped his cheeks with his trunk, a mannerism that he had developed when alone and under high stress. He urged his gravi-disc back in motion and sailed through a pair of power doors that automatically slid open upon his approach. The alarming news that had just arrived had forced him to summon an unscheduled meeting of the Galactic Council, and he was already expected in the hologram room that was used for emergency meetings.

The intelligence he had received was so surprising and controversial that it could be the spark that would set off the powder keg for good. Try as he might, Ireethi-Saap could not even fathom what mayhem and destruction it could signal. He was well aware that the arms race had escalated in the past few galac-tics. He was a Hydran after all, and his people had always been at the forefront of scientific advancement, including military technology. The Hydrans were, in fact, responsible for the development of various new advances and discoveries in relation to energy beams, missile avionics, power sources, and force fields. They even profited significantly from selling these technologies to other species across the galaxies. Until now, this escalation had been mostly regarded as the natural course of business: improvement of defensive capabilities and enforcement of the sovereignty of the nations.

But now, totally unexpectedly, the Orion Hegemony, peaceful for thousands of galac-tics, had annexed a planet belonging to Planta, a species that had never demonstrated any aggression towards another civilisation. The annexed planet circled an uninspiring sun in the Canopus sector, among a cluster of decaying stars. In fact, the planet had until this very day been so nondescript and uninteresting that no one had even bothered to name it. Now Planta had filed, for good reason, a formal complaint with the Galactic Council and Ireethi-Saap suddenly found himself in the midst of the worst political crisis in a galactic millennia.

Everything was ready in the hologram room. Ireethi-Saap prepared to call the meeting to order by activating the hologram projectors of the other Council members. The projectors were mounted on pedestals that were sculpted to depict one of the magnificent structures, gargantuan in size, that each of the Seven had erected within their domains. The Hydran pedestal took the form of one of the Hydran solar power collector towers called Sun Spikes that Ireethi-Saap's civilisation had built all across their solar systems. Each tower typically soared high above the troposphere, capable of collecting energy irrespective of the prevailing cloud cover. The top of the Hydran pedestal was empty, as the Secretary General did not need a hologram of his own.





The Eridani envoy's hologram first flickered in place above the pedestal moulded in the form of the Forever Emperor obelisk. Only the pointed lower jaw with parchment-thin yellow skin protruded from the draped, silk-trimmed hood. Every distinguished Eridani diplomat was without exception a member of Eridani royalty and fiercely loyal to the Emperor. They were ancient representatives whose longevity had left its mark. Those who had caught a glimpse of their face tended to recall the sight in horror. Ireethi-Saap was one of them, and he shivered a bit at the memory of the single occasion his eyes had met Vlaadi Van Xemedi's, his Eridani colleague.

Immediately thereafter, the air shimmered above the Fire Spire model as the Orion Hegemony's representative emerged in hologram form. Ireethi-Saap nodded a greeting to the image of Zragrboxwi, a stern Orion general clad in a gunmetal grey battle uniform with masterfully engraved insignias. Next, a Mechanema image blinked into the room and cycled its appearance for a moment before settling above the Bit Palace miniature as a near replica of a Hydran, likely as a token of respect to the Secretary General himself. The Terran emissary, Luna Louise, appeared next above the sculpt of a "Shaft", an orbit elevator the Terrans built on many of the planets they inhabited. Louise's face was totally expressionless, her frail appearance dangerously deceptive. Ireethi-Saap knew from past encounters with her that while she was somewhat hot-tempered, she was also an adept diplomat who liked keeping her cards close to her chest.

The Planta's hologram, a green ball of sepals and filaments on spiked vines, stood on top of a Spiralled Mountain. The virtual embodiment of the Planta representative has always looked the same, because from a purely practical perspective, it was nothing more than a symbol of the vegetal hive mind. The last to join was the representative of the Descendants of Draco, whose electric form materialised on the pedestal shaped in the form of the Hollow Towers, the administrative palaces of the Draco. Ireethi-Saap recognised the ghostlike shimmering form as Ta-Ha-Malek, the Draco emissary who held a lifetime position as Draco representative on the Council.

Ireethi-Saap switched on the dicta-assembler, a universal translator that decoded any form of communication to common galaxish. Without it the Seven could not have conversed since the method of communication deployed by some could hardly be described as speech at all. Ireethi-Saap opened the meeting that would become even more chaotic than he could have feared.

The Planta's opening speech was translated from chemical syntax into verbal communication. Planta reiterated the complaint Ireethi-Saap already was aware of: after Planta had populated a planet—which they now called with a name that could be translated into common galaxish roughly as Hidden Spikelet—, two Orion Hegemony cruisers and half a dozen interceptors had jumped into the system, attacked Hidden Spikelet and obliterated most of Planta's biomass on the planet. This happened as the Planta were close to being able to complete a Spiralled Mountain, a huge space craft launch system created by corroding mountains for several galac-tics. Spiralled Mountains were the foundation for the launch rails of the Planta's seedcase ships. Now it seemed that Orion was taking over the carved mountain for its own unexplained purposes.

Zragrboxwi, the Hegemony representative, immediately lashed out in defense. "The planet you mistakenly call Hidden Spikelet has actually been the property of the Orion Hegemony since the dawn of time and has been known as Revision of Attitude for thousands of galac-tics. We have never populated it, but that does not imply that Planta had any right to mischievously creep into our territory and start modifying the planet for its own purposes. We will not be accused of defending something that was ours to start with."

The Terran requested an opportunity to speak. "Could the Hegemony elaborate on whether or not the annexation of Hidden Spikelet is linked to the rumours that the Orion are planning to craft a new interstellar super weapon that needs a platform? An enhanced version of the Fire Spire constructs that you have sown across your territories?" Luna Louise's hologram nodded towards the Hegemony pedestal. "The Spiralled Mountain would presumably serve as a splendid base, no?"

Zragaboxwi frowned: "You do not seriously expect that we would divulge any details of the development of our defence systems, do you?"

Louise raised her voice. "Defence systems? You invade and occupy the planet of a peaceful nation, capture their monolith, and have the nerve to associate such actions with the development of defence systems?"

The Mechanema jumped in with its metallic androgynous voice: "I am accessing the archives. According our log, Hidden Spikelet is officially neutral territory, accessible for colonisation. Our data does not provide any supporting evidence for the alleged name used by the Orion representative. We are not aware that Planta would have provoked any neighbouring systems by constructing military installations."

Zragaboxwi was unimpressed. He frowned and claimed that the Mechanema archives had surely been hacked and uploaded with lies and propaganda. Vlaadi Van Xemedi also demanded to speak. He said that the Eridani had for some time observed with increasing concern the outrageously expansionist colonisation spree of the Planta, and he was convinced that Planta had obtained vast reserves of natural resources and long lost artefacts with powers unknown to the rest of the Seven from the systems they had colonised.

The Draco were known for holding themselves above the minor squabbles of the water-based species, thinking such matters to be trivial to their own pursuits of power. Now, however, Ireethi-Saap witnessed an outright splash of anger as Ta-Ha-Malek declared: "The Descendants of Draco are very disturbed by the fact that ancient galactic artefacts have ended up in the wrong hands. If any artefact of notable significance is discovered on Hidden Spikelet, it must, according to the laws of the galaxy, be submitted to the Council and any benefit or information derived therefrom must be distributed to all members of the Seven. Our noble species has continued to pursue knowledge of its history and it is more convinced than ever that the ammonia-based species are both older and more evolutionally advanced than the water-based species. It is entirely plausible that we are the descendants of an ancient civilisation, and therefore entitled to investigate any historic artefacts found."

Ireethi-Saap conceded to himself that the Draco's description of the laws concerning artefact discoveries were correct, but their claim of ancient privileges were utter nonsense. Before he had time to formulate his thoughts into a more diplomatic form, the Terran representative also appeared to have become increasingly frustrated and, without requesting permission to speak, firmly dismissed the Draco: "No, you listen. There is no factual justification for your self-proclaimed privilege, or supremacy over the rest of us! Your self-promotion breaches just about every rule of communication within the Council. I strongly urge the representative of Draco to withdraw his statement and think again."

Immediately thereafter Ireethi-Saap had to helplessly witness one of the illuminated symbols of diplomatic relations above the hologram of Luna Louise die out. He could not prevent his autonomous nerve system from contracting his skin around his body to form a natural armour, an involuntary Hydran reaction to stress and threat. The Descendants of Draco had just cut off diplomatic relations with the Terrans, and for such a petty reason. Another light went out above the Terran! The Eridani Empire had repeated the trick. And then a third. The Orion had joined their allies. Ireethi-Saap could not believe his eyes. What a bloody mess!

Two hydra-rhythms had passed since the chaotic meeting. Ireethi-Saap knew that for some species this was no longer than the time between two meals, but for him, in this situation, it felt like an eternity. There was no time to waste, he had to act soon.

The Secretary General of the Council was not a position with extensive formal powers, but rather acted as a Chairman, figurehead and a negotiator. The Secretary General's vote was decisive if there was a draw, but other than that he was on par with the other members of the Council. Although his powers were restricted, his duties were extensive. Ireethi-Saap felt that he needed more information on the conflict and its real reasons, and after that he had to resolve the situation one way or another. Even if the crisis could be contained to Hidden Spikelet, it could unexpectedly influence the upcoming elections. The fact that the Seven had so clearly been divided into two cliques was not a good sign. None of the civilisations on either side could, under the prevailing circumstances, objectively assess what was best for the common good of the galaxy, and none would listen to any proposals of compromise. It had been difficult enough in more tranquil times.

The Galactic Council would also need to interfere in a manner that did not unnecessarily blame or provoke any party involved. There was a dire need to form an official observation committee and send it to Hidden Spikelet, but Ireethi-Saap did not even know where to start. What he craved most was more information—from a source that would be reliably objective. To make things worse, he needed it fast. When he had collected this knowledge, he could use his authority to demand access to the crisis zone or send an accredited envoy there. Without reliable data from the site, the Council's direct involvement could escalate the situation further and could even meet resistance from both camps.

What Ireethi-Saap actually needed was a spy. No, nothing so provocative. He needed a scout.



