

DEMONSPAWN



Christina Engela

Demonspawn By Christina Engela

Copyright 2018 Christina Engela
eBook Edition

eBook Edition License Notes

This eBook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This eBook may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your enjoyment only, then please purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

Demonspawn

Imagine, if you will:

The battle cruiser was lost. In the desolation of the vastness of space, all was silent. All, that is, except for the screaming. Then that too fell mercifully silent.

Captain Armon Kaine was the last of his crew that had survived – or at least, if any others were still alive, he was unaware of them. It didn't seem likely, given the circumstances. Somehow that... *thing* had managed to kill every one of his crew within the space of only a few days! All had died horribly – mangled and mauled to death!

At first the deaths had been taken as freak accidents, being at first sight unrelated and spaced far apart... but that was just *at first*. How were they supposed to know, after all? How was *he* supposed to know? Then, as suspicion was aroused, murder seemed the cause – but not long after, even this conclusion proved wholly inadequate. Soon it became crystal clear that it was no natural thing that hunted them.

Sabotage isolated them, cut the ship off from home – and without the communications system, any hope of outside help had been thwarted. Then the worst of it began... slowly at first, and then quicker. Frantic sightings of frightening things – *horrible things* seen by the crew – led to chaos. One by one, they were being picked off – starting in the lower levels at first, the killer began to move its way up... The crew, terrified, opted to die fighting and went hunting for their attacker. Kaine's only regret was that they found it.

It killed them all.

Systematically.

He wondered how he would meet Death. Soon it would be his turn. Kaine knew this all too well. There was nothing now that could stop it. But there was still a chance that he could choose the manner of his demise; the manner in which Kaine would meet his end. His crew – warriors all, had put up one hell of a fight! His ship – once the brightest pearl in the crown of the fleet was a mess now, in every sense of the word. Systems were in disarray, damaged equipment malfunctioned, and pieces of

control panels shattered by blaster-fire littered the decks. In the fighting, severe hull damage had caused parts of the ship to be sealed off. Dead bodies – or raw red chunks of them – lay everywhere. His ship had been desecrated, just as their bodies were – it was an abattoir!

The corridors were dark where the lights had failed. His footsteps echoed eerily as he ran down them. He'd been on the run for what felt like days. He felt naked; his tattered, sweat-drenched tunic clung to his body, especially under his breastplate. Fatigue had caused him to discard his body amour. It was of no realistic use anyway, and just made him hotter and sweatier, made stealthy movement more difficult – and only weighed him down.

The weapon he held in his sweaty grip was one of a small consignment of prototypes received at the last port of call. The expert report had called it the most powerful hand weapon in the known universe. He choked. That would soon be put to the test!

Fear clutched at his heart with icy fingers, and as he wiped sweat from his stinging eyes, he fought it off. His breathing was heavy, labored. He knew the thing must already be after him, stalking him, tightening the noose. After all, if he was the only one left alive on this tomb of a ship, what else would it have to do? His sharp warrior's senses functioned as well as any tactical battle computer, and it felt like a thousand eyes were staring holes into his back! Glancing round furtively, listening for the faintest sound, he forged his way onward. If he could just reach the bridge, there was a chance he could stop it. Just a chance – he would die as well – but he'd take it!

'What madness would create such a thing?' He wondered.

He had to end the madness – stop the slaughter. His will was iron, his course set. That *thing* must not be allowed to get out of his ship and kill again – it had to end right here, right now! His nerves were overtaxed, almost over the edge – he was relying on instinct to keep him going. Kaine's sanity seemed to be slipping out of his grasp, but he had to hold on – he had to. Long enough to make certain the trail of blood would end here.

With him.

Finally the bridge door loomed ahead. The end was in sight! The door slid open and he stumbled weak-kneed through. Several mounds of mangled flesh – all that

remained of his last bridge crew, lay sprawled on the deck grid in welcome. Most of the lights had failed in there, leaving the bridge mostly in shadow.

