

**COUNTDOWN
TO GRAVEYARD**

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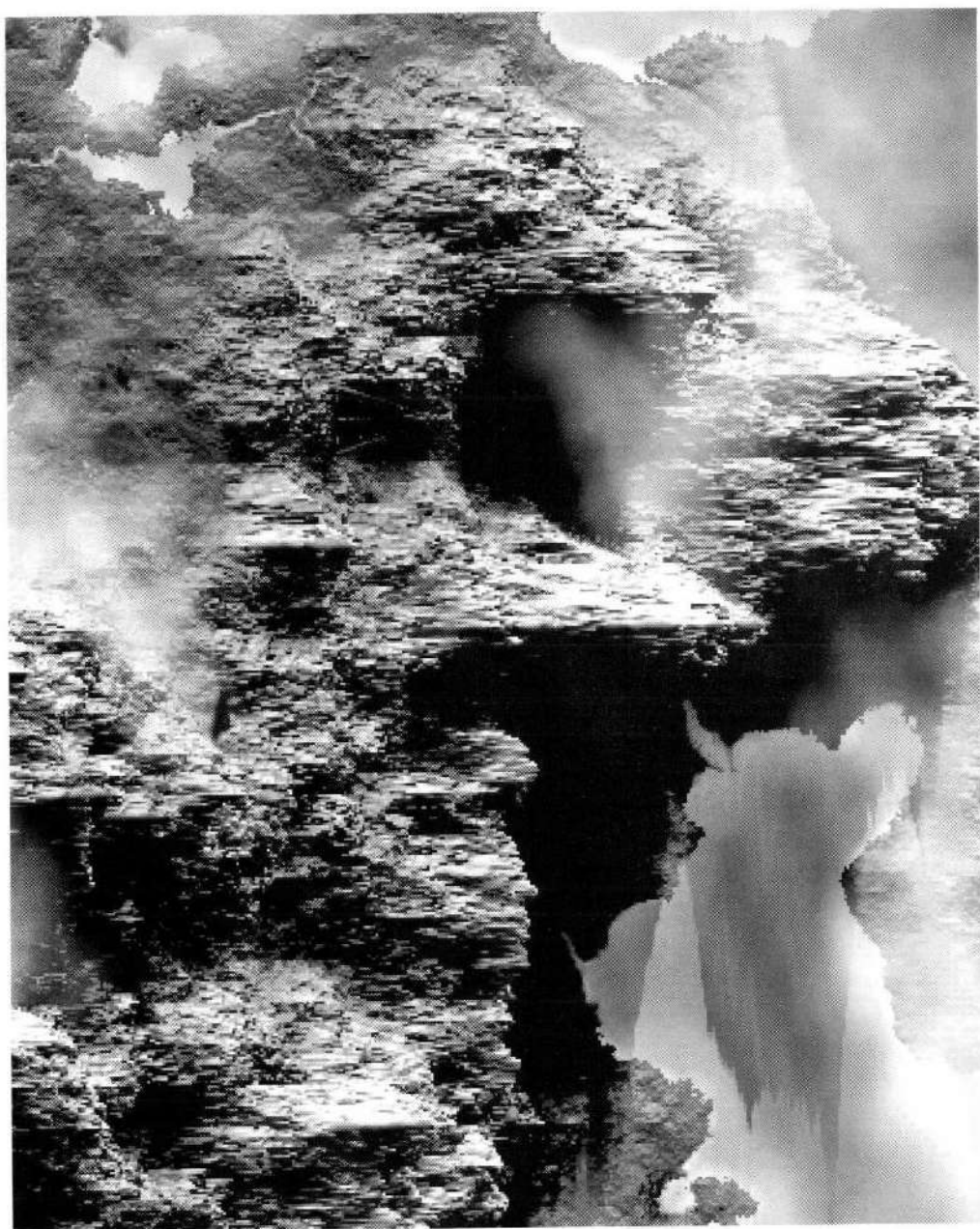
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OBJECTIVE





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.

