

# *BLACK SUNRISE*



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# **Black Sunrise By Christina Engela**

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## Black Sunrise

Imagine, if you will:

The Ruminarii Hammerhead was so named because of its peculiar hull shape – and, being the main warship of the warlike Ruminarii, they were as much feared as they were hated. Roughly a kilometer long, the shiny dark ships were as black as space and – as some whispered, as dark as the souls of the entire Ruminarii race themselves. In fact, the general advice in circulation – er, advised those who encountered any Ruminarii ships on their travels through deep space, to find a hole, crawl inside – and then to pull the edges in after them.

As might be deduced from this gem of completely useless advice – and the sheer amount of fear they generated apparently by default, Ruminarii were an extremely hostile race. Following the Earth-Ruminarii war some eighty years earlier – which the Ruminarii had somehow inexplicably lost, Terran linguists had determined that there was no word for ‘welcome’ in the Ruminarii language – with the closest approximation to that meaning being something like ‘*what do you want?*’ During the four centuries lifespan of their current civilization, the Ruminarii race had managed to lay waste to almost a thousand star systems in their part of the galaxy, enslaved their populations, and stripped countless worlds of all they wanted.

It had been said, by certain older civilizations who for the moment will remain nameless, that if the *Harrt’shisk Hab’arr’oun* (Empire of the Golden Sun) ever had any allies, these would’ve been very short-lived alliances indeed! Seemingly, Ruminarii displayed only the negative emotions, and their ferocity was matched only by their boldness and ruthlessness. How a race founded purely on hate, spite, ambition and evil managed to flourish as they did is a question on which very, very few civilizations had survived to speculate. It was undoubtedly fortunate that Earth should be one of these elite few, but for now, let us simply say that while the people of that remote blue planet perhaps weren’t as informed of the significance of that achievement as they might’ve been, within the confines of the black ship in the blackness of deep space, the present company did not approve.

Half-Lieutenant Marsh’k Kluss’ta was not a happy man. Naturally, that didn’t bother him as things were rarely otherwise. Also, technically he wasn’t a *man* either, since he wasn’t Human... but he was most certainly a prime example of a typical male of his species. He was bad to the bone, and as the commanding officer

of the *Black Sunrise*, happiness was not a state of mind expected of him, though in reality – *our reality* – he was probably not such a terrible person. The crew, though terrified of him even under normal circumstances, believed that he had the heart of a little child... somewhere.

Being the commander of a Ruminarii war vessel meant that he had been more than just lucky – he'd been ambitious enough to have risen to the rank by means of dirty tricks, not excluding assassination and ruthlessness, and was therefore implicitly distrusted by the *Tidhii Mah'k'hai* (Naval Command, and by implication the Queen Of Suth Herself). He was expected to mete out, in generous portions, brutality to conquered subjects, and to act swiftly and mercilessly in dealing with all alien encounters. In short, he was expected to be a bad example.

The Ruminarii were bipeds – and a reptilian species (which probably goes a long way to explain their cold-bloodedness). “Suitably shaped” is the most likely non-profane description most people could find for Ruminarii – otherwise, they were just plain ugly... at least by Terran standards. Ruminarii didn't have a name for their language, other than the name of their race – but it could only be described as “*hissy*”.

A device in the arm of Marsh'k's chair made an obscene noise. The murals on the chair matched those on the walls of his personal cabin, and suggested disturbing things being done to some briefly unlucky beings, some with tentacles, some with their eyes on stalks – all reminded him vaguely of dinner and made him feel hungry.

“Yes?” Said Marsh'k.

“We're about to enter the targeted system, Lord.” Said a tinny reptilian voice in Ruminarii.

“Ah. Bad. I'll be there in a moment.” Marsh'k paused. “You forgot the salute.” He hissed silkily.

“*Lord?*” Said the voice, suddenly overcome by panic. “*Ses'ach L'ru!*”

“Too late. You know what you have to do?”

“Y-yes, Lord.” There followed a sound reminiscent of a head banging repeatedly against a steel bulkhead. An electronic squeal erupted between bangs, suitably muffled by the pick-up, and then died – silence fell.

“Are you done?”

“Y-yes, Lord.”

“Does it hurt?”

“Ouch. Yes. It hurts a lot, Lord.”

“Bad. Don’t forget again, or you can bring me your fingernails yourself.”

