

Wreckers - a short story

(c) Rupert Goodwins, 1991

"Since mankind began to explore his world, the lighthouse has been a symbol of both his power and his frailty. A bold tower, warning, guiding, scratching at the night sky, it marks the last gift of civilisation to explorers and traders as they make their lonely way across impassive depths. Alive, it keeps the faith of Man's conquest of nature; should it die, great disaster is sure to follow."

Eduardo Pietra, "Dark Sea, Dark Sky", 3134 AD

Nobody knows exactly why the young spacefaring world of Earth should have taken upon itself the task of marking out the Galaxy. Other, older races had long guided themselves through the lonely space between stars, navigating by distant light and the swirl of gravity. Only Earthmen took the trouble to send out beacons, and -- it seemed -- only Earthmen were willing to stay with their markers, keeping the great transmitters alive and the intricate machinery working. Why anyone should want to spend years alone in a speck of plasnoglass was a mystery to most right-thinking species, but while few could understand the quirks of humans it didn't take long for the new navigation aids to be accepted by everyone.

It amused Flying Officer Paul Tweddell to think about this as he worked through the long drudgery of station inspection. All this technology, so delicately placed on the edge of known space, just to make sure that the flabby land-locked planetdwellers could get their carrots shipped half-way across the Milky Way. He'd worked in a spaceyard once, building the gigantic, automatic freighters that now depended on the beacons to keep the economy of the Confederation going. And the beacon depended on him, the most powerful man in this sector of the Galaxy.

Aww, who was he kidding, he told himself. The station could look after itself; if the machines went wrong, the droids fixed them, and if a droid went wrong another droid fixed that. He knew why he was here, and so did Admiral of the Fleet Sir Jarrald Conran, Knight of Greater England and royal pain in the rear. Also known as The Pig, to those lucky officers who came under his command, due in part to his rather broad nose but, mostly, to his personal habits.

It had fallen to Flying Officer Tweddell, a year ago, to uncover the truth of one of the more extreme rumours concerning those habits. The morning after the drunken night during which he'd taken on the bet, he'd used his considerable technological skills to construct a tiny drone, no bigger than a mosquito. Into the body, the size of a grain of rice, Tweddell had packed gigabytes of quantum memory, cameras, flight systems, absorption spectrographs and sound transducers. That evening, he'd sent it on its way, buzzing down the corridors of Fleet Command, its tiny brain tuned for the distinctive scent of the Admiral.

Back in his room, Tweddell had watched the full-colour, three dimensional images it relayed back. He'd only had time to put in ordinary stereo sound, but the way things were going that would be more than adequate. He'd already recorded some interesting images in the guardroom, where Corporal Gerald's inept attempts at flyswatting revealed more of his deep knowledge of obscenities than his much-boasted skill with weapons. Tweddell was looking forwards to that particular scene accidentally finding its way into the building's video distribution system, especially if some freak technical hitch resulted in it

interrupting the Chief Padre's compulsory Sunday sermon.

Suddenly, the screens in front of him went blank. Good. He knew that there were a whole host of anti-bugging sensors in the Admiral's quarters, so he'd programmed his drone to keep radio silence as it flew into the battle zone. Nothing to do now except wait for the next ten minutes; he contented himself with composing some ribald subtitles for Gerald's more extraordinary contortions.

Bing! The fly was out again, and heading for home. The computer reported that it had found what he'd told it to look for; he'd have to wait for the pictures until it had returned. Minutes later, it buzzed in and settled on the interface plate, only the metallic sheen of its wings revealing that it was anything other than one of the swarms of insects that pestered the place during these hot summer nights. With a muted chortle, his Officer's Computer delicately downloaded the contents of the drone's memory.

The results were better than he'd dared hope for. The rumours had said that the Admiral had an interest in obscure television programmes; they'd said nothing about his fascination for antique childrens' series. Tweddell had never heard of *The Magic Roundabout*, nor *Andy Pandy*, but it was clear that such gems of a forgotten age were dear to The Pig. His childish chuckling and tittering were reproduced as clearly as the speckles of drool on his chin and the thumb jammed firmly into his mouth; the drone had obviously captured the high points of the Admiral's evening at home.

Armed with the incriminating evidence, Tweddell collected the winnings of his bet from his friends, all of whom agreed that it was a small price to pay for such excellent entertainment. Clearly, the recording was far too dangerous to achieve a wider circulation, much as it deserved it, so Tweddell was careful to destroy every copy. With some regret, he dismantled the drone, after all, he could always build another.

There the jape would have stayed, another item of Command gossip, had the Admiral not chosen to run a snap inspection of Flying Officers the next week. The men had dutifully turned out, smart row of shiny shoes and dress uniform, and as usual the event was transmitted to the entire base. The Admiral was in jovial mood, and the inspection had taken rather longer than it should. It was past midnight when it finished, and the Admiral took it upon himself to deliver a short speech to camera about the necessities of getting enough sleep.

"And so, gentlemen," he concluded, his broad pink face beaming out from monitors across the base, "time for bed."

