

Cahedra's First Stop

(a short story by Koen Martens)

1021 AD¹

When they had left their home planet there had been time to store a limited amount of resources only. That, and the then strong demand on raw material, with the hundreds of ships like the Cahedra also in a great hurry to leave the Solar System, was the reason that they had to make their first stop after a mere 1023 years of near light-speed space travel.

The Cahedra, a large cylindrical habitat ship, was parked in orbit around Gemlock-gamma, the third planet in orbit around Gemlock, a sun-like star in its early age. Already, the sunscrapers worked full shifts to fill the ship's reaction chambers. The ship was large enough to accommodate a few hundred-thousand people along with a fifty-thousand animals, but the population was held at a mere forty-thousand for thousand years due to the limited resources available during the first hop of their journey.

The interior of the Cahedra was literally scooped out from earth and effectively hauled into space with giant orbital cranes. An en-

¹A.D. for After Destruction.

tire elongated valley had been enclosed in a gigantic metal cylinder, which now formed the inner hull of the ship. Due to its steady rotation, it was possible to walk along the inside of the ship. Half of the curved inside contained the valley Cahedra, the other (top) half was in effect a giant projection screen. Although the ship's simulated gravity permitted walking on this top half just as everyone 'down' in the valley, no one ever did. Apart from the intensity of the giant projectors in the valley providing the inhabitants down below the illusion of a sky, there was the overwhelming sense of vertigo looking down on the dwellings below.

Most of the off-surface areas and all of the on-surface areas (that is, on the surface of the valley inside the cylinder) fell under direct control of the Gaian Authority. Their central command room was located directly under the Gaian temple complex. Of course there were tens of meters of shielding between the publicly accessible temple grounds and the highly guarded central command room. Although set in the same ancient stone-wall decor as the temple itself, the room was the beating heart of the ship. Around the large round stone table, that had embedded interface pads, displays and other high-tech gadgets, sat the sixteen primary commanders of the Gaian Council. One of them was speaking: "So nine of the scrapers are out there now, with five on the hunt. The other three are in the docking bay for planned maintenance."

"Thank you mister gamekeeper. The Gaians appreciate your efforts, and are glad that deployment of the sunscrapers completed well ahead of schedule.", another man spoke. The hood of his black robe was pulled over his head, leaving only a shadow where his face must have been.

He continued, "Mr. Grimli, how is the fueling proceeding?". One of the primary commanders got up from his stone seat, consult-

ing the some portable pads that lay on the table before him cluttered over the embedded display.

“By now, as we speak, we are up to a 53% fuel level, meaning we successfully filled and sealed the first reaction chamber, Mr. Representative.”, Mr. Grimly spoke.

“Very well, “, the hooded man to which Mr. Grimli referred to as Mr. Representative spoke again. “This concludes our consult for now.” Barely after finishing the last word, the hooded figure disappeared in thin air. Not long after that, some of the gathered officials rushed of, seemingly at random grabbing some porto-pads in their haste. Others engaged in conversation, while yet another small fraction of them attended to the controls embedded in the table.

Working aboard a sunscraper was a hot, hard and again very hot job. The technology was very crude, and operating one was in essence a constant fight to keep the thing from falling apart. Each sunscraper was rigged with four full engine systems. Only one of those would normally be operational at a given moment, with at least one backup engine to take over as soon as the running engine broke down, which happened frequently and usually included at least one exploding sub-system. One-hundred-and-forty mechanics worked constantly to repair the damaged engines, trying to keep up with the failure-rate. But those working on the engines had the easy job, working deep inside the relatively cool core of the scraper, never significantly hotter than a 60 degrees Celsius. This was bearable even without one of the thermal insulator suits. The hull-men however had to work in temperatures as high as a 120 degrees. In those circumstances, a thermal suit became a necessity. The ultra-thin material worn directly on the skin insulated the crew-men from the heat, but still they sweated like pigs.