HOW TO WAGE INTERSTELLAR WAR

Earth would certainly have gone to war with Luyten in the past, had it not been for the dozen light years that separated the two sides. It is however possible for a spacecraft to take on entire planets merely because gravity is on their side. Lasers and particle weapons aside, an attacking craft will find the most potent force for destruction is the redirection of asteroids so that they collide with the target planet; a simple and inexpensive tactic.

War was imminent and so reinforcements began to arrive from Luyten in a rota system. A tour of duty for a spacecraft was typically ten years real time. Upon return to Luyten, the warships were upgraded with the results of a further decade of research and development.

It was the Maxellamar Ring of Luyten that declared a state of war. Predictably, there was hardly any audible reaction from the civilian population - the policy of forcible draft for the war effort saw to that.

Two draftees were Rorian Deevergh and Desverger. The warship that took them to Tharagrene was part of a

Stellar Booster - a drive system that took the craft to near lightspeed. Smaller craft detached from the command vessel at the journey's end where other craft were then attached for the return trip. The forces of which Rorian and Desverger were a part were therefore effectively stranded until the arrival of the next Stellar Booster which, at that stage in the War, happened around every six months. By 2697, the War had gained momentum.

Rorian and Desverger were ground troops for the Federal Forces of Maxellamar. They had served for a number of years in Five Division as punishment for past offences and had, after a while, developed a grudging respect for each other. When it was decided that more forces should be mobilised, Five Division was designated to begin the five year journey to Lacaille. Very few people would have been willing to face the prospect but troops, of course, had no choice, especially if they were members of five division.

Time dilation from speeds close to light made the trip seem shorter for the passengers on this trip and thus more bearable and once the tortuous journey had been made, the decision

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 off 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 stopped.

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.

HIRED GUNS

Foolishly, when investigating the weapon truck, they had taken no account of built in surveillance systems. Only they know the truth about the massacre. The authorities, in turn, know know of their existence. That knowledge made the team led by Rorian and Desverger possibly the most wanted people in the system.

The first difficult they faced after witnessing the massacre, was to return to Luyten. This took many different turns and, in the course of that journey, they were joined by a further eight people - some they can even call friends - some don't even live up to that. Nevertheless, all of them have useful skills. The war effectively ended with the detonation of the warhead though pockets of resistance continued to fight well into the next decade. But the October 14th Incident, as it became known, was accepted as the official end of the War. Lacaille was very much the loser. And as news filtered its slow way across the light years, the War became little more than a collection of facts in history books, even before Rorian arrived back home.

NOW IT IS 2712.



COUNTDOWN TO GRAVEYARD

Six hundred and thirty thousand million kilograms of metal, plastic and ceramics hung like a baleful star in the greying skies of New Europe. There were several of these objects in orbit around the capital planet, but Freewill was the first, built in an age when the frontier still meant something. Now the scant resources went elsewhere and the Orbital stagnated as living on planetary surfaces became fashionable once again. As with every property left to itself for a time, squatters moved in. Freewill became self-governing in all but name.

Cheule stared for a long time through a view port down at the planet and saw the same land mass that she had seen yesterday and the day before that and the day before that. It was a Single Star Hotel sort of view; all that starscape and there was a planet in the way. The Anysije might not have been the greatest place in the system, she thought, but at least it wasn't in a synchronous orbit. You could watch the planet spin beneath you. The drink was cheaper, too. Perhaps she could persuade Rorian to buy her one.

He was sitting with his terminal working, as ever, across in the lounge, with Clavius watching the screen and nodding from time to time. He obviously wished he was somewhere else. She knew how he felt. Freewill was a strange choice for R&R, but given their wanted status, it was a sensible one.

The lounge was nearly deserted apart from themselves. Desverger provided the main source of noise with an arcade machine and neglected air scrubbers gave the room a characteristic dank smell. It was late in the artificial night and the lounge had been switched to automatic. Above the entrance hung a large, jaunty sign which flickered: Your Fun is About to Go Nova! Not for her. She waved her hand in a certain way and a few seconds later a dispensing robot wheeled across. She slotted in a coin and was handed a cola.

Rorian... she said softly.

C'mon then he replied without looking up. He pulled out a chair and she accepted it.

What's the situation?