Kaine closed the thick steel security door as quickly as his shaking fingers would operate the control panel. It had been designed to ward off mutineers, perhaps even an enemy boarding party... but never anything quite like *that!* Then he locked it, and turned and faced the desecrated bridge. Alone now, he set his teeth grimly. The destroyed bodies that lay at his feet had had names once, just hours before... Kremin and Horek. They'd promised him they'd hold the bridge at all costs, until his return. They'd been good men... faithful to the end! He owed them this – as their commander!

Now he could put his plan into action, if he had enough time. He was going to order the computer to cause a deliberate imbalance in the drive system, which would cause a huge explosion – destroying the ship! *His* ship! He was Armon Kaine, commander of this putrid hulk – this sad, desecrated corpse of a ship, and he was going to die with it – but he was going to take that damned vile thing with him!

The machine demanded a series of access codes. As he entered the first, a faint whispering sound startled him, causing him to snatch up the sweep laser. All was silent. He mentally replayed the sound in his mind – it had sounded like metal on metal... Could he have imagined it? He listened intently.

Nothing.

Swallowing, he put the weapon back down on the console and entered the second code. Then, suddenly, there was a sound like a marble dropping on the floor – bouncing slowly, gradually getting faster as it dropped lower and lower...until it faded away. *The thing was toying with him!* Where was it? He strained his hearing, but all was again silent. He wanted to shout and scream obscenities at the monster, but he fought the impulse. It might not really know his location after all – and that would've only led it right to him! It must be coming for him! Surely it must be by the door by now, looking for a way in. Perhaps it would try to trick him into opening it? Time was running out! Kaine hastily keyed in the third and final access code.

Death the destroyer never is late!

The words of the old proverb of his people still milling in his mind, he hastened to complete the final destruct commands with quivering fingers. The shortest available

countdown time was thirty *honarks* – that’s how long it would take to create an imbalance in the main reactor. There was no access code required to stop the countdown. Clutching the sweeplaser, he punched the final key. The countdown began. If *it* got in here now, he’d have thirty honarks to keep it away from the computer and aborting the destruct sequence! Kaine firmed his grip on the sweeplaser. He thought of his wife and his family. His two young children... A home he wouldn’t see again in this life. Thirty honarks to live wasn’t long, but he intended to live them well.

If dying’s all that’s left – then die well!

The noise came again, rustling like metal on metal. Was it toying with his mind, or was he starting to snap? Playing games like it did with the others? Perhaps it was trying to find a way to trick him into opening the door after all... He hadn't seen anything yet though. That thought brought with it a rising wave of raw fear. He swallowed. Maybe it couldn't get in after all. Each passing moment reduced the hunter’s chances of stopping it – and brought him closer to eternity and his ancestors.

There was a sudden muffled thump inside the room. Behind him. Kaine turned, bringing the sweeplaser round with him. With a sudden sickening shock he realized it was *there* – straightening up from behind a control desk *where it had been all along!* The monster had lain in wait for him! Death was right on time.

Kaine, suddenly afflicted, staggered backward on legs of ether. He saw it clearly – a dark, bulky shadowy shape! His stomach turned with terror! What remained of the bridge lighting seemed to fade away around him, into total blackness. *It* was there – not the frightful illusions the others had seen – but *the thing* itself, unmasking itself to its last victim. Somehow the reality was much more frightening... It advanced on him with the rhythmic click of Death. Kaine knew that if he were to start screaming now, he would go irretrievably mad! Instinct had left him momentarily cold, frozen.

If dying’s all that’s left – then die well!

The sweeplaser came up and Kaine fired, screaming all his hate and anger and fear and hopelessness at it. Sparks flew. The flashes lit up the dead bridge and flammable material in the small room burst suddenly aflame. The chunks of bodies on the deck sizzled... globs of melted metal and plastic rained down around them... But it was not enough. Something dark and unstoppable stepped through the blasts of light and energy and the curtain of flame that had lit the bridge – and as it loomed

over him menacingly, appreciating his astonishment, his fear and hopelessness – at that moment, he knew it was over. Kaine lowered the weapon and stood there, facing the Reaper. A light spectrum filled his eyes and he heard himself scream as his life boiled away, and a sound like a waterfall filled his head. Then there was nothing. All was still. All over the ship, the remaining lights and equipment shut down. Darkness fell with an echoing clang that spanned the millennia.