"Boing, went Zebedee", muttered Tweddell, who had the misfortune to be standing immediately behind the Admiral and within range of both camera and microphone. Since the entire base had spent the last couple of days watching the TV programmes in question, the effect was most impressive. As the Royal Crest faded in to mark the end of the transmission, the military fanfare was lost in a sea of laughter that filled the base from top to bottom.

In the inspection room, the Admiral seemed incapable of further speech. He glanced wildly at his guards, who stared impassively at the wall opposite, and then half-ran towards the exit. The guards executed a smart quarter turn, and marched after him. As the door swished shut, Tweddell found himself surrounded by incredulous colleagues, unable to believe his audacity. He couldn't believe it himself.

He believed it the next morning, when an urgent message on his terminal informed him that his tour of duty at Fleet Command was being cut short and he was being transferred to Beacon 04523N. Immediately. Don't bother to pack.

Promotion review deferred indefinitely. Now stop reading and run to the shuttle that was waiting just for him. RUN!

It wasn't much consolation to learn, on the month-long trek to the Beacon, that Admiral Sir Jarrauld had taken early retirement and now sat on the board of Trans-System Broadcasting Inc, in charge of fine arts programming.

Nor was the deference that the shuttle crew showed him, appropriate to a colleague who had laid down his career for the merriment of the Service, particularly helpful.

And so here he was, surrounded by well-meaning but somewhat tiresome robots, watching over machines whose capacity for boredom far exceeded his.

On the month since he'd been brought here, he'd had ample time to break into the personnel records on the main computer, and had not only found that he was marked as an extreme threat to Service security but that one of his frozen replacements was here for much the same reason.

"Morning, Boss! Looking for aliens?"

One of the service droids was bumbling along the passageway past the viewport where he'd been staring into space. He'd found that the various robots all had distinctive personalities, friendly and humourous in differing proportions. He hated them all equally, but this yellow one was a little less obnoxious than most and in honour of the Admiral he'd decided to call it Dougal.

"No, Dougal. I've been considering whether to use all this vacuum around us for some scientific experiments. You know what Scamax is?"

"Yes, boss. Ultra-high yield explosive."

"We've got some, haven't we?"

"Yessir. Compartment seven, locker three. Five kilos. Make a dent in anything, that stuff."

"Could you carry that much in your storage pod long enough to get a safe distance from the station?"

"Yes... if I didn't have to use the pod to store dust from the cleaning session I've just remembered I'm to carry out immediately in the sleeping quarters. Now if you'll excuse me, Boss..."

It trundled away, unreasonably fast. Tweddell found it was usually quicker to scare them away than order them; they tended to treat everything as a game.

He went back to his long-term project, which was to gather enough poop on the Admiral (or, truth be told, any Admiral) to cause him some form of physical harm. As well as the navicom facilities of the Beacon, it had a comprehensive radio reception system, designed for various scientific experiments but easily twisted to tap into the vast interplanetary datafeeds.

Sitting at the comms desk, he watched the flicker and chatter of the main links between the two closest planets, Garelanath and Carhabohm. Even those, he thought with a grimace, were years away at lightspeed. No doubt, in eleven months' time, he'd be able to patch into the military link that would carry the news about his last joke at the base. For now, he had little taste for the pomp and bluster of Fleet broadcasts; mostly, he scanned the police frequencies. Another interesting area was the idle talking of the bureaucrats on the civil service bands that often contained little nuggets of gossip or detail that gave him

interesting clues about all sorts of things. After all, there was nothing else to do.

One such message was on his screen now, concerning the sending of stores to the Beacon managers. The usual set of irrecoverable vitamins, personal effects, spare parts and new droids were there, but one item was marked as "For Project Oakleaf". This was new to him -- he never saw the unloading of stores, the droids emptied the unmanned shuttles that turned up -- and he immediately searched the Beacon's databases for more data. Nothing.

He called up Dougal on video. The robot was in the wiring ducts, following the main electrical cabling through the darkness of the space station's guts with its powerful probelamps. He caught a glimpse of thick snaking wires caught in cold, bright white light, and then the droid panned the monitoring camera onto itself.

"You unloaded the last shuttle, didn't you?"

"Not me," said the droid on the screen of the console. "I consider such menial duties beneath my status as Senior Robotic Entity. I've been here a long time." Longer than me, thought Tweddell. Smug so-and-so.

"And as such, perfectly suited to helping a Flying Officer with his scientific experiments..." he said, glaring at the videolink.

"You'd better speak to medidroid 4, Boss. I'll put you through immediately"

Dougal vanished in double-quick time; the screen switched to another robot, a different colour but looking much the same.

"Medical. What seems to be the trouble?"

Tweddell hadn't seen any of the medical droids before; he'd avoided the hospital bay with the sort of superstitious fear common to spacemen.

"Medical nuts. I want to talk to the droid who unloaded the last shuttle from Earth."

"That was me, sir. I note that you're a newcomer to this Beacon facility, and although I'm sure you've been fully briefed may I point out that each of the droids in the Beacon are, although dedicated to a particular function, nevertheless capable of competently performing a wide variety of roles essential to day-to-day station management. Furthermore, if any emergency arises..."

