

## Golden Needles

Earthdate: 2179 BCE

Prince Syree's stomach gurgled.

He knew that within six hours he would be dead. The tip of Syree's saurian tail twitched. Standing tall and proud, his glossy skin and pennons a dark blue, he stared out at the rain drumming against the windows of the hexagonal mess hall's three exterior walls. Lightning illuminated the slender, golden starships in the distance.

"Attention, Defense Teams," the deep voice of Mission Control piped from the loudspeakers.

Syree sniffed the air, but could only detect the faint odor of disinfectant used by the cleaning crew. "I hope they're not sending us up without supper," he said to Res Halnor, his ship's nexialist--their jack-of-all-trades.

Halnor, a dark violet raptor and, like Syree, a Slick, avoided eye contact with the Prince. She just nodded and, bending her long, graceful neck, pretended to examine the talons of her right hand.

The voice over the loudspeaker continued, "Enjoy your meal. Three days ago the renegades of the Black Fleet annihilated the colonial planet Alpha Thentis 4. Their arrival here is imminent. Remember, citizens will be heroes and criminals will be pardoned if you survive the mission. Go to your assigned vessels when the klaxon sounds. Good soaring."

"Look at 'em. A hundred or so 'volunteers' just milling about. Waiting to die," said Res Kreenree, a green and brown mottled Slick and the engineer for Syree's assigned ship. He was

leaning against one of the freshly washed, white interior walls, not far from Syree, casually smoking a cigarette.

Kreenree was trying to flirt with Halnor. Well, give him enough rope... Syree didn't say anything. Just shook his head.

"Anybody think it's odd that they'd trust someone convicted of arson with cigarettes and a lighter?" Kreenree continued. He looked at Halnor. "Or a serial killer with a laser pistol?"

"Just in case any of those warp-mad raptors teleports onto our ship," Halnor said as she touched the pistol in the belt around her neck. She gave Kreenree a wry smile. "Have you noticed that just about the only Roughs in this crowd are 'citizens,' not criminals? How come Slicks come up before the courts of this fine kingdom so much more often than Roughs?"

Kreenree took another puff on his cigarette. "Speaking of Roughs, where's our captain?"

Syree was about to reply when gates in the walls slid open and chutes extended nearly to the floor. Hungry raptors roared in anticipation of the coming meal. Squealing niligans, pig-like animals the size of half-grown sheep, slid down and out onto the mess hall floor. Scrambling to their feet, without furniture to obstruct them, they ran panic-stricken among the eager raptors.

"Supper!" Prince Syree said. As a buff-haired niligan bounded past, he skewered it with the talons of his left hand. He tossed it into the air and snapped his razor-sharp teeth through its neck and shoulder. The creature died instantly. Syree tilted his head up, savoring the hot blood coursing past his tongue into

his throat. With a toss of his head he flipped the niligan around, head-first, and swallowed it.

Syree turned to the tall, slender Kreenree and said, "You don't think Respected Captain Corrin would eat her last meal here with us, a bunch of Slicks, do you? Not that beauty queen!"

He licked the blood from his hand, then continued, "Why, she's probably somewhere putting makeup on her pennons." Syree extended his arms, stretching his own glossy blue pennons taut, and pirouetted--a gesture mocking Captain Corrin's vanity--and which sent the niligans skittering and squealing.

Kreenree, watching for a niligan to come his way, threw his cigarette to the floor and crushed it with his foot. "Res Halnor, I 'spose you'd have had a brilliant research career--if you hadn't been a Slick. Is that why such a young and attractive PhD became a serial killer?" Kreenree asked. "Or did the cops just stop looking when they picked you up, like they did with me?"

Halnor raked one of the scampering niligans with her talons. Screaming in pain, it escaped. Kreenree stunned it with a blow from his tail and kicked it back towards the nexialist. "Heads up there! You'll think faster with a full tummy."

Syree just smiled and thought, "He doesn't give up."

