

# TRACKER



A short story by James Follett



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by

JAMES FOLLETT

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After minutes of minutes of continuous fighting, Candy was exhausted.

She wheeled her skimmer around in the circle and fired her last plasma bolt at the hovering defender. It was a powerful bolt - the most powerful in the game and the first that Candy had dropped. With it went her chance of destroying Centurion. Very well - she would wait. While the glowing ball of raw energy was cooling, she waited in the open for another and fired a quick glance at the circular stone display to check her position before sending her skimmer hurtling along the same trajectory. She fired again, hoping to be on the flank of the trackway and then she was gone - but she had passed this way before. She gave a cry of anger and frustration when another defender appeared before her. Without thinking she stretched her skimmer into a horizontal branch and suddenly realized, too late, that the trackway was taking her away from Centurion. The other defender stopped just as she was looking for a way to turn back around and she had no time to turn and follow her.

"Fantastic, Candy, fantastic!" yelled the hysterical voice of her partner who was in her own "You've given us all a hell of a time. I'm a member. We're going to see you go to see you go."

"It's not going!" Candy roared.

"That's what we like to hear, Candy, baby! And fighting with this just shows the damn nerve in front of you. Over though it's saying that you're on your last legs, you're still a champion. But your skills are finished and that's what we love to hear. That's why it's great having someone as young as you on the show. Candy - you just got your first job. Listen, Candy, baby - there's nothing out there who she's waiting for. It's all the morning that you're going to be in the next few minutes. Tell us what it feels like, Candy. Your heart's in the morning of one night to give you a lot of what you're doing. It's all the morning that you're doing."

Candy gave a wide, excited grin and her hair and eyes were all the same that she had to be a champion.

The... By the Same author:

THE DOOMSDAY ULTIMATUM  
CROWN COURT  
ICE  
CHURCHILL'S GOLD  
U-700  
EARTHSEARCH  
EARTHSEARCH-DEATHSHIP  
THE TIPTOE BOYS (filmed as 'Who Dares Wins')  
DOMINATOR  
SWIFT  
STARGLIDER (for Rainbird Software)  
MIRAGE



After twenty-five minutes of continuous fighting, Clandy was exhausted.

She wheeled her skimmer around in the node and fired her last plasma bolt at the pursuing defender craft. It was a neutron bolt - the most powerful in the game and the sixth that Clandy had scooped up. With it went her chance of destroying Centrepont. Very well - she would ram it! While the glowing ball of raw energy was streaking towards its target, she spun her skimmer and risked a quick glance at the combat status display to check her position before sending her machine hurtling along the narrow trackway. Blackened patches flashing by on the flanks of the trackway told their own story - that she had passed this way before. She gave a cry of anger and frustration when another defender appeared before her. Without thinking she wrenched her skimmer into a left hand branch and suddenly realised, too late, that the trackway was taking her away from Centrepont. The robot hologram camera that was tracking her every move from behind overshot the turning and had to loop around and accelerate to catch up with her.

"Fantastic, Clandy! Fantastic!" yelled the hysterical voice of the game master in her ear. "You've given us all a fabulous Tracker to remember! We're gonna be real sorry to see you go!"

"I'm not going!" Clandy screamed.

"That's what we like to hear, Clandy, baby! Real fighting talk that just ignores the status screen in front of you. Even though it's saying that you're on your eighth regeneration of your skimmer, that your shields are finished and that you've had six neutron bolts. That's why it's great having someone as young as you on the show, Clandy - you youngsters never give up. Listen, Clandy, baby - there's billions out there who are wondering what it feels like knowing that you're going to die in the next two minutes. Tell us what it feels like, Clandy. Your heartbeat's running at one eighty so I guess you're just as excited about your forthcoming death as we are."

Clandy gave a sob, reached into her tunic and ripped out the sensor that was taped to her chest.

"Hey, Clandy," a puzzled note in the games master's voice. "What's happened, Clandy? You're not dead yet because you're still flying."

A scout appeared before her. Clandy threw the levitators into reverse but there was nothing she could do to avoid the balls of plasma streaking straight at her. The first bolt ripped the floor out of the skimmer and vaporised the levitators so that the speeding machine came to a screeching halt on the trackway. The second bolt blasted through the canopy but was unnecessary because Clandy was already dead.

