



ESCAPE FROM A DOOMED PLANET

TWO STAR SYSTEMS, ONE BLOODY WAR

The seeds of the War can be found in one of the first exploratory mission to the Lacaille Star System. Luyten had supplied a starship, Daedalus, and its associated system ships. A tentative colony had already been established on the planet Jeuvo Cassandra. The crew of the system ship Canberra comprised both Luyten personnel and a science team from Cassandra. History, unfortunately, did not record who was manning the high sensitivity infrared linescan when the planet that was to be called Tharagrene was revealed. Had it been a barren rock much as Cassandra was - then it would simply have been logged and forgotten about, save for the obligatory surface mining teams many years later.

Tharagrene proved to be both Earthlike and habitable, but without indigenous life. It was a valuable find. The laws of extra-system exploration inherited from Earth meant that the young colony had a legitimate claim on the entire system. Inevitably, both sides claimed the discovery as their own.

Luyten couldn't act immediately. With no faster-than-light travel even possible, the most rapid response possible would take a minimum of ten years. Daedalus remained in the system and was eventually converted to an space station in orbit around Tharagrene. In the time that followed, Lacaille expanded to settle on Tharagrene itself. The surface conditions made it ideal to develop and grow.

And so, twenty years after the discovery of Tharagrene, another starship arrived in the system.

It was called the Nubian.

It was state of the art technology.

It was a warship.

The group are tolerant of him because he has an extensive working knowledge of business practices and an unrivalled number of contacts within numerous industries. He is financing some of the modifications of Dark Matter. No one has cared to ask where the funds are coming from.

came to push Five Division into thE heart of enemy held territory - the capital city of Sahvoar.

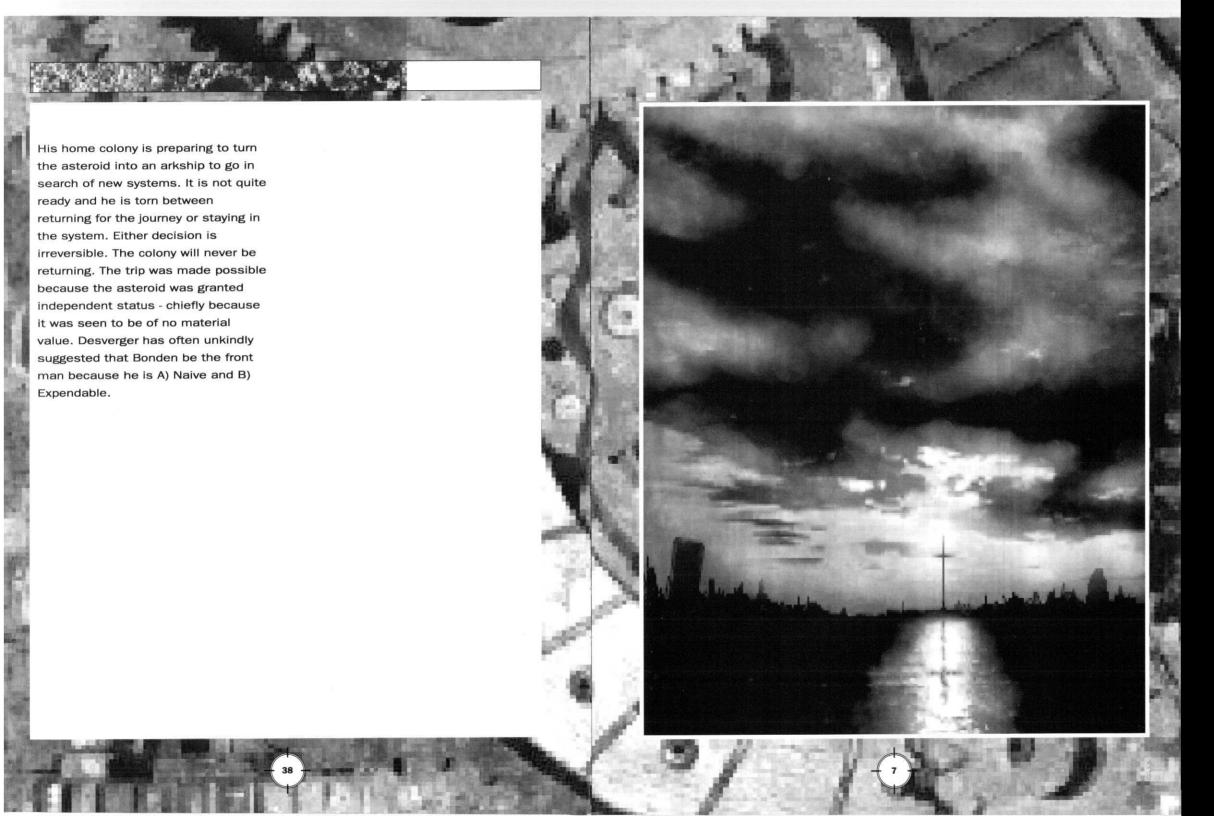
Midway into the mission and suddenly caught in savage crossfire from opposing troops, Rorian and Desverger made for the nearest cover. They found an unmarked truck, supposedly civilian that was cut of from the rest of the ground forces. The crew were dead, but were wearing the military uniform of their own side. The truck proved to be a disguised missile carrier - such things were unusual but not unheard of. What made this particular situation disturbing was the nature of the weapon in the cargo hold. It was a Planetary Denial Weapon, a biological/chemical hybrid warhead of the sort banned for the past two hundred years. It was obvious that it was on a timed delay. Desverger, who had considerable missile experience, believed it could not be