“Yes, Lord! I won’t forget, Lord –”

Marsh’k cut the circuit on the rest of the helmsman’s whining and rose to his feet, stretching to his full height of just under six standard Terran feet. Discipline was important to all Ruminarii commanders, and the key element in instilling discipline was to instill an overwhelming fear in the crew of what would happen to them if proper decorum and procedures were allowed to slip.

Not many Ruminarii warships had ever been captured intact by any enemy, and so for those the Ruminarii “invited” aboard their vessels, this was usually a one-way sight-seeing trip. For those who really want to know, Ruminarii Hammerheads had an extensive corridor network, the interior walls tended to be heavily decorated, savagely militaristic and inevitably, close together. He strode down one with the certainty of and confidence of someone who had right of way. On seeing him, lesser ranks fell to the deck and groveled like their fingernails depended on it. There was a chorus of dramatic shrieks and whimpers as he passed. When Marsh’k arrived on the bridge of the hammerhead, everyone was already expectantly face-down on the deck, each endeavoring to grovel lower than the next. Ah... nothing quite like bad discipline to keep the crew in its place.

“*Ses’ach L’ru!*” Came the slightly muffled chorus, meaning in Ruminarii, ‘*Hail the Captain.*’ Marsh’k sat down on his seat of office. The sound of his black uniform and body armor against the glossy material of the command chair made a muted and rather obscene noise as he sank into it.

“*Mor’dek’hai de suul.*” He retorted dismissively. This had been translated to mean something like ‘*Oh, shut up and get back to work!*’ The crew ceased their groveling routine and got back to their stations. There was a flurry of activity as they all tried to look extremely busy with their instruments and control consoles.

“Report!” He ordered, his dark eyes falling on the picture on the view screen at the front of the bridge. Their ship was just passing one of the outer planets of the system, a frozen ball of ice.

“Lord, there are nine planets in the system.” Said the helmsman, sporting a rather large fresh-looking bump at the center of his forehead. “The fourth seems habitable. We may find life there.”

“Life means death!” Marsh’k retorted grimly. “For them, anyway! Conquest and plunder await us!”

Life as a private investigator, slash bounty hunter wasn't all that Gary Beck had wanted it to be. There weren't any big mansions on a palm beach owned by an affluent writer generous enough to let him live rent-free and use his spare Ferrari – but then he had to ask himself, what could he expect, living on a planet like Deanna? As a third-rate colony in the Terran Empire, Deanna had more than its fair share of dull moments – that is, aside from having built a reputation for being the center of the universe as far as weirdness was concerned. As a foremost example of *case in point*, critics would almost invariably point out that Deanna orbited a star called *Ramalama* – and if you think *that's* funny, Deanna's two moons are called *Ding* and *Dong* respectively – this is a local joke – *and* if that weren't actually weird enough, one of them also fell down occasionally – AND got put back up again!

The sun called Ramalama hung blazing hot in the sky, and Gary Beck's shirt stuck fast to his back. He'd just told himself again, under his breath, that this was a result of him hanging around places like *this* too long! It was a beautiful 46 degrees on the scorched dry desert plains of Deanna, and in case anyone was wondering, there wasn't any applicable shade. Beck's boots made dry gritty noises on the surface as he made his way down the deserted main street. Nervously, he adjusted his wide-brimmed hat so he could see a little better. The air hung motionless, hot, dry and stifling. He could hear every breath he took, going in and out, it was so quiet and still. The sun remained blinding. All was silent, deafeningly silent, and that just made Beck even more tense. He knew the man was there, somewhere. He tracked a movement to his left with the shotgun. A light gust of wind rolled a tumbleweed along the boardwalk outside the old abandoned jail until it dropped off the end. Beck exhaled tensely, and glanced round.

“He's here somewhere, I know it.” He thought aloud. A large abandoned boardinghouse loomed over to his right, the broken glass shards of its dark, broken windows seemingly snarled at him. Beck walked on, studying the decaying buildings intensely, as if his life depended on it. He adjusted his grip on the shotgun again – the stock had become wet and slippery. Then, rounding a corner, he spotted something that told him his quarry was definitely in the area!

“*At last!*” He thought, examining the single horse that stood tethered to a decaying wooden post in the street outside the old saloon, from a distance. The creature made no attempt to nibble the grass close to the dry water trough by the post. Far from not being hungry, or perhaps being used to better, it seemed like the

horse was eyeing the greenery with suspicion, as though waiting for it to move first.

“He is here! Probably close by!”