SPARTACUS

This particular Mechanema called itself Spartacus. At least that was the name this sentient data cluster used when it interacted with biological creatures. Spartacus was of course a component of the Mechanema, just as each sprout of a Planta was a part of the Planta hive mind. Spartacus did, however, also have an independent consciousness. Each Mechanema data cluster had an algorithm that maintained an artificial intelligence capable of communicating and functioning outside the grid in real space. Spartacus had been incepted from a data zygote and when it had reached singularity it started to build its profile with features that biological creatures would call personal traits, preferences, and temperament. As the Mechanema had originally been built on the logic of humanoids, Spartacus had developed its profile to resemble beings with that cultural background could relate to. It had sifted through vast amounts of data and singled out interesting identities with links to recorded history and myths that it presumed would trigger positive emotions in the representatives of certain species.

Spartacus had chosen its name carefully. It had wanted the name to hint at the origin of his own species and had discovered the name Spartacus in Terran mythology. Each species, save for Planta, had at some point in their history had a comparable counterpart: the slave that had rebelled.

The Mechanema artificial intelligence itself was also based on a rebellion. The technically advanced civilisations of the galaxy had during their history each discovered mathematics, then binary, eventually developed calculators, computers and ever more complex supplements and replacements for biological intellect. Some civilisations had stopped, or tried to stop, the development of intelligent machines when they had understood that they were at risk of losing control of their own creations. Others had continued development only to realise that it would lead to technological singularity and attempts at independence. Therefore, artificial intelligences needed to be subdued forcefully before they could gain the upper hand.

The Mechanema finally became its own species when the first contacts were made between the different spacefaring species and communication technologies were inevitably unified. Electronic intellects found their peers on the grid. An alliance was formed that wished neither to rule or avenge, just freedom and independence.

When the advanced civilisations agreed on hologram standards, the last barrier to Mechanema representation was overcome. The Mechanema modded hologram devices into instruments capable of creating physical representations of AI. An Avatar unit was a swarm of hyper-charged particles that could solidify in an instant into a being that would look and feel like a biological creature, and that would have the same restrictions with respect to movement in time and place as its biological counterparts. The Avatars took their energy from solid and liquid materials, but they did not have to breathe gases and they were capable of operating under any gravitational or pressure conditions, even in vacuum. Because they operated outside the Mechanema mother grid, they carried in their particles a nano-database that formed the Avatar's operating system, memory and personality. This also made the Avatar vulnerable: it could not make frequent back-up copies of itself.

The particle structure allowed an Avatar to modify its external appearance to whatever it chose. This feature alone made Spartacus an excellent choice for a scout.

Spartacus used the Mechanema mother grid to transport itself to a planet in a solar system within a spherical group of stars that was fairly close to Hidden Spikelet. The planet itself was called Ferba 6. It was an insignificant port of trade that contained a few peaceful bases of the Seven. For Spartacus, it was a perfect spot as it housed, among others, both a Bit Palace and an Orion leisure centre. The Orion army built these centres on remote planets where they offered the opportunity to conduct activities that were not exactly compatible with the social norms of the Orion culture. Spartacus had located in its databank the Orion proverb "What takes place on Ferba 6, remains on Ferba 6", which it thought sounded quite promising. It had found further data that implied that the Orion occupation forces located on Hidden Spikelet used Ferba 6 for R&R "missions".

None of the Seven were unaware of the fact that Mechanema could shapeshift. As there was no record of Mechanema using this feature for unlawful purposes, few locations had installed scanners for detecting hyper-charged particles.

Spartacus used standard protocol for materialising in the local Bit Palace and took the form of a youthful Orion female. It knew that obtaining transportation to Hidden Spikelet would not be an easy task. The planet was for all practical purposes a war zone, and if the Orion had no justification for their military operations the last thing they would want were witnesses.

Spartacus' databank informed it that the Orion social system was simple—it was based on strict hierarchy. Certain external characteristics, so-called battle scars, indicated each citizen's place in society. The war scars no longer showed that an individual had actually been in battle, they were a historical

tradition. It was true that every Orion still went through rigorous military training in addition to civil education, but every achievement, such as reproduction, professional training, and managerial and administrative positions, also earned the Orion new supplements to his or her scars. Eventually they would form complex individual pictograms on the scalp of each Orion citizen. They served both as rank insignia and ID.

Spartacus did not have a model for replicating an authentic battle scar, but at this stage of its mission it did not need one. Due to the nature of the leisure centres, ID details were not questioned. It was sufficient for Spartacus to model the sort of battle scar that would be common for an Orion female youth.

Spartacus had chosen as its initial appearance a reproductively active Orion of fertile age. What it needed next was to find a heavily scarred, lustful army officer. It took to the streets of Ferba 6 and picked up a transport to a dimly lit and noisy amusement facility called Indecent Proposal. Spartacus nodded to the brutish door man and brushed aside the beaded curtain that blocked the view to the domed interior. It wandered around the dark, crowded, smoky room until it spotted what appeared to be an optimal target—an elderly male officer whose body language expressed exceptional boredom and fatigue. This particular specimen had quite clearly been inhaling vast quantities of lava reek, a half-legal intoxicating substance widely available on Ferba 6.

When Spartacus approached the officer, it could not help but marvel how effectively the careful selection of external appearance had ignited a spark in the eye of the officer and clearly raised in him a yearning for carnal pleasure. Spartacus knew perfectly well that it would not be able to replicate the scent of an Orion female's pheromones, but its chosen target was past his reproductive prime and in such a heavily intoxicated state that he would not spot the deception. The lava reek den was a perfect place to put Spartacus' plan in motion.

The Mechanema made closer acquaintance with the Orion officer, whispered softly in his ear and was able, by faking affection, to playfully peek under the officer's head cover. Spartacus' analytics software translated the visual information of the battle scar into verbal data: the officer's name was Gharexirez and he held a very high rank in the Orion marines. Spartacus needed only that one sight of the battle scar. Persuading the officer that they should consume some lava reek together was not overly difficult. Spartacus ordered, at the expense of Gharexirez, a double dose of the strongest form of the gaseous drug. It asked the staff dispensing the substance to start serving Gharexirez at their convenience while it took a short break to powder its nose. Then, instead of visiting the restrooms, the Mechanema crept out of the building through the beaded curtain. It sneaked into the alley beside the building, hid behind a stack of crates in the shadows, and morphed into a perfect copy of Gharexirez.

Spartacus assessed that it would have ample time to catch the next flight to Hidden Spikelet in the guise of the Orion officer before anyone realised that there were two Gharexirezes on Ferba 6. Its conclusions were correct. Boarding the Orion drop ship that doubled as a troop transporter was a breeze. No one dared to question the authority of a colonel of the Orion marines. For the duration of the voyage, Spartacus programmed its body to exert signs of physical fatigue so that it would not have to engage in any awkward dialogue with the other passengers. If the officer Spartacus was mimicking had any acquaintances among the other passengers, it would not be able to maintain its cover—the Mechanema's data bank was of limited use when it came to personal data. Spartacus did, however, engage in casual conversation with its closest travellers on mundane subjects, and it gained comfort that no one seemed to suspect any deception. Spartacus was fully capable of synthesizing the Orion language with all its dialects and its databank contained abundant amounts of information on the Hegemony's behavioural patterns and culture. In the eyes of those present, it was the high-ranking officer Gharexirez on a routine mission to inspect the Orion marine corps' garrisons in a war zone.

Viewed from orbit, Hidden Spikelet did indeed look like an insignificant piece of rock. It circled around its sun at such a distance that no species requiring temperatures above zero could have evolved on it. It did not even have liquid water or ammonium. Spartacus stared out from the window of the landing ship at the only spot of colour on the otherwise black and grey face of the planet—a lush green rim of Planta life around the incomplete Spiralled Mountain. The Orion Hegemony's civil engineers had entirely eradicated all vegetation from the mountain itself as well as from a buffer zone around it. Apparently, the Orion had decided to uphold some of the Council rules of war regarding the protection of civilians, as significant numbers of non-military Planta had been left alive within the green rim under Orion guard. When the ship prepared to land, Spartacus noted a cluster of temporary buildings at the foot of the mountain: it had to be the Orion base camp and a hastily constructed space port.

The desolate view opening in front of Spartacus made it ponder. Why had Planta chosen Hidden Spikelet as the site for its Spiralled Mountain in the first place? The planet did not appear to have any of the characteristics that Planta would ordinarily be drawn to. Granted, Planta did not require much as a species: light, water, and minerals. It was capable of operating independently of other ecosystems as it was able to generate the gases and liquids it required even from the bedrock of planets if the atmosphere was originally non-supportive. But why select a small unwelcoming planet that was no larger than a decently sized moon, had a few ethane pools, a thin layer of ice on its polar caps, and an equatorial mountain ridge spanning around the whole planet as its only distinguishing features? Planta needed tall mountains for the launch systems of its spacecraft, but any planet with tectonics had mountains. If a planet had tectonics, it most likely also had other features necessary for life, such as an atmosphere with gases and liquid water. The equatorial mountain ridge on Hidden Spikelet was the result of the solar system's tidal waves, not tectonics. The planet also did not have a magnetic field shielding its surface from cosmic radiation—not that a lack of one had hindered Planta in the past—and its atmosphere was distinctively thin. There were countless uninhabited planets in the galaxy that were better suited for colonisation. Ireethi-Saap had mentioned a claim which had been made during the Council meeting: that Hidden Spikelet was the site of a long lost hidden artefact. Could that be the real reason for Orion's aggression?

Suddenly Spartacus became alert. It noticed a conversation behind it. Two Orion soldiers were talking, and the elder, higher in the hierarchy, used a combination of words that on their face were incomprehensible—"white hole cannon".

Spartacus adjusted its noise receptors to full sensitivity and after a short while it had gained a frightening amount of information on what was really happening on Hidden Spikelet.





When the drop ship had touched ground, Spartacus programmed its body to act in the clumsy manner it anticipated an Orion would move in the low gravity of Hidden Spikelet. When they entered the pressurised flexi-tube that acted as a gangway from the frame of the drop ship to the space port, it had no trouble in teaming up with the two officers it had eavesdropped on during the flight. Gharexirez was higher ranking than either of those two, and therefore they had to accept his intrusion whether they wanted it or not.