CHOICE

They faced a difficult choice. Should they inform their superiors? Rorian believed that some General had his own covert plans for the weapon and that to report the current status of the warhead was no less than a duty. Desverger argued that this was a naive approach and that their own side meant to kill everybody, friendly and enemy forces alike.

The alternative was simply to flee. This proved the more viable option. Beating their own miniature retreat, they enlisted the help of a medic, Jenillee Freymon and an combat robot, Cim. With this additional assistance, they stole a shuttle and headed for high orbit. The escape was just in time...

The biological component of the weapon - spread widely by the initial blast - became effective after a day. Tharagrene was condemned as a plague planet. Any craft climbing up from the surface was ruthlessly destroyed by an orbiting particle cannon that, coincidentally, just happened to be in range for such a purpose. There were few survivors.



MIYRIEL TORRE Born: 2612, New Europe

Miyriel led a very sheltered and otherwise uninteresting life for a long time. When she was informed that she was wasting slowly away from a rare disease for which there was no cure, she immediately squandered the entire family fortune on getting a complete body replacement.

Essentially she is now a cyborg. Her brain is all that s left of the original but it remains as sharp as ever. Of course it was impossible to undergo such a change and keep a normal lifestyle. Miyriel ran off with what remained of the money and invested it until she simply outlived everyone else she knew - a fact that pleased her greatly. They never showed any support during her illness and seemed resigned to the fact that she was going to die.

She has an interest in interfacing with any new equipment she can find. Some would say that she is a bit unstable. She is decidedly eccentric and often given to playing childish practical jokes. Now that Miyriel is agile and active once more she pretends to be a teenager. The new

life she has been given by her mechanical body is too precious to waste. She feels she has to be on the move and gets increasingly quirky when forced to remain still or when bored. The robotic chassis that comprises her body is designed for aesthetics rather than mechanical efficiency. Even so it is considerably stronger than a human body. It has several smartgun adaptors so that in theory Miyriel could interface with any weapon that Cim could. In reality she would not touch anything so crude. To her mind a weapon should be stylish and compact - as should all machinery.



month. She groaned. Dark Matter was the current fake identity of their spacecraft and the illicit modifications could only be done here on Freewill without attracting too much of the wrong sort of attention. Here! Why here? She knew it was probably inevitable.

This was Kiurcher s idea wasn t it? she said levelly.

I will be several-moments said
Clavius in his gravelly voice and left
diplomatically. Rorian shifted
uncomfortably, but didn t answer.
Cheule returned her attention to the
screen, aware of his gaze. Shifting
lines of green and blue formed a
schematic of the ageing Vector Class
Cruiser called Dark Matter. Statistics
scrolled by at the touch of a screen.
She watched this for a minute until
she couldn t feign interest any longer.
He looked at her seriously then a
thought seemed to brighten his face.