See for yourself he sighed, Dark Matter's going to be in dock for a

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'll 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've 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.

Be here now.

Crashing noises erupted from the machine. A voice clearly said Game Over. He picked a coin from the box and pressed it into the slot. The game started again. Rorian stared. Desverger glanced momentarily and caught the look.

Credit card trouble to fake.

We'll just have to catch them at the second rendezvous point in the Inner Belt.

Unlikely to be case, said Desverger not looking up from the game. One: Pilot, Morton, his own ship. No loyalty to group. No kindred sense.

What do you mean? Asked Rorian.

First better prospect, takes it. Not see him again.

He's got a few long standing things to sort out, that's all. Desverger ignored the comment.

Two: Wife. Ah, curse it! The arcade ship exploded in a fireball. He used another coin.

Surprised, Rorian? he continued. Jenelle, Morton very close. Intent was marriage. She'll support any

decision he make.

This is pointless. Rorian said and made to return to the bar area.

Three: Desverger said raising his rasping voice. The Twins. Emotionally bonded like all twins. One dead. Other emotionally crippled as result. Neither any more use.

Despite himself, Rorian continued to listen though he didn't face Desverger directly.

In effect, lost quarter of team. Good thing.

Good?! Rorian shouted, They're valuable members!

Team too large. Too unwieldy. Graveyard mission; real reason to get new hardware. They're gone, taking ship with them. That's so.

No. That's not it at all. Something delayed them and this is just a normal mission.

You speak from knowledge? No. Voice betrays you. Always your trouble. Can't read the signs. Graveyard bad news.

Money is never bad news. You see signs where there aren't any.

If we live I'll look you in eye. See who is really correct. You'll avert first. But you'll 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

there as if everything he did was either so obvious it was beyond questioning or didn't need explaining at all. He obviously hadn't planned on justifying himself.

So who's the patron? she continued.

He shrugged.

Where's the meeting then. Where do we go?

Sorry, Cheule. It's a one on one meeting.

I can't, we can't just let you go by yourself.

She tried to pretend that it was only a legitimate concern for the leader. Even pretending that it was simply because only he had clearance for the ship and they would be stuck otherwise seemed false. A terrible image of holding his severed eye up to the retinal scanner to gain access to the ship sprang into her mind.

Just a single person, Cheule.

If anything happens... She remained emphatic.

Stay here. That's the plan. That's always been the plan. Anything

happens and I walk straight into it. Only me. Get it?

Boss man's right, lover chipped in Desverger, twirling his pistol. She ignored him as best she could.

Freewill's dangerous. We've never been hired from -

Stay here! he shouted. She held eye contact for as many seconds as she could before he finally snorted in disbelief and stormed through the door.

The quality of the image from Rorian's subcutaneously implanted camera was shaky and monochrome but it worked fairly well. The pictures were relayed to the terminal that he left with them. In the left of the screen, Desverger could be seen clambering into a ventilation duct. A large door occupied the middle of the screen with Cheule's concerned face reflected on it. Adele and Bonden entered from outside the lounge. Bonden bounded over to watch with them. Adele looked serious and flicked back her wet hair.

Good swim, I trust said Clavius with a trace of a smile.

Good enough. Never realised a zero-

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.

Get the rest up here, now, he said, Then it s Bay Twelve in fifteen minutes.

He went as abruptly as he had entered.

The Bay Twelve door opened to reveal what at first appeared to be a thin corridor, circular in cross section. As they entered, it revealed a vast cavern seen through the transparent walls of the corridor which formed a tube connecting to a shape that was partially concealed. Only a half dozen or so spotlights highlighted a warning symbol, a giant exhaust, a registry number and finally a name. The Platinum Heart. To either side was what appeared to be a metal valley, the basis of a docking and construction bay in which floated the massive spacecraft. Desverger barged his way past everybody in the confines of the boarding tube, got to the top first and bowed mockingly, swirling his cloak simultaneously. He entered the craft and was swallowed up by the darkness.

The interior was a dull grey; a characteristic of all ex-military vessels. A stocky man waited inside the entrance way and greeted them each by name, which Cheule found

disconcerting. He in turn introduced himself as Moeller. Once for each of them.