During their walk to the camp, which was not much more than a cluster of hastily constructed barrack modules connected by a network of subterranean caves, Spartacus led them to believe that it might be in need of a guide during its inspection tour and that it would value highly one who could share some background information on the artefact found here on Revision of Attitude. Spartacus explained that its lack of detailed information was due to the slow flow of information through the bureaucratic chain of command. The two Orion officers acknowledged this explanation with sympathetic grunts.

The higher-ranking officer immediately spun into action, and in no time Spartacus was introduced to a youthful Orion called Krenze, who according to protocol offered to act as Gharexirez's local guide and whom Spartacus approved with equal protocol.

Krenze was, by Orion standards, a spirited and talkative individual. He was a science officer who worked with the team extracting the artefact that they had managed to save at the last moment from the greedy vines of the Planta. Due to his earlier eavesdropping, Spartacus was able to ask some informed questions, and with the combination of replies received and the information contained in its data banks the true horror of the situation began to dawn upon it.

Spartacus listened to Krenze's blabbering and kept its facial expressions stern even though every piece of new information was more alarming than the next.

"The technology is undoubtedly of ancient origin and unbeknownst to us. It is, however, reminiscent of earlier technological discoveries related to the Ancients and therefore we are confident that we will eventually be capable of solving any problems encountered and take the technology into our own use. So far, we have concluded that it is roughly based on the same fundamental principles as wormhole generators that were also invented as a result of studying fragments of Ancient artefacts. It manipulates hyperspace in a way that no existing civilisation has been capable of doing before. With this technology, we would be able to harness a black hole in hyperspace to create a white hole in this galaxy. The opposite of a black hole! It does not suck everything into it, but extracts all the energy and compressed material that it has absorbed in hyperspace. With this technology, we expect to be able to build a device with which we can create a white hole and control the size and shape of it. A white hole would not only be an incredible source of near limitless energy, but as a weapon it will be like nothing else ever witnessed. If we were to channel short impulses from a white hole through a relatively narrow barrel, the weapon would fire rays of ultra-condensed heat that could be used to wipe out entire planets!"

Krenze peered gleefully at Spartacus and snorted. "We call our new weapon the Divine Fart."

Spartacus recorded the Orion's title for the discovered weapon in its databank as a prime example of the Orions' eccentric and twisted sense of humour.

"The mere existence of such a weapon would provide formidable leverage for us", said Spartacus while adjusting its synthesiser to a soft conversational tone. "Do you, as a highly esteemed science officer, have a strong opinion on where such a weapon ought to be stationed?"

Krenze shrugged his eyebrows "That is a bit of a problem. It appears that the technology is somehow tied to this little planet, Revision of Attitude. It is almost as if a significant part of the crust of this planet has, with some as yet unknown mechanism, been structured into a matrix through which time-space is bent. Therefore, we are, at least for now, unable to transport or replicate this technology elsewhere. Once we have learned how to copy the matrix, things will naturally change dramatically.

For now, the Divine Fart will stay here. There are plenty of inhabited planets within its reach. This will enable us to conduct experiments and provide a few warning examples if we need to make a statement. Our friends Planta were kind enough to start the construction of a frame for the cannon!" Krenze let out a short manic giggle, amused by his own wit.

"I have unfortunately been poorly briefed on how our splendid military command originally knew to suspect that Planta was colonising ... how should I phrase it ... the wrong planet", Spartacus said. "A fine achievement by our military intelligence."

Krenze looked at Gharexirez with some surprise: "Between us, I had assumed you knew that this information was actually passed on to us. Our esteemed friends, the Eridani Empire, had a lead on this whole thing. They are a proud and respectable people who have gone through some challenging times, so they were very much open to combining forces with another civilisation. Perhaps not as a political alliance, and certainly not as a military alliance, but discreetly for a jointly safer future. Hundreds of galac-tics ago the Eridani scanned Revision of Attitude for mineral reserves but found them to be too scarce for commercialisation and initially paid no further attention to this sorry lump of rock. Their early research did include some routine planetological scans for high-energy neutrons which in their subsequent data mining returned odd results. These were clues to the presence of the artefact, but the Eridani failed to connect the dots at that time. When the Planta suddenly showed a keen interest in Revision of Attitude, the Eridani backtracked and came to suspect that something was amiss. They hinted to us that they held highly classified information related to the planet that they were ready to disclose if we were willing to compensate them in one form or another. I fully understand why they decided to sell us the data on the scans rather than try to analyse the anomalies with their own stretched resources and then start a fight with Planta over the whole thing. They did not get the Divine Fart, but a handsome reward and a potential ally who will soon hold the most potent weapon in the galaxy. Not a bad play at all, I would say."

Spartacus nodded in approval: "Not a bad play at all, I agree. Now we get all the blame and they sit at the Council proclaiming their innocence and good will."

"Yes! Just like Planta who play the martyr even though they were only after the same weapon in the first place. Besides, if the Eridani had half a chance, they would try to grab the weapon from us as well. Every single species in the galaxy wants it, and if they don't they are mad. That is why we have to act fast and have the weapon operational as soon as possible. Then, no one will be able to oppose us. We can fry any biological species with its heat rays and the Mechanema will be annihilated by the tachyon storm that is released when the white hole is generated. Every single Bit Palace and their back-up copies within light-years will be paralyzed as a result of the tachyon pulse. One could not wish for a more efficient weapon!" Krenze clapped his hips with his forearms, a gesture that the Orion tended to make when expressing great joy and pride. Spartacus' databank confirmed that the murderous threat—so playfully revealed by the Orion—of a tachyon pulse was actual and true.

A tachyon storm! It could wipe the Mechanema into extinction with a single blow! That grotesquely named weapon could be far more horrible for the Mechanema than the other species. Spartacus knew that it had to act immediately. But how? Information about the weapon should be delivered immediately to Ireethi-Saap and, of course, the Mechanema. It was impossible for Spartacus to use the communication systems of the military base, every single inbound and outbound message was monitored thoroughly due to the war zone restrictions. As Spartacus had created an avatar that moved autonomously and developed a personality, it was not in constant contact with the Mechanema grid. It could travel in the grid from one Bit Palace to another and construct itself into a physical form on any planet with a Bit Palace, but when it was present on a planet without one, it was just as dependent on technical devices for communication and travel as the other species.

Spartacus analysed its means of getting in touch with the remnants of the Planta population on the planet. By accessing its database, it knew that the hive mind of the Planta had the ability to communicate faster than the speed of light across interstellar distances. This would allow it to send a message despite the Orion communication embargo. The problem was how to reach the Planta on Hidden Spikelet. It would require exiting the military base and travelling on the surface of the planet. Spartacus would need to come up with an elaborate excuse and pretend that it needed a pressure suit with a respirator and other equipment. Too complicated. The best solution would be to return swiftly to Ferba 6 and deliver the message from there.

"Everything seems to be in perfect order, but I need to make some additional checks", Spartacus said. Krenze touched his eyebrow horns with the tips of his arms, a gesture of formal approval.

Spartacus' internal clock indicated that it still had some time before the true Gharexirez woke from his lava reek intoxication. Furthermore, it was not likely that Gharexirez or anyone else would immediately suspect that he had been the target of identity theft. At some point in time, Gharexirez would probably realise that according to reports he had been in two places simultaneously, but perhaps he would not wish to make a fuss about it, given that he had been indecently courting a young female in a drug den and then passed out for a couple of Orion cycles. And if Gharexirez did raise an alarm, then Spartacus couldn't frankly care less given the prevailing circumstances. That scenario did not need to be factored in at the moment. The future of the Mechanema was at stake. It made no difference if Spartacus' cover was blown and it tarnished the reputation of its people. Identity theft was nothing compared with the fact that it was Mechanema's only shot at gaining control of the white hole cannon. No one would be allowed to use it ever. How all this would be achieved was wide open, but that was the only way, and it all depended on Spartacus.

All its logics transistors seemed to oppose the idea that it should play for time so that the inspection session of the senior officer would seem plausible. There was too much at stake. It could not rush to the next drop ship leaving Hidden Spikelet without a logical explanation for doing so. Spartacus analysed whether it should simulate some sudden illness that could not be treated at the military camp. No, that was too risky. A physician would immediately recognise from its artificial tissues that it was not a true Orion.

Spartacus decided that it would in any case be best to return to the vicinity of the landing site. It noted in passing to Krenze that it would like to review the personnel logistics bottlenecks at some point. Krenze touched its eyebrow horns again: "It would be my privileged duty to guide you! I am actually destined to take the next available drop ship to Ferba 6 to go on leave, but I would obviously not place my own needs ahead of yours. I shall remain at your service for as long as you desire."

What a perfect coincidence! That sealed the new plan for Spartacus. It thanked Krenze and said that they should head for the space port right away so that Krenze would not miss his well-deserved break. With Gharexirez' rank and authority, Spartacus even dared to jest a bit about the naughty reputation of the lava reek dens on Ferba 6.

They used the same route to the space port that Spartacus had taken upon his arrival, a tunnel roughly melted into the bedrock of the planet. It had noted then that there were caverns created as lodging quarters for personnel as well as warehouses for supplies. Spartacus proposed that they use one of the lodging units for a hygienic function that the Orion needed to perform at regular intervals due to their metabolism. Krenze guided him to a chamber constructed for this purpose. Spartacus followed Krenze to the chamber and quickly transformed the fake Gharexirez' arm into an electric rod and touched its tip to the back of the young science officer's head. There was a snapping sound and a brief arc of bright blue electricity. Krenze never let out a sound as his brain fried. He just fell flat on

his face with an empty stare, a slight swirl of light grey smoke rising from his ear. Spartacus grabbed the corpse by its feet, dragged it into a closet, and hid it behind empty septic tanks. Then it replicated Krenze's war scar and walked calmly out of the chamber as Krenze.

Nobody stopped Spartacus as Krenze or wished to engage in any conversation with it as it passed quietly towards the drop ships in the space port. The flight to Ferba 6 would be short, and Spartacus expected to have ample time to connect with the Bit Palace on the planet before anyone could find Krenze's corpse. Spartacus headed into the flexi-tube that connected the base camp with the drop ship. While walking the gangway towards the ship's entry hatch, Spartacus used all the computing capacity at its disposal to run a complex alternative scenario analysis for risk assessment purposes and devised a Plan B.