"Enough!" shouted Tweddell, who knew that the machines could talk about themselves for hours. "Did you unload anything from the shuttle for Project Oakleaf?"

The droid remained silent for a second. Tweddell was about to expand on his planned programme of high-speed deep space droid disassembly when an alarm went off. The screen blinked twice, and then displayed:

"ALERT: BEACON TRANSMISSION MODULE 4 OUT OF PHASE.
TIME TO FAILURE: 20 MINUTES.

STATION SUPERVISOR REPORT TO BTM BAY 4 IMMEDIATELY.
SPARE MODULE ON WAY FROM STORES. THIS MEANS YOU,
F.O. TWEDDELL. REMEMBER - YOUR REACTION TIME IS
MONITORED AND WILL BE ASSESSED FOR FUTURE PROMOTION.

ALERT ENDS."

Dougal sped past, clutching a small box.

"Quickly, boss, and bring your finest screwdriver."

Tweddell ran after it and leapt into a waiting zippway car, repeating some of the vocabulary he'd learned from Corporal Gerald. He wasn't sure whether this emergency was real; it had come at too convenient a point, but he knew the drill. Beacon Transmission Modules, or bulbs, were the main devices on the station that kept the signals going; unless he wanted to spend the rest of a rather short life mining zanthium he really had to keep the bulbs sweet.

He got to the Beacon Transmission Module bay a few moments later. These were at the tips of the station; ostensibly because the geometrics of deep space beacon technology made the whole station resonate as a form of aerial. He thought it was more likely that the planners thought that the beacon operators would need as much exercise as possible.

Whatever the reason, the bulb was indeed malfunctioning. The lazy flip of the Lissajous display had been replaced by a frantic scramble of orbital points. He stood at the control desk tuning the circuits, tweaking the delicate adjustments to match the replacement part that Dougal had just installed.

He finished, and gave the bulb a last check. Bulb 4 stable and A-OK.

"Why can't you tune the thing, you metallic octopus?" he asked the service droid.

"You don't have to be insulting, Sir. There's a limit on the level of station maintenance we can carry out while there's an active human, and tuning the bulbs is clearly above that level. If we could do everything, there wouldn't be any reason for you to be here. And I do so enjoy your company, Boss."

"But you can do it in the absence of a human, even if you're positively heartbroken by loneliness. Can't you?"

Dougal replied that it could, but was clearly unhappy about the admission.

Then the ship's computer reminded him that it was lunchtime and there was steak on the menu; the droid vanished towards the sleeping quarters before he could ask it anything more. As he mooched towards the kitchen, he wondered whether this choice of menu was just another mistake, or whether the station really was engaged in some subtle torture. The longer he stayed here, the more likely it seemed.

Tweddell was a vegetarian by inclination, but couldn't convince the computer that, even if the steak was reformed from plant protein, he considered it in rather bad taste. So he picked at the unidentifiable green stuff that had been thoughtfully provided.

"Forgetting about the steak," he told the computer, "this unidentifiable green stuff is rather good. What sort of plant is it?"

"That's not a plant. It's the skin of a Betelgeusian pond goblin, carefully peeled off in a double-spiral and fried in the juice from its liver. Came in the last shuttle from Earth. It's terribly popular at the moment. There was no need to do that, Sir. Now the cleaning droid will have to interrupt its important maintenance schedule to clean it up."

Tweddell was not happy that afternoon. Dougal had gone into a sulk over having to scrape so much good food off the ceiling, and the medical droid was being serviced and unavailable. So he decided to talk to his colleagues, on the grounds that it couldn't make things any worse. This was no simple matter, since his two relief pilots were in cold store and only alive by the most convoluted medical definition.

But it was possible to talk to frozen people through a keyboard and screen link, provided he was prepared to wait half an hour between exchanges. He'd been talked to by his commanding officer during his cold store training; like anyone else, he couldn't remember a thing about it when he thawed out. It was a strange business, conducted through wires inserted below the scalp, and nobody understood it much. More of a seance than a conversation.

He decided to talk to his fellow security risk first. Flying Officer Edward Knight had, he'd read in the confidential records, had something of a fling with a lady from the Southern States who later turned out to have a penchant for assassinating perfectly innocent politicians. Hardly his fault, thought Tweddell, although he clearly had problems in the girlfriend department.

It wasn't until he'd established the link to the life support machines that he realised that he didn't know what to say. How do you make small talk with a corpse?

"Hello, Edward. This is Paul, on station on Beacon 04523N. Would you like to talk?"

He typed it in rapidly, feeling foolish. The machine swallowed the message; he switched it back to monitoring the radio broadcasts between Garelanath and Carhabohm.

Twenty five minutes later, the reply came from his frozen crewmate.

"Talk... no, there's nothing to talk about. Nothing at all. Do not disturb me again, whoever you are."

Not a good start. Obviously, he was using the wrong tactics. Tweddell had a standard fall-back position for this, and most other, eventualities. He decided to lie. A good lie, he'd learned, needed research.

