

The Raygin War

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Book Sample

CHAPTER EIGHT: The Vents

Spaz entered the opening first. He jumped up grabbed the vent's edge and hoisted himself into the ventilation shaft. The fit was tight, but there was enough room for them to crawl on their hands and knees, one behind the other. He figured by leading the way, he would have the advantage of seeing possible danger first.

Spaz could see Tews frown as he looked at the distance from the floor to the opening.

"Come on Tews, I have a date later."

Tews jumped up, grabbed the vent, and tried to pull himself up. Smitty watched the entomologist's feet kick for a few seconds and decided to give him a boost. Tews's thin arms didn't have enough strength to jerk his frame into the vent. Smitty positioned himself between Tews's legs and pushed upward.

"Phrrrrrt"

"What the fuck," said Smitty, "You farted on my head! I should have let you dangle there."

Spaz started laughing so hard tears came out of his eyes. In return Smitty squinted at him.

"Sorry Smitty, I didn't do it on purpose. The bugs are giving us some kind of milk mix in our food. I'm lactose intolerant, and I don't have my meds."

"I'm glad I'm in front," said Spaz, "or it would be a long day."

Now it was Smitty's turn to laugh. "Spaz, you poor bastard. The vent you're in is an exhaust line. When Tews shits his pants, the smell will follow you, the whole way. I'll have the captain put you in for a medal. Now get going."

Awe great. "Hey Tews, will your farts attract the bugs?"

"You're confusing Carrion beetles with Dung beetles. Carrions will stay away from feces. I suppose it could be good news for us."

"Enough fart and shit talk. Get going before I climb up there and get you moving myself," said Smitty.

Spaz turned on the light stick hanging around his neck. The duo started inching their way through the vent. They kept turning around to see their vent getting smaller and smaller. When they could no longer see it, they heard Smitty put the vent cover back in place.

After several minutes, Tews stopped. "Spaz, my legs are beginning to cramp. I need to stop for a few minutes."

“Don’t worry, it’s normal. I cramp up too if I exercise too much. When you feel a leg cramp coming on, stop, sit down, grab your feet and stretch your leg. It should go away in a minute or two. The more we move through the vent system, the sooner your unused muscles will adjust.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I haven’t exercised for a decade. I sit all day researching, so I’m sure my muscles have atrophied.” Tews worked on his muscles, stretching his legs and pulling on his feet as the two talked. “You know, Carrion beetles like to tunnel underground. It makes sense they use tunnel designs in their everyday lives. It’s an efficient use of space. A ship constructed of tunnels and chambers provides greater structural strength.”

“So, you’re saying these bugs are smarter than us?” asked Spaz.

“No, I’m saying it depends. If they have been around longer than us, that’s good news.”

“Why? What difference would it make?”

“If humans and the bugs evolved during the same time period, it would tell me the bugs are smarter than us. If they evolved millions of years before us, it would mean we are smarter than them. At this moment in time, their technology is a little more advanced than ours, so it would give them an edge in a war. We have to discover a weakness, have a breakthrough in our own technology, or steal their science.”

“What about the large number of warships we have throughout the universe?”

“I hate to ruin your hope, but Carrion beetles are like roaches. If you see a few of them, there are always thousands more. The bug populations have always outnumbered human populations throughout our evolution.”

“Crap, Tews, you’re full of good news aren’t you? Now I’m depressed.”

“Don’t be, the way I see it, we are much like the bugs in this ship. They are taking advantage of our weaknesses and we are looking for weaknesses in the bugs to exploit. Along the way we can try to steal anything we can. Bugs and humans evolved along different paths. I’m sure we will each have technology the other species did not think about developing.”

“Now you’re talking buddy. Let’s steal their technology. Hell, let’s think big. We can steal their whole fucking ship! Come on, let’s get going.”

If not for the light sticks, traveling through the dark vents would have been impossible. Spaz saw the first fork coming up. One path continued on the same level and the other took a gradual slope downward. Spaz took his homemade marker out and drew a horizontal line with a descending arrow on the joining wall.