Captain Loke sat comfortably in his commanding chair on the

bridge of the Zhelma-14, one of the second generation sunscrapers, built after the departure from earth. A few hours ago the captain had ordered the scraper out of the safe frontier-orbit, maneuvering closer to the stars surface. The hunt was on. After about forty more minutes, Zhelma-14 stopped her descent. By then they had blown their first engine apart, the repair teams already frantically working to get it in working order again.

Zhelma-14 waited for some 3 minutes, the bridge silent apart from the distant beeping of the hot-spot tracker. The captain took off his shirt, wearing only his uniform shorts now. It was the only sensible thing to do, apart from getting into a thermal suit of course. But captain Loke didn't like them, and rumors among the crew said the captain once worked in the exposed hull compartments without one.

"Surface scan completed and predictions proceeding nominally, Sir.", a woman's voice broke the anticipating silence. She stood next to the console wired to the hot-spot tracker, which she operated with her left hand as it continued beeping in the background. The captain leaned his chair slightly forward.

"Deploy the gravitronic nodes.", the captain spoke.

"Aye sir", a man behind another console replied while tapping the controls. A sudden jerk hit the sunscraper as the nodes started extending from the hull. Five extended radially on the ship's horizontal plane, forming a five-sided approximation to a circle. A sixth, larger node simultaneously extended perpendicular to the others. Another jerk thirty seconds later, when the nodes had reached their final positions, each five thousand kilometers away from the ship. The crew on the bridge remained silent and unaffected by the shocks that went through the ship. They knew what lay ahead.

"Open a channel to gamma five", the captain said.

"Channel open, Sir", his communications officer replied, fol-

lowed by a chime from his console.

“This is captain Loke aboard the Zhelma-14, ready to synchronize the gravitronic channel.”

“Hey Demen, nice to hear the ship is still holding. Second engine dead yet?”, a voice sounded from the ships speakers surrounding the captain and his officers.

“Just he one so far, you bastard. Quit the small talk, do you have a lock onto our receptor node?”, the captain replied.

“Sure do, stand-by, engaging”. Immediately the ship began to tremble. The captain shouted “Damn, you could have warned us before you engaged that fucking beam”. The voice on the other end said, “Hey, quit the small talk you...”. After that the trembling went to violent shaking, drowning out every other sound with a vicious thumping. After a while the shaking weakened off, and the operator on Gamma-5 was audible above the noise again, “...eam engaged, good hunt, captain.”.

1035 AD

Down on the surface of Gemlock-gamma, Pele Domaz sat on the terrace in front of one of the bars in the tertiary dome. The settlement had expanded from it's first primary dome that housed the science labs with the secondary dome used mostly for housing. Further domes, built as time had passed, contained recreational facilities and storage for the miners.

From the terrace, Pele and his companion Dazl Brokowjv had a view over the planet's surface outside the dome. The landscape sterile, no atmosphere, nothing but bare rock exposed to naked space.

“I like this place”, Pele said, staring in the distance. “I like it, despite it being a Gaia-forsaken empty rock. I like it, even though

there is nothing. By Gaia, look around. Nothing.”

“Well, “ Dazl replied, “at least the soil is fertile as your experiments clearly showed. “Something could grow out there, in theory.”, he added.

Pele stared of in the distance again, sipping from his glass of water.

“Water”, he said emphasizing each syllable, “Without water, nothing will grow there..”, still staring through the glass dome.

“No, it won’t..”, Dazl looked around quickly and continued softly, “Listen.. I might as well tell you..”. He leaned forward, “Couple of months ago I sent some X-class shuttles around the planet, see what is on the dark side.”

Pele frowned, and said “You mean in all those years no-one went to see the dark side? I assumed it had been investigated years ago, and was classified uninteresting.”.

Dazl was almost whispering now, “Apparently I’m not supposed to tell you this, but it’s covered with water-ice.”

Pele fell back in his chair, astonished by Dazls remark. “You mean...”, he mumbled. “You’re saying that until a few months ago nobody had paid a visit to gammas dark side, and that not only you now visited it for the first time and is turns out to be covered with pure water?”

Dazl nodded. Pele whispered, “That means.. We’re staying”. He repeated the last words, again and again, his voice growing loud. He stood up, shouting the words now, one last time, “WE ARE STAYING!”