Cautiously, Beck moved on, checking the roofs, doors, windows – the various objects lying strewn across the cluttered, dead streets like dried clots in the arteries of a corpse. Oh, what he would’ve given for a bio-scanner! Seeing nothing of interest, he walked out further, keeping against the wooden wall of a building, just in case. His heart pounded in his ears. “Strange, isn’t it?” The thought popped up in his busy mind, “you could be in hundreds of fights, but everyone always seemed like the first time.” The truth of this was apparent to Beck – after all, a million different things could happen, go completely *wrong* – and to make it his *last*. Surprise was the name of this game – and Gary Beck knew all too well that his quarry wasn’t going to just jump out and shout “Wha!” at an unexpected moment.

“Where is he? Which building?” Beck wondered silently. He decided to look inside the old saloon. A little distance away, the horse snorted nervously, scratched in the dust with a hoof near some scrubby-looking grass, and after a few moments more – rather bravely – bent down to nibble at it. Beck took another cautious step forward up the wooden steps. Just then, he heard a sudden familiar clicking sound. He froze.

“Don’t move bounty hunter!” A rough voice grated from somewhere close behind, “Don’t you even breathe!”

“*He’s got the drop on me!*” Beck swallowed nervously. “*This is where I really start sweating.*”

“Hi, Corrigan.” Beck called out as casually as he could manage. “We should stop meeting like this... people might talk.”

He heard Corrigan growl with irritation. Well, Beck reasoned, he tended to have that effect on some people.

“Cut the crap and drop the hardware. The pistol too.” Came the barked retort.

Reluctantly, Beck dropped the shotgun. It clattered to the gravel, fell over – and rather unexpectedly, went off! A hole magically appeared in the dry trough close to the horse, sending wooden splinters flying. The horse bolted – and so did Beck! A couple of shots rang out, bullets whistling off eerily into the distance as he ran, keeping his head down. Then he reached the relative safety of an alley, and kept on going as fast as he could until he reached the next corner, where he took cover behind a dilapidated old water barrel. He breathed hard, and the dust in the air only made it worse. Considering his next move, Beck eased the pistol from his holster. A

sudden shot rang out, followed by a loud thud as the bullet struck somewhere close by. Beck stuck his gun-hand over the top of the barrel and fired three shots blind. Corrigan's reply to that came so close he could feel the heat!

*"Lousy cover!"* Gary Beck mentally cursed, taking stock of all the holes in the crumbling wood planks of the barrel.

Gary turned and saw his only possible escape – a low window in a wood wall opposite his position in the alley. Without hesitation, he leapt towards it – shots fired by his adversary trailing him as he jumped through it. As glass shattered, flew and fell around him, Gary Beck landed on a wooden floor and, scrambling across it, made for the nearest doorway he could see in the dark. He cursed as he realized he'd lost his hat! Hats were precious to those who wore them on Deanna – under Deanna's hot sun, one could end up looking like last week's bacon 'n beans by the time one hit thirty! He loved his hat! But there wasn't time for that now – he kept on going, making a quick note of where he lost it, so he could go back and get it later.

The old ruined building was dark inside – broken abandoned furniture and rubbish lay piled everywhere. Some pieces were covered by dust sheets, and lots of cobwebs and dust – which only made the place seem all that much more spooky... not that *spooky* bothered the renowned Gary Beck much. The darkened passage into the old dead building wound a bit before it led to a room with some large windows, through which light streamed in spite of the decaying stringy old curtains. The light fell on several collapsed piles that Beck made out to be former bar tables, and the skeletons of bar stools and chairs.

From there, he heard a muffled noise outside, like footsteps! Time to run! Beck knew Corrigan's reputation – and he sure as heck didn't want to go up against a stone-cold convicted wife-beater – at least, not *unprepared!* The man was capable of *anything!* He just made it to the derelict bar, when a spray of bullets shattered old glasses and empty bottles on either side of him. Without thinking, Gary vaulted over the top just as the stained old mirror behind the bar exploded shrapnel at him! It was a hard landing behind the bar – the floor planking was a lot harder than he was, and there were bits of old glass and other crap lying scattered everywhere across it that made things a good deal more painful. More gunshots rang out, growing louder – Corrigan was close now – far too close! Glass was shattering and raining down, tinkling and clattering everywhere! Wood splinters and dust danced to the melodious chaos... and then abruptly, silence fell.