He looked at the file for the other iced pilot. Paul Hambleton, the computer crisply informed him, was a solid career officer who had requested service on the Beacon. An attached file from Fleet Medical noted that this was his fifth such request and, although he was not considered mentally unstable, there was clearly some underlying reason for this abnormal behaviour. Another attached file, this from Fleet Ethics, said tersely that Hambleton's last few terms of shore leave had been spent in casinos and racing orbits and that the next stint away from a Beacon would probably bankrupt him. For the first time that day, Tweddell smiled.

"Attention, Flying Officer Hambleton. This is Fleet Ethical Technician Powell. We have evidence that you are in possession of information beyond your status, possibly acquired to help fund your gambling. You will be dismissed immediately if you try to deny it. Co-operate, and your case will be reconsidered."

There. That should do for starters. The Fleet Ethical mob were a fearsome security service; an odd mixture of policeman and priest who could do the most terrible things to a person while saving them from themselves.

Some time later, the reply came.

"Technician Powell. I have no idea what you are talking about. I know nothing of any secrets. How could

I, I'm a Beacon man, I haven't been near anything more military than a transfer shuttle in years. What could I tell you?"

"Flying Officer Hambleton. To help yourself, you must tell me everything you know about Project Oakleaf."

He half expected that another station emergency would go off as he typed those words, but if the main computer was monitoring his unorthodox activity it gave no clues. A smaller screen to one side of the main console was showing that the medical droid was back in action, and that Dougal seemed to be out of its sulk. The thing even appeared to be humming to itself as it cleaned the zippways. He watched it for a while.

Come on, come on, thought Tweddell, drumming his fingers on the desk. An hour and a half, and all I know is that Knight's still not over his lady love. The console bleeped, and the answer appeared. Even on the screen, the feeling of fear between the words was tangible.

"All I know is the rumours I heard last time I was on Carhabohm. A radar designer told me that three Beacons had exploded in the past ten years. He said that nobody knew why, it could be sabotage, it could be some aliens, Whatever they were, he called them Wreckers. He claimed to have been installing some hidden weapons systems on a Beacon in case of further attack, and that these were called Oakleaf. I was planning to look for these during my next tour of duty, but I know nothing else. I... I can't remember the name of the designer. I am sorry, Technician, but I can't help you more. Please believe me. I know it is wrong not to report these rumours, but I am trying to stay out of trouble. Am I not on the Station now? I seem to remember I was, but it isn't clear."

"Flight Officer Hambleton, you have admitted your errors and may help to maintain the security of the Beacons. You must be more dutiful in future.

Consider the case closed. Returning you to your cold sleep on Beacon 04523N."

There. That ought to do it, thought Tweddell as he typed. Now let's see how much those droids know.

"Hey, Dougal. Get here, at the double!". He could've just summoned the robot through the electronic pager, but the station public address was a lot more fun.

Seconds later, the droid appeared. "What's up, Boss? Spilled your cornflakes again?"

"Button it, shorty. Security check - how operational is the Oakleaf stuff?"

"Is that a direct order, Flying Officer?", the droid said coldly.

"You bet. Give with the info, or boooooom...." Tweddell made an expansive gesture with his hands.

"Filing request. Sorry, no can do. You haven't got the clearance. I'll ask Command to promote you if you want, but your career... boooooom....". Droids lack the necessary wrist and elbow joints to make expansive gestures, so Dougal bumped up and down.

"Get out of here and rust somewhere... no, hold on." Tweddell thought fast.

"You know what I've been doing these last couple of hours, right?"

"Not me. I've been cleaning. Useful work. I should be doing it now." said the droid, lowering the temperature of the conversation from cold to glacial.

"Aw, don't give me that. I know that you and the computers are chattering away all the time on those radio links you've got. Now, did you hear what my respected, if somewhat frozen, friend in the vaults said about Oakleaf?"

Dougal said nothing, but jiggled about like a nervous child.

"I'll take that as a yes. Now, if what he said was right, we're in trouble. Beacons have been going ka-boom, and nobody knows why. Look, get me the records on the Beacon Project for the last few years."

"No need, Boss", Dougal said, quietly. "I've checked them."

"Do they match what Hambleton said?"

"Almost. Since he's been frozen, Beacon 01966F has been lost. Same circumstances."

"Where's 019..?"

"It is -- it was -- the closest but one."

"Did it have Oakleaf?"

Again, Dougal was silent. This time, it was Tweddell himself who exploded.

"If you don't tell me, we'll all be dead. Little bits in space." He closed his eyes, and counted under his breath, then was calmer. "Forget my jokes about the Scamax, bad taste, I'm sorry, my problem, OK?"

"OK, Boss. Nice sense of humour, if you don't mind me saying so"

"Mmmph. Now, did 019 have Oakleaf?"

"Hold on, I'll get the others." said Dougal.

Tweddell waited, exasperated, while the faces of the other droids popped onto the monitor screens, one by one. From the lights on the console, it was clear that they were talking to one another on radio, but the only sound in the space station was the almost noiseless sigh of the life support.