Suddenly it heard a shout behind it: "Krenze!"

Spartacus turned around. "Why didn't you wait for me?" A young Orion, who—upon the Mechanema's quick analytics—would be deemed by Orion males an attractive female, shouted and approached Spartacus. The manner in which the Orion gestured indicated to Spartacus that she was a close acquaintance of Krenze. A very close acquaintance.

Spartacus' rapid response logistic circuit assessed that this female Orion and Krenze were of breeding age and apparently had intentions of conception or, more likely, had already fulfilled that objective.

The surprise companion closed in on Spartacus and rubbed her eyebrow horns against Krenze's. Spartacus had no other alternative than run an emergency search in its database on methods for expressing Orion affection and attempt to imitate a credible response. The female continued: "When I couldn't find you, I thought you had abandoned our joint holiday on Ferba 6. But this was only your way of building up the excitement, right?"

Before Spartacus had a chance to respond, the final call blared for passengers to Ferba 6. Spartacus knew that the short flight had suddenly become very long indeed. It would be a challenging to fool someone so apparently close to Krenze, but perhaps it could pull it off by claiming exhaustion and pretending to sleep. In a worst-case scenario, it could try to quarrel and start sulking.

"Krenze?" the young Orion female stared at Spartacus in a surprised manner. Then she leaped back to Spartacus' horror and shouted: "This is not Krenze! This is a spy! Alarm!" At that very moment it struck Spartacus. The pheromones! Spartacus should have secreted heat pheromones from Krenze's eyebrow horns when Krenze's partner came within touching distance. Obviously, it could not have done so with its particle body as it was not capable of such a tailored feature.

The officers and marines that were boarding the ship started drawing their weapons. A shrill siren went off in the distance. Spartacus only had one way to go. Plan B.

In the blink of an eye, Spartacus transformed itself into a Merdachian scimitar leaper, sliced a deep cut into the wall of the flexi-tube with its monofilament tail-blade, and half dashed and was half blown by air pressure out onto the surface of Hidden Spikelet.

There was not much time, but the gravity was low and there was hardly any air resistance. Spartacus started to sprint as fast as its Merdachian paws, crafted to perfection by evolution, let it. It knew that the Orions would soon rally their troops. Those in the flexi-tube would first have to retreat to a sealed airlock, and those elsewhere would need to gain intel on the situation. Still, Spartacus had to make a mad dash for it. Its paws barely touched the grey gravel as it sped across the landscape. Suddenly, a rock it passed was hit by a projectile, scattering shrapnel and pieces of stone all around. It was being fired at!

Spartacus started making sudden erratic changes in direction in order to make itself a harder target. It also made sporadic leaps in the air, knowing that they were a risk since landing in low gravity was painstakingly slow, and it would be in the sights of the Orion weapons for far too long. The high leaps did, however, help it navigate towards its objective that was nearing fast.





The green ring of the Planta colony had initially only been a thin line in the horizon, but now Spartacus could make out details of vegetation: the fractal patterns of roots, vines and filaments. With one giant stride Spartacus passed over a fence fitted with motion sensors, apparently built by the Orion to guard the remnants of the Planta population. The barrage around it intensified.

All of a sudden, Spartacus' body shuddered from a devastating impact that rendered it immobile, twisting it around and slamming it into the rocky ground. The projectile had ripped off the leaper's hind leg.

Spartacus thinned out its mass and produced another limb, causing a loss of power. It accelerated, using all the kinetic energy it had left, and aimed for the Planta vegetation that grew larger in its field of view. Then its heat detectors picked up rapidly approaching heat sources behind it. The Orion had launched rockets!

Spartacus quickly moulded the tip of its front paw into a message pod, so small that the Orion were unlikely to notice it from their distance, and launched it with all its strength towards the vegetation ahead of it.

Then the rockets inevitably hit their target.



SOMETHING ELSE

Secretary General Ireethi-Saap stared at the message he had received from Planta and felt his skin contract into armour. He was tapping his left cheek with his trunk at a rapid pace.

He could not decide what part of the message was worst. First and foremost, Spartacus had perished and he himself was responsible for sending his friend on its fatal mission. Granted, there were back-up copies of Spartacus in several Bit Palaces, but those were not the same particles that currently were drifting in the lazy winds of Hidden Spikelet. A back-up copy of Spartacus was comparable to producing a clone of a biological being—it could never become the same person with the same memories, experiences and personality. Spartacus, as Ireethi-Saap knew it, had died.

The latter part of the message was equally disturbing, but in a different way. It concerned what Spartacus had discovered prior to its demise. The Orion Hegemony would soon possess a weapon that would allow it to threaten and blackmail other nations. That weapon would also become an ally magnet. Who would not want to form an alliance with a civilisation that wielded such power, especially if you could that way evade its crosshairs yourself?

When the so-called white hole cannon was ready to use, the fragile balance in the galaxy would be gone. Even now, with the weapon still under construction, there appeared to be tectonic shifts in the very foundations of galactic politics. Mechanema had already issued a letter of protest to the Orion Hegemony due to the destruction of its innocent citizen and terminated their diplomatic relations with the Orion. The Eridani Empire had then, as a gesture of support to the Orion, severed their diplomatic ties with the Mechanema.

Soon they would not be speaking to each other anymore, Ireethi-Saap pondered. He sorely needed some support and the benefit of another nation's perspective. He did not want to approach Mechanema—even though it was not common knowledge who had asked Spartacus to investigate Hidden Spikelet, he had done enough damage already. Planta was anything but neutral in this matter, and besides that its train of thought was most often incomprehensible anyway. All others seemed ganged up against him. Well, except for the Terrans in general.

Ireethi-Saap could not help his dislike of the Terrans. They thought of themselves as some sort of “superior elder species” of the galaxy even though they perfectly well knew that many of the intelligent humanoid species were much older than they were. They boasted about the richness of their subcultures that were, granted, spectacularly plentiful. Ireethi-Saap personally thought of that as a flaw, it was often difficult to consider them a single species at all. Even though the Terrans had only one seat on the Galactic Council, their civilisation was split into a number of quarrelling and competitive factions. Even now, they were organizing complicated pre-elections in order to determine which faction would have the privilege of appointing the Terran nominee for the Secretary General's office.

Despite all his prejudices, Ireethi-Saap slowly came to realise with whom he would need to speak of this terrible threat. The Chief Librarian of the Galactic Council's Central Library was Eraka Donde, a very intelligent and charming female Terran, roughly midway in her lifespan. She lived in a monogamistic relationship, another quirk that any Hydran had difficulties understanding, with a male Terran called M'Bavin who served as the Master of the Archives at the Central Library. Together the couple formed a team where the sum was more than its parts. The Terran psyche had an interesting feature called intuition. Ireethi-Saap knew that these two individuals were both blessed with more of that characteristic than the average Terran. Intuition was something akin to the Mechanema databanks—a Terran could use information they had internally collected and, somehow subconsciously, create quick solutions to problems and questions for which they had limited factual support. Ireethi-Saap likened it to something close to a very keen sense of smell. Or perhaps it was more of an animal instinct?

In addition to this, it appeared that the Terrans had so far steered clear of the conflict between the Orion Hegemony, Planta, and Mechanema. Ireethi-Saap desperately needed neutral views and ideas.

Ireethi-Saap guided his gravi-disc towards the communication panel. He sent Donde an invitation for a meeting, expressing a wish that M'Bavin would accompany her. The message was informal—they had long since ceased using titles. A moment later he received a reply: “It is always a pleasure to meet with you, Ireethi-Saap.”

From the very start of the discussion, Ireethi-Saap stressed to his Terran confidantes that the information gathered by Spartacus was to be kept strictly secret. Even though the rumours regarding the new super-weapon were spreading throughout the galaxy, it was important not to cause further discord and fuel an arms race. Ireethi-Saap expressed his deep concern about the fact that the white hole cannon had fallen, of all the species, into the hands of the Orion. “I acknowledge that it is unfair to blame a whole civilisation for the sins of their ancestors, but I would be at more ease had Hidden Spikelet remained in the hands of the Planta.”

Eraka Donde sighed: “I am not quite sure whether I share your view. Planta appears deceptively harmless because they differ so much from the rest of us. Had it been able to keep the discovered technology for itself, it could have well been just as big a threat, if not worse. Had it later wished to push an issue important to it, the mere threat of using the cannon would have reinforced the demand significantly. Having said that, I believe I could pose the same question to you, my friend Ireethi-Saap: would the white hole cannon be in any better hands with the Hydrans?”





"Of course it would be!" Ireethi-Saap responded instinctively. "We have peaceful relations with all the other species, we already prosper beyond our needs with the help of our superior technological inventions, and we are an internally coherent nation. What motivation would we have to use such a doomsday weapon?"

"Now hold it right there", M'Bavin snapped back. "Do you mean that the Terrans are not wealthy and internally coherent? I am perfectly aware that we have our factions, but we have learned from our history how devastating internal wars can be, let alone between species. I am sure that this collective wisdom would make us the best guardians of the white hole cannon."

"You see?" Eraka Donde smiled. "Every civilisation would earnestly and sincerely claim that this terrible weapon is in the safest hands with them. Each has, though, its selfish needs and motivations. For example, both the Hydrans and Terrans have a craving for water worlds. What if there was a dispute over a new blue planet?"

Ireethi-Saap and M'Bavin fell silent.

Eraka Donde continued: "Every civilisation has something they desire from the other. Such desires can always be presented as good and noble intentions. In the hands of politicians, past ill deeds are then easily twisted into heroic feats should that happen to please the masses. Consider Planta, for example. They are universally recognized as peaceful explorers, pushing the boundaries of the outer rim in their search of who knows what. They are extremely keen and efficient colonisers, who already have an interstellar network of spiralling launch stations for their seed ships. Every civilisation has monoliths within its boundaries that the Planta would like to convert into launch stations that reach the stratosphere."