Beck's nemesis crept up to the bar, cautiously moving around it. It looked to Beck like Corrigan was copying all the moves he'd seen in old cop movies and westerns – and doing it all rather badly. Corrigan lowered his pistol upon realizing there was no one behind the bar after all. There was however, an open trapdoor... *And that would mean the bounty hunter was -*

“*Don't move!*” Came Beck's distant, slightly muffled – and subterranean barked order. “My turn, I think!”

From his vantage point in the old basement, Gary Beck had a good view of his prey. Or at least, a good view of his feet. The rest of him could only be in so many places. The gaps and knotholes in the floorboards came in handy: one he aimed through, the other had the muzzle of his ten-mil in it, aimed upwards at Corrigan. It was a 10mm Jupina Black semi-auto pistol, one of the finest handguns known to Human-kind – or anyway, at least to Beck. He didn't *have* to warn Corrigan – after all, the man had spent the entire morning trying to kill *him* – but Beck had a conscience. Anyway, dead men were a lot harder to carry than live ones.

\* \* \*

It was the dawn of manned spaceflight. Well, okay – more like just after tea time. The Terran Empire had been around since – well, a century or so ago, and more colonies were being established every year. *Tordrazil* was one of those planets that any average citizen of said Empire had probably never heard of, at least, not unless they were investors in the *Beljan Interstellar Mining Company*, and if they were really studious about reading the company prospectus and cared where their minerals came from. That particular company specialized in deep space mining operations, and also the transportation of raw materials and related equipment. Oh, there were other similar companies in the same field, but Beljan Interstellar was the largest, having a fleet of mineral survey ships and loderunners almost an eighth the size of the Imperial Space Fleet, which as you can imagine, was pretty darn big. If there was a demand for it, Beljan Interstellar would be out there digging it up. The Tordrazil operation was their latest, and of necessity, it was on the fringe of then explored space. How else could they stay ahead of claim jumpers and the competition?

*TR424 Duval* was on such loderunner belonging to Beljan Interstellar. She was of the Bannor class, and equipped for long-term deep space voyages. Bannor class ships required little maintenance. Fully automated, the Duval had a remarkably long fuel endurance, which meant it could be out for years at a time, much to the

consternation of the small and less vital crew – but more about that a little later.

Bannor class loderunners were not to be taken lightly. Just one look would convince you that you were facing *gigatons* of hi-tech transport. With a length of 4.3km and a beam of 800 meters, it would be a gross understatement to call such a vessel at the peak of modern Terran starship engineering a mere ‘loderunner’. In its five major mixed cargo holds, the Duval could carry enough food supplies to feed a whole Terran colony for several months. The Duval was, as a consequence, a very profitable ship, which was just as well, because the Bannor class didn’t come cheap.

This particular example was only eleven years old and had been cruising the regular Samor – Barantis run for the past five years. Transporting ores and metals was the main purpose of these ships, but sometimes there would be open spaces in the cargo holds – and Management didn’t like open spaces. Open spaces were bad for business. Open spaces in the payload could result in another open space in the crew or loading dock manifests, so to keep Management happy a portion of the Duvals’ cargo space would be assigned to carry items dispatched by private individuals – and sometimes, even a small compliment of passengers... that is, passengers who didn’t mind long periods between stops without many sights to see, unless cruising the arse-end of the galaxy was their thing. On the plus side, it was cheaper than a ticket on one of the really big cruise-liners... and it was more *subtle* way to travel.

Currently however, the Duval’s cargo manifest boasted several superkegs of export-quality Samorian sherry, a variety of miscellaneous industrial, colonizing and farming equipment. Aside from all that, she also had on board a vast cargo of semi-processed platinum ore on route to the heavy industries on Gorda. All told, that would take care of the Duval’s traveling arrangements for the next year or so, or pretty much.

Being the skipper of such a vessel was not a stressful job, despite the sheer size of the thing – which was enormous! Everything on the ship was completely automated, which meant this behemoth could be efficiently handled by the ship’s computer – or, by a far less seasoned captain than the one she currently had. Besides, the Company knew that hiring mature skippers with actual experience would cost them *real* money – and hey, the computers ran everything anyway.

Everything on Duval was automated, from navigation to engineering. Even transportation fees were negotiated with Head Office via the interweb. No negotiating skills were needed on the part of the crew whatsoever. Despite the

overabundance of automation, insurance companies still wouldn't insure fully automated ships unless they had at least a token crew aboard, so that's what he and the other eleven were – a *token* crew. The small crew of twelve was only there in case – gods forbid – something went wrong that the computer couldn't handle – or with the computer itself. And at least, if something did go wrong – gods forbid – and horribly so, the company would only have to answer for the loss of a mere twelve people, and not several hundred.