The sudden silence that descended on the trackway was broken by the soft hiss of the hovering hologram camera as it moved in to send close up pictures of the carnage to the watching billions on the thousand planets of the Imperial Egron Empire.



"So don't forget folks!" said the games master, baring his teeth in a huge grin. "Tune in the same time next week when it could be your turn to win immortality, and fame and fortune for your family by playing Tracker! And who knows, maybe it could be you who destroys the Centrepont computer!"

The master monitor in the Tracker control room displayed a rapid montage of vivid hologram shots from notable deaths in previous Trackers. The programme credits consisted of the names of the production team carved on a procession of tombstones. As soon as they were over, the images changed to a series of startlingly three-dimensional commercials that cost the advertisers a million credits a second to show. The last ad was for Egron war bonds showing gore-splattered corpses seeming to jump out at the audience.

"An excellent show," boomed Trumbel Bullard, beaming around at the television production team when the lights brightened in the control room. "Do we have an audience rating update?"

"It's just coming through, excellency," fawned the director, watching a slave display unit on his control panel. "Oh..."

"Well?"

"It peaked at sixty-seven per cent, excellency." The director sounded depressed.

Trumbel Bullard's beam changed to a frown. "Well - at least it's up a point on last week."

"Yes, excellency. That's because Clandy was young. We need young contestants."

"But where do we find them?"

The bleeping of Trumbel Bullard's personal pocket phone saved the director the embarrassment of having to confess that he didn't know the answer to the question. A picture of Silas Kringe - personal secretary to the Imperial Prator - appeared on Trumbel Bullard's wriststrap screen.

"Bullard. The Imperial Prator wants an audience."

"Why? What's he going to do? Tell him we'll have a camera crew at the palace in thirty minutes."

"He wants to see you, junket brains! Now!"



Trumbel Bullard looked down with pride from his personal skycar at the swollen obscenity that was the Centrepont organic intelligence. Surrounding the grotesque growth that rose from the plain like a festering cancer was the complex maze of trackways where so many Egrons seeking fame, immortality and glory had perished. The trackways were laid out in a series of hexagonal sectors. Each sector contained its own maze of trackways which were joined to adjacent sectors by communication link trackways. Even as Trumbel Bullard gazed down, he could see the robot scout skimmers moving purposefully along the trackways - looking for trouble. They were backed up by the more heavily armed defender craft that stayed near Centrepont itself.

The whole thing had been built two centuries earlier by the army as a training simulator to encourage the development in pupil pilots of the lightning reflexes necessary if the Egrons were to achieve their dream of galactic domination. And now, two centuries later, with sixty per cent of the galaxy under Egron rule, Centrepont was no longer useful. Attempts to demolish it had met with messy failure because the Centrepont computer was a living entity that had no intention of dying. After that, the hideous thing had been left alone - picking up an occasional Egron Design Centre award - until Trumbel Bullard had hit upon the idea of turning it into a spectacular television game show in which immortality was the certain prize and death the certain outcome. The Egron Arts Council thought it a great idea and put up fifty percent of the front money needed to get the show off the ground. Their investment was repaid a million-fold; within four weeks Tracker was the top-rated show in the Egron Empire and was syndicated to the planets of the Fringe Worlds Federation.

Originally hundreds of eager young Egrons had clamoured for contestants' tickets but the endless deaths led to them losing interest. Their places were filled by older contestants - usually social misfits with slow reactions - which meant that they were killed off quickly. Quick deaths were not good television and displeased the advertisers. The skycar passed over the Plain of Glory where countless thousands of headstones, laid out in neat rows, marked the graves of former contestants. Set into each headstone was a small television screen playing a continuous loop recording of the pre-game interview that the contestant had given before his or her death.

The whispering voices of the dead reached up to the skycar as it hissed by overhead.

"I believe that I can defeat Centrepont...."

"No problem. I've been training on a simulator...."

"I want to die because my wife left me...."

"I want to die because my wife's come back...."

"I like hunting, and swimming and camel wrestling...."

"Tracker? Are you sure? There's been a dreadful mistake. I thought this was...."

A ceaseless babble of souls whose bodies had long been dust. For that was the meaning of glory and immortality to the Egrons - to be interviewed on television and have that interview played unendingly until the Universe and all creation collapsed back in on itself to the ultimate event horizon from which nothing escaped... Not even the tenuous digital tremors of recorded television interviews.