* * *

Commander Joe Lofflin knocked back a tumbler of Scotland’s Finest to brace himself. He’d spent the last few hours preparing to face the crew, without too much success. He’d tried thinking up speeches, taking notes – even reading philosophy. He finally decided on a glass of scotch. Not on the rocks – there were no rocks because the icemaker was broken. He chuckled wryly to himself. Even the bloody glass was cracked! That said it best, didn’t it? Although Lofflin usually took a dim view of drinking while on duty, he’d made an exception. *Humph*. An *exceptional* exception. For exceptional circumstances! Lofflin figured he needed some kind of reinforcement for the task that lay at hand... After all, it’s not easy to tell two hundred and twenty six people they’re going to die.

Up until three days ago, I.S.S. Mordrake had been a fully functional Benatar class cruiser of the Imperial Space Fleet. That is, until the incident at Horner’s World – an isolated desolate chunk of rock in the furthest known, godsforsaken reaches of the Omega Quadrant – a vast stretch of barely charted, let alone *known*, space. Now, thanks to the ill-considered actions of Captain Philip Wainright Blaine – that bombastic old bastard, the task of telling two hundred and twenty six crewmen to prepare to die fell to yours truly – Joe Lofflin.

Two hundred and twenty six!

It was a frightening thought! A sobering thought – which was why it was so hard for Lofflin to actually get drunk that day... the thought of certain death kept seemingly counteracting the effects of the alcohol. Certain death by hypoxia – freezing cold and suffocation, as the ship’s waning emergency batteries gradually and inexorably wore down... Death looked pretty damned certain alright!

Or was it? In space, not all things were certain... not even death.

And yet, here they were. So many men and women, confined together in a floating metal, artificial, technological tomb – so much collective talent, skill and experience

– and none of it any use to them! There was nothing they could do to prevent it! So they'd given up... They'd already done all that was Humanly possible, after all. There was only so much that a superbly skilled crew could do with tons of steel and plastic.

Two shuttles were left intact onboard the ship, but they were useless as they were well out of range of any safe haven. In emergencies, one shuttle could carry 40 people – but would run out of oxygen in as many hours. That minor detail had settled any argument. If they couldn't all go, then none of them would. Besides, where could they go to? They were well out of range of any of the nearest colonies. Lofflin sighed, fighting back the heavy tide of emotion. He'd been sitting on his sofa most of the day, staring numbly at old pictures of his friends, family – of home. ...A home he'd never see again.

Unless there was some kind of miracle.

Commander Lofflin had seen too few miracles in space to expect one now. Every breath he drew was one less – another step closer to the end. Death was certain... by asphyxiation and cold, as the life support systems inexorably drained their remaining power. The collar of his tunic seemed to tighten around his throat, choking him. He tugged at it, cursing his captain again mentally.

'Damn Blaine! Damn the man! The bastard knew we weren't fighting fit, but he had to go and engage them!' Pouring another glass, Lofflin allowed his mind to rewind three days back, to the circumstances that had brought them to this accursed part of space...

Some people said space was like the ocean. *Never turn your back on it, they said. Never let your guard down or treat it lightly. If you play with it, it'll kill you.*

In all of known space, including the vast reaches of the Terran Empire, the Omegan Quadrant – which lay on its fringes – was very likely the most dangerous place to go. Within its unexplored wastes lived the Corsairs. The Corsairs were space pirates, who had their own fleet, colonies and society. They were originally of Earth stock, but followed their own code, and were known to act mercilessly against any foreign ship or colony encountered. For the most part, they made forays into Terran space, harassed colonies and arbitrarily laid waste to anything that took their fancy. As the expansionist, though generally peaceful policy of the Empire pushed back the frontier of unknown space, exploring and establishing outposts and colonies along the way, they were met with an increasingly hostile threat to their young

colonies... Corsairs would often rain down on the youngest, most under-defended colonies from the dark reaches of space, looting, sacking and pillaging. In the space lanes, lone unmarked black Corsair marauders raided convoys of supply ships, plundering loderunners and even stealing the ships themselves to build their fleet.