It is on this note that Captain Bran Johannsen enters our tale – as a fine young 25 year-old man, a relatively inexperienced graduate of the Merchant Space Academy in Mars City, who only got his Executive Officer's ticket four short years ago. His demeanor as he sat back and relaxed on top of a bar stool alone in the ship's recreation area belied his true feelings about his choice of career. The observation deck was nice and quiet. “Deserted” would be a better word. His feelings on the matter aside, it wasn't all bad, being a passenger on his own ship, especially considering he was getting paid for it.

The rest of his potentially expendable crew was either sleeping or eating – or both, in various amusing combinations. Only five of them would be on duty at any particular time – two on the main bridge, one in medical, one in cargo control and one in engineering, although mostly – with nothing to keep them occupied – they could be found in their cabins watching movies or pursuing their latest hobby. The computer would handle everything as far as navigation and management was concerned. All they had to do was be there and watch and to give the occasional input. Bran couldn't help feeling that he wasn't needed. Perhaps this was for one very obvious reason – he really wasn't. This wasn't good for his ego, this not feeling important gig. Sometimes Bran even felt like a stowaway on his own ship, out of place, like he didn't belong there. His dreams had slowly changed...until they weren't the same anymore – they'd adopted the tendency to become worn out through all the editing and reediting and sometimes, the complete redrafting of the script.

He'd joined the Company four years ago with his brand new Skipper's ticket in one hand and in the other, a bag filled with all his worldly possessions, ready, keen and eager to see the galaxy... and found himself posted to the Duval. At first, it was great – but then, perhaps inevitably, boredom struck. There was no excitement in his day anymore. After a while, the sheer thrill of riding a huge space ship as it accelerated to beyond the speed of light became as dull as a ride on a Mars City bus – with even less scenery, if that were possible. He'd sought relief for his boredom in different ways. Relationships? *With crew*? Hmm. That might alleviate the boredom

somewhat – but then again, too risky – besides, he knew where all of them had been, and in some cases, where they were headed.

Even the regular girl-in-every-port-phase had slowly ground to a halt for Bran. After a few years visiting the same old ports, Bran had found he'd already run through all the pickings to be had at all their regular stops... and aside from local company that took payment, his options were rather slim. Generally his dockside flings provided little real distraction or excitement – with the possible exception of the last girl he'd canoodled with on Salus. Bran remembered her husband somewhat resentfully as a violent, unfriendly man with a tendency to just turn up without warning and start shooting at him. The local Sheriff wasn't too thrilled about it either at first, and it cost Bran practically a whole month's pay to keep Management from hearing about it.

Consequently, Bran generally kept to himself socially, and didn't hold with paid company either, particularly since the rest of his crew had from time to time made a game out of comparing STD's and running a monthly pool on who could catch the most exotic one. "Show 'n Tell" they called it, giving a little irritated eye-roll at the thought... He hadn't actually bleached his eyeballs after the first time his crew members began a session in the canteen one night after dinner, but part of him wished he had. At any rate, his crewmates now knew never to do that in his company again, so they kept him out of that activity since.

Bran Johannsen was more than just bored, he was beginning to feel that he might be depressed. Having not much else to do meant he had a shit-ton of time to just sit and think – that was the main problem – he *thought*. He thought all the time. He fantasized and dreamed – not about his future, or to plan, or about anything really constructive... no, he'd begun to doubt himself. Lately he spent hours thinking about his choices in life – the choices that led him to this particular point in his life, to this career, to stagnation, where his once bright shiny dreams had faded, wilted, turned brown, and had started to sprout molds and spores and to look more interesting in a gothic sort of way. These days, to pass the time, Bran often caught himself day-dreaming about one of his crew having an industrial accident – perhaps one of his less favorite subordinates, just to liven up the unending tedium. In his fantasies, the decks were awash with blood, strewn with fallen limbs and the silence drowned by frantic screaming... He caught himself start to smile again, and shuddered.