Once clear of the Centrepont complex, Trumbel Bullard voice-commanded the auto navigator to fly him to the Imperial Palace. He settled back in his seat and wondered for the hundredth time why the Imperial Prator wished to see him.

Even by Egron standards, Trumbel Bullard had been a baby of such extraordinary ugliness that his mother, eager to observe the Egron custom of testing the mettle of newborn boys by leaving them outside for a night, had left him on the highest and coldest of the Egron glaciers and was dismayed to discover the following morning that he had survived; a catastrophic misfortune of such dimension that it prompted the despairing woman's husband to take a one-way space shuttle ticket to Zircon III where he headed for the nearest bar and drank three novatron neuron brain smasher cocktails in a row without first visiting the special visitors' acclimatization bars.

The forty Egronian years that had passed since such an unpromising beginning had done nothing to improve Trumbel Bullard's looks and character. Shunned by his family, his teachers and society in general, he had drifted into a career that was ideally suited for someone with no real understanding of the world, good taste, and the likes and dislikes of the populace: he joined the Egron Broadcasting Autonomy and became a television producer. His programmes were undoubtedly the worst ever relayed throughout the conquered worlds of the Egron Empire. Starting with documentaries that extolled the virtues of Egron domination - short holograms aimed at the audiences of the conquered worlds who seemed slow to appreciate such a message, he moved rapidly to long-winded drama serials in which the episodes alternated between contrived eye-acting scenes which involved the cast glaring at each other and saying little, to episodes in which one member of the cast would unaccountably go berserk and butcher all the other members. In short, Trumbel Bullard's programmes were of such compulsive awfulness that they attracted huge audiences. The resulting flood of advertising revenue into the Egron state coffers was on such colossal scale that the Imperial Prator of Egron was able to finance far-flung military enterprises which added to the Egron Empire without adding to the crippling burden of taxation that the conquered worlds were already suffering. So important had advertising become to the Egron budget that Trumbel Bullard was quickly elevated to programme controller - a promotion that allowed his infinite capacity for bad taste to gallop off in all directions.



"Bungler!" the Imperial Prator stormed at Trumbel Bullard.

"Incompetent oaf! For the third week you've allowed the audience rating for Tracker to drop below seventy per cent. Why?"

"Your highness - there are so few young volunteers wanting to play Tracker these days. The older players don't last long enough to even get near to Centrepont."

"The girl who died just now looked young."

"An exception to the rule, your highness."

The Prator marched across the glowing floor of his vaulted audience chamber and yanked Trumbel Bullard off his knees. "Idiot! Advertise for young players! Use your imagination! Let's have a Young Persons' Death Opportunity Scheme!"

"I've tried advertising your highness," said Trumbel Bullard miserably. "Youngsters today don't see much future in death."

"If the rating drops below seventy per cent for four successive weeks, we lose all the advertising from the Fringe Worlds Federation!" the Prator raged. "That's revenue amounting to over ten billion!"

"Yes - I know that, your-"

"Then why aren't you doing something about it!" the Prator thundered. "If we lose that revenue, then we'll have to raise taxes on the inner worlds, which means that they'll get rebellious again which means that we'll have to strengthen our garrisons which means that we won't be able to afford another task force to liberate Novenia from the tyranny of its totalitarian democracy!"

Trumbel Bullard was confused. "But, your highness - I thought we'd invaded Novenia?"

The Prator's expression hardened. "We have. But things went wrong. Hermann Krudd loused everything up. He stretched his arms and gazed appealingly at the ornate ceiling. "By the black holes of Andromeda - why am I surrounded by such imbeciles!"

Trumbel Bullard said nothing. He knew that the conquest of Novenia was an obsession with the Imperial Prator.

"So," said the Prator in a more moderate tone. "You get the audience rating for Tracker back up to seventy per cent plus, otherwise I shall consider you for a new job..."

Trumbel Bullard looked hopeful. For a long time he had felt that his total lack of talent was not being fully exploited in his present role. "A new job, your highness?"

"As Superintendent of Mines on the Kaldorian Asteroids!" the Prator snarled. "Now get out of my sight! Out!"



The space station orbiting the planet Lav was a warren of sweaty, smoke-filled dives and outlawed ethnic food restaurants where most of the protected species of fauna of the Fringe Worlds were served up as a variety of illegal but tempting dishes.