“Look Tews, here’s how I’ll label the passageways. I’ll identify the direction we travel with a line and on the joining wall I’ll put an arrow, like this.” Spaz drew a horizontal line connected to a descending line with an arrow. Behind the horizontal line he wrote the letters HP. “To get back to our holding pen, reverse the arrow. In case we get separated, we can each follow the directions as we diagram the ship.”

Tews shook his head at the notion of being alone in the vent system. “If it weren’t for you I’d be fighting my fear every second. Do me a favor, never get separated from me.”

“Let me tell you something a soldier once told me. He said fear is not real.”

“The person who told you that is a liar,” said Tews.

“Let me finish jackass. He said fear is something you create with your thoughts. It’s a choice you make. The danger is real, but not the fear.”

“Spaz, you’re full of crap, but thanks for trying. Do me a favor. Don’t get separated from me. That’s what will help me the most.”

Spaz gave up on trying to help Tews's accept his fears. The two explorers continued to crawl in silence until they came upon a passageway. It led to what appeared to be a storage room. They were both silent while they checked for any sign of occupancy. After several minutes of surveillance, they agreed, the room was empty. Spaz bypassed the alarm wire, pushed the magnetic vent cover out, and pulled it back into the vent setting it aside.

Spaz slid into the room first and helped Tews down from the vent. The room contained twenty cargo boxes. Each box had color markings and unfamiliar writing on the top and side.

Spaz whistled. "Look at the wall behind the boxes. We're in a mini armory. We have these on our ships. Look there," Spaz pointed, "the racks are missing four rifles, it could mean-- "

Spaz stopped talking as the door opened and a bug walked in carrying two rifles. Tews froze in fear. The bug's body jerked in surprise when it saw him standing in front of it. It let off an acid smell. Spaz figured it was a warning for other bugs, so he kicked the door shut. The bug dropped one rifle as it tried to raise the other one. Spaz jumped on its back and tried to strangle it before it could shoot Tews.

The bug dropped the second rifle, and used its forearm to club Spaz on the head. The bug looked at Spaz. He was groggy and couldn't move. For the moment he no longer posed a threat. The bug turned and started moving toward Tews. Spaz watched as he tried in vain to get his own legs to move.

Tews started to move backwards. He reached for the aspirator located in his carry bag. In his haste, he tripped over his own feet and fell on his back. The big bug wasted no time. It moved over him, and raised its arm to deliver a fatal blow. Spaz heard a familiar sound.

Phrrrrrt.

Tews farted. Smelling the vaporous odor, the big bug froze. Its arm was high in the air ready to strike. The confusion gave Spaz the time he needed to jump on its back while pulling out his needle gun. He fired two shots into the big hump part of its neck. The bug dropped with a thud. It died staring at the face of Tews.

Spaz started laughing.

A stunned Tews, still shaken said, "What happened?"

Spaz was laughing so hard he had trouble breathing. He managed to spit out, "Your fart killed it!"

"Get out of here, you're lying."

"Oh yeah, wait till Smitty hears about this. He knows first hand how bad your farts can be. Why, I'll bet you get a medal for being the first person to kill a bug with their ass!"

"You're a funny man. Now get serious. I need to know, what happened to the bug?"

Spaz showed Tews his needle gun. "I put two darts in its – what did you call that big hump? Its thorax."

"Yeah, the thorax. I can't believe two tiny darts killed a big bug."

Those two tiny darts release six prongs in sequence after impact. It causes a corkscrew effect as it opens. The dart leaves behind a four-inch hole. With two darts, I figured I'd hit at least one vital organ. It's good I wasn't too far away. These guns are designed for short range use."

"Nice work. You saved my life."

"The way I figure it, your fart saved your own life."

"You aren't going to let this go are you Spaz?"

"Nope."

"Come on, let's grab some guns and get out of here."

“It’s no use to take them, remember? They won’t work.”