Friends, said Moeller when they were all gathered. Though I regret I cannot tell you the nature of this - er - job I wish performed, you will be given full details closer to the time. Naturally the payment will not be processed through any banking system and will be delivered in Rare Earth Elements, or should you wish, Platinum. A poetic touch, no? A percentage will be distributed in a moment, more upon leaving for Graveyard and, of course, the bulk of it upon your return. We will be leaving orbit in a little over six hours. Please feel free to make yourselves comfortable. He bowed rather unconvincingly and left.

The assembled team began to talk amongst themselves but Cheule decided to follow Moeller s example and leave to find more of the ship. Rorian caught her before she made it to the door.

What s bothering you? he asked.

You promised! she said bitterly. It seemed to take him a while to realise what she was referring to.

Just this one more job, Cheule. This'll net enough to head for any system you like. You will get your share. Cheule? he hesitated, I'll 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 be 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'll show you. Farsight. Yes.

He pulled out the card that was already installed to show everybody and then placed it back. Activating the amp started a glow of light in front of him. There were a few gasps from those who were less familiar with holograms. A pattern began to form in the centre of the glow.

As you can see, a picture is being created of the location about - 100? 150? - about one hundred metres in front of me even with walls in the way. Is that a storage bay? Yes. I believe it is. Different cards produce different effects.

The group were looking at him in amazement. No one spoke. Cheule smiled warmly at him. So encouraged, he continued.

Radioisotope power source so it won't run out. Some effects give information, some cause destruction. And so on. I have no idea how they got hold of so many. Oh yes. No user serviceable parts inside so don't try opening them. He grinned.

The forward observation lounge was in darkness, save for a smattering of glowing green indicators, the red of a scrolling message screen and of course the faint light from the stars

themselves. The soft glow of the edge of the Galaxy was visible as a band of diffuse light across the view. One of the points of light was brighter than the rest. Schematics unfolded and folded across the window, superimposed on the scene. Cheule sat quietly in one of the lounge seats, contemplating the view. She knew she would have been pleased to discover - through deduction - that the bright star was in fact Yalhoth and the smaller point of light just next to it was Graveyard - their destination. The schematics robbed her even of this pleasure. Letters on the window flashed and indicated Yalhoth with a green box, a catalogue number and the name itself. She hated it for that.

Behind her the lounge doors opened with the soft hiss of pneumatics. Yellow light streamed in, taking on a red hue through her night vision. The metal-on-plastic clump of a robot echoed a few times and then stopped. The whine of motors was too pronounced and deep for it to be Miyriel. The crew was too scared of Cim-Lite for it to be allowed to wander the ship unchecked. There was only one droid one it could be.

Miss Siygess it said.

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

The automatic pilot indicated its willingness to be taken over. Clavius now took control and the noise subsided slightly.

Timed message release active. intoned Cim. The robot waited patiently for instructions.

Scan and give us the highlights. said Rorian.

Accepted. Target elimination. Details follow. 10 Megs of off line data. Editing. Illegal government weapons research. Bio-engineering sites. Key installations. Retrieve backpack nukes from marked sites. Detonate at designated points. Digital terrain map supplied - Guild VII compatible. Estimated mission time 13 days plus 4 hours. Secondary objective - reconnaissance. Rendezvous Platinum Heart, co-ordinates given. Compositing mission profile from drop zone onwards.

Is that it? shouted Borden sarcastically, Merely waste half the planet?

Too intense for you, youngster? said Desverger.

What the hell have you got us into this time?

Enough of that. Take the cash and don't ask questions. That's how it's done. replied Rorian.

Yeah, easy... said Cheule quietly, her mood becoming sombre. The vibration of the flight was making her armour plate rub uncomfortably against her neck. What made the flight worse was the absence of any form of window in the hold. She couldn't see anything unless she turned her head to the extreme left where a small patch of the windshield was visible between Clavius and Rorian. And that held only the grey of the sky.

Five minutes to zone.

Nothing on passives. We're in the radar shadow of the mountain. We'll emerge into the main beam in a half minute.

Ok. Clavius. Contour following within the next thirty seconds.