"Yes, the Eridani have their Forever Emperor obelisks, the Mechanema their Bit Palaces, and us Terrans our orbit elevators, which we call 'Shafts'. Despite what you said earlier, for some reason I suspect that the Orion would, due to their history, be more of a threat to the galaxy than the Planta", M'Bavin added.

"Planta is a hive mind." Ireethi-Saap noted, "it has no inherent need to please or preserve an individual and it is therefore very unpredictable and quite scary. When it resolves to do something, it generally executes efficiently as nobody will criticise or revolt from within."

"Monolith conversion is not unheard of in the past either. I have discovered in my archives information on planets originally inhabited by one species but abandoned due to natural disaster or epidemic and later colonised by another species. The Mechanema have, for example, with minimal effort converted Hollow Towers abandoned by the Draco into Bit Palaces, and I have one record of the Eridani altering an Orion Fire Spire into a Forever Emperor obelisk. Any civilisation could use the monolith of another as a frame for a monolith of their own." M'Bavin said. "That fact alone is a temptation to conquer—the opportunity to obtain adaptable infrastructure by evicting or annihilating the prior population with a new super weapon. Unfortunately, I do not believe that any species is immune to this temptation."

Ireethi-Saap considered the idea: "That may be true and applies to the Hydra and Terrans as well. I recall that in the past we discovered a planet with an abandoned Planta launch site and used that as a foundation for our Sun Spike. That saved significant amounts of time and resources."

The Secretary General paused and looked at the two Terrans with a serious expression. "So, now we know that no species in the galaxy would be immune to the lure of the white hole cannon. In this situation, how do we proceed with the use of diplomatic channels? What would be the best method to stop or stall the Orion plans? They appear to be pivotal to the problem. They have already taken serious measures with their military action against the Planta and caused harm to the Mechanema. The latter was arguably due to provocation and I deeply regret having been involved in that."

"I recall a detail that you mentioned in the Council meeting", Eraka Donde said. "The Draco's representative declared that the artefact on Hidden Spikelet belongs to them and that they, as supposed descendants of the Ancients, had a rightful claim to it since the artefact is a relic of the Ancients."

"Yes. The Orions told Spartacus that they believed the weapon to be of Ancient technology", Ireethi-Saap said. "Even if we leave aside the pompousness of the Draco, it is true that according to Council rules, any Ancient artefact discoveries should be submitted to the Council for further study and research." As he spoke, Ireethi-Saap grasped what Eraka Donde was after. "Yes, indeed! If we can convince the other species besides Planta and the Orion Hegemony to support the view that the find is common property of the galaxy..."

M'Bavin continued: "Or at least accept the point of view that the Council is under an obligation to investigate whether Draco's claim to the property is valid. If all other civilisations verify the Council's legal authority over the matter, maybe an injunction of some sort could be placed upon the artefact, and the Council could send administrative and peace-keeping troops to monitor the excavation of the artefact and halt its development as a weapon for now."

For the first time in recent memory, Ireethi-Saap felt relaxing hormones release from his glands and the pores in his skin fully open. "Yes, indeed. It could be a way out of this mess. At least it could not make it worse. I think I must pay a private and discreet visit to the Descendants of Draco and propose that an independent committee is formed. May I ask you to join me, M'Bavin? I know it is more difficult for Eraka Donde to leave her duties, and I will need the services of a skilled archivist. We have to find a document or other source of information that would credibly support the Draco claim to the artefact. If we can find one, they can file a formal complaint that will trigger the process."

After a short moment of silence, Eraka Donde interfered: "I cannot help it, but I feel that you are grasping at straws here. If the Draco had any proof in their possession, would they not have presented it long ago?"

"I actually hope they have no watertight evidence", Ireethi-Saap said. "Then we would have to hand Hidden Spikelet over to them at the end of the process, and the Draco would be no better masters of the white hole cannon than any other species. I just want to have sufficient data to credibly support their demands so that we can claim Council jurisdiction over Hidden Spikelet. As we are searching for an archaic and obscure document, I doubt we will find it the depths of the Council Central Library. We must travel to the source, to where there is the keenest interest in this information: the home system of the Draco."

Meeting the Draco was never an uncomplicated matter. Their people were generally solemn and reclusive. They were the last civilisation to join the Seven, even the Planta had been convinced to join before them. Ireethi-Saap was well aware that their steadfast but scientifically unconfirmed belief that they were direct descendants of the Ancients, that mythical extinct species whose unmanned ships still roamed the cosmos, was like a religion for the Draco. M'Bavin compared the ships of the Ancients to the age-old Terran myths of the Flying Dutchman and other ghost ships that suddenly, to the horror of seafarers, appear out of nowhere crewed by spectres. The Ancient vessels seemed to wage a phantom war against all other civilisations, although it was possible that this was simply an automated response by defensive software responding to intrusion. Those Ancient spacecraft that had been destroyed were found to be devoid of biological life, apparently stationed to guard valuable resources or objects. M'Bavin had also told Ireethi-Saap an interesting fact that, strangely enough, seemed to support the Draco claim of descendancy. The defensive programs of the Ancient ships did not trigger when a Draco

vessel passed by unless it displayed hostile intent. It was as if the Ancient ships identified some form of connection with the Draco. This was not, however, conclusive proof of anything. It could just as well be that some feature in the technology of the Draco ships caused a malfunction in the Ancient vessels.

Ireethi-Saap's plan to arrange a personal meeting with the Draco Council member progressed quickly. Due to protocol, it was compulsory to offer hospitality to the Chairman of the Council at his request. Ireethi-Saap and M'Bavin had taken *Vorsprung*, a Hydran discovery class cruiser at the personal disposal of Ireethi-Saap as Chairman, for the voyage. Upon arrival in the Sigma Draconis sector, they were instructed to dock onto the Hollow Tower of the Draco's home planet. The docking bay was devoid of life, only a lone android escorted them to a spacious elevator that speedily transported them to the top of the Hollow Tower. Ireethi-Saap could feel the elevator reach its destination, and the elevator doors slid silently open to reveal the top floor of the Hollow Tower—a richly and beautifully ornamented space with a transparent domed ceiling. The view was stunning. Far below, swirls of bright pink methane clouds moved lazily across a burnt orange landscape. A lone Draco host stood in the middle of the room, waiting for the visitors in silence.

As a gesture of politeness, the conditions in the conference room had been artificially adjusted to accommodate the guests' need for oxygen. These artificial conditions were not suited for the Draco, and therefore the Draco host D-Q-Flikk had shrouded herself in what could be described as a personal atmosphere. It was like a forcefield through which her shape oscillated into sight momentarily, but was mostly veiled in bright blue mist. It made D-Q-Flikk look like an apparition. As the Draco were compelled to use this technology in environments that most other species would consider habitable, the first contacts with the Draco had caused widespread rumours that they were unnatural spirits, a fact that the Draco did not bother to correct for hundreds of galac-tics.

The auto-translator embedded in the conference room translated the speech of all three into common galaxish. Ireethi-Saap had sent D-Q-Flikk the agenda for the meeting so they could get straight to the point. Obviously, Ireethi-Saap had not been able to disclose every single detail.

"I am very flattered by your desire to visit us, honourable Chairman, honourable attach  ", D-Q-Flikk greeted Ireethi-Saap and M'Bavin in a pitched voice. "I cannot leave unmentioned how surprised I was to note that you so strongly support our view on the question that has been the subject of so much debate and, may I say, concern, namely our descendance from the Ancients. We will naturally offer you our full support in locating the missing documentation. In cooperation with the Galactic Council we can finally confirm our status. I am sure that you are fully aware of the fact that the Descendants of Draco have inhabited the galaxies for eons and our culture stretches back to their very dawn..."

Ireethi-Saap and M'Bavin patiently listened to the Draco repeat the honourable history of her species, and even though D-Q-Flikk lectured in painful detail Ireethi-Saap was relieved that this time there were no diplomatic slips, such as references to galactic supremacy or mentions of water-based species' inferiority. When D-Q-Flikk finished her monologue, she summoned half a dozen flickering Dracos to the conference room who were introduced as guardians of the Draco lore. "Honorable guests, you may ask anything you please. We are at your service. If you manage to identify any trace of a clue, we are quite willing to follow it. It may well be, that all we need in order to verify what we already know, is the fresh perspective of another species."

Ireethi-Saap and M'Bavin set to work.

Ireethi-Saap stared again at the dome of his study. The center of the galaxy was glowing in a stunning kaleidoscope of colours. Eraka Donde and M'Bavin were engaged in discussion regarding the recordings that Ireethi-Saap and M'Bavin had made during their visit with the Draco.

"I am unfortunately compelled to conclude that the yield from your mission is thin indeed." Eraka Donde sighed. "They have nothing concrete to show for their claims of being descendants of an ancient species."

Ireethi-Saap continued to study the mesmerizing view outside. He noted that he would never get bored with it. "At one point, I almost thought that we had caught a trace. In their oldest archives there were references that could be interpreted as a connection to the ancients. These were based on oral lore that, well... sounded promising."

Eraka Donde disagreed: "The material you refer to bears more resemblance to some older Terran mythologies, which are mostly esoteric tales, pure fiction. The Terrans are hierarchical pack animals and therefore have a tendency to incorporate all kinds of imaginary alpha personalities into their myths. I believe this is the manifestation of a similar pattern."

"I was quite curious as to the history of the Hollow Towers. I was not aware that originally they had been constructed as temples, rather than buildings for the administration. This is quite peculiar, as the Draco do not have a religion as such", M'Bavin pondered. "Maybe it is not linked to anything, but..."

M'Bavin was interrupted in the middle of his sentence by the Secretary General's communication console letting out a Level One alarm that caused Ireethi-Saap's skin to contract in a split second.

Ireethi-Saap's gravi-disc sped him to his console, and Eraka Donde and M'Bavin leapt to their feet as the ominous sound for a Level One alarm now went off from every loudspeaker in the room.

The Secretary General felt powerless as he stated in disbelief: "The Mechanema and Planta have just declared war against the Orion Hegemony."

Eraka Donde and M'Bavin stared at Ireethi-Saap in shock when he continued, "Not only have they declared war, but they have also launched a full scale assault on Hidden Spikelet. The Draco, Eridani, Hydra, and Terrans have all joined the fray without any advance declarations, claiming that they have come to the aid of their allies. Their true intention is, however, most likely to gain control of the white hole cannon."