"OK. We don't know anything about Oakleaf until you're dead. Orders."

He tried to stay calm and polite, but failed. "Fantastic. Shall I walk out of the airlock now, or do you want to wait until the aliens get here?"

"Now now; no need to be like that, Boss. Look, here comes the medidroid. Lie down and hold your breath."

"What?"

"Lie down and hold your breath. Also, don't breathe."

Tweddell opened his mouth, fully meaning to blast the droid through the plasnoglass wall and into the vacuum beyond through force of obscenity alone. Then, suddenly, he saw what was going on. He closed his mouth, quietly, collapsed neatly onto the warm plastic floor of the corridor and forgot to breathe out.

"Medidroid 4. I believe that Flying Officer Tweddell is no longer functionally alive. Please carry out your standard morbidity tests at once."

"SMT. At once."

The medidroid extended a small telescopic arm, and held it in front of Tweddell's face. For twenty seconds, none of them moved.

"SMT 1. No respiration, normal or residual, detected. Proceeding to SMT 2"

The telescopic probe extended another six inches, and moved down to his chest. There was a crackle from the ship's PA system, then the corridor filled with sound, enormous, regular, a huge heartbeat of a noise that shook his whole body from inside.

Tweddell looked at Dougal, then at the medidroid, then back at Dougal.

For a robot with no head to shake and no lips to smile with, Dougal did a most impressive job of signalling "Don't worry. Stay still."

The probe pressed against his shirt, and stayed there for five slow, painful beats of the giant heart.

"SMT 2. No heartbeat, normal or abnormal, detected. Proceeding to SMT 3"

A sudden quiet flooded through the ship. Tweddell let out his breath in a long, grateful sigh.

"Boss - this will hurt. Open your eyes and look at me. Wide." Through the ringing of his ears, Tweddell heard Dougal's urgent voice. More confused by every passing second, he did as he was told. Somewhere beyond all this, he dully realised what was happening, and relaxed. slightly.

Flash. Despite himself, he yelled; the light from Dougal's probelamps exploded inside his head with a splash of incredible pain. Involuntarily, he rubbed at his eyes, trying to get rid of the blinding, smashing afterimage.

"Put your hands down! Down!" Dougal had lost its joviality and was shouting, battlefield commander under fire. Tweddell responded to the tone of the order like the soldier he had been trained to be.

Gasping, he felt a cold pressure against the tears that washed over his eyes, his face.

"SMT 3. No pupil response noted, normal or abnormal. Proceeding to SMT 4"

The matter-of-fact report from the medidroid calmed him, somehow.

"Stay still now, Sir. I'm behind you now.."

There was a rustle of movement around him. He tried to see what was going on, slowly, through the blackness of his blinded eyes, he began to make out the lights on the ceiling and dark shapes above his head.

More touches from cool metal on his skin, at chest and head. First one set, then, seconds later, another. A faint tingle, a feeling of feathers, ran across his shoulders and scalp.

"Stay still. Relax." said the droid. He thought, inanely, that whoever had programmed Dougal had a fine grasp of human psychology.

"SMT 4. No significant electrical activity from autonomous or central nervous system. No significant electrical activity from higher or medial brain functions. Standard morbidity tests concluded. No signs of life are detectable in Flying Officer Tweddell. There is no chance that standard resuscitation procedure will revive him. I pronounce him clinically dead.

Shall I prepare to activate one of the relief crew?"

"Until I understand the reason for the death of Officer Tweddell, that would not be a good idea", said Dougal.

"I can conduct the autopsy now, if you require." replied the medidroid with rather too much relish for Tweddell's peace of mind.

"Thank you, Medidroid 4. Return to your duties. You can get up now, Boss."

Tweddell sat up, and rubbed at his eyes again. It didn't help him see, but it felt familiar, reassuring.

"I don't know what you did, Dougal, but I think I'd have liked it better if you'd killed me for real."

"How does it feel to be dead, then?" answered Dougal, once again his chattery robotic self.

"Was it really necessary to blind me? And what was all that with the electrical activity?"

"Well, sir," said the droid, a touch of pride in his voice. "the heartbeat through the PA was exactly the same as yours, but in antiphase. Opposite.

The medidroid picked that up at the same time as your real heartbeat, and the two cancelled each other out. I turned on my probelamps just bright enough to stop your eyes seeing the doc's medical light when it tested you, so that your pupils wouldn't respond, and I'm afraid I cheated on the electrical stuff."

"Cheated... how can you cheat with my brainwaves?"

"I put my own probes on your skin just before the doc did, and pumped enough low-frequency electricity through your body to mask your normal vital signs. So, it thought you were dead. If it thinks you're dead, you're dead. I don't know what that does to your plans for the weekend, Sir."

"It's not a very smart robot." said Tweddell, pulling himself up by the chair on the console and sitting down heavily.