For many years now, colonists had borne the burden of Corsair attacks. The Space Fleet had ships on patrol, but space is a big place – there were only so many ships, and a lot more space... The Corsairs often slipped through the net, and got clean away with their loot, before the blood on their hands even dried. Everybody knew what the Corsair's called their home world – Turtle Island, or its other name – Meradinis... but what nobody knew – that is, except for the Corsairs themselves, was the location of Meradinis. So, the Corsairs would raid *here*, and while the Fleet responded as quickly as they could, the Corsairs retreated, and raided *there*... and so it went, on and on, for years and decades, seemingly without end. The Fleet's inability to find the Corsair home world after all this time was what had prevented the Terran forces from actually combating the threat and taking it out at the root – and until they knew where to find the Corsairs, or figured out how to be everywhere at once, nothing would change.

The Corsair's intelligence was excellent. This led to the suspicion that they had spies and agents at ship yards, space docks, star bases, colonies, and perhaps even in the Space Fleet itself. They seemed to have a knack for striking only at the least well-defended settlements, which seemed both terrifying and abhorrent at the same time. Raping, killing, looting, pillaging, wanton violence – hell, if there was a word to describe all the things they did in *one word*, Lofflin still hadn't found it! Their list of crimes against Humanity was piling up to the point of becoming an obscene parody of the Space Fleet's inability to protect the Colonies.

These horrific and small scale attacks had been gradually increasing in size, scope, brazenness and frequency until just two years before, a fleet of black Corsair ships had descended on three local colonies simultaneously and killed almost a hundred thousand people, mostly civilians. The commonwealth media named the atrocity *the Christmas Massacres*.

In a desperate attempt to even the odds, Space Fleet increased recruitment efforts, and instead of retiring several older ships, put them into a refitting program to prolong their lives and increase the ship-count of the Main Fleet. The Phoenix Refitting Program resulted in a twenty percent increase in patrols to be made of the frontier worlds, while newer, larger warships were built to directly tackle this invisible enemy. Finally, just three months ago, the Imperial Senate had tasked the

Space Fleet to make forays into the Omegan Quadrant with the following objectives:

1. Locate the Corsair home world.
2. Engage any Corsair ships with the aim of fulfilling point 1.
3. Otherwise capture or destroy any Corsair vessels encountered by any means necessary.

The crew of the Mordrake had followed those orders for three months now; three months without a pause, patrolling the fringes of the OQ while in the last few weeks their ship experienced technical problems and equipment failures. Most of the time they found nothing, hearing rumors of Corsair sightings from passing loderunners and other traders on the fringes of known space, until three days ago – when they were finally heading back to a repair base with technical problems. The stardrive had gone on the fritz to the extent that it was becoming unreliable. Blaine had known the condition of the ship when he ordered them in pursuit of the Corsair. He'd simply chosen to ignore it.



Joe Lofflin carelessly tossed the photos at the chair against the bulkhead. They thudded onto the seat and slid over sideways. He was the first officer, the Exo – and if anyone knew the Captain was a tough, thick-skinned stubborn son of a bitch, it was him. ...And that's the way it used to be – the *old* Blaine... not the new one. Where was the Captain now? After hearing the damage reports... after he'd realized what he'd done – how much his selfish glory-seeking pride had *cost* them – he quietly slunk off to his cabin and refused to answer any calls.

Lofflin had tried to talk to the man, to reason with him. Later the same day, after he'd given a hand to the rescue and recovery effort of the crew, he went to see him at his cabin – but Captain Blaine had locked his door. Not that protocol allowed Joe Lofflin to just try the handle and barge in – at least under normal circumstances... Blaine would've skinned him alive and nailed his hide to the outside of the door! But, after ringing the door chime continuously for twenty minutes, he eventually did try it – to no avail. Pounding on the door and calling loudly for Blaine to reply didn't help matters either – that only served to draw attention to the fact that the Captain was acting like a child, which also unsettled the crew even more.