The hot-spot console beeped urgently, underneath a lower but not less urgent second console chime. “Graviton level at 100% captain”, one of the officers on the bridge reported. A woman immediately followed that up with, “Venting with probability of o-dot-

ninety-seven in quadrant B7, Sir.”.

Finally, after hours of silent anticipating, the hunt started. Captain Loke ordered the Zhelma-14 to quadrant B7. The view-screen showed a false-color image of the star’s surface, revealing a hint of the energy dynamics going on below. Then, from one instant to the other, a giant arc fountained out of the surface, vast amounts of pure hydrogen thrown into space. The captain held on to his console interface pad with both hands. His officers still stood or sat with their consoles, firmly holding the handles along the sides with one hand and tapping the pads with the other.

“ENGAGE THE DEFLECTOR”, the captain shouted his lungs out, barely able to make himself heard above the thundering roar as the ship shook and jerked.

And then, the roar overwhelmed any other sound by orders of magnitude, and sunscraper Zhelma-14 was inside a violent tube of raw solar material thundering mere meters from their five radial nodes. Now everyone aboard was just holding on to anything they could grab. There was nothing they could do now but wait. Wait until the exploding tube around them collapsed upon them, or (as did usually happen) until the roaring tube just ended to exist. Today was no exception, captain Loke noted to himself when the scraper steadied herself and the shaking terminated. Below them, the flaming arc of solar mass plunged down on the surface again, setting off waves in all directions. The tunnel of burning, trapped energy they had just scraped was growing smaller fast.

As the crew reassembled, on the bridge as well as in the hull compartments and the engine rooms, the captain opened a channel with central command. After he verified that they had collected the tubular beam, the waited in silence again.

After 18 months of solar flare hunting, the sunscraper Zhelma-

14 was practically at the end of her lifetime and on it's way back to the docking station inside the Cahedra, a journey of about 7 months. When they arrived, the temperature aboard the ship was still very high, although they were now far away from the star's surface.

"Zhelma-14, you have been assigned to bay 15, please lock your trajectory to guidance frequency 10A.", an artificial voice sounded from the bridges PA.

"Do it", captain Loke spoke.

The ship, barely together after the long time operating in harsh conditions, was out of his control now, guided by the gravitronic fields that emitted from the Cahedra. The sight of the huge sun-scraeper docking platform, visible through the half open doors (enormous in their own right) in one of the flat sides of the cylindrical habitat ship, was a relieve to captain Loke. After almost 3 years without leaving Zhelma-14 he was dying for a drink in the Groove.

The scraper passed the massive, 60m thick, steel doors, and then turned a 90 degrees upwards. Docking bay 15 lay ahead, highlighted on the view-screen with a bright yellow rectangle, that stood out against the dark metallic background of the surroundings. A few moments later the scraper came to a sudden stop, with one last trembling shake.

Even before the crew had fully disembarked, maintenance teams that had been waiting outside started to install the scaffolding. Within the next weeks, almost all parts of Zhelma-14 would be replaced by freshly generated ones, and soon enough captain Loke would be on his way back to Gemlock. None of this bother captain Loke at the present moment however. After a quick stop at his quarters to freshen up, he was now well on his way to the Groove, for that long anticipated drink.

1039 AD

“Theoretically, yes, we could melt the ice with a single blow of the tiniest amount of sunscrape.” Pele and Dazl were in the security of the latter’s office now, instead of one of the terraces out in the public like they were a few months ago. It was Dazl speaking.

“Setting up the gravitronics is going to be one hell of a complex job, mind you. And we need a scraper, and at least two deflectors.”, he added.

Pele frowned, thought about it for a moment, then answered: “I know just the person to help us with that.” He frowned again, obviously wondering about what had been said so far. “But one thing I don’t understand. You say you have terraformer-building tools, DNA pools both human and animal, huge amounts of raw materials stocked up. Why did the GA approve of all this??”