Confirmed. The ship fell to within twenty metres of the ground and kept that distance. Speed was still greater than mach 1. What's local speed of sound?

Low. 550 metres per second.

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.

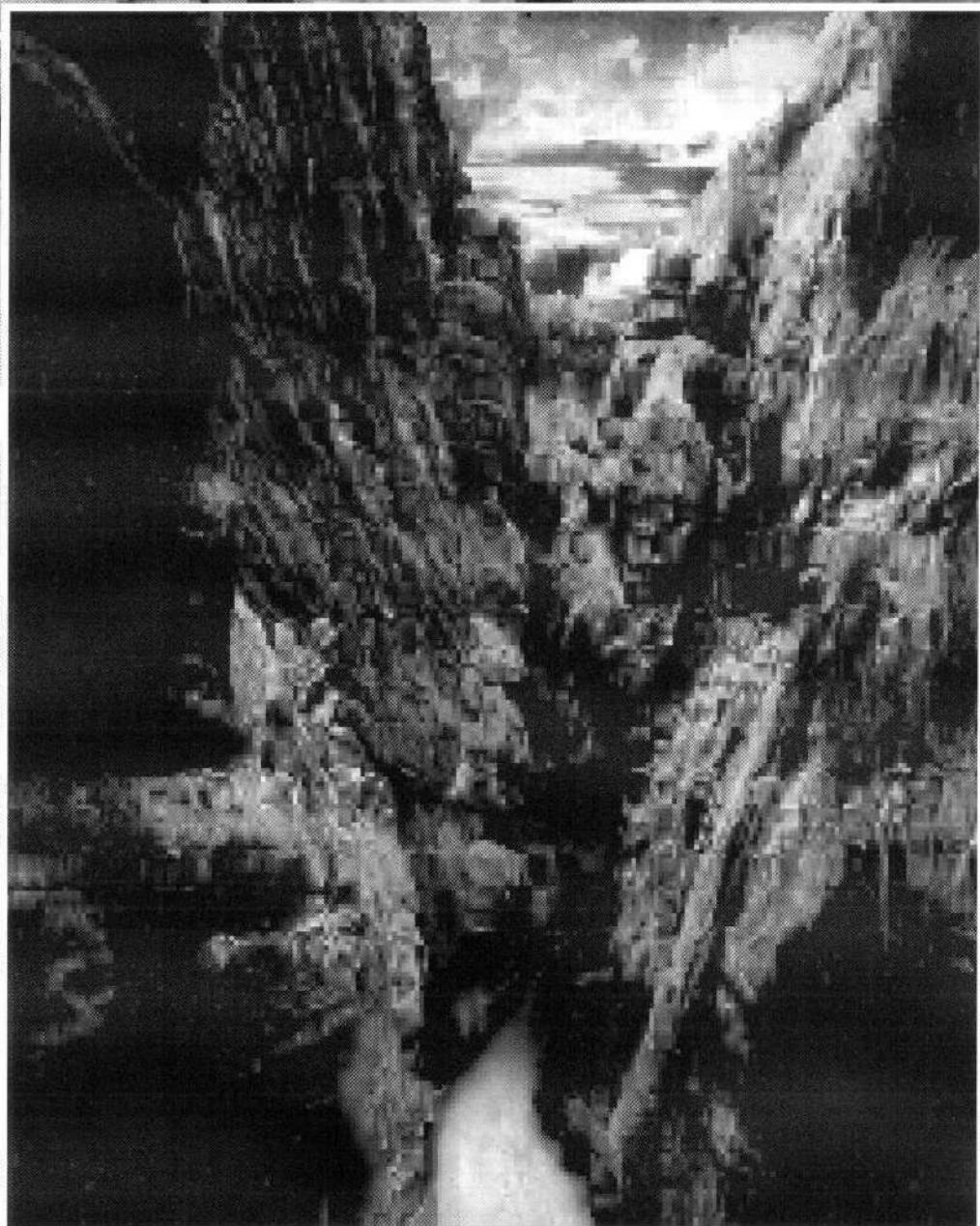
Within ten minutes, the Dropship had
been covered in a camouflage
netting, surprisingly crude considering
the levels of technology they had at
their disposal. The most effective
anti-radar coating was at the same
time the least smooth and of course
the least effective for aerodynamics.