Any suggestions for the new name?

Something fitting... She took a long swig of cola and sighed. Ok, originally it was Gravitational Constant which then became Summer Storm and then Serendip Eclipse. Right? she said. Did you choose all

these?

Rorian shook his head. Then my favourite, Midnight Sun he continued, and finally Dark Matter.

Cheule thought for a while. Seems to be a predilection for profound names. She paused. Rorian I know why we re here. The other reason I mean, there s a mission coming isn t there?

I d make you my second in command if there was such a thing. He was no longer smiling. I need to work. Just go and relax.

Knowing we II probably be fighting for our lives in a week s time?

The Flux Cannon costs more than we can afford. This mission will pay for it. I hope so.

Typical useless growled Desverger, Easy to find space station but easier to let computer guide you.

So they we been delayed. We can manage without them. Countered Rorian. He tried to follow the game Desverger was playing and pretended not to notice the game s coin box which had been split open.

No excuse. They gave word. Be here.

ADELE REANNON Born: 2681, Jeuvo Cassandra

Adele is from the Lacaille System. This alone makes her a target for UPBI interest. What s more she was one of the foremost security experts in that system until the Lacaillian sponsors went back on the deal they had with her. The new security equipment she designed was simply taken, along with all the blueprint disks. She had enough presence of mind to suspect that she would also be the subject of an assassination attempt, in order to prevent her knowledge being of use to anyone else. In this, she proved right. She narrowly escaped and was then audacious enough to actually advertise her services to any mercenary team willing to take her onboard. Rorian, fleeing from Tharagrene at that time, was only too happy to make her a full member.

Her home was Jeuvo Cassandra, a small rocky planet, halfway between a real planet and an asteroid. It had no atmosphere and all life there was contained in vast complexes - the only viable solution. Jeuvo Cassandra did not have enough surface gravity to

sustain a useful atmosphere even if one was introduced. Because of the cost of maintaining the complexes, they mainly housed professional people engaged on research in various forms. Thus Adele has no real family, only a lot of friends who now think she is dead.



If we live I II look you in eye. See who is really correct. You II avert first. But you II stick with me because really, you need all of us. Am I right in that at least? he said sarcastically.

Desverger didn t care to answer.

Cheule felt a tap on her shoulder and spun around violently, grasping for the pistol that wasn t there. Habit.

Sorry, she said relaxing when she saw Rorian, That led up to something nasty once. He handed her a glass of something.

Thanks. Two down. Aren t you having one?

No. I ve got to keep my head clear.

Freewill spirits aren t that dangerous she said, I know they have a reputation but... She tailed off, realising. He saw the change in her expression.

Yes, It s a meeting.

Why here? she said simply.

Because right now we can t be anywhere else.

It s too much of a risk.

I m not as foolhardy as you sometimes make out. The camera will provide a measure of insurance.

I don t care if you do have an embedded micro-camera or whatever you call it. If we get footage of you being blown away, it doesn t help us a bit! shouted Cheule.

She span around and strode away from him. Rorian looked as if he was considering what to say to her when an insistent bleeper sounded on his belt. He detached a square device and noted a red indicator.

Kiurcher s signal he yelled.

Right on whooped Desverger from across the lounge. He drove his fist into his palm then pulled out a pistol and flicked at the safety.

Cheule noticed with regret that the regular crowd had slowly ebbed away. There was only her and the rest of the Hired Guns. She tried to fit distaste, incredulity and displeasure into her voice. She was good at it.

You were deliberately looking for a job here? she said.