Dazl chuckled. “They didn’t. We never told them, and they aren’t interested anyway.” He paused a moment, contemplating his next words. “You know I have been supervising this place ever since we arrived on the surface sixteen years ago and set up our first lab.” Pele nodded and Dazl continued, “At first, the GA kept close tabs on me, checking every detail of every thing I did. But as soon as the mining operation was up and running, they just seemed to lose interest.” He pointed his finger to the bird-cages in the garden. Pele was aware of Dazl’s fascination with birds, and had frequently enjoyed walking around the cages seeing the variety before his eyes.

“They were my first insubordination”, Dazl went on. “I just asked GA to get me the cloning-creches, small ones of course. I made up some story about how birds-DNA was instrumental in accelerating the mining operation. And it worked. They never checked it, eager to get me off their backs.”

Pele interrupted, “But after a while, GA must have suspected

something. After all, the birds and everything else you got by lying didn't really increase the production of course."

"Well, " Dazl smiled, "in a way they did. I've kept production artificially low. Not too low to arouse the GA's efficiency buffs of course. Actually, we are mining about 50% more than what is transported up to the Cahedra. Even then, we are working on just a quarter of our capacity."

"Amazing, " Pele said. "Amazing.. And the GA...". Dazl finished the sentence, "...just doesn't care!"

"But why? I mean, you must have been doing this for well over a decade now, and we started our little conspiracy just a few years ago.", Dazl asked.

"I don't know. It just seemed right, the natural course of action to take. I've lived on the surface of Gemlock-gamma for a while now. Although I've had many opportunities to visit the Cahedra, I never did. By now, the thought of going back.. Well, it scares me.. It scares me to death.. Maybe that's your why, I don't know."

"I know what you mean", Pele reacted. He felt the same fear, he had been terrified of the claustrophobic architecture of the habitat ship all his life. That he got stationed on the surface of Gemlock-gamma had brought some relieve, but the thought of going back still haunted him.

"By the time Cahedra leaves this system, " Pele said now, "I will have spent almost 40 years on the surface. More than half my life. I can't just leave then.". He sighed.

"And by that time, the larger portion of our surface population will be born and raised here. I bet few of them will ever visit the Cahedra. We should mobilize these people now, Dazl, while they are young. Influence them a bit to our advantage. Not that that will be hard, a sense promising sentiments already."

"I agree, " Dazl said definitely, "we will need a lot of workers

anyway if we are to succeed. But we have to do it without exposing ourselves. Even though GA is mostly ignorant about us, we'll certainly blow it by shouting from every rooftop what our intentions are."

"Of course. We just have to encourage the public opinion a bit, the rest will happen instantaneously when the time is right." Pele got up, walking towards the bird-cage, taking his drink with him. He stared at the birds, whispering "Freedom, birds.. Freedom forever."

Captain Demen Loke had been drinking down in the Groove for hours already, when he was approached by the handsome young fellow who eventually led him to the surface of Gemlock-gamma to meet an old friend. The Groove, by the way, was ruled by anarchy, one of the few districts on the Cahedra where the Gaian Authority never showed themselves. Not officially, anyway. But just like captain Loke, many GA employees frequented the bars and brothels, and it was even rumored that several high-ranking officials had their own addresses here. That was probably also why the GA tolerated the place, founded by a displeased faction of the habitat ship's population 6 centuries ago. It was the first mutiny ever aboard the Cahedra.

Captain Loke had other things on his mind now however. From the tiny view-port in his current room he had seen he was not on the Cahedra anymore. Apparently, he was on the surface of a planet or a large moon or something like that. The fatigue of his last three-year scraping tour, the one that had ended only a day before, combined with the overdose of alcohol after as many months of abstinence had sent his mind and body beyond the capability to comprehend his situation. He fell asleep again.

When he woke up, he was no longer in the first room. His eyes had trouble focusing for a full minute, but then he saw who it was

sitting in the other chair. His memories reconfigured, the boy who had taken him from the bar. The mysterious old friend he was going to meet.

“Pele!”, he yelled out in celebration. He jumped out of his chair, his still aching body overwhelmed by the joy of seeing his friend again. “Hello Demen”, Pele said while he got from his chair. For a moment they stood in a friendly but tight embrace, both happy to see each other.