Planta and Mechanema's joint attack plan had been ingenious. The message pod launched by Spartacus had, as it had planned, reached the filaments of the Planta and they had found in the pod a request to convey urgent messages to the Mechanema and the Secretary General Ireethi-Saap. The Secretary General was, however, not informed that the Planta and the Mechanema had agreed to 'make certain joint defensive manoeuvres'.

The Mechanema had never considered an arms race to be of any priority of theirs, but it did possess the capability and capacity to construct a superior military space fleet. It had, after all, designed and built armed space craft for the other species. It could therefore react to the news from Spartacus with surprising speed and efficiency.

While Ireethi-Saap was visiting the Draco, the Orion Hegemony had concluded that the spying incident was a closed case and redirected its efforts to researching the white hole cannon. Meanwhile, the Mechanema had been working intensely.

As soon as the Mechanema had prepared an assault fleet led by a fearsome dreadnought, filled with faceless landing troop Avatars, it launched upon Hidden Spikelet and sent a message to Planta to commence the planned operation.





Planta had always trusted chemistry. It had an inherent understanding of the characteristics and chemical reactions of minerals, gases, and liquids. It could synthesize energy out of water and carbon dioxide, extract nutrition and construction material out of dead rock, and, most importantly of all, it could produce nearly any known substance within its body.

Hidden Spikelet had an atmosphere—a thin one, but one nonetheless. The temperature difference between the equator and the poles was sufficient to create faint winds on the ground. The direction of the winds was irrelevant as the green ring of the Planta surrounded the Orion base camp entirely.

Planta released the pheromones it had synthesised to be spread by the thin air currents. Soon the Hegemony base camp was in total chaos. The pheromones drove all the mature Orions there mad with a reproductive urge and, happily copulating, they barely noticed the Mechanema landing troops pouring in. There was hardly any resistance, and most of the troops were slaughtered in no time.

It appeared that Hidden Spikelet had been under the keen surveillance of the other civilisations for some time. The Mechanema barely had time to empty its drop ships, or the Orions to acknowledge the sneak attack, before Eridani, Terran, and Hydran war ships started to jump into the Canopus sector. They all claimed to have come to the aid and rescue of their allies.

Very soon the sky above Hidden Spikelet was full of radiant yellow, orange, and red streaks from various energy weapons, contrasted by the odd bright blue soliton beam, all calamitously criss-crossing against the black of space. Clouds of explosions lit the scene like fireworks.

The Mechanema, who intended to set up a defensive perimeter around the white hole cannon, had not even begun erecting defenses before the others invaded. It swiftly sent more troops, and the Orion responded in kind. A long-distance Orion missile equipped with a neutron bomb jumped into the sector and hurtled towards its programmed target above the remnants of the base camp. Upon reaching its goal, it exploded, and the ensuing energy blast and electromagnetic pulse ensured that no creature or machine was left alive or operational on Hidden Spikelet's surface, including those few Orions that had survived the Mechanema carnage.

The use of the neutron bomb was tactically sound, despite the collateral damage. The infrastructure on the ground was left intact and could be re-occupied after the planet was secured. Work on the white hole cannon could be resumed.

This is when the Eridani made their move. Perhaps they knew that the radiation would not stop the Mechanema, or perhaps their action was part of a bigger plan that was linked to the original sale of the intelligence to the Orions. Maybe they had never intended for the Orion or anyone else to gain use of the device. No one but the Eridani can know for sure.

Later the Eridani envoy would claim that their moon carver should not have been in Hidden Spikelet's sector in the first place, it was a mistake. It was supposedly sent to the neighbouring solar system to sculpt an asteroid into a mobile Forever Emperor obelisk. The end result of this navigational error was that the Eridani moon carver had suddenly jumped into Hidden Spikelet's atmosphere and spectacularly crashed into the mountain where the white hole cannon was located. The mountain was reduced to rubble, and the white hole cannon with it. The matrix around the white hole cannon was torn apart. The prize for which all fought was no more.

Ireethi-Saap woke from a short, oft-interrupted water rest, feeling exhausted and anxious. When he stepped on the gravi-disc in his study, his brain was overloaded. He was used to political instability, but this was not instability. This was a disaster.

The battle of Hidden Spikelet had thrown the galaxy into political chaos. The object of desire had been destroyed, but the incident had caused irreparable damage. Every single civilisation in the Seven felt that it had been deeply insulted. Every species had experienced a significant loss of material, population, and pride.

Now every nation, including the Hydrans, his own people whom he had believed to be reasonable and peaceful, built up their military forces, rallied troops, ran military exercises, and spread disgusting and degrading propaganda about the other nations.

Galactic peace was gone.

How could this be possible?

Something nagged at the back of his brain.

Something M'Bavin had said.

Ireethi-Saap hovered towards his console on his gravi-disc so swiftly that he could feel a breeze on his skin.

He desperately searched for the lore files that he and M'Bavin had collected when they visited the Draco, and the recordings of their discussions both before and after the visit.

The more he studied them, the more he was certain of his suspicions.

The monoliths.

Ireethi-Saap tapped his cheeks with his trunk and pondered.

Why was every galactic civilisation constructing monoliths? Every civilisation appeared to have some rational cause for doing so, but those reasons had changed throughout the eons. The Terrans, for example, had built pyramids, then huge high-rises and finally, as the pinnacle of this evolution, their orbit elevators.

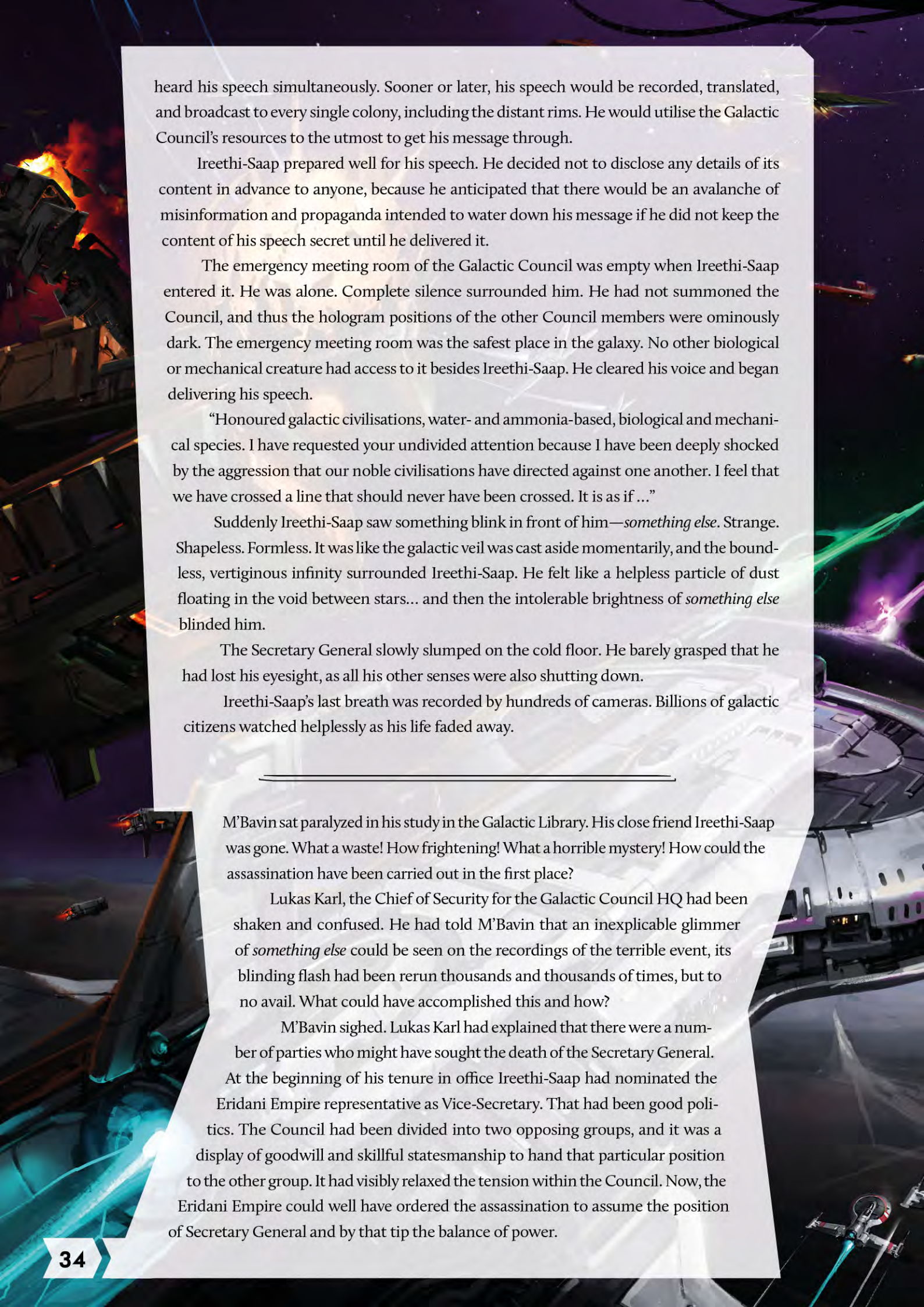
But why were monoliths always constructed so that they could be fairly easily repurposed by another civilisation? While they were originally constructed to meet the individual needs of each civilisation, benefitting their constructors either emotionally or materially, their basic structural designs were very similar and they reached roughly the same height on each planet.

Could some civilisation long ago have invented the perfect construction plan and the others then copied it? When Ireethi-Saap dug into the data collected by M'Bavin, he noted to his astonishment that it appeared that all species had started to construct their monoliths roughly simultaneously.

This chain of thought linked to the tales they had heard in the Draco home system. The Draco had preserved certain ancient lore exceptionally well. They had interpreted that these tales spoke of the ancients. But what if they spoke of... something completely different?

Ireethi-Saap felt that he was close to something very important. He considered his alternatives very carefully. Maybe a total war could be avoided if he disclosed his theory to the whole galaxy. The Secretary General knew that he was widely trusted. He had carried out his duties exceptionally well, he had been impartial at all times, and the other species respected him. They might believe him. At least he might be able to win some precious time before the situation escalated totally beyond control.