The fact was worse than the suspicion. Rorian was just standing

KATRINA HOMEZ Born: 2685, Tesseract

Katrina was unlucky enough to be intelligent, shrewd, attractive and physically very strong. Unlucky? It made her a perfect target for recruiting by the Secret Services (UPBI). When first approached, she naturally refused. She already had a worthwhile job as field reporter for a news network. The UPBI staged her death and abducted her. She underwent intensive brainwashing and reprogramming and emerged with most of her mind intact but with a fanatical devotion to the UPBI. Katrina subsequently went on undercover missions and had an excellent track record - from the services point of view - until she was ordered to investigate a mercenary team by infiltration This she did by an elaborately set up scenario where she pretended to be rescued by them and subsequently joined them. Her deception was uncovered when a head wound from a combat mission left her delirious. She talked about the UPBI. Desverger wanted to kill her outright. However, the UPBI had underestimated her underlying willpower. Given a focus and with

support, Katrina overcame her conditioning and now she is a valued member of the team. She views her service in the UPBI with horror and deliberately goes out of her way to prove that s she s changed. This can lead to her being over zealous at times. When under stress, or in combat, some of the programmed ruthlessness can still show through. Rorian is perfectly satisfied that she is loyal and is willing to take her at face value. Desverger, however, still has doubts and airs them openly. She



g swim could be so hazardous said Adele dead pan.

Yeah, nearly had every medidroid on the level called out! added Bonden. Clavius laughed. In the empty room it echoed. Cheule frowned at them both but never said anything.

I believe it s a local sport Adele continued. Attrition rate would seem to be high.

So what s happening, Clavie? said Bonden,

We bumped into the big cheese an he never even stopped to say hi . He off someplace? Hey that s Dessie on the screen.

Desverger had popped his head out of the duct and was indicating something. He paused and then nodded a few times before disappearing again. The doors on the screen began to slide open.

The room beyond was dark. The small audience around the screen kept silent. It resembled a photorealistic arcade game.

Cheule imagined any number of surprises contained in there and was indeed surprised when the lights sensing Rorian s body heat flickered into life to reveal a perfectly bare room. Bare, except for a single videophone. The image of the phone in the screen got larger and a hand extended seemingly from behind the screen and tapped a few buttons on the phone s keypad. A message, too small to read from the screen, appeared and the screen shook vertically a few times. She wondered what had happened. Then she realised that Rorian must be nodding in response to something. It was irritating that there was no sound.

Where s Dessie? asked Bonden.

Desverger is acting as a form of insurance said Clavius,

There is only supposed to be one person in this meeting. If it turns out to be a set up then Desverger is his best chance of getting out alive.

Ah.

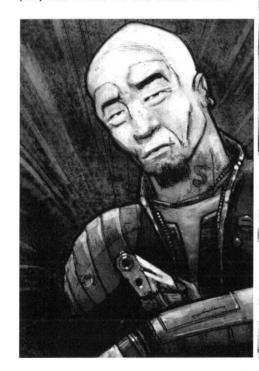
Cheule couldn't stand to watch anymore and sought out a chair. She closed her eyes and was lost with her thoughts. Eventually Rorian returned. His entire stance, solid, aware and alert indicated to Cheule that the relaxation was over. She put down her unfinished drink.

CLAVIUS Created: 2536, Monulyth

Clavius is a product of technology, being a primitive gene-engineered creature in the days before such things were illegal. He is basically human but with a resistance to radiation that in theory would enable him to command unshielded spacecraft for long periods. The performance improvement of the craft resulting from the reduced mass of the shields would increase dramatically. To further reduce spacecraft mass, living space was reduced to a minimum and Clavius was given a psychological profile to deal with this. As a result he is a borderline agoraphobic. The project to create such a creature began during the period before colonisation when the need for efficiency was at its height. In a patriotic fervour, his incept date was on the hundredth anniversary of the discovery of New Europe.

Clavius is not proud of his heritage and has no family to speak of save for the overseers at the lab where he was born. Although they are now long dead, he still hates them and all they stood for.

With his creators now a memory, he found no purpose in his life. Being in sole command of a craft made it absurdly easy to steal and the lighter weight enabled him to outrun anything in the system. He went everywhere he possibly could in search of a new purpose which he has never found.



Just this one more job, Cheule.
This II net enough to head for any system you like. You will get your share. Cheule? he hesitated, I II be sorry to lose you.

She turned from the same, constant view of New Europe. Her eyes reflected in the glass. She felt like Jennilee with all this wistful gazing.

I have to go back.