Captain Loke looked around Pele’s living room. It was quite large compared to his quarters in the Cahedra valley, enormous compared to his quarters near the sunscraper bay. He said, “So this is where you disappeared to. I’ve been tracking you down for years now. I rather missed our nights in the Groove, I really do.”

Pele remembered those nights, even though the last time they met the Cahedra was still cruising through Gemlock system. “I do too, my friend. I do too. Later we should visit dome 5, nothing compared to the original of course, but enough bars to get as hung-over as you were when you arrived yesterday.” They both laughed and talked and laughed again for a while. Then the conversation turned to the inevitable departure of the Cahedra from Gemlock system.

“I guess it won’t be easy for you leaving your work and home here when we go.”, captain Loke said.

“Impossible..”, Pele answered. But before he could elaborate Loke interrupted him, “I know I dread the day that we pack our stuff and go. I like my job you know. Sure, commanding a scraper is dirty, heavy work. But nothing comes close to the feeling you get when your scraper is right in the middle of a thundering tube. I’d hate to lose that, damn sure of it.”

“Good, good..”, Pele was lost in thought. When he realized Loke had stopped talking, he snapped back his attention.

“Come, let’s go and meet this friend of mine. Maybe it does not

have to end after all.”, he said. He stood up, indicating captain Loke to follow him. And with a puzzled look on his face, the captain did.

1041 AD

The sound of what appeared to be a giant gong, but in reality was an audio sample emanating from the sound-system, sent those present in the central command room rushing to their chairs around the massive round table. When all but one chair was filled, the gong sounded a second time. Then a flash and the representative materialized in the remaining seat, dressed in black as always, with the hood of his suit obscuring his face.

The representative spoke, “As of now, you are all relieved from your current duties. You will leave this room in an orderly manner and wait at your private quarters for further orders.”, the words a monotonous stream that ended abruptly as the access doors swung open and an overwhelming force of GA agents emerged. The agents wore black uniforms decorated with green stripes on sleeves and trousers. They had black helmets enclosing their heads entirely. When all the primary officers were finally escorted out of the central command room, most of the agents and all doors closed again, except the one which remained open with four agents waiting beside it. And then another small groups of agents entered, escorting three men into central command. Their footsteps echoed from the wall of the now almost empty room.

When the three men were seated near the representative, he spoke again.

“Gentlemen”, the lower spectrum of his voice clearly amplified artificially.

The representative looked at the men for a moment, pausing at

the one in the middle. The man sat confident in his chair, his sleek blind hair combed backwards. He was in his late fifties but it did not show. His outfit was similar to that of the agents that had escorted them in, but optimized for style rather than functionality.

"General Grayda, " the representative addressed the blond man, "as of now you are responsible for all external affairs." This was a novum, Grayda thought. All his experience in his years with the GA secret services had always been dealing with internal affairs. On-board the Cahedra, there simply were no external affairs. "This is going to be something", he silently thought.

The representative then turned to the man on the left of Grayda and said, "Mr. Daves, as of now you are responsible for all internal affairs.", then turning to the last man, "Mr. Zacki, as of now you are responsible for our departure 5 years from now."

"It has come to our attention that mutiny threatens our mission. The colony has mobilized against us. We have allowed their frivolities for too long, blinded by the ignorance of those who sat here before you."

"The colonists have been betraying us."

At that moment, a screen projected itself above the table. Long lists off cargo that was shipped down to the surface of Gemlock-gamma scrolled before their eyes. Some entries were highlighted, and the representative commented on some.

"Here, 350 men and 275 women to be deployed as 'console cleaners'. Here, 2 tons of grain and maize to be used as 'tyre cleaning agent'. Bird food!", he stressed the last two words, pausing the scrolling list. He (and the scrolling) then continued, "Cloning-creches, terraforming chemicals, a century worth of medical supplies, and all with pathetic excuses."

"Mr. Grayda, you will infiltrate the colony and find out what is going on. Furthermore, Mr. Daves, you will shut down all commu-

nication between us and the colony."