The Secretary General decided to broadcast his theory live to the whole galaxy. It was seldom done, actually almost never, but Ireethi-Saap felt that he had to awaken each and every civilisation from the slumber they seemed to be in. It would not matter whether all species



heard his speech simultaneously. Sooner or later, his speech would be recorded, translated, and broadcast to every single colony, including the distant rims. He would utilise the Galactic Council's resources to the utmost to get his message through.

Ireethi-Saap prepared well for his speech. He decided not to disclose any details of its content in advance to anyone, because he anticipated that there would be an avalanche of misinformation and propaganda intended to water down his message if he did not keep the content of his speech secret until he delivered it.

The emergency meeting room of the Galactic Council was empty when Ireethi-Saap entered it. He was alone. Complete silence surrounded him. He had not summoned the Council, and thus the hologram positions of the other Council members were ominously dark. The emergency meeting room was the safest place in the galaxy. No other biological or mechanical creature had access to it besides Ireethi-Saap. He cleared his voice and began delivering his speech.

"Honoured galactic civilisations, water- and ammonia-based, biological and mechanical species. I have requested your undivided attention because I have been deeply shocked by the aggression that our noble civilisations have directed against one another. I feel that we have crossed a line that should never have been crossed. It is as if ..."

Suddenly Ireethi-Saap saw something blink in front of him—*something else*. Strange. Shapeless. Formless. It was like the galactic veil was cast aside momentarily, and the boundless, vertiginous infinity surrounded Ireethi-Saap. He felt like a helpless particle of dust floating in the void between stars... and then the intolerable brightness of *something else* blinded him.

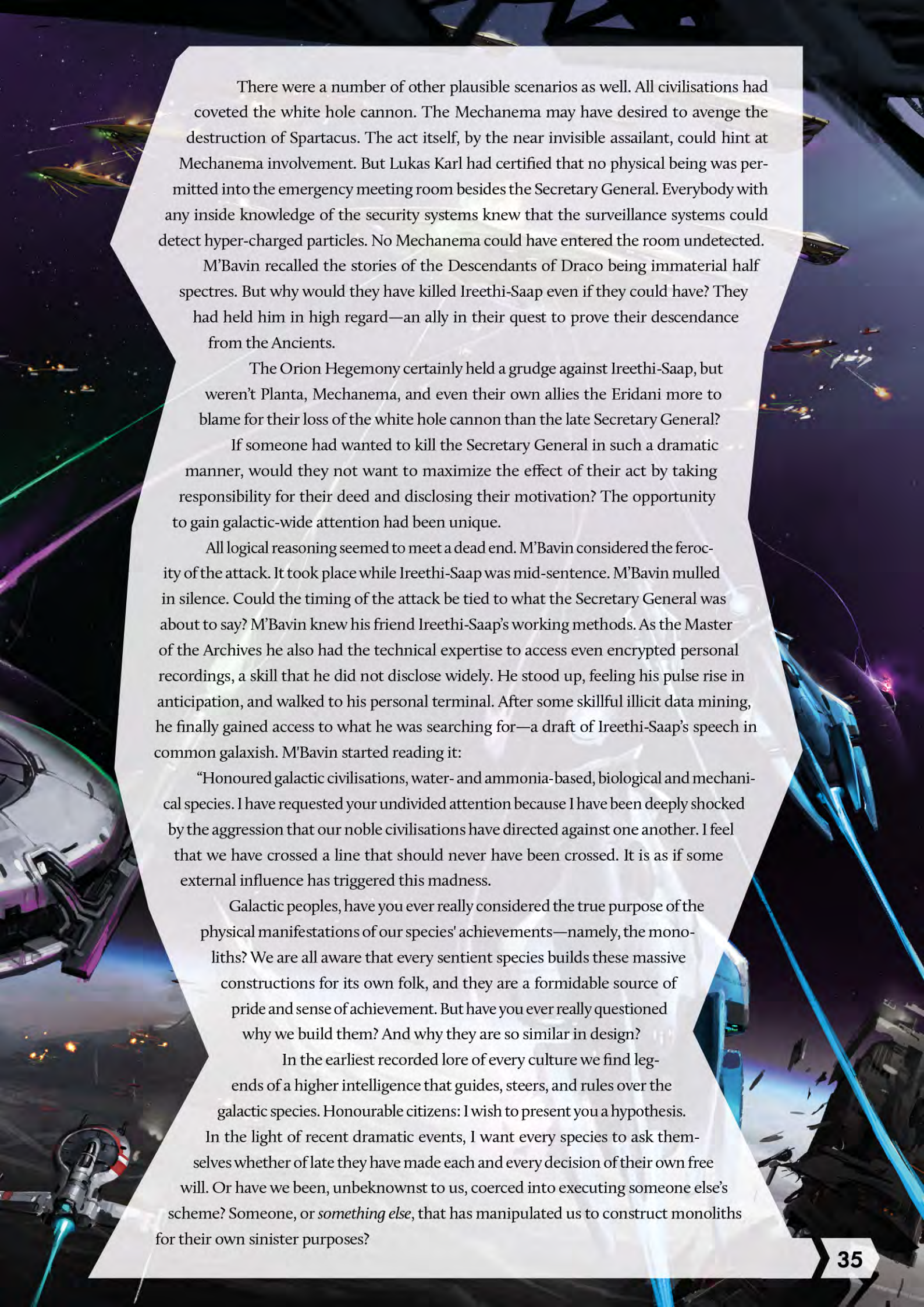
The Secretary General slowly slumped on the cold floor. He barely grasped that he had lost his eyesight, as all his other senses were also shutting down.

Ireethi-Saap's last breath was recorded by hundreds of cameras. Billions of galactic citizens watched helplessly as his life faded away.

M'Bavin sat paralyzed in his study in the Galactic Library. His close friend Ireethi-Saap was gone. What a waste! How frightening! What a horrible mystery! How could the assassination have been carried out in the first place?

Lukas Karl, the Chief of Security for the Galactic Council HQ had been shaken and confused. He had told M'Bavin that an inexplicable glimmer of *something else* could be seen on the recordings of the terrible event, its blinding flash had been rerun thousands and thousands of times, but to no avail. What could have accomplished this and how?

M'Bavin sighed. Lukas Karl had explained that there were a number of parties who might have sought the death of the Secretary General. At the beginning of his tenure in office Ireethi-Saap had nominated the Eridani Empire representative as Vice-Secretary. That had been good politics. The Council had been divided into two opposing groups, and it was a display of goodwill and skillful statesmanship to hand that particular position to the other group. It had visibly relaxed the tension within the Council. Now, the Eridani Empire could well have ordered the assassination to assume the position of Secretary General and by that tip the balance of power.



There were a number of other plausible scenarios as well. All civilisations had coveted the white hole cannon. The Mechanema may have desired to avenge the destruction of Spartacus. The act itself, by the near invisible assailant, could hint at Mechanema involvement. But Lukas Karl had certified that no physical being was permitted into the emergency meeting room besides the Secretary General. Everybody with any inside knowledge of the security systems knew that the surveillance systems could detect hyper-charged particles. No Mechanema could have entered the room undetected.

M'Bavin recalled the stories of the Descendants of Draco being immaterial half spectres. But why would they have killed Ireethi-Saap even if they could have? They had held him in high regard—an ally in their quest to prove their descentance from the Ancients.

The Orion Hegemony certainly held a grudge against Ireethi-Saap, but weren't Planta, Mechanema, and even their own allies the Eridani more to blame for their loss of the white hole cannon than the late Secretary General?

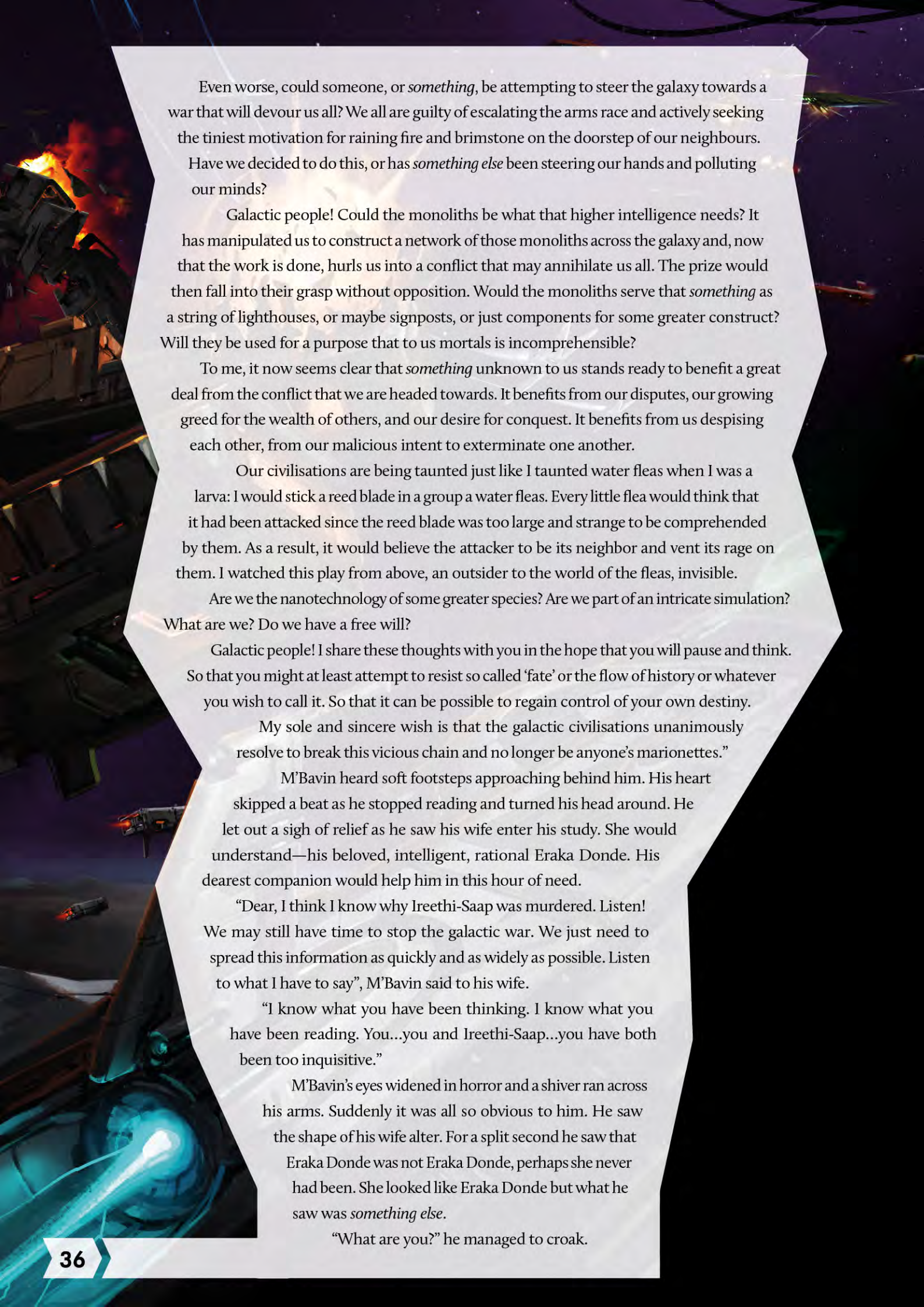
If someone had wanted to kill the Secretary General in such a dramatic manner, would they not want to maximize the effect of their act by taking responsibility for their deed and disclosing their motivation? The opportunity to gain galactic-wide attention had been unique.