That effectively left Lofflin in charge of the ship – or rather, what was left of it. That was three days ago, now. The rumor mill was having a field day – it was all over the ship: '*The Captain's given up on us,*' they were saying. Morale had taken a steep nosedive even before their predicament had become general knowledge, while they were still sweeping up the pieces and patching up the injured... but knowing that the Captain had abandoned them was a nail in their coffin.

Meanwhile, Lofflin knew very well what Blaine was up to in his cabin.

“Getting drunk!” He said out loud. There was an edge of bitterness to his voice. “Probably so smashed up drunk he won't notice when the air runs out!”

‘Damn it! Hiding in his room like a sulking kid! They deserve to hear it from you, Blaine! They deserve to hear it from you!’

Lofflin ground his teeth angrily. Why should he bear it all alone? Then he got up and straightened himself out. A cool shower and a shave helped him feel better. Then he put on aftershave and a clean, crisp set of uniform, and ran a brush over his short brown hair, and left his cabin. He *would* see the Captain – for whatever the man was worth! He'd drag him from his drunken stupor and force him to take back the responsibility of being in charge!

‘Captains don’t have the luxury of abandoning their responsibilities just because they can’t face up to them!’ He thought determinedly as he briskly walked to the Captain’s cabin. It wasn’t that far away from the officer’s section of the general crew accommodation block amidships, and took him all of five minutes, every step echoing in the strangely quiet and deserted corridors. He didn’t see a soul on the way there, nor did he hear a sound of life – not even as he passed the – he felt all alone on this normally bustling and busy ship, and he could even hear the extractor fans working above the grid work of the ceiling! It was so quiet he could almost hear his own breathing. *‘How do you tell a man he’s going to die? Well, Blaine – Captain – you’re going to share your thoughts with me on that!’*

Lofflin rang the chime. There was no answer. He tried again, with the same result. He wasn’t in the mood for a repeat performance of his previous attempt to see the Captain. Then he put his ear to the door and listened. He heard music... The words were drawled, American. If he strained his hearing, it sounded like country music... Seriously, Blaine? It was real depressing stuff! But then, wasn’t everything right now?

He started banging on the door again with his fist until it occurred to him there was only one way he was going to see Blaine – his security access code. He punched it into the keypad beside the door. A green light on the faceplate winked on and the door unlocked itself. He turned the knob and opened it a crack, noticing that no light showed through the gap. Consequently, when he swung it open, the fact that it was the largest cabin on the ship – practically an apartment – having a lounge, dinette, bedroom and bathroom, went completely unnoticed. The music was just reaching a heartbreaking crescendo, something indefinite about a horse with a flowing mane and a girl with big boobs – it was hard to tell from the song which was which. Under ordinary conditions, Lofflin would’ve laughed at it.

“Captain?” He called from the doorway. Receiving no answer, he took a few steps into the darkness. “Lights!” He ordered the computer.

In a blinding instant, it was as though the room had never been dark at all. Little green spots clouded his vision for a long moment before his eyes became accustomed to the bright light. His eyes swept the room – he was in the lounge. On the other side of the room, a low archway led into an open plan kitchen-cum-dining area. It allowed the Captain of the ship a little more freedom, some privacy – and even the opportunity to host guests for dinner and so on. It was, Lofflin knew, one of the few privileges of the position. Against one wall stood an opulent sofa, possibly old leather, and in front of it, a glass coffee table cluttered with books and

ornaments. It looked as though Blaine had been scratching through his mementoes. A few small empty boxes lay in a pile on the opposite side of the room. On the bulkhead behind the sofa was a large mirror with a picture of the ship etched on it in the center. The ship's name and number were visible along the bottom edge: "*I.S.S. Mordrake AT-995*". His view panned across to the other side of the room, where he spotted the Captain. Blaine was on a chair, slumped forward over the round glass-topped dining room table, a glass still in his hand. Lofflin shook his head, having half-expected to find Blaine skulking inside a blanket-fort on his bed, perhaps sucking his thumb! He stalked over to him, every nerve twanging with disgust at the childishness of the man under the circumstances! He reached past an open bottle of alcohol on the table and shut off the portable player, causing some of the detritus piled beside it to move. Blaine's eyes jumped open in an instant – bloodshot and bleary. He reeked of booze – his mouth was still open and he'd drooled over some old newspaper clippings his head was lying on.