Both men nodded, still not daring to speak.

"Our top priority is our departure 5 years hence. Do nothing to endanger the mining, Mr. Zacki hereby receives primary command."

After that, he was silent for a few moments, then his head seemed to jerk forward and back in position again in one instant. "Gentlemen, your new security profiles are set." And then the representative simply vanished.

"We must make our move now", Dazl's voice sounded urgent. Pele, just awakened in the middle of the night by the beeps from his comm-unit, was suddenly wide awake.

"All communications with the Cahedra are terminated. It happened just when I spoke to one of us aboard. They're on to us, they replaced the entire Gaian council for crying out loud", Dazl shouted into his comm-bracelet. The visual display showed Dazl's face and in the background people in apparent worry nervously running around from left to right and vice versa.

Pele checked something on the console next to his bed. What he found was exactly what he expected, and he calmly answered into the comm-unit, "Ok. Captain Loke is on the hunt right now, I'll contact him soon as I get there."

"All right,", Dazl answered, "Listen, we're in the command bunker now as you've probably guessed. I'm shutting down the raw material transport to the Cahedra, let them know who is in charge here. Move your ass over here ASAP Pele, we are making the move now!"

Captain Loke entered the bridge. It was hot, hotter than ever before he imagined. He spoke out loud and clear, "Open the ships

intercom channel.". He waited for the affirmative beep and continued, "Listen up crew. I just received orders from Gemlock-gamma, the next loop is theirs. Hold on to your guts, this may become a bit of a rough ride.". He nodded at his comm-officer, who took his queue and turned the intercom off.

The captain looked around, to his crew on the bridge. It had been easy to persuade them to join the stayers, even when he told them what had to be done. And now they were about to start a revolution. They had talked over the procedures again and again, and that was all they had to go on. The Zhelma-14 did not have the facilities to run tactical simulations of course, and for obvious reasons they avoided the simulators at Cahedra Technical University. When they would be performing the plan, speaking or even signing would be impossible, what with all the noise and the shaking and all. Yet all their actions had to be coordinated within the narrow span of just 200 milliseconds.

"Reconfigure the nodes, alert Gamma-5 and Gamma-7, tell 'em to stand by.", the captain ordered. Several of his officers fiercely attended their consoles.

"Nodes reconfigured, sir.", one of the officers shouted. Then his comm-officer, a young but muscled woman, said calmly "Sir, Gamma-5 ready and in position. Gamma-7 is breaking orbit and maneuvering into position."

"Dalane, ", Captain Loke was the female officer who operated the hot-spot tracker now, "How long before vent?"

"I have an o-point-nine-four in G5, imminent in 33 minutes sir", she replied. Her voice did not reveal how nervous she really was.

"Move in position and tell Gamma-7 to hurry their goddamn asses. I want 'em in position in no more than 20 minutes", the captain said.

"Aye Sir".

The three men that had suddenly gained almost absolute power over the Cahedra had assembled in central command again. The representative was also there.

Mr. Daves, the freshly new primary officer of internal affairs, was reporting what his comm-links had shown earlier.

"It's a mad house, Mr. Representative. All inhabitants have converged to the few off-surface exit points. Some curious about the colony, wanting to go there themselves and stay. Most, however, are eager to get down to the colony and beat the stayers' heads to pulp." He seemed only slightly disturbed. Of course, the state of mind the latter inhabitants possessed right now was carefully orchestrated by his men.

"Good, good. This anger towards the stayers will be nourished. Isolate those few pro-stayers, put them in cargo bay zeta-7.", the representative said.

One of the pads that lay in front of Maynard Grayda, who was now in charge of external affairs, beeped alarmingly. He grabbed it from the table, looked at it and said, "Something is going on, one of the deflector ships is behaving oddly."

"We know," the representative interrupted, "Gamma-7 just broke orbit.". A soft rumble emerged from somewhere far away. The entire command room, in fact, the entire Cahedra, trembled at the onset of the vibrations. The men sat silently around the stone table, the rumble swelling to a thumping. Some of the pads fell from the table.