Trader Dreg Gallan was hunched in a corner of Dirty Kloe's Diner, enjoying a bowl of leopard rat soup, and wondering where to unload the five tonnes of dodgy furs he had won the day before in a card game. His eyes darted around the crowded diner - missing nothing. Like all traders who had fought their way to membership of the elite, he was suspicious of all and everything. The biggest dangers were from jealous husbands, wildlife conservationists, and the cops - in that order. Early in his career Dreg had maintained on board his Cobra spacecraft a database that detailed all those planets where he faced danger from jealous husbands. As the years rolled by, the database had become so huge and unwieldy that he was obliged to convert it to a smaller database that listed those planets where he was safe.

Dreg's questing eyes latched onto a dark-skinned girl who had just entered the diner and was looking uncertainly around. He groaned into his unkempt beard and pretended to be busy with his soup. With looks like that, the girl had to be a Novenian. And that meant big trouble with his main course that Dirty Kloe was, at that moment, cooking for him in her grimy, grease-encrusted kitchen. The girl spotted Dreg and waved at him before picking her way through the crowd to his table.

"Dreg Gallan?" she queried. "My name is Tallis. I'd like to talk business with you." The girl sat down without waiting for an invitation and studied Dreg with large, serious eyes.

Dreg sipped at an empty glass and tried to look nonchalant while trying to keep an eye on the kitchen door. Maybe he could signal to Dirty Kloe when she appeared. "How'd you know who I am?" he asked.

Tallis smiled. "I've seen your face on the wanted fax. And there aren't that many traders who've reached elite status."

Dreg banged down his glass. "Space stations are neutral, kiddo," he rasped. "'sides - I ain't wanted in these parts. So if you're a bounty hunter, you wait for my ship outside - well clear of the station."

"Relax, Dreg. No one in their right mind would want to tangle with your Cobra. I want to do business with you."

"Oh yeah? What sort of business?"

"I want you to take me to Egron."

The trader gaped at his uninvited guest. "You're crazy! You know how far that is? You know how many planets there are in the Egron Empire?"

"I want you to take me to Egron itself," said Tallis evenly.

Dreg laughed and shot a quick glance at the kitchen door. No sign of Dirty Kloe. "Now I know you're crazy. Okay - why do you want to go to Egron? And why do you think I could get you there?"



"The Egrons know you - you do a lot of trade with them. Strategic materials for their war machine. Correct?"

"It's not illegal," said Dreg cautiously. He gave a cunning grin. "At least - not here - but it would be on Novenia. Right?"

Tallis matched his grin. "An offence almost as serious as hunting Novenian stargliders."

"Okay," said Dreg, keen to change the subject. "I guessed you were a Novenian. Now why should a Novenian want to go to Egron? You two are sworn enemies."

"I can't discuss the matter."

"Listen, kiddo," said Dreg menacingly, leaning across the table. "I don't get involved in no enterprise unless I know exactly what's going on. You want me to take you to Egron - so you tell me why, and what's in it for me. Otherwise - no deal - nothing. Understand?"

Tallis looked uncertain and then appeared to make up her mind. "I'm on a mission for my government," she said. "The Egrons refuse to open any form of communication between our two planets. No exchange of ambassadors - no passenger or trade links - nothing. My job is to make an unofficial contact with the Imperial Prator to see if we can start some form of dialogue."

Dreg chuckled. "The only dialogue that old warmonger's interested in comes out of the mouth of his juno cannons."

"Someone's got to make a start."

"You still haven't told me what's in it for me."

Tallis pulled an object from her tunic pocket and placed it carefully on the table. It was a Novenian javelen - the finest example of the precious stone that Dreg had ever seen. It captured the dull light of the fume-filled diner and transformed it into a brilliant, iridescent pool of crimson glory shining out from the centre of the table. With a furtive glance at neighbouring tables, Dreg picked up the stone and studied it through half-closed fingers. Although a hardened trader, he found it difficult to maintain his customary disinterested expression. Even poor javelens commanded silly prices.

"I've got three more just like it," said Tallis. "A reasonable price for my fare to Egron and back wouldn't you say?"

That this strange girl had four javelens nearly knocked Dreg off his chair, but his trader instincts asserted themselves. He shook his head. "Maybe I could get a price for them on Egron. But the Egrons don't appreciate anything pretty. They're only interested in things that go bang. Now maybe five such javelens."