"Joe!" Blaine groaned, attempting to speak clearly. "Joe! Good ol' Joe!" "Captain, you're drunk!" Lofflin said, stating the obvious while trying to keep his voice level. Blaine grinned at him lopsidedly and giggled, almost choking. He slapped the table, knocking his empty glass over. It began to roll towards the edge of the table, until Lofflin caught it and replaced it right way up. "Ye-ss, of course I am! Don't ssup-pose you – think I co-uld ssit here an' calmly wait t'die – d'you? Weee-ll, not ssob-er anyway. Ha ha ha."

Disgust and hopelessness swelled inside Lofflin – he felt like punching that drunken face till it was either sober or unconscious, or ...gone. Right at that moment, the latter seemed the most attractive option.

"*Damn it, Captain! We need you – the crew needs you!*" Lofflin scowled. "You're turning your back on them – in our most desperate time!"

Blaine grappled for a bottle on the table, knocking over a silly little model of the Tower of Freedom on Ba Jel on the way, and proceeded to fill his glass with poor co-ordination – and whisky.

"The cr-ew?" He said, becoming serious momentarily. "Damn th-e damned crew. They're all...dam-ned! Cass-ualties of war. Tha's wha' they'll say back at the Fl-heet... Core Com-mand! All of us! Wastin' your breath, silly fellow." He slurred again. "Took me days t'git this'loshed an' arm not..." he paused to half-drain his glass. "Goin' t'go back, see – sso sst-op wastin' yer time!"

Lofflin felt the anger rising inside him. It was an uncharacteristic anger, and before

he could stop himself, he felt one of his hands grab the man's tunic at the shoulder, while the other slapped the glass flying! His knuckles stung from the blow, but he was past caring! *To hell with the consequences*, he thought – what the hell could they do to him that was worse than the fate awaiting them? Then he grabbed the Captain by the other shoulder as well, and shook him.

“*Damn it, sir* – we have to expect the worst, but this is no time to turn your back on us – your crew – the crew you took an oath to protect and lead!” He grabbed the half empty bottle from the table and brandished it under Blaine's nose, his bloodshot eyes swimming in shock. Lofflin was shouting now, but was beyond caring. “Does *this* help you to forget that oath, Captain? Does it make it any easier to ignore the pool of *shit* you dropped us in? Will *this* make your guilt go away?”

Lofflin ran out of steam. What was the use anyway? The man was beyond reach, and there was nothing that really could be done further in any case – except for each of them to make peace with their fate and with whatever set of gods they favored. As if that would make any damned difference! He let the limp, bedraggled man go, bumping the table. A sheaf of old papers slipped from the table top and sighed to the floor. Blaine slumped silently back into his chair, totally deflated. This was not the Captain Blaine who would give clear concise instructions on the bridge, the commander who always had a series of options in his plan, or the man who would stick to protocol and etiquette as if they were etched in stone by one of the Old Gods. This was not the same man Lofflin had known as *Captain*. Sure, Captains weren't perfect – they were only Human, and everybody had faults. The man had been hard and demanding of both ship and crew, but never truly harsh or really unfair, and the crew had respected him, even loved him... maybe – some of the time at least. More than that, they *depended* on him, as did *he*. But this pathetic drunken... *shadow* – wasn't *him*! *This* wasn't Blaine, not the Blaine he knew.

Under normal circumstances, by now, Joe Lofflin would have been restrained by Security Marines and escorted to the brig under arrest – but the shadow just sat there, looking bewildered. Then Blaine began to tremble, with grief and with guilt. He looked up at Lofflin, his bloodshot eyes making erratic contact with his own.

“I...” He croaked, lips trembling. “I'm... Joe, I'm sorry. You'll never know how sorry...” Greasy tears ran down the shadow's cracked face. Repelled by the sight of the specter, Lofflin turned and walked away, slamming the door on his way out.