At last they were ready.

Eleven of them stood in front of Rorian. Four to go for the nukes, four to stand by in case of trouble and the remainder to stay with the Dropship. They formed a loose line and looked at him expectantly. The two robots stood motionless as always, Bonden next to them, restless, not willing to wait even this much. Kiurcher hung at the back not wanting to be seen. Desverger daring anyone not to pick him for the worst of the fighting. Clavius ready to do whatever was asked. Jennilee shying away behind him. Adele looking slightly bemused by the whole situation. Miyriel was just, well, Miyriel. Katrina was expressionless, having slipped back into her cold ruthlessness and of course Cheule, who was looking at him intently as if she should be in charge and leading them to another planet entirely.

Just four should be necessary. said Rorian. He rubbed his hands together and unshouldered his rifle.

So , he continued, who s it gonna be...?



MERCENARY DATAFILE

RORIAN DEEVERGH
Born: 2670, New Europe

There is a saying in the poorer areas of New Europe that can be paraphrased as One only needs a plastic spoon to eat and live; One needs a silver spoon in the South for the same reason. To be born on Luyten's capital world is to automatically gain a lofty superiority over the other inhabitants of the system and to know that one is better in every way.



Rorian was born in the Southern Sectors of New Europe to parents who were particularly wealthy, even among their contemporaries. Because he was an only child, as was the custom, he found little time of his own, owing to social pressures that were entirely an invention of the rich. Like many of his generation, he rebelled and turned to a life bordering on the petty criminal, seeking thrills that everyday life seemed unable to provide. By age 16, he was organising elaborate stunts and commanded a small gang of disaffected teenagers. One of those stunts went badly wrong and three people were killed as a result. Not being old enough to execute, he was forcibly drafted into the Maxellamar Ring of Luyten Army where he became part of Five Division.

Despite his profound dislike of authority, Rorian has made a name for himself as a skilled combatant. It is unwise to insult him as he is short on temper and has an almost superhuman dislike of fools. He places nobody above himself but will honour any promises he makes - but only to those he deems worthy. Faults in others are tolerated, but only if they make an effort to put them right,



even if that effort never quite succeeds. To those outside he seems utterly ruthless when a situation like a firefight occurs, then he will apparently ignore the fact that it ever happened. In reality it bothers him greatly; he will brood about it for days afterward but never giving a hint of this to others. They need to be able to see only his strong side.

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 ill-prepared 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.



JENILLEE

Born 2685, Tesseract

Jenillee had a love affair early on in her life. Jase was the classic example of a childhood sweetheart that lasted into teenage years. Perhaps it was too early in her life. Never having known anything other than happiness with Jase, nothing could have prepared her for his disappearance. He was suspected of being abducted for forcible drafting into the military; a process on Tesseract that was by no means unheard of. It left a gaping hole in her life and, naively, she joined the army herself in a hope of finding him. Somehow.

Needless to say, there were no quick results. Her job in the medical team in Five Division seemed easy enough. She enjoyed caring for the few injured and working with people. Since she came into contact with people from all the divisions and all ranks and she was able to befriend some who could help her. Computer searches and lookouts took place. There were still no results but she never gave up on her dream.

Never gave up, that is, until the start of hostilities on Tharagrene where

Five Division were relocated. The horrors she saw there aged her more than any space travel and she became bitterly cynical. But the worst was yet to happen. Jase was brought in with a batch of wounded under a different name. She was unable to do anything for him, his wounds were so severe. He died by her side without ever saying a word and seemingly unaware of who he was; still less who she was. The escape from Tharagrene happened that night with her among them, helping to steal a shuttle. Before this, she would never have contemplated what amounted to treachery. Now it seemed there was no other choice.

These days Jenillee can often be found staring out of a viewport or watching the horizon. On duty, she reverts to the dedicated professional person she used to be. But when her task is done she returns to stare out of her viewport - alone. What she thinks about, no one can say.