Tallis took the stone from Dreg and stood. "Very well, Dreg. I'll find a trader who-" she broke off when Dreg grabbed her wrist and pulled her down.

"Okay, Tallis - whatever your name is - you've got a deal. When do you want to leave?"



"Here it is, Dreg!" boomed a woman's voice. "The meal you've been waiting for!"

Dreg and Tallis looked up in surprise at the brawny-armed woman. It was Dirty Kloe. She dumped a huge, laden plate on the table before Dreg. The dish consisted of an enormous seed-sprinkled bun, split horizontally and oozing chopped zagran leaves and chicadillo relish. That the dish looked capable of launching itself from the plate and flying around the diner was due entirely to the pair of outstretched feathered wings that sprouted from each side of the giant bun.

"One starglider special, Dreg darling," said Dirty Kloe proudly. "Done just the way you like it."



Dreg's Cobra was two days from Egron when it was intercepted by an Egron patrol ship. With much back-slapping and swapping crude jokes, Dreg plied the Egron troopers with booze and bribes for three hours before they cleared his traders' visit permit and allowed him to continue on his way.

"Just what is going on?" Dreg demanded when Tallis emerged from her hiding place.

Tallis looked mystified. "I don't understand."

"Listen, kiddo - pretty dimples don't do nothing for me. Those gooks tell me that I'm the third elite trader who's come this way during the last two months. I know all the elite boys - none of us do that much business with the Egrons. So what the hell is going on?"

"I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about, Dreg," Tallis replied, avoiding the trader's eyes.

"Tell me something, kiddo. If you're on a peace mission, why don't you just go in open like? Like you was carrying a flag of truce?"

Tallis smiled sweetly. "You know the Egrons, Dreg. What would the average Egron commander do if he saw the enemy walking towards him carrying a white flag?"

Dreg chewed on his beard and grinned. "Okay, kiddo. Point taken."

Two days later, with Egron filling the viewports like a bloated Kalangran melon, Dreg obtained atmospheric entry clearance and activated the Cobra's shields. A long burn from his modified ion thrusters killed the Cobra's orbital velocity so that it spiralled planetwards. After ten minutes of murderous buffeting, he levelled the Cobra out high above the planet's darkside and extended the stubby wings that enabled the spacecraft to function as an aircraft.

Tallis released her restraint harness and peered through the forward viewports. She was wearing a one-piece skintight suit and a pouch-festooned belt. "There!" she pointed excitedly at a distant object that seemed to be hovering above the darkened plain like a grotesque illuminated tumour. "That must be Centrepont!"

Dreg grunted without taking his eyes off his instruments. Like all elite traders, he had learned the hard way not to wholly trust computer-controlled flight systems.

"S'right," he muttered. "Never missed a game yet. Remember the civil war on Athlone II? I was gun-running in them days. Damn me if both sides didn't knock the war on the head every Saturday to watch Tracker. Okay, kiddo. We're nearly there. I'll be below the spaceport's radar horizon in twenty minutes when we drop behind those hills. I can touch down in the bush for thirty seconds - no longer - before heading into the spaceport. Okay?"

Tallis nodded.

"Just one small matter of your fare, kiddo."

Tallis dug into her tunic pocket and handed the trader two javelens.



"We agreed four."

"That's right, Dreg," Tallis replied, opening the floor hatch and stepping onto the rungs that led down to the escape hatch. "Two javelens each way. I'll give you the other two when you've picked us up."

"Us?" Dreg queried, but Tallis had disappeared and slammed the hatch shut.



Dreg didn't even need to touch down with the Cobra. Tallis jumped when the machine was still clear of the ground. She rolled over in the dust and ran from under the Cobra's hovering bulk. Dreg saw her wave of reassurance and quickly lifted his machine away.

Tallis dusted herself down and watched the Cobra hissing into the darkness as it headed for the spaceport. A small, furtive creature of the night gave a squawk of alarm when she stepped on its abode and scurried into the bush. Silence fell like an ominous shroud. Tallis opened one of her pouches and keyed a miniature radio transmitter several times before settling down to wait. An hour later she heard the scuffle of approaching footsteps. She quietly opened the pouch and keyed the radio again.

"Tallis!" a familiar male voice called out.

"Over here, Hal."

A figure loomed out of the darkness.