Halnor's brow ridge flushed green with thanks but the young saurian said nothing. Her teeth pierced the niligan's neck. After swallowing it, she said, "I'll bet in the olden days--before cities and aircraft and spaceships, when our ancestors soared from the cliffs and trees--smooth scales were better than rough.

It isn't fair that I should be treated like a criminal and sent to die just because my scales are slick."

"Relax, Res Halnor, we are criminals. Maybe it's not a suicide mission. Maybe we'll survive, be pardoned, and you can soar again. So eat hearty," Syree said.

She furrowed her brow, looked at him, and said, "You're a prince, Syree. You shouldn't even be here. How can you make light of this situation?"

"Shouldn't be here? Tell it to the judge. Even being a prince isn't enough to save a Slick who collides with an airliner." He skewered another skittering niligan, enjoyed the hot blood, then swallowed the carcass. "Perhaps if I'd been a Rough things would have been different."

"Different, Hot Shot?" asked Res Kreenree, not impressed by Syree's royalty. "You mean if you'd been a Rough you wouldn't have become a hot shot pilot recklessly scurrying around the flightways? Or if you'd been a Rough they wouldn't have convicted a prince? Face it--You were born on the wrong side of the blanket. You'll never be a real prince."

For a moment, Syree just looked at Kreenree. Any further exchange was ended by the raucous call of the klaxon. It sounded three times. Except for the grunting of the few remaining niligans, the room fell silent. Everyone waited for the voice over the loudspeaker. One by one, the name of each raptor was called. A mini-thunder clap followed each name as air filled the empty space left behind when the raptor teleported from the bloody mess hall floor to the spaceport tarmac.

"Aitch!" Syree cursed, wincing as he materialized and his body pushed aside the rain drops in the light sprinkle.

The raptors were too clumsy to teleport directly onto the bridge of their ship. Small spaces were too confining to try a stunt like that. Any overlap with a flight-couch, or another raptor, could be deadly. Maybe another million years of evolution would improve their skills.

One by one, they sprinted toward the tall golden ships illuminated before them. Up the elevators. Through the airlocks. Just like the drills of the past weeks.

Captain Corrin, a white--or at least, a very light gray--raptor with a PhD in subspace communications was already at her position on the bridge as Syree, Halnor, and Kreenree climbed the spiral stairs and emerged through the hexagonal portal in the center of the floor.

"Into your couches," Corrin said as the hatch slid closed behind them. "The renegades have come out of warp. Twenty-five seconds to ignition. Ready?" Her voice communicated not a trace of the antipathy betrayed by her glance.

The bridge was a hexagon nearly ten meters across. On a typical Home starship, each of the six walls would be the location of a distinct console. Corrin stood in front of the Captain's Console--a 3D view screen taking up most of the wall. A pair of interference speakers, one to either side of the view screen, tracked the Captain's movement and allowed her alone to hear Mission Control and ship-to-ship communications.

Syree approached the opposite wall. Here, a second, somewhat smaller, view screen was located above the Pilot's Console--a bank of switches, dials and LCD readouts nearly two meters wide. The two walls flanking the Pilot's Console had similar equipment--the Engineer's Console at the left and the Nexialist's Console to the right. On a typical mission, the walls to either side of the Captain's Console would have the Navigation and the Defense Consoles. This was not a typical mission and these last two walls were bare.

Each crew member moved to his designated station, straddled his flight-couch and settled in, then pulled the harness over his back and shoulders, securing it with a click.

Syree looked at the others. "Ready," he said.

"Ignition," Captain Corrin ordered.

Syree initiated the launch sequence. Moments later the ship shuddered.

"Home Guard Eight, away, Res Captain," Syree said.

As it moved up through the storm clouds, Eight began to vibrate, rattling the crew's teeth. Acceleration pressed the raptors down into their couches.

"Remember," Captain Corrin said, struggling to look at Syree and the others over her shoulder. "We're a team, just like in the simulations. Each renegade raptor has more warp power and a stronger link to the High Plane in that little bone at the tip of his or her tail than we have in all of our bodies put together. That's why they were chosen for star travel. It'll be all that we can do, even augmented by our ship's crude warp engine, to

maintain proper position between the renegade ships of the Black Fleet and Home. Look sharp."