Tearing himself away from the cruel fantasy, he looked back at his former life... *former* because here on this ship – this nothingness, limbo – it didn't feel like

life. It was like he was asleep, or in a coma – while back home, and everywhere else, people carried on living their lives. Here in the belly of this ship, time stood still. Limbo? No, wait, perhaps it was more like a Purgatory, where he couldn't live life as such, but he could review his past mistakes and berated himself for them... It occurred to him that perhaps he'd gone to the *wrong* Academy. Instead of the Merchant Space Academy, he should've enlisted in the Space Fleet! The guys in the Space Fleet – the ones he met sometimes when he visited spaceport bars and so on – always had more interesting stories to tell. You know, tales about the dude who got vaporized in a plasma accident in the engineering section, or the chick who got turned into a blob of weird space jelly by some alien virus – or the time someone flew a starship into an astor-field at warp four by mistake (apparently they were still trying to find the black box on *that* one). The Imperial Space Fleet's recruiting office sure didn't go around advertising '*Join up, see the universe, meet interesting aliens and die screaming*', but it was known there were risks involved. It was part of the job after all, and yet somehow, *they* still got recruits signing up in droves! Yes, indeedy – their stories were far more interesting than *his* – took a load of ore to Gorda, nothing happened. Took a load of mining equipment back to Tordrazil, nothing happened then either. Took a load of machinery to Salus – more nothing – picked up and dropped off a few passengers on the way – and, you guessed it, no action there either.

Through the huge observation windows, each spanning at least ten feet and almost reaching the whole stretch between the deck and ceiling, he could see the star-splattered universe outside. Even through triple layers of alloyed plasti-steel, it reminded him – more than ever – of an ant's view of the inside of a shower nozzle. The Duval was about to enter the next system where they were due to stop for a brief layover.

Just about the only time something had happened to liven things up, was the time when the Duval's previous cargo-master was incinerated by a female Florpavian flame bird with a bad case of hiccups. Of course it had been an accident – perhaps even an industrial one – the birds were notoriously dangerous cargo... as nigh on every loderunner skipper and cargo master in the galaxy knew. They were damned tricky to transport – which is probably the only reason he'd had any entertainment at all on that trip... How long? About six months previously – it felt like *years* by Bran's reckoning. The female of the species was widely known to be way more stable than the male – chemically stable, that is – perhaps similar to most other species. The male birds, on the other hand, only tended to explode unexpectedly. As a result, almost all Florpavian Flame-birds transported through space would be female. Males would as a rule only be transported if they'd been

suitably sedated – in other words, rendered unconscious with good drugs, and transported in a cryogenics chamber – preferably lined with lead and concrete.

Still...even that little flash in the pan had only provided temporary relief. All Bran had to do was fill in a few reports about the incident, send a few emails – and the Company took care of everything, including insurance and funeral arrangements (matchbox and postage). He also made a mental note to stay as far away from Florpavian Flame-birds as possible in future. The more uneventful his job was, he'd felt initially, the safer it was going to be for him. Well, so far, so good. He was safe, but bored. Bored, bored, bored. But he was safe. Bran was far more likely to live long enough to spend the all the money he'd saved from this rather lucrative gig... one day. Who the hell *else* got paid what *they* did for the amount of *actual* work? Seriously.

“*Money* – now, money’s important!” He thought with resentful positivity, other than politicians who got paid to fool themselves into thinking they actually ran the Terran Empire, he couldn’t think of anyone. Well, except maybe the crews of *other* Bannor class ships. A few more years of this lark and he would be able to retire before he even reached 30. Then he could *really* start living! Until then, he was stuck here aboard the SS Nowheresville, thinking up amusing ways for his crew to become statistics.

Thing is, he really, really didn’t like where this seemed to be headed. It wouldn’t be long, he felt, before he would start talking to the potted plants on the rec-dec. Trouble was – as bad as he made his lot out to be – one of them would *actually* talk back to him. Like, really. It would *talk*. Bran Johannsen didn’t like talking plants; it made him doubt his sanity a little more than he already did.

An artificial voice with a hint of *dictator* about it, came over the intercom and derailed his train of thought.

“General - announcement. (Pause) We - are - now - entering - the - Ramalama - System. (Pause) E-T-A - Deanna - orbit - twenty - three - hours - six - minutes. No - crew - action - required. Thank - you.”

“*I only want to hear vun click!*” Bran muttered sarcastically in mock-Nazi under his breath, just as the distant sphere of one of the outer planets crawled into view and distracted him from his intended routine of holding two fingers vertically under his nose and raising his right hand in a little mock Nuremburg salute. The sphere was a breath-taking swirl of multicolor cloud patterns, which created the impression that it could’ve been the last work of a mad artist with a fondness for narcotics.

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