He frowned, unable to read her expression. Catching this, a forced smile broke across Cheule s face.

And I have to get that other drink you owe me. she said. With those words, a lurching and faint trembling was felt. A muted roar became apparent, then silence, followed by another burst of noise then silence once more.

We re leaving Freewill, said Rorian. I would ve at least thought there d by some warning. C mon. We ve a few minutes before the main drive is activated. Let s find an acceleration chair.

So this was it, Cheule thought.

They were underway.

Bonden, alert though he was, sat up

with a start and stared in awe at the shape that Moeller was holding. He began to raise his hand to attract his attention, but faltered as if he really couldn t believe what he was seeing. The patron stopped.

You re familiar with these? he asked.

Bonden looked round him. Yes. I, I think so.

Good. You can give a briefing. Save some time.

Moeller nodded to Rorian, tossed the device to Bonden who caught it awkwardly, and left to occupy himself with the drop ship preparation.

I, uh, this is an psionic amplifier. It s used to create a variety of effects - it s very rare . Effector I mean. I saw one on Graveyard. It uses force fields to manipulate matter and lasers.

Uses lasers I mean. As well as force fields. These are controlled by a computer, here, to create the effect you desire. Oh, yes. The type of effects are very complex and the information needed to create one is stored on a datacard - have we got one? Yes. Here. Only one can be used at a time and...I II show you. Farsight. Yes.

CHEULE SIYGESS Born: 2685, Earth

Cheule is unique amongst the team members in that she comes from Earth in the home system. She often claims that she really means Little Earth, an asteroidal colony in the Inner Belt, but her argument is unconvincing. She doesn t talk about her past much and any mention of Earth causes her to change the subject, often forcibly. Her real life story is shrouded in mystery. All that is known is that she was 18 when she left Earth for reasons that are unknown to anybody within a dozen light years - literally. She arrived in the Luyten system after an entire ten years, having boarded a Stellar Shuttle, the Dragonwick, by adopting the identity of her twin sister. The effects of time dilation at speeds close to, but not exceeding light, mean that only 4 years passed for her. Physically she is now aged 22 but in real time she is 28. In all that time she was not discovered a fact that testifies to her talents.

The Dragonwick was one of the last Stellar Shuttles to leave the Solar System before all communication with Earth abruptly ceased in 2708. The Dragonwick was itself destroyed in mysterious circumstances shortly after entering the Luyten system. Cheule was gone long before that. The team, such as it was back then, found her on the Fuysije Orbital where she tried to con Rorian out of his shuttlecraft and nearly succeeded. He admired the gall of someone who had heard of him and still wasn t afraid.



Hello Cim she said in return. Why could no-one pronounce her name correctly? Why else? They were Luytanians.

Mr. Desvergh wishes to see you.

I m staying here. She turned around. Cim was silhouetted against the doorway, a mobile mountain of metal. Red and green points of light from the panels reflected off its polished surface. It waited patiently.

Tell Rorian I am not available she said.

Mr. Desvergh was most insistent. Shall I replay the message? Cheule shrugged. Of course. Cim had a large audio buffer. It only had to play the appropriate section.

...especially get Cheule. I want her to be here when we discuss contingencies. If anything went wrong I want her to be the first out of here...

She considered the fragment of conversation, aware that her response would be recorded just as unobtrusively.

Rorian, that s very kind of you. I II be there later. Cim, you can play that

back to him. Now go.

As you wish. The robot backed away and the doors slid closed once more.

I ve got contingencies of my own she said to herself.

It was a further two days before the Platinum Heart performed a slingshot manoeuvre around Yalhoth, gaining speed from the planet's gravitational field. It was a common enough practice. At a key point in the trajectory however, a small shape detached itself and carried on - undetected - towards Graveyard and into the atmosphere itself. The Dropship began its flight profile.

Cheule grinned inwardly, inspired by the noise.

Rorian! she yelled over the roar of the ramjets. The antinoise systems were overwhelmed by the rush of air.

What?

The new name: how about Slipstream?