"It's a very smart robot. The best, next to me. It's just that I told it to carry out the standard tests, and it followed my order to the letter. Can I help it if, in a fit of panic, I try to do the SMT at the same time and get them all slightly wrong? I'll see if I can remember to file a full report, but I'm still a little shaky. Sir. "

"OK, so I'm impressed." He was, despite himself, but he was also mostly blind and slightly deaf. Slowly, his normal vision returned, and the station faded in around him. For the afterlife, it looked depressingly like nothing had changed. "I'm dead, as well. Tell me about Oakleaf."

"Check your monitors, Boss."

He looked at the console. The main monitor, normally displaying the station status, went blank. Then a series of security warnings, through the spectrum from red to indigo. He was cleared to green and normally, on the rare occasions he'd accessed high security files, he'd only persuaded the computer to show him stuff through to blue. Indigo, one level below the highest hue of violet, was secret enough for

the ship's computer to take steps to incapacitate him if it found him in possession of material so coded. No questions asked.

This time, however, the tape merely played. After all, dead men don't pose much of a security risk. He thought he could get to like this, although he might have trouble getting off the station when the relief came. Probably messed up his pension, too.

He watched. A man appeared on-screen, in the uniform of a general in Fleet Ethics.

"This is the status report for Project Oakleaf, dated zero-one, zero-seven, three seven five four.

Following the loss of Beacon 01966F, we have accelerated development of the project. However, we still lack enough information on the nature of the threat to the Beacons to eliminate the possibility that it is the product of some subversive action against the Fleet. Therefore, all Oakleaf information remains classified at Indigo."

Except for the clerks who fill out the forms for the supply shuttles, thought Tweddell. He'd never be nasty to a petty bureaucrat again. For at least a week, anyway.

"As a result of the loss of 01966F, we are equipping 04523N with prototypes of the full defensive system", the tape continued. "This is to allow the automated equipment systems to evaluate ease of installation, and, in the event of an attack, for the droids to exercise their valuable roles in repulsing the attackers. Note, though, that the human component of Oakleaf will not be employed in this eventuality, although the weaponry is on station."

Half right, thought Tweddell.

"Assuming that the threat is of alien origin, the evidence we have gained from previous attacks points to a new form of interstellar organism, probably intelligent, definitely active destructional. Computer simulation of the modes of attack show that what we have here is most likely a form of spatial energy, organised as individual organisms. They co-operate as a single entity, although we have no knowledge as to their communication mechanisms. The current theories from the Xenobiological Division say that these organisms propagate through space as spores until they detect -- again, through unknown means -- that there are appropriate foodstuffs in the vicinity. Once this has happened, they probably mutate to an aggressive form, capable of ingesting the foodstuffs they seek. Any questions?"

There was a bleep from the console, and the briefing went interactive.

"If you have any questions", said the computer, "please ask now. The tape contains a full database of current knowledge on Project Oakleaf."

On the screen, the general waited, patiently, arms folded. Tweddell cleared his throat, and said "More details on the organisms, please."

A computer-animated diagram showed the likely lifecycle of the beasts. All pretty standard, and Tweddell couldn't see much to worry about; the things spent most of their time either as young or in the spores.

"What is the nature of the foodstuffs?" , he asked, phrasing his question in the precise terms that worked best with the machines. Perhaps he could organise a poisoned snack for his guests; after all, the kitchen

machines had plenty of experience in churning out the most subtly unpleasant nosh he'd ever eaten.

The screen cut in to a closeup of the general.

"We have examined the residue from several attacked Beacons", he said, gravely, "and from what's been left we can predict that they're after the following compounds, which they can completely assimilate."

What followed, to Tweddell's increasing dismay, looked like a breakdown of the materials that made up the station. Plasnoglass, tristressed flurosteel, transmuted polycarbons, all of them major ingredients in the strongest and most vital components of any space-going vessel. Some menu.

He swallowed. "Continue", he said.

"The method by which they consume these compounds is unclear. It seems according to the physicists, that they exude a form of molecular debonder that acts directly on the basic attractions which hold the molecules together. There is no known protection against this; one of the top priorities of Project Oakleaf is to evolve one." The closeup got closer; the head of the General filled the screen.

"If you haven't realised, gentlemen," he said, "the potential for disruption of all interstellar commerce is unbounded. Should our predictions be true, and we fail to produce a countermeasure, we will be thrown back into a time before space travel. This is the main reason for fitting the Samson device, which I understand has been an unpopular measure on the Council; I hope you can see the reasoning behind it."

Tweddell felt a cold emptiness in his stomach at the last sentence. This tape was designed for Council members; he was watching one of the most privileged bits of information in the Galaxy. Sometimes, back at Fleet Command, he'd discussed the possibility of uncovering such restricted data with his classmates; the consensus was that anyone who came into possession of stuff as hot as that would doubtless meet with a swift and terribly unfortunate accident. For once, he was glad of the vast stretch of space between himself and the nearest civilised port.

"Thank you." he said to the console. "I've finished now. Please keep the tape in readiness; if I want to review it, I shall ask for the Oakleaf Briefing."

"Understood", said the console, and flipped back to the normal status display. It was as if nothing had happened; without too much effort, Tweddell could imagine that he was back to a few hours ago, worrying about getting bored and swearing at the droids. He stared at the display, pretending that nothing had happened, nothing was going to happen.