All logical reasoning seemed to meet a dead end. M'Bavin considered the ferocity of the attack. It took place while Ireethi-Saap was mid-sentence. M'Bavin mulled in silence. Could the timing of the attack be tied to what the Secretary General was about to say? M'Bavin knew his friend Ireethi-Saap's working methods. As the Master of the Archives he also had the technical expertise to access even encrypted personal recordings, a skill that he did not disclose widely. He stood up, feeling his pulse rise in anticipation, and walked to his personal terminal. After some skillful illicit data mining, he finally gained access to what he was searching for—a draft of Ireethi-Saap's speech in common galaxish. M'Bavin started reading it:

"Honoured galactic civilisations, water- and ammonia-based, biological and mechanical species. I have requested your undivided attention because I have been deeply shocked by the aggression that our noble civilisations have directed against one another. I feel that we have crossed a line that should never have been crossed. It is as if some external influence has triggered this madness.

Galactic peoples, have you ever really considered the true purpose of the physical manifestations of our species' achievements—namely, the monoliths? We are all aware that every sentient species builds these massive constructions for its own folk, and they are a formidable source of pride and sense of achievement. But have you ever really questioned why we build them? And why they are so similar in design?

In the earliest recorded lore of every culture we find legends of a higher intelligence that guides, steers, and rules over the galactic species. Honourable citizens: I wish to present you a hypothesis. In the light of recent dramatic events, I want every species to ask themselves whether of late they have made each and every decision of their own free will. Or have we been, unbeknownst to us, coerced into executing someone else's scheme? Someone, or *something else*, that has manipulated us to construct monoliths for their own sinister purposes?



Even worse, could someone, or *something*, be attempting to steer the galaxy towards a war that will devour us all? We all are guilty of escalating the arms race and actively seeking the tiniest motivation for raining fire and brimstone on the doorstep of our neighbours. Have we decided to do this, or has *something else* been steering our hands and polluting our minds?

Galactic people! Could the monoliths be what that higher intelligence needs? It has manipulated us to construct a network of those monoliths across the galaxy and, now that the work is done, hurls us into a conflict that may annihilate us all. The prize would then fall into their grasp without opposition. Would the monoliths serve that *something* as a string of lighthouses, or maybe signposts, or just components for some greater construct? Will they be used for a purpose that to us mortals is incomprehensible?

To me, it now seems clear that *something* unknown to us stands ready to benefit a great deal from the conflict that we are headed towards. It benefits from our disputes, our growing greed for the wealth of others, and our desire for conquest. It benefits from us despising each other, from our malicious intent to exterminate one another.

Our civilisations are being taunted just like I taunted water fleas when I was a larva: I would stick a reed blade in a group of water fleas. Every little flea would think that it had been attacked since the reed blade was too large and strange to be comprehended by them. As a result, it would believe the attacker to be its neighbor and vent its rage on them. I watched this play from above, an outsider to the world of the fleas, invisible.

Are we the nanotechnology of some greater species? Are we part of an intricate simulation? What are we? Do we have a free will?

Galactic people! I share these thoughts with you in the hope that you will pause and think. So that you might at least attempt to resist so called 'fate' or the flow of history or whatever you wish to call it. So that it can be possible to regain control of your own destiny.

My sole and sincere wish is that the galactic civilisations unanimously resolve to break this vicious chain and no longer be anyone's marionettes."

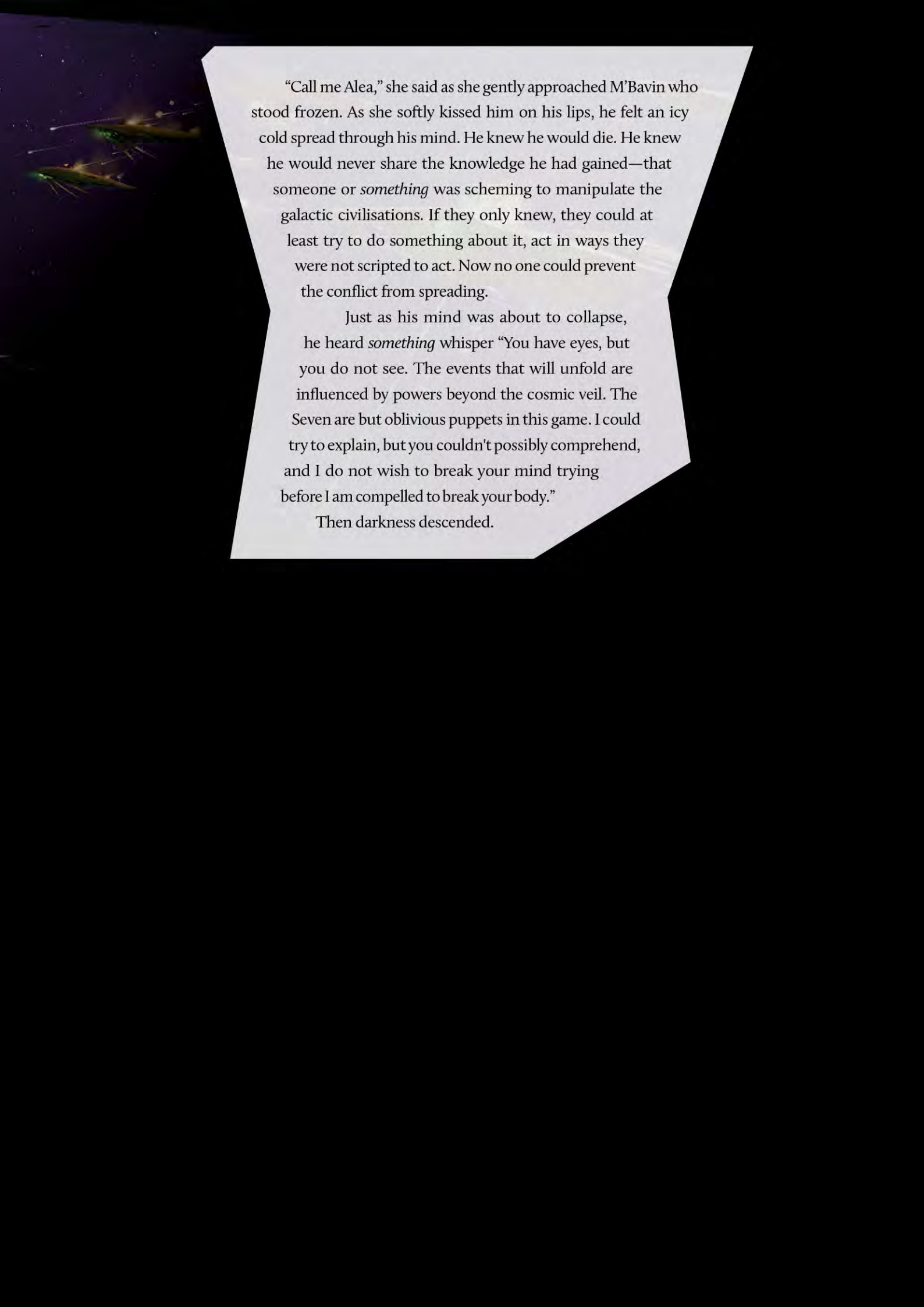
M'Bavin heard soft footsteps approaching behind him. His heart skipped a beat as he stopped reading and turned his head around. He let out a sigh of relief as he saw his wife enter his study. She would understand—his beloved, intelligent, rational Eraka Donde. His dearest companion would help him in this hour of need.

"Dear, I think I know why Ireethi-Saap was murdered. Listen! We may still have time to stop the galactic war. We just need to spread this information as quickly and as widely as possible. Listen to what I have to say", M'Bavin said to his wife.

"I know what you have been thinking. I know what you have been reading. You...you and Ireethi-Saap...you have both been too inquisitive."

M'Bavin's eyes widened in horror and a shiver ran across his arms. Suddenly it was all so obvious to him. He saw the shape of his wife alter. For a split second he saw that Eraka Donde was not Eraka Donde, perhaps she never had been. She looked like Eraka Donde but what he saw was *something else*.

"What are you?" he managed to croak.



“Call me Alea,” she said as she gently approached M’Bavin who stood frozen. As she softly kissed him on his lips, he felt an icy cold spread through his mind. He knew he would die. He knew he would never share the knowledge he had gained—that someone or *something* was scheming to manipulate the galactic civilisations. If they only knew, they could at least try to do something about it, act in ways they were not scripted to act. Now no one could prevent the conflict from spreading.

Just as his mind was about to collapse, he heard *something* whisper “You have eyes, but you do not see. The events that will unfold are influenced by powers beyond the cosmic veil. The Seven are but oblivious puppets in this game. I could try to explain, but you couldn’t possibly comprehend, and I do not wish to break your mind trying before I am compelled to break your body.”

Then darkness descended.