Still fuming, Lofflin stormed off toward no particular destination, but eventually made his way to the recreation center. It was empty. Somebody had made an effort

to clean up a bit. Broken bottles and glasses from the bar filled a large waste bin that stood to one side. The shelves of the bar itself were empty, save for a comic mug that bore the humorous legend ‘*The best man for the job is a woman.*’ It was full of swizzle sticks – just like most of the women Joe Lofflin had known in his life.

That set him wondering how a female Captain would’ve handled the situation. *Hmm. Probably somewhat better*, he thought. They would probably have been at the repair base now, having some ‘r.n.r.’ at the local bar, watching a movie or sport or something. He might’ve been still contemplating his future, meeting the right guy, settling down, starting a family... Realizing that all those hopes and dreams were now moot made him angry again, but he had no energy left at that moment to give vent to it. Instead, he just stared at his surroundings, and leaned on the bar counter. He was hungry, and he realized with surprise that he hadn’t eaten since the previous day.

The mirrors behind the shelves on the wall behind the bar had cracked all different ways. *Kind of like the crew*, he pondered. The pool table was still intact though. He went up to it and leaned on the thick green felt top. *Pretty soon*, he thought, *things are going to start falling apart*. Dying for a cause was one thing, but waiting for death like *this* – useless, wasted – was senseless! Hell, dying for *any* cause was objectionable to him! He thumped the table with a fist. Coming out this far into space was a risk in itself! But this was the life they’d chosen, and they lived with it, every damned day! It was a calculated risk – general accidents, system failures, possibly hostile aliens, fighting Corsairs... anything could happen – life in space was full of surprises, both good and bad!

The Space Fleet recruiting office didn’t fill its quota by advertising ‘*Join up, see the universe, meet interesting people and maybe die screaming*’. Oh no, they were very patriotic about it; in the same way that patriotism was the single cause behind every major war fought since – well, since *History*. ‘*You aren’t going to let THEM do that to US and get away with it, are YOU?*’ it said between the lines of every recruiting poster since the time of bronze spears and iron swords – and lately along the lines of black flags with skulls and cross-bones on them.

The Fleet wasn’t just there to discover habitable worlds or to aid in their colonization – or to defend democracy or freedom, or any other vague, abstract, candy-cane concept. Ever since some hostile aliens called the Ruminarii attacked Earth several centuries earlier, the Space Fleet had existed to defend Humankind against the hostile *inhuman*. The friendly inhuman, nobody had a problem with, obviously – except maybe a few well-hidden nut-cases who slept in underground

fall-out shelters with their blasters under their pillows, and hoarded water and AAA batteries under their beds. The Fleet was also there to defend against Corsair attacks – and just in case they ran into some more Ruminarii – or somebody even worse.

In many ways, the Corsairs were worse than the Ruminarii – because the Ruminarii weren't even Human. They'd attacked Earth just ten years after the Big Nuke in the next step of their intended conquest of the galaxy, and tried in vain to reach the planet after destroying nearly all of Earth's small colonies on Luna and Mars before being driven off again. The young Human upstarts who had only dipped their little toes into the waters of space proved to be hardier foes than the Ruminarii imagined, and the Gimp War lasted five years. Earth was the rock that broke the hull of their expansionist Empire, and they pretty much withdrew and pulled back afterwards. By contrast, Corsairs were not only Human, but they originally came from Earth itself – and subsisted by plundering and murdering their own kind. They were despicable.

No, Lofflin thought grimly, the idea wasn't to die for a cause, no matter how great and glorious – it was to fight for it and to stay alive in order to keep on fighting for it until there was no longer a need to fight anymore! Not to die like *this* – wasted – like spam in a can, awaiting a slow lingering death! He sighed. *Hmm.* That's what they said in World War I, calling it the *Great War* – the War to End All Wars, only it didn't quite work out that way, did it? War isn't great, not great at all. Not by a fucking long shot! No matter how noble the intent was of inspiring people to go to war to make it '*the last war,*' there was always another one to follow, because war breeds war. War is a constant. For some nations, and in some periods in history, it was both way of life *and* the basis of economies.

You've Just Finished your Free Sample

Enjoyed the preview?

Buy: <http://www.ebooks2go.com>