Syree adjusted their trajectory.

"Engineer--Autograv on," Corrin ordered. "Each of you, confirm your readouts and data streams." Movements were easier as the gravitational field was adjusted to Home-Normal.

"Res Kreenree, change the view screens from visible to our new 3-Kelvins band."

Now, the previously invisible space-black ships of the renegades stood out as clearly against the false-color green of the background radiation as did the golden ships of the Home Guard. The Black Fleet waited along Home's orbital track as the planet approached.

As Syree and the others watched the 3D displays, twenty-four golden needles slowly assembled into an array of seven interlocking close-packed hexagons shielding the planet Home from the Black Fleet.

"Res Halnor," Corrin said. "Make sure to scan everyone on our target ship as often as you can. We must find some clue to their warp-madness. Res Kreenree, see that every data bit gets back to Home, even into the dissolution of our ship."

"Res Captain," Syree said, his brow ridge darkening. He was proud of the way Kreenree and Haldor performed during the simulations. "We know our tasks."

"Current status, Res Kreenree," the captain said.

Kreenree called out each reading from his console. "Fuel - seven point two percent. Electrical storage - four hours thirteen

minutes. Life support – four hours ten minutes. Depropagator power – one-hundred percent."

"Right on target," Captain Corrin said. "Res Pilot Syree, what is our position status?"

"All twenty-four ships will be in position in thirteen seconds, Res Captain."

"A historic, if dolorous, moment in the chronicles of our people. Stand by," Captain Corrin said. "Res Halnor, switch on audio so that we can all hear the conversation between Home Guard Ship One and the renegades."

Ship One's message to the Black Fleet had already begun. "...ships are not armed. We wish you no harm. Our only desire is to come on board and treat the warp-illness that is destroying your minds. As your scans must show, our ships are incapable of returning to Home. Let us go home together as brothers and sisters."

"We are no longer your 'brothers and sisters.' We have morphed beyond that. We are your masters. Submit or, like the others, be destroyed," came the belligerent voice from the flagship of the Black Fleet.

The ship to ship conversation was interrupted by a transmission from King Nella, Syree's uncle, at the Home Royal Palace. "This is Nella. We are one people and must remain so, Rough and Slick, warp-strong and weak. We want to negotiate."

"Negotiate? For the four hours remaining to your puny armada? It is you who are mad, not us. We do not negotiate. The Black Fleet demands your surrender--now!"



"Our surrender is not an option. Nor is yours. Black Fleet-- Accept our offer of help from the ships that we have sent up, or perish," King Nella said.

"Or perish? Your Highness, we speak for the last time. The countdown has begun. The warp-fold field to destroy you and your planet is about to commence. You have only minutes to put your affairs in order," said the voice from the Black Fleet. The channel closed.

Inside Home Guard Ship Eight, Res Nexialist Halnor stared at the view screen. "They're changing formation!" she called out. "I'm sending you their probable final configuration, Res Pilot Syree."

Syree reached out, punching new instructions into his console to reprogram the thrusters, altering the ship's heading. "All our ships are compensating," Syree reported.

"Will we be in position, Res Pilot Syree?" Captain Corrin asked.

"Res Captain Corrin. We know our tasks," Syree said. "Res Kreenree, I need more thrust."

"Sixty seconds until contact with their warp-fold field," Halnor said.

Kreenree's fingers tapped at his console as he rerouted critical power. "We don't have enough fuel or time for much, Syree."

"Res Kreenree," Captain Corrin said. "The atmosphere was calm during take-off, once we were above the storm. We should have unused fuel from the spin stabilizers."

"Forty-five seconds until contact with their warp-fold field," Halnor said.

"We may need that to hold position when that field hits us and we're trying to send data to Home," Kreenree said.

"It's more important to be in position," Captain Corrin said. "Do it."

"Thirty seconds," Halnor said.

"Let it go, Kreenree. We're in position," Syree said.

"You done good, Hot Shot," Kreenree said.

"Fifteen seconds," Halnor called.