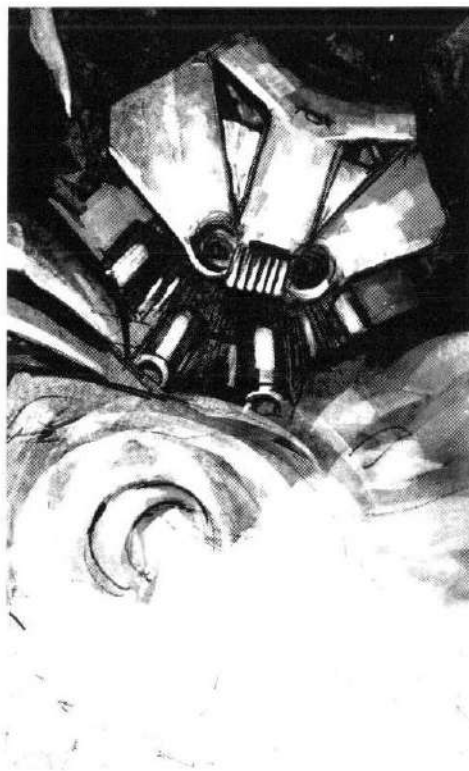
MC 128-7 CIM

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.



Although he will accept reasonable orders from any member of the team, it is not generally realised that everybody's instructions carry a certain weight. Rorian, of course, has top priority in this regard and can override anyone else. The MC Series are modular in construction, enabling limbs and major components to be replaced without fuss. This was how the reprogramming was accomplished initially. The mission parameter datacard was swapped with a new one. This, of course, directed loyalties to Rorian.

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.



Yet, it wasn't so much the team adopting her as the other way round. Rorian accepts that she is with them only because they will further her cause, whatever that might be. He knows also that her smile conceals a lot of hurt - of what, he is at a loss to say. The team mostly regards her with awe. Earth to them is an almost mythical place. Strange tales, often contradictory, get told about Earth, often about terrifying things, and someone from there could clear up a lot of fables. Anybody could claim to be from Earth of course, but no-one doubts that in her case it's true - if only for that terrible haunted look in her eyes when the subject arises.

CLAVIUS

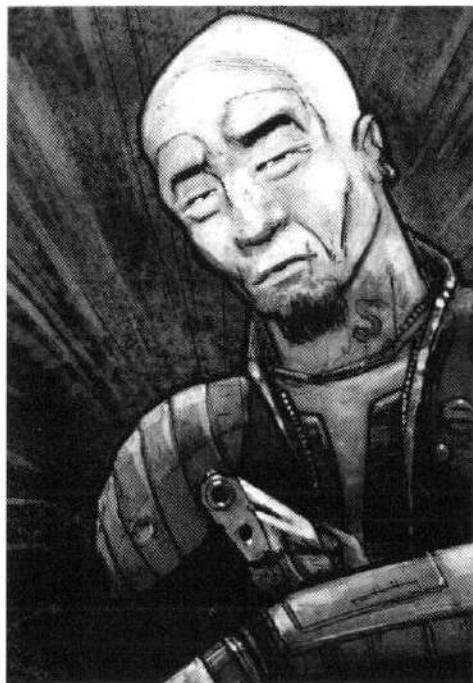
Created: 2536, Monulyth

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.



Those days are long in the past now and he has had many adventures in his time. With his incorporation into the team, he has at least gained a pretence of a purpose. From some difficult conversations with Cheule, he now harbours a wish to learn more about Earth and intends visiting there someday. This will take many years of his life but he suspects that his creators did not set a limit to cell replication; in effect he will not age. He often relates some tales of his own to the rest of the group when there is time to be spent and has proved to be an enthralling and captivating narrator.

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 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



despises him as he reminds her so much of what she used to be. Her memory of life before the service is almost non-existent and she isn't even sure whether Katrina is in fact her real name. No documents can be found which can tell her for sure and of course all computer records show a blank.

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.



She is realistic enough to realise that revenge is a futile pursuit. She has no idea who could have ordered her assassination and the assassin himself is dead by her own hand. The security equipment was the culmination of her life's work so she has resigned herself to seeking out all the pleasures that life has to offer - anything else would be a waste of time and effort and would only bring hurt.