"Was that...", General Grayda mumbled.

"Did they just...", Mr. Zacki looked at the representative. All three of them were now wondering if this was really the vibration caused by starting up one of the reaction cores.

"Recall every scraper and deflector ship back to the Cahedra

now, Mr. Grayda."

"Yes, Mr. Representative", and Grayda tapped the embedded console in front of him. Three low beeps sounded from it, clearly worrying general Grayda. He said, "Four sunscrapers and three of the deflector ships are not acknowledging, Mr. Representative."

A soft hum, a modest flash, and then a projection appeared above the table. Projected in 3d they saw the systems sun and the four inner planets. As the light in central command dimmed, little dots emerged. Red dots represented the sunscrapers, bright orange dots for the deflector ships and one large green dot represented the the Cahedra itself.

Most of the red and orange dots near the green dot were moving in the latter's direction, except one orange dot which seemed to move towards Gemlock-delta, the fourth planet. The dots near the star were regrouping, clearly intending to retreat to the Cahedra too. One of the sunscrapers was still remaining near the star's surface however, ready to catch another solar burst so it seemed.

Just as Grayda was about to comment in the projection he just called up, the representative exclaimed, "Well, yes, none of this is relevant anymore. You may have noticed the Gaians started engine one. We intend to leave when the loyal ships dock. Eject cargo bay zeta-7 right after all of the stayers on board the Cahedra are isolated. The colonists will get their chance to stay here as they wish. Without them, we will have enough raw material, despite the prematurely aborted mining operation. That'll be all, thank you gentlemen.", the representative looked down and then disappeared.

The men sat there, puzzled. Even more puzzled after what they observed near the sun's surface by watching the still running projection.

A solar flare emerged, Zhelma-14 already trembling under the

great violence below.

"Move in!", captain Loke shouted. "Engage!"

And then, as the ship went into violent shaking, the flaming tube, sucked out of the flare, surrounded the scrapers extended gravitronic nodes once again.

50 milliseconds later, Zhelma-14 repolarized the nodes. Sixty milliseconds later, the nodes detached from the sunscraper. One-hundredth milliseconds later, three of the four engines cut to full throttle, sending even more crashing blows through the already heavily shaking ship. The degenerated tube of solar mass, cut off prematurely, formed a donut. One of the engines exploded, ripping most of the bridge personnel from their consoles. After 180 milliseconds, the second engine exploded even more violently, sending everyone flying through the bridge, even the captain. He almost did not get a chance to navigate the ship up, getting the hell away from the raging donut-shaped ring that was about to collapse into the single spherical blow of sunscrape that they intended to send on it's way to Gamma-7. Then the third engine exploded, after which all of the crew were either dead or unconscious. But they had succeeded, the pulse was on it's way to Gamma-7, ready to be bounced to Gemlock-gamma. The Zhelma-14, now engine-less, coasted away from the sun, with it's ghostly crew silently awaiting.

Four weeks later in one of the many bunkers below the surface of Gemlock-gamma. Dazl, Pele and a dozen others were busy commanding the revolutionary forces. With the thundering bolt approaching, it was vital to hide all their equipment, shuttles and personnel in underground bunkers and tunnels. A month ago, when the Zhelma-14 had initiated the revolution, everything Dazl and Pele had carefully prepared locked into place. They were now at the top of a well-organized army, the ground troops recruited from the

miners, who willingly volunteered. They had set up command right here, in one of the deepest bunkers. And then, suddenly, everything happened at once.

"Gamma-prime, the trap has shut, we have secured the pulse, and oh.. It's a beauty", a distant voice crackled from the ceiling-mounted speakers.

"Show it", Dazl said to one of the others. What they saw on the view-screen was awesome indeed. They saw gamma-7 of course, the source of the last message. The deflector ship was just a tiny dot, dangerously close to the enormous pulsating mass that once was the pulse that was sent by Zhelma-14. In a few minutes, the mass would explode into a giant ball of fire again, directed straight to the dark side of Gemlock-gamma.