Captain Corrin left her station, inserted and turned the Depropagator Key in Kreenree's console. "Standby for Depropagator," she said as she moved back to her couch and rebuckled her harness.

Everyone stared at her as she watched the last few seconds blink away on the ship's clock.

The only sound was the faint hissing of thrusters as Syree made adjustments to hold their position.

"Now, Res Kreenree! Depropagator on!" Captain Corrin snapped. "Status?"

The ship began to shake as the warp-fold field arrived.

Kreenree punched the activation code into his console.

"Active, Res Captain," Kreenree replied. "The Depropagator will come to full power as their warp-fold field peaks, assuming that we're all in sync."

"Looks like this is going to have to do," Syree said, reaching out to his screen as if to nudge the 3D images of their ships into proper positions. "Now what?"

"One aitch of an explosion!" Halnor said. "If we knew more we wouldn't have crammed twenty-four ships with sensors and transmitters. Let's hope that the folks back on Home will receive enough info for a better understanding of the High Plane. There has to be a reason why bio-warping space-time produces madness in the Roughts but a warp-engine doesn't."

"Your data stream is looking good, Res Halnor," Kreenree said, turning to smile at the Nexialist.

Halnor returned the smile, then glanced back at her LCD readouts and to Syree's view screen.

"Cut the chatter," Captain Corrin said. She fidgeted in her couch. "Five seconds to sync... four.... three... two... one..."

A moment later everything went silvery white. No sound. No silence. No up, no in. Only the silvery white scent spinning them over... and over... and over...

The white brightened to darkness. A faint rotten egg smell tinted the air a deep bluish-green. Syree's tongue flickered in and out, fondling his teeth. The cabin lights were off. In the darkness, the sun passed intermittently across the view screens.

"Res Captain! Res Captain Corrin!" Halnor called, her voice edged with panic.

"Halnor! We're okay! I'll have the lights back in a second. I hope," Kreenree said to her. "Anyone else here? Hot Shot?"

Their eyes began to adjust to the scant light provided by the console readouts.

"Get me more power, Kreenree. I've got to stop the ship's tumble," Syree answered. "Halnor, where are we? ...Res Nexialist Halnor?"

Halnor began twisting dials and punching commands into her console. "I'm sorry Prince Syree. I'm just... Sorry. We've no hyperspace or warp navigational equipment. Didn't need it for this mission. All I see is just this one star. It thought it was the sun. It's not. This can't be right! Looks like we're in a bubble in a dust lane. Must've been blown through a tear in the High Plane. Could be anywhere."

"How about those lights, Kreenree? We need to check the captain."

"I said, just a second, Syree. Don't wrinkle your pennons! And as far as that aitch of a captain, let's hope she teleported into hyperspace."

Syree listened to Halnor's rapid, shallow breathing.

"Why Res Kreenree," Halnor said. "Calling the captain an aitch-tu-ess could get you court-martialed--even if she is one."

She was trying to get herself under control. Teasing Kreenree. She'd be okay. Syree's attention returned to the situation at hand.

The lights flickered on, then off.

"Aitch!" was Kreenree's lone comment.

As the lights came back on, the Captain's view screen flickered, then went blank; wisps of green smoke curled from the edges. Corrin was slumped on her couch.

"Corrin's unconscious, but she's breathing," Syree said.

Kreenree bent for a closer look at his console. "Aitch! Autograv is malfunctioning. G-force is gradually increasing."

Halnor shifted, uncomfortable on her couch. She took a deep breath, then exhaled slowly. "Prince Syree, we're not alone here. Looks like Eleven and Seventeen. Kreenree, switch the view screen back to visible," Halnor said.

Two golden needles tumbled across Syree's screen. Halnor continued, "And we're in trouble. We're in a star system--almost on top of the lone planet. Just coming into view on the screen now. We're going down!"

Syree steeled himself against the increasing G-force. "Eight to Eleven. Eight to Seventeen. Anyone there?" Syree called.

"No life signs on Eleven," Halnor reported. "Looks like maybe three on Seventeen."