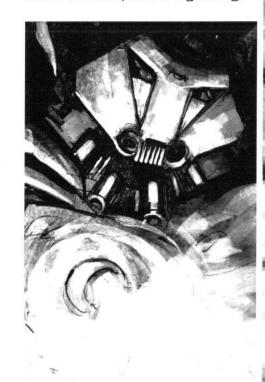
I II think about it. I prefer Solar Maximum. The reply was cut off by the sound of the drop ship shifting to conventional turbojet cruise.

MC 128-7 CIM Built 2706, Tesseract

MC 128-7 CIM is a robot designed to fight. The number stands for Military Construct type 128 revision 7 Combat Infantry Model. He is simply known as CIM, pronounced Sim. The original team s escape from Tharagrene was largely due to Cim, not so much by his own initiative, but stemming from a swift reprogramming which enabled them to overcome enough security to escape in a shuttle. Nothing subtle, he ripped doors off their supports.

Cim is a highly complex piece of battlefield machinery but is possessed of what might be called a very limited intelligence by human standards. He has almost no reasoning capability and is undoubtedly not self-aware, at least by any conventional test. The military has no need of such esoteric functions. What they do need however, is as little maintenance as possible. CIM - like most military robots can take human food and chemically extract energy from it. The type 128 robots are the bipedal equivalent of tanks, sacrificing

manoeuvrability for armour, autonomy for firepower. Because a robot is essentially a highly mobile computer, Cim comes in very useful for calculating orbits and storing data for which he has been unkindly called the world s greatest filofax, an insult which he is incapable of registering.



We re making too much noise then. Drop to 350. The audio sensors over the next ridge can detect our supersonic track easily.

Revised time to zone, 4 minutes twenty seconds.

Reckon we can risk the active sensors?

Make it a quick one.

Two second burst on the Doppler radar. 360 degree. Full spectrum. Anything?

Radar has a 10 degree blind spot at 180.

That doesn t matter.

Nothing on screen. Wait, several ground targets.

Type?

Nothing important.

Airborne targets?

None.

We re in!

A smoothly-shaped object sailed over the ridge to the sound of muted thunder, keeping a precise height from the ground and slowing down constantly. Its appearance frightened creatures hiding in the undergrowth and startled birds who took to the air, offended at the object s intrusion. A blast of air swept the ground underneath the object which wobbled uncertainly at the top of this column of fast moving air and, slowly, its height above the bushes and trees diminished in a flurry of vegetation and dust stirred up by the unnatural squall. With a final rush of sound, the drop ship placed itself deep within the covering layers of forest.

Broken branches spilled onto the ground. The residual whine of motors slowed to be replaced by the higher pitched note of the landing ramp servos. Rorian emerged first, then Desverger then CIM.

Camouflage details, go. ordered Rorian.

Within ten minutes, the Dropship had been covered in a camouflage netting, surprisingly crude considering the levels of technology they had at their disposal. The most effective anti-radar coating was at the same time the least smooth and of course the least effective for aerodynamics.

DESVERGER Born 2670, New Europe

Desverger is similar to Rorian in many ways. He was also born on New Europe and rebelled against authority until being drafted into the army. Desverger was a product of the seedier, more disturbing elements of New Europe that no-one wished to speak of. He slept rough and got involved in serious crime, not caring how it reflected on the gang, not caring about anything. Eventually the crimes were serious enough to make front page news. He hated having to be second in command for everything, but tolerated it simply for what he could gain. Ironically, when he was eventually caught by the police, the result of his short trial put him in the same army division as Rorian.

He suffers from rapid mood swings. Usually he is very cold and doesn t get on well with anyone else. Officially he is a member of the team for his skill as a marksman and weaponsmith. In actual fact, despite the rivalry, Rorian is possibly the closest thing to a friend he has and the bond goes deeper than they both realise. He has, during his life,

probably killed more than everybody else in the team combined. A fact which, to their disgust, he often boasts of. After the escape from Tharagrene, Desverger separated from the rest in order to pursue his own life free from the interference of anyone else. He embarked on an illprepared career as a professional assassin, but his style was anything but professional. The result of his endeavours is that a number of real assassins have him as a permanent target should he ever be encountered. Once again (to his displeasure) he found that he had to make his way back to Rorian to seek protection.