"Tallis! It really is you!"

"Of course it's me. Who else could it be?"

"You never know with the Egrons. I've died a thousand deaths waiting for you."

Tallis disentangled herself from Hal's over-enthusiastic embrace. "Is everything fixed?"

"I've got a hired groundcar. It's not far."



Tallis leaned on the balcony rail of the rented apartment and focussed the telezoom on the floodlit apparition of Centrepont. She studied the obscene organic brain for some minutes before allowing the instrument to rove over the surrounding trackways. She could even pick out two prowling scouts on their eternal patrols - ready to destroy anything that ventured onto the trackways. Seeing the monstrous creation for the first time added nothing to her knowledge; she had spent hundreds of hours going over hologram recordings of Centrepont. What the holograms hadn't conveyed was the aura of evil that the thing seemed to radiate.

Hal joined her at the rail. He was a tall, studious man who had designed the Centrepont simulator back home on Novenia. "You saw what happened to Clandy?" he asked tentatively.

"I studied the recording at least a hundred times," Tallis replied, lowering the telezoom. "Her death would've been in vain if we weren't prepared to learn from her mistakes. Mistakes that I won't repeat."

"Tallis. . . I can't bear to think that what happened to Clandy might happen to-"

"Listen, Hal," said Tallis harshly. "We destroy that. . . that thing out there and we destroy Egron's economic base. Centrepont is earning them billions and billions in advertising revenue. For the first time in history a nation has the ability to finance a war machine and not worry about the cost. If I fail, there'll be another Novenian after me, and then another until it's destroyed." She smiled suddenly and squeezed Hal's hand. "After a year's training, I don't intend to fail. So where's that portable simulator? I might as well keep my hand in."



The long-legged girl was the tenth on the morning audition list. Trumbel Bullard goggled at her, hardly believing his luck.

"This is the girl who lasted two hours on the simulator," whispered the director.

"Two hours!"

"Shhh!"

Trumbel Bullard waved the director aside and beamed at Tallis. A looker like her would have the audience ratings soaring into the nineties if she could last half as long.

"So my dear. You want to play Tracker?"

The way Tallis dimpled her cheeks when she smiled turned Trumbel Bullard's stomach to water. "Oh yes, Mr Bullard. I want nothing else in the world."

"And which world might that be, my dear?"

"Latron IV - the most loyal world in the empire, Mr Bullard."

"You really think you could destroy Centrepont?"

"Oh yes, Mr Bullard."

Trumbel Bullard gave the girl a sickly grin. "Many thousands have given the same answer, my dear."

"Oh, but I'm different, Mr Bullard."

You can say that again, Trumbel Bullard thought. "Very well, my dear. Although there's others in front of you, I'm putting you down for the next game in three days. What do you say to that?"

Tallis gave a little squeal and clapped her hands in delight. "Oh thank you, Mr Bullard. Thank you so, much."

Poor kid, thought Trumbel Bullard. Poor sweet, innocent little kid. We must organise a Tracker recruiting campaign on Latron IV.



"A great interview, Tallis," said the game master, giving Tallis a hearty clap on the back. "Any last thing you'd like to say to the viewers on a million planets before we play Tracker?"

"I'd like to say hallo to my parents back home on Latron IV."

The game master grinned toothily at the camera that was hovering over Tallis' waiting skimmer. "Most people like to say goodbye, Tallis - but you go right ahead."

"Hallo, Ma! Hi, Pa!" Tallis yelled, bobbing up and down and waving at the camera.

Out in the bush at the pick-up point, Hal shuddered. He wanted to turn off his wriststrap screen but he forced himself to watch as technicians helped Tallis into the skimmer and closed the canopy.

"Take it away, Tallis!" boomed Trumbel Bullard's voice. "We're all rooting for you." The picture changed to another camera that tracked Tallis as she gently applied power and steered the skimmer along the entry node and into another trackway.

After five minutes of experimenting with the controls, while keeping a wary eye on the illuminated map that showed her position, Tallis began to feel more relaxed. Hal had done a good job with the simulator - she felt as if she had been handling Tracker skimmers all her life. She ignored the pulsating Centrepont although a reddening of the network of veins on its bloated surface spelt an increase in neural activity. . .

Her presence had been detected.

A scout popped out of a turning and flew along in front of Tallis. She made no attempt to attack the scout even though it was a large, unmissable target. After a minute the scout lost interest and darted away.