"Hello Eight. Seventeen here. Captain and engineer, dead or unconscious. My nexialist and I are shook up, but all right. What's happening? Where in the aitch are we?"

"Look smart, Seventeen. Not much time," Syree said. "My engineer will transmit instructions to your navicom so your nexialist can get you powered up and you can stop that tumble."

"Look, buddy - I'm a second-story man, not a real pilot!"

"Get hold of yourself! This is Prince Syree. You've had enough training during the simulations to become an ace pilot, Pal."

"Sorry. Will-co. Hey! My nexialist, he said some of your transmission is garbled."

"Sorry, Hot Shot..." Kreenree interrupted, speaking to Syree. "Gravity is up to about four Gs. My arms are like lead. Hard to key in the info properly. Tell Seventeen to manually set their error-correction to maximum. That should compensate."

Syree passed the instructions along, then watched as Seventeen gradually leveled out. "Okay now, what's your name?"

"Dontay," came the reply from Seventeen.

"Okay, Dontay," Syree said. "We don't have fuel for a landing. But we're going down anyhow. If we do it right, we can make it."

"Hey, hey--I said, I ain't no pilot!"

"Ever skip stones at the shore?" Syree asked.

"...Yeah, sure. Well, in the canal, anyhow."

"Okay, we're going to try it with these ships. I'll keep my transmitter on so you can read what I'm doing. Just follow me and you'll be all right. Got it?"

"Yeah. Got it!"

"Prince Syree! Look!" Halnor called.

Eleven, leading the three ships, had hit the atmosphere. It broke apart, continuing on as a flaming shower.

"We're next! Just follow me, Dontay," Syree said.

"Roger! No worries," came the cocky reply.

"Nose up... Not too much... or you skip right back into space. Good... Good..."

"Syree, is this going to work?" Kreenree asked as the ships began to bounce themselves around the planet below.

"Ask me... again... tomorrow," Syree said, struggling against the increased G-force to keep the ship on track.

"We're losing speed and altitude," Halnor said, an optimistic note in her voice.

"You're getting red, Seventeen. Nose up. Get your nose up, Dontay! Dontay, nose up! Nose..." Syree screamed into his mike as Seventeen nosed down, tumbled. Syree stared at the inferno.

"Hey! Hot Shot! You still flying this tub?" Kreenree said, an edge to his voice.

"What? Yes! Sorry! Everybody, listen up. I don't know just how fast we'll be going at impact. Be ready to teleport yourselves out. But wait until the last moment! I'll give you a five-count. You did say this place has a breathable atmosphere didn't you Halnor?"

"No, Prince Syree. I didn't. But it does... Sort of."

"Just hope this bouncing doesn't shake us apart," Kreenree said. "What about the captain?"

"Can't help her now. Just hang on. Don't worry. Bounce, down, around... Bounce, down, around... Just like at the beach."

The minutes passed, like nolari blood at snow-time.

"Syree, we're losing power!"

"What, Kreenree?"

"Must be damage to the storage cells. They're going fast."

"Can't you reroute some of the power from this aitching autograv system? It seems to have plenty! We're coming over the north pole. This's no place to lose control. I need at least one more bounce."

"Sorry, Hot Shot. Looks like we're out of time."

The lights began to dim. The ship pitched forward.

"Uh-oh! Sorry, that's it," Kreenree said. "Nice knowing you Halnor, Hot Shot."

"Prince Syree!" Halnor shouted.

"We'll make it! We're close enough! Teleport out on my count."

"Syree! What are you doing?" Kreenree called out as Syree released his halter and began to crawl across the floor toward the captain's couch.

"Got... to get... to Corrin."

"Leave her! That Rough's got no right to expect our help," Kreenree said. "We're in charge now!"

Syree pulled himself up against the autograv's four Gs and reached over Corrin. He released her harness to get a better grip on her, then turned his head to watch his fading view screen.

"Ready? Five... Four... Three... Two... One... Now!"

The crew teleported from the ship just before it hit the ground.