"Excuse me, Sir", said Dougal. Tweddell had forgotten that it had been waiting behind him, watching the briefing. "What do we do now, Dougal?" he asked.

"You asked me to review the records from previous stations. I was wondering, Boss, perhaps you might like to see them. It might give you an idea whether we're likely to incur a visit."

Again, Dougal was jiggling up and down. If the droids were going to get scared, thought Tweddell, he'd lose what the briefing had described as a valuable defence. Still, the thing had a point.

"Good idea. What've you got?" he asked.

In response, the screen cleared again, and displayed a 3D chart of the Beacon network. Half the Galaxy was there, crossed and linked by the invisible beams from the stations.

"These are the Beacons that have been lost so far, removed in the order they were destroyed", said Dougal.

A random smattering of dots winked out, one by one, from the screen, to be replaced by a flashing red symbol. At first, Tweddell couldn't make a pattern out of the growing points of light. He decided to use some of the formation viewing tactics he'd learned at Fleet Command.

"Switch perspective from the Galactic plane to perpendicular, and restart", he commanded. The display changed immediately, and started the process of replacing Beacons with red lights again. It was still a map of the Galaxy, but viewed from above, not from the side. Something told him that he wasn't far from predicting the attack path of the aliens, but it still wasn't clear. He tried telling the computer to draw lines between the lost stations, but this just wove a cobweb over the screen. Perhaps if he included the nearby suns? This time, he saw it.

"Link the beacon losses, chronologically, against the density of stars and gravitational gradient", he said. Perhaps these things just drifted through space, following the tug of gravity...

"Computing..." the console said. "This will take ten minutes."

Tweddell checked the time. Strange; the computer hadn't reminded him that his meal was due any moment now.

"Computer; what is the status of my next meal?", he asked. Silence.

"Computer!" Nothing.

"Excuse me, Boss", said Dougal. "Has it occurred to you, in your newly deceased state, that the kitchen might not consider you worth feeding?"

"That's a very good point, and another bonus for the departed.", he replied. "Still, I guess that I'll start to miss the cuisine sooner or later. What do I do to get the kitchen back and baking?"

"I haven't thought of that." said Dougal. "I guess you go hungry."

Hardly good enough. "How about I reprogram the kitchen computers?"

"You could try, Boss. I know there are some software defences there..."

"If they're designed to stop me getting poisoned, then they've been broken since I arrived. I guess they've got to be sorted, though."

This didn't worry Tweddell, who had rewired more war sim computers than he'd had hot dinners. Ironic, really.

"Look, you get down the wiring conduit and switch on those lights of yours."

he said to Dougal. "I'm going to persuade it that it's still in the factory and running a test program; you'll have to intercept its command links from the main computer and tell it what I tell you to say. Clear?"

Dougal, obviously taking to its new role as saboteur, whisked off without so much as a single wisecrack. Minutes later, it reported.

"In position, over the Kitchen wire bundle. Now what, Boss?", it said.

Tweddell punched up the station circuits on the monitor. Spiderweb diagrams frosted the screen, links pulsing as he tracked down those he needed to cut. "OK - I'm sending you the reconfiguration details".

He watched as the monitor traced the changes, rerouting the nervous system of the station as the droid delicately teased the wires and optical fibres apart.

Alarm! A whole section of the screen went bright red, then dark. In the distance, a warning siren sounded.

"Hold it!" he shouted. "Computer - hold that alert. Take no action against the intruder. Report."

"Intruder in bus duct. Modifications to station command network detected. Purpose assumed hostile. Preparing to remove intruder.", the computer replied.

"Hold. Dougal - what did you do?"

"There's a control link here that's not in the station map, Boss", said the droid, " and I had to divert it."

"Is it part of Oakleaf?"

"Yes."

"Right. I guess that, if even the kitchen doesn't want to know me, I can't override the rest of the alarm monitoring?"

"Ain't necessarily so. The kitchen just works on how many personnel are alive and eating, but the main computer probably thinks you're maintenance."

"OK. Computer: unlink Oakleaf circuits from tamper detect. Abort last alarm. Ongoing human-controlled maintenance order." Let's show it who's in charge.

"Unlinked. Alarm abort."

The missing links came back onto the screen, and the warning red lines went to safe, unwatched blue.

"OK, Dougal. Carry on."

A few moments later, the droid reported back.

"Dinner is served, I guess. Whaddya want?"

Rescued from the carefully chosen diet programmed in by the Fleet's dieticians, psychologists and doctors, the kitchen proved itself a masterful cook. Japanese salad and stuffed vine leaves; almost worth dying for, he thought.

Back at the control panel in the main corridor, the computer had finished its task of matching the lost Beacons to the starmap. He whistled when he saw the results; a spiral through spacetime as clear as footprints in snow.

During the meal, he'd given some thought to what was going to happen when his tour of duty finished; if he didn't have something solid to show for his meddling he'd be in trouble so deep he'd be in freefall for months. Now it looked as if he'd struck gold.