"What's she doing?" Trumbel Bullard grumbled in the control box.

Tallis ignored the turning into a communication link that led to the adjoining complex and maintained her steady speed. Another scout appeared behind her and fired. The skimmer's energy shield absorbed the plasma blasts. The scout became more aggressive. At the next turning into a link, Tallis wheeled round, flew straight at the scout and destroyed it with a well-aimed ball of plasma.

Hal blinked in surprise. His wriststrap screen was in black and white but he knew that Tallis must have fired a low energy infra-red bolt from her initial consignment. They weren't much good for anything except destroying scouts and defenders.

"Neat," observed the director.

Trumbel Bullard was about to reply but Tallis repeated the rapid manoeuvre. The second scout exploded - causing a temporary imbalance of the tracking camera's optics. When the picture cleared, Tallis was streaking along a link and scooping up a high-energy plasma cell which she immediately fired into the peripheral computer that controlled the sector. A minute later she knocked out another sector using the same tactics and scooped up a replacement high-energy cell.



Tallis gave a contrived whoop of elation for the benefit of the audience. Suddenly there was a tremendous hammering on the shields. A scout had seemingly materialised behind her and was decimating the skimmer's shields faster than they could be regenerated. The numbing vibration delayed Tallis' reactions for crucial milliseconds. There was a blinding flash; the instruments and shield indicators reset themselves and she heard the game master telling the audience that she was now on her second total regeneration of her skimmer. Six more to go.

"Pretty good, your excellency," the director observed. "Two sectors wiped out before she lost her first skimmer." Trumbel Bullard didn't take his eyes off the master hologram field. "What's the audience rating?"

"Nudging fifty."

Trumbel Bullard nodded. The figures during the first half of a Tracker were invariably low. "Tell the news networks to look at our feed," he instructed softly. "I've a feeling this one's going to be worth them patching through."

Tallis glanced at the game plan map and took a turning that kept her near the outer edge of the sector. A scout trailed her but she managed to lose it. A minute later she foxed another scout, dived down a communication link and destroyed the computer that controlled the sector she had just left.

The director turned and grinned at Trumbel Bullard. "Different, your excellency," he remarked. "This one seems to be avoiding the scouts and working her way around the outside."

Trumbel Bullard nodded. Unlike previous Tracker challengers, the girl from Latron IV was avoiding the obvious direct route to Centrepont; instead she appeared to be concentrating on isolating sectors one by one by destroying their control computers and link trackways.

After ten minutes Tallis had wiped out another two sectors. Suddenly her luck changed when a series of concentrated attacks by scouts left her with only three regenerations of her skimmer in hand. She retaliated by destroying another complex and scooping up the neutron plasma ball.

So engrossed was Hal in watching the game that it was some seconds before he realised that a shadow had fallen across him. He looked up. Dreg's Cobra had arrived.

In the game control room Trumbel Bullard received a call from the Imperial Prator.

"What's happening, Bullard?"

"The player has wiped out five sectors, your highness."

"I can see that, idiot! Just make sure that she doesn't cause too much damage! We don't want to miss an edition because Centrepont's out of action while it repairs itself!"

"But the audience ratings are creeping up to sixty-five, your highness!"

"Sixty-eight per cent and she's zapped another sector!" the director yelled.



"One sector left!" the Prator raged. "If she damages Centrepont, Bullard - I'll damage you!" With that the Imperial Prator cut the circuit.

Trumbel Bullard was miserable. He got roastings for dull Trackers and now he was getting a roasting for an exciting one. Either way he couldn't win. He turned his attention back to the game where Tallis was skirting the outer trackways of the last sector. The huge cerebral swelling of Centrepont's brain was now bright crimson. The girl was giving it problems.

Two defenders appeared in front of Tallis and started firing immediately. That the two powerful craft had come to her rather than wait near Centrepont itself was an indication of how seriously the living intelligence was taking the threat from this new challenger. Tallis disposed of the defenders without difficulty.

"She's hanging onto her neutron plasma bolt!" the director shouted. "Sixty-nine per cent! We're going to do it!"

Overwhelmed by tension, the game master stopped his inane, non-stop commentary as Tallis accelerated along the trackway. Having ignored all the direct routes, she was now approaching the left turning that led straight to Centrepont. The pulverising fire from a following defender sent her shield level indicator sliding to zero. There was no chance of reaching the turning in time to escape the crippling fire. She braced herself for the shock of regeneration.