Syree, with Corrin in his arms, materialized just a few feet above the ground. They fell, then tumbled though the snow. He looked around. The ship was a couple hundred yards away, a bent needle impaled in the frozen ground.



Halnor and Kreenree, materializing at a higher altitude, oriented themselves and soared out of the clouds. They circled the ship then glided back, landing beside Corrin and the Prince.

"You've got her, you fool! Why save a rotten egg?" Kreenree demanded.

Halnor looked at Kreenree. "'Only by protecting the rights of the minority can we insure the rights of the majority.' I heard Prince Syree say it once, in a speech on the vid. That's why, Kreenree."

Kreenree just looked away. "Well, now that we're here we'd better find some shelter before your precious captain dies of exposure."

"The scanner showed caves in those hills just to the other side of these trees," Halnor said, gesturing over her shoulder. She knelt to examine Corrin.

"Good. We can stay there while we wait for rescue," Kreenree said.

"Rescue?" Syree said. "Who's going to rescue us? Nobody even knows where we are. We don't even know where we are. We may have quite a wait! Let's gather some of this brush to make a litter for Corrin."

Halnor stood and began to gather downed wood. "Prince Syree, it's worse than that. On our way down I was looking at the scanner data taken during the explosion. Something went wrong when we depropagated the warp-fold field. The energy release was far greater than expected."

"I thought the unexpected was just what we should have expected," Kreenree said. "That's why we were loaded with all that fancy equipment." He looked around, but didn't pick anything up.

"Do you want the good news or the bad news first?" she asked.

"What are you getting at, Res Halnor?" Syree asked. "You said something about a 'tear in the High Plane' earlier?"

"Yes. The data indicated that most of both fleets were destroyed, as planned. But it also indicated a severe tear in space-time--The High Plane. I'm not sure of it's exact location, but it was big enough to allow anything in its vicinity to pass through subspace and come out who-knows-where. Just like us."

"You're saying that Home may have passed through the tear?" Kreenree asked.

"Not yet. But Home's orbital motion will probably take it right into the tear. Then, without the sun, all life there will die.

"Oh, great," Kreenree said, "So, what's the good news?"

"That was the good news," Halnor said, and hesitated. "The High Plane is very nearly flat--it seems to extend to infinity as the universe expands. Mass concentrations--our galaxy and the black hole at its center--produce localized curvature, stressing the fabric of space-time." She held her arms out and up, extending and tightening her pennons. "The data indicated that the tear will grow imperceptibly until it allows this stress to produce a sudden fold in the High Plane. In only five or six

thousand years a significant chunk of our galaxy could snap out of existence." Her palms and pennons clapped together; air escaping from between her pennons blew up a cloud of snow so that she seemed to disappear for a moment.

"Nothing can stop it?" Syree asked.

"Maybe, if someone knew about it. If they had a proper starship with a functioning warp engine, or one of the renegades as a passenger, and if they had a hot shot pilot like yourself. The fabric of the High Plane might be woven back together, even at nearly the last minute. If they were extremely lucky. But..." Halnor looked around, sighed, and crumpled to the ground, sobbing.

"A lot of ifs," Kreenree said. He bent down and patted Halnor's shoulder tenderly. "What about life forms on this planet?"

She looked around, rubbing tears from her eyes, smearing her eyeshadow. She took a deep breath. And another. Then she grabbed Kreenree's hand and squeezed. Sniffling and shaking her head, she said, "The scanners showed life, even here. But no signs of a civilization, if that's what you're hoping."

"Okay," said Syree. "We're going to make it. Let's see if we can get the captain to one of those caves."

"Sure," said Kreenree, helping Halnor to her feet. "And after we see to her we'll see if we can't get ourselves a civilization built from scratch so that we can go fix that tear."

Prince Syree wrinkled his nose and blew steam into the icy air. He looked at the snowy ground around him, then gazed up at

the clouds in the azure sky. "Maybe we're too pessimistic. Maybe Home is safe. They'll solve the problem of warp-madness, then they'll sure as aitch fix that tear in space-time."

"But what if Home does pass through the tear," Halnor whispered. "Will it wander forever, just another rogue planet?"