"I received a message from Gamma-5", a young woman said, breaking the spell the image on the view-screen cast over those watching it. She continued, "They have recovered Zhelma-14, she's badly damaged. Most of the crew died, but captain Loke survived. Although the ship is heavily damaged, and the captain seriously injured, he insists on flying the ship home himself."

Pele smiled, knowing that his friend was safe.

"This is weird", a relatively young boy yelled, "the Cahedra is ejecting something.. It's... wait.. It seems to be...".

The woman that was apparently in charge of communication interrupted, "Incoming message from the Cahedra. It's a cargo list..", she touched her console and the cargo list appeared on the view-screen. "Cargo bay zeta-7...", the woman said, uncomprehending, "...it's full of people..."

The boy spoke again (but Dazl had already figured it out), "That's what they just ejected, a cargo bay.. And according to these calculations...", he tapped his console frantically then suddenly stopped. The boy almost cried, "By Gaia, at this speed it will shatter to pieces

on the planet in no-time..". By then all present realized what was going. Before they fully appreciated the repercussions, the crackled voice came on again: "Pulse released. One hell of an explosion, our ship almost smashed against the surface of Gemlock-gamma."

Pele walked up to the nearest console, instructing the view-screen to replace the cargo list with the trajectory of the approaching pulse. It had bounced off Gamma-7's gravitronic deflector field nicely, and the predicted trajectory indicated a straight hit. He replied to the crackling voice that came from Gamma-7, "Remind me to thank you later, first tell me quickly, do you have any gravitons left?"

"Wait", then some muffled voices barely audible above the static, and then the reply came: "We have almost one percent left."

In an instant Pele decided that must be enough. He ordered Gamma-7 to use their last blast to slow down the cargo bay full of people that was crashing down towards the planet's surface, deferring the question of how the ship would return home for later. Then he yelled to Dazl to get his shuttles out of their underground hideouts and get the hell to the projected crash site. Finally, when the young boy reported that the Cahedra was slowly starting to move, Pele snapped. He yelled, "Who the fucking hell cares!!"

Twenty-six minutes later, Dazl arrived at the site where the cargo-bay had crashed. It was a relatively smooth landing, considering that cargo bays generally don't land well. Still, the huge metallic container was cracked severely along all sides, and probably the roof and floor were damaged in the same way. They had to move in fast to be there before all oxygen would have vented through the uncountable cracks. The shuttles, with a capacity of only 30 persons, flew the 3000km distance to the nearest underground bunker several times, rescuing as many as possible. As the last of those

that survived were loaded in the three waiting shuttles, all properly suited up of course or they wouldn't be able to walk on the atmosphere lacking surface of Gemlock-gamma, Dazl contacted Pele on his comm-link. When Pele appeared on the view-screen, Dazl realized they were too late.

Pele shouted, "Goddammit, get back here, impact is in 11 minute 40 seconds, the preliminary shockwave is alr...". A thundering sound made it impossible to hear Pele on the comm-bracelet anymore. Then he saw a wall of rock and dust moving in on him, smashing him against the metal body of the shuttle with a relative velocity of almost 300 kilometers per hour.

Pele sat staring to the view-screen for minutes, coming to terms with his best friends dead. Around him a rush of people, some of them openly in panic. He vaguely picked up the word "Impact", and then the first shockwave sent the entire room up several meters and back down again, all in a fraction of a second. The second shockwave, progressing over the surface and not directly through the planet as the first did, sent the whole are in violent spasms from left to right, adding to the already confusing up-and-down movement that continued undiminished. He saw people being thrown from one corner to the other. Part of the ceiling came down, dust everywhere, speakers hanging from their connecting wires.

After what seemed like an eternity, the worst of the earthquake's were over. Pele was now among the three that survived out of the fourteen originally in the bunker. He said, more to himself than to the other two, "The worst is over now.". Apart from 3 very powerful after-shocks he was right.

And then, the water came rumbling down over the surface hundredths of meter's above them. The room started shaking again when the waves crushed down on the roof, but Pele didn't care any-

more. He stood up, barely able to prevent himself from falling down again. He yelled, "By Gaia, it worked. IT WORKED!".