"She's on her last skimmer and she's lost her neutron bolt," muttered the director. "She can't do it now."

Tallis swore. The regeneration meant that the neutron bolt she had been carrying was left behind on the trackway. Not being able to turn around on the trackway meant that she had to double back in order to scoop up the vital plasma bolt.

A right turn. And another. A left. Demolish the scout that tried to stop her. Her hands gripping the controls were numb with concentration. Left again. A glance at the map.

"Sixty-nine per cent!" the director yelled. "The news networks are now covering the game!"

Two more turnings, thought Tallis grimly. She swung the skimmer savagely to avoid a defender's fire that glanced off the walls of the trackway. Another turning and there was the ball of neutron plasma - spitting and hissing like a living thing on the trackway. Centre the skimmer to scoop it up. . . Don't miss whatever you do. . .

Tallis offered a fleeting prayer when her instruments showed that she had successfully recovered the neutron plasma.

"Seventy-six per cent! She's done it! We've done it!"

"No!" Trumbel Bullard cried. "Get on to the nearest strike force base. Get them to scramble a Bute Fighter! We've got to stop her!"

"What!"

Unaware of the panic she was causing, Tallis slammed her skimmer into the node



that led to Centrepont. Nothing could stop her now. The defender that came hurtling towards her managed two shots before being disintegrated by her concentrated fire. Suddenly the massive trunking that was the base of Centrepont's cortex was in front of her.

Without even a prayer to help it on its way, she fired her single neutron plasma bolt at the exact centre of the massive nerve carriers.



The hours spent on Hal's simulator paid off for Tallis in the final seconds when she plunged her skimmer right into the heart of Centrepont before the forces she had unleashed had developed into an explosion. With nerve fibres and shreds of synthetic brain tissue flapping from its canopy, the skimmer burst through the far side of the giant brain. Hal's careful calculation proved correct because, without energy to sustain the walls of the trackways, Tallis was able to effortlessly smash her way through them until she was clear of the Tracker complex. The only problem now was whether or not she had enough charge in the skimmer's levitators to reach the pickup point.

Hal gaped at his wriststrap screen. A single cataclysmic explosion seemed to be tearing the entire Centrepont complex apart in slow motion. Flying debris must have destroyed the hovering cameras because a few seconds later the tiny screen went blank.

"What's going on?" Dreg's voice called on the open radio channel. "I've lost Tracker!"

Hal spotted a plume of dust on the horizon with the Bute Fighter in hot pursuit. The crazy way the fighter was zig-zagging, and the erratic blasts of its laser cannons at the ground suggested that it had found itself a particularly evasive target. "Standby to close the cargo hatch and liftoff!" he yelled. "She's on her way!"

Seconds later the dust plume resolved itself into the hard outline of a skimmer. It swerved towards the waiting Cobra. The noise as it screeched up the ramp and into the cargo hold was drowned by the harsh whine of the Cobra's ion drives opening up to full power. The fighter pilot recognised the ugly outline of a Cobra and decided that he had extremely urgent business to attend to over the nearest horizon.



Compac II - the largest of the Kaldorian Asteroids - was unique in the galaxy because, owing to its axial tilt and incredible distance from its sun, the duration of its summer was precisely ninety seconds. The peak of this once every 300-year event was when the midday temperature actually rose to four degrees above absolute zero. Unfortunately the presence of one, unsocial cloud was sufficient for the occasion to pass unnoticed. Because the cloud cover on Compac II had remained in place for ten million years, the inhabitants, mostly miners, never bothered to plan their barbecues and holidays to coincide with the summer. While such conditions were ideal for the exploitation of Compac II's principal asset - frozen methane - they did tend to make the asteroid the most singularly depressing place in the entire Universe.

Into this dismal environment a visiting ferry introduced a lone figure by unceremoniously dumping him on a frozen plateau and speeding on its way. The lone figure dusted the crystals of frozen methane from its survival suit and trudged across the bleak methanescape towards a group of emaciated miners who were squabbling hungrily over ownership of a half eaten sneaker.

"Hallo," said the newcomer just as the miners started hacking at each other with daggers. "My name is Trumbel Bullard. "I'm your new Superintendent of Mines."





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