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.



BONDEN SPEY

Born: 2690, Starscape

Bonden was born and brought up on one of the asteroidal colonies in the Inner Belt called, rather whimsically, Starscape. Because it was such a closed society, mystical and religious thinking formed a large part of his childhood and shaped his attitude. He takes things less than seriously, searching for adventure and high times without reckoning on the gritty nature of reality. He is often unable to appreciate the consequences of his actions and has the old fashioned belief that there is glory to be had in fighting for a noble cause. Noble causes are difficult to find.

Bonden is the only person in the team to have actually been to Graveyard before. He essentially did this as a bet. His friends said he couldn't manage without equipment or resources in addition to his own natural resourcefulness. He tried it because it was great fun to outwit the authorities. It was an interesting experience and not at all what he expected. He got caught up in the subtleties of the Duone religion. He retains sympathy for the Duone's willingness to pursue their own

beliefs in the face of technology and is fascinated by the fact that technology is an almost integral part of their religion. Out of all the group, he retains the most hope and optimism for the future.



His home colony is preparing to turn the asteroid into an arkship to go in search of new systems. It is not quite ready and he is torn between returning for the journey or staying in the system. Either decision is irreversible. The colony will never be returning. The trip was made possible because the asteroid was granted independent status - chiefly because it was seen to be of no material value. Desverger has often unkindly suggested that Bonden be the front man because he is A) Naive and B) Expendable.

KIURCHER

Born: 2663, Tesseract

Kiurcher was born in a military base on Tesseract where such a thing was frowned upon. Since shipping him and his parents out of the base would have cost money and compromised security it was determined that he be raised to be uniquely skilled in a particular military trade. He wasn't much good at those trades but was gifted in mathematics and coupled with a business sense he was placed in charge of funding at the age of 16. By 18 he had embezzled huge amounts of cash and began his flight from job to job until his past caught up with him. Eventually he turned to crime full time.

Kiurcher doesn't display any emotions and any that he does have are limited in intensity and restricted to the entire negative range. He does this intentionally in order to play his cards as close to his chest as he can manage. Little is known of his past and he gives nothing away. This is perhaps fortunate, because if he told everything he knew, then a lot of people would find themselves in serious trouble of the kind that

usually ends in a verdict of death by misadventure.

He has no regrets about his life and tries to indulge in excess whenever possible. Since joining the team he has become more pensive and paranoid. He tries to find out as much about the next job as possible in order to assure himself that he won't be in any danger. Kiurcher is egocentric and wishes to follow up any possibility of extending his natural lifespan.



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.

CIM-LITE (PIRATE COPY)

Built: 2710, Freewill

CIM-Lite comes under the designation Enhanced Survivability Unit. The CIM-Lite robots are more intelligent than the usual combat oriented military types. This design is dictated by the primary and to a lesser extent, secondary mission profiles. The primary mission type is essentially the same as all other combat robots which is troop support. The main difference is that a CIM-Lite model may take command of up to 16 other robot types. This is not merely giving orders to the other robots which are then carried out. It connects to them via radio link so closely that they become extensions of the CIM-Lite; effectively they become extra limbs. Sixteen robots acting in unison are vastly more effective than sixteen independent units. To exercise this direct control, it needs greater than normal intelligence. CIM-Lite possesses a personality as a consequence of the needs of a greater intelligence. Even so, it is a cold and calculating one with distinctly polarised morality. Cim-Lite's world has no shades of grey but only the black and white of the

bad guys and the good guys. Problems used to occur with this model where civilians were concerned. The chassis is a lightweight one designed for agility and speed, sacrificing armour and firepower. Aesthetically, the model is designed on psychological principles to induce a degree of fear in the enemy. Tactical ability is far higher and Cim-Lites have a high degree of autonomy in the absence of superior officers or orders.



CIM-Lite is the newest member of the team and is often called Newboy as a sort of joke. Battle robots tend to be male because the brain is programmed to act male, ie with violence and aggression. He does not have an illustrious history with regard to the team. They simply saved up money and bought him. The chassis is a copy, but the behavioural Roms are from an original.