"Addendum to Oakleaf briefing", he said; the console started recording.

"Strong correlation between star density and attack sequence. If I follow the pattern beyond the last lost Beacon, 01966F, I can predict that the next point of attack will be..."

He followed the spiral down, past the last attack, matching the projected course of the infection through to the next glowing point that marked an active station.

"...Beacon 04523N, in about..."

He made the calculations, and checked them. Again.

"...ten hours from now."

He stared at the screen in silence. The console, assuming he'd finished, beeped twice and switched back to the normal display. Around him, the station hummed; around it, the cold vacuum of space. He'd never liked being alone before.

Once again, his military training took over. For the next half hour, he went through the drill for defence preparations, but it was almost play-acting. The Beacons were never considered a military target; nobody would want to attack such a useful, benign station. As a result, there were no shields, no lasers, no deep-space plasma nets. He started to feed a status report to his two reliefs in the freezer, and told the life support to get them ready for an instant revival. If something happened to him, he wanted them in action. This time, he thought, there'd be a fight.

He called Dougal, who'd been monitoring.

"I need to know what the Oakleaf hardware is, and I need it to work.
What've we got?"

Dougal paused. "Not much, and none of it's installed except Samson."

"That was on the briefing, wasn't it. What is it? Is it any good?"
Tweddell asked.

"Yes. It works, it's been tested, and it's automatic."

"I'm sure. I asked you what it was; we haven't got time for advertisements"
Tweddell snapped back.

Another pause. "It's an emergency beacon, and a station autodestruct."

"Auto... you mean, it blows us all up, all by itself? We'll turn it off."

"Can't do that. It's completely independent, own power source, own computer, and it's very trigger happy. If it thinks that the station's overrun, or that it's being tampered with, it fuses."

"No override?" Tweddell asked, disbelievingly. Everything had an override, everything was triple-safed.

"No. It was that, or risk spreading the infection. We'll have maybe forty minutes, maybe an hour from first contact."

Tweddell sat back in the chair, and thought rapidly.

"OK. We don't worry about that. If the briefing's correct, it'll all be over by then, either way. What else

have we got -- no, hold that. Get the droids to get it all into place, then tell me."

"At once. I thought you'd never ask..." Dougal went silent, and the station burst into motion. It was like kicking over an ants' nest; droids appeared from storerooms and scurried through the corridors, the zippways, the ducts, carrying equipment, power sources, and what looked comfortably like extremely heavy armament.

Tweddell watched, first in amazement, and then with a growing conviction that he was in with a chance. No, said the soldier inside him, we're going to send 'em packing. We're going to win. But he didn't have long, and there was so much to do.

"All that personal stuff", he said to Dougal, "I won't be able to use a tenth of it myself. Can the droids handle it?"

"Of course, Boss. They've all had basic training, but they're not exactly battle-hardened. You'll have to keep an eye on them; I'll do what I can, but best treat them as raw recruits."

"You're a fine second-in-command." said Tweddell. Hell, if he had to play general, he might as well make the droid feel good about the game. "Now, what've we got for the station?"

"Two things - long distance radar and the Battlepods."

"The what?"

"The Battlepods. Their flexible nozzles attract the aliens, and dispose of them. We have four of them - one attached outside each of the orange airlock doors"

"They sound like the space equivalent of a Hoover. Hmm - a vacuum cleaner that works in a vacuum..."

"That's what I like about you, Boss - laughing even in the face of dea...", Dougal realised his faux pas too late. "Should be half the battle won, if they work.", he continued, "If they don't, you'll have to suit up and go outside with the plasmicide spray."

"We'll find out soon enough. When can I have the radar?"

Dougal was silent for a moment, checking the other droids.

"It's online now."

Tweddell glanced at the console. There was a new display, a simple sector map, ranging deep into the surrounding space.

"Gives you a few moment's warning" said Dougal, "which is better than none."

"Yeah. Is the main computer OK - it's not going to throw one of its alerts at us when we start firing, is it?"

"No chance. When you fixed the kitchen stuff, I think you convinced it to ignore all the Oakleaf activity. Good move, Boss."

So, it was time to wait. A final check - the droid factory was ready, he'd got extra guards on the generator and gravity control rooms; nothing to do but watch the radar.

"Any idea what they'll look like?" he asked Dougal.

"No. They could be blobs of green slime for all I know. You should be pleased, you're the one for the scientific discoveries and now you'll be the first to know.", the droid replied.

"I suppose you're right. Look, go and check the airlocks; don't worry, I'll tell you if anything happens." The droid, realising that he wanted to be left alone, trundled away.

Through the plasnoglass, he watched the unchanging stars against the blackness of deep space. Almost unnoticed, the radar screen changed, first one, then ten tiny dots of blurred light crawling towards the station. Tweddell heard the Samson machine activate; a slow pulse of power against the drone of the station, counting away the seconds.

He turned on the P.A.

"Let's go, troops!"

"Good luck, Boss", Dougal bleeped back from his sector.

On the radar screen, the first dots reached the station. The Wreckers had arrived...