“I have an idea, give me a minute.” Tews grabbed his homemade knife, fabricated by the engineers. He stuck the bug with it, and obtained a smudge of blood. “Hand me a gun.” Tews took the gun and placed his now bloodied finger in the claw hole but nothing happened. “Crap, I was sure this would work. Wait, I have one more idea. Do you have the yellow marker Ruth made for us? It has phosphor in it.”

Spaz handed the marker to Tews. He watched as Tews smeared the marker all over various places on the rifle. This time when Tews slide his bloodied finger into the claw hole, they both saw a weak light.

“I’ll be damned,” said Spaz, “how did you know to do that?”

“I remembered learning a lot bugs can see light in the ultraviolet (uv) range. By using the phosphor marker, the uv light gets absorbed by phosphor material. In turn, it gives off light in the 400 nanometer range making it visible to most human eyes.”

“It’s like I said, you’re the brains, and I’m everything else.”

“Yeah, but let me ask you this Spaz, who killed a fricking bug? Bad ass you, or chicken shit me?”

“Touché Tews. Well played.”

The two looked at each other and began to laugh. Tews squeezed bug blood into a container, so they could operate the stolen bug rifles later.

Spaz walked over to a crate and opened it. “Holy crap, look what I found! We hit the jackpot, it’s loaded with plasma rifles.” They both started to look inside the other containers. Each box contained twenty-two new plasma rifles.

“Looks like they’re ready for some kind of ground fight,” said Tews.

“This is great,” said Spaz. He looked up at Tews to see a shocked look on his face. “No. I mean it’s not great their ready for ground fighting. It’s great we found all these guns here. If we took guns from the rack, I was afraid they would notice right away. Now, we put these two guns back in the rack and steal the rifles from the containers instead. I say we put the big ass bug into an empty box. With any luck, we will be long gone by the time they find it.”

They set a bunch of guns near the vent and crammed the dead bug into a box.

“This place is making me nervous. Let’s get moving,” said Tews.

“You’re right. We still have a lot of exploring to do. Climb into the vent, and I’ll hand some rifles up.”

“Spaz, I can drag no more than two rifles at a time.”

“I know. It’s all right. I’m limited to carrying about four while crawling in the vents. We do like the military does it. We stage a bunch of rifles somewhere we can pick up later. We can get them all up in the vent for now. Afterwards we will move the guns out of sight, and finish exploring the ship. When we go back to the pen, we can send people to pick up the rifles.”

“Okay, good idea. Hey Spaz.”

“What.”

“I want you to know, you’re more than muscle to me. You are an intricate part of our team.”

Spaz grinned. “You’re sucking up to me so I don’t tell Smitty you killed a bug with your fart, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

The ventilation duo moved forty-four rifles into the vent ducts. They placed them in a location where they were out of site, but retrievable. Spaz took the lead again, and started crawling down the same passageway.

After about five minutes of crawling, Spaz could see the light coming from another vent ahead. He turned to Tews and pointed his finger in the direction from which the light was reflecting. As the two made their way to the vent in silence, they could hear a commotion coming through the vent cover. The two peered through the slats in the cover to see what they had found. It was the galley, the ship's kitchen.

Bugs moved in and out of what appeared to be a series of storage units. They placed what looked like decaying vegetables and meat into clear containers. The scene below looked like a restaurant preparing food for customers. But, the bugs weren't scurrying inside the walls; they were doing the food preparations. The bug in charge reached its scaled fingers into the tray and pulled out a large piece of decaying meat. It held the flesh up near its mouth, and snatched it with its mandibles. The bug gripped the large piece of meat and ripped it in two and forced both pieces into its mouth. It chewed a little bit and swallowed.

The bug eating the meat started clicking and hissing. In a flurry of activity dozens of bugs grabbed the prepared trays and left the kitchen. The few bugs left kept preparing the food. Spaz had seen enough and moved back into the vent shaft. Tews watched the bugs for several more minutes.

He too crawled back into the main passageway. "Gross."

"Yeah, I agree, it sucked. I can still remember being a junior trooper and having galley duty. Once you've worked in a galley, you never want to eat another ship's meal. Come on, we have to keep going and look for things we can use."

After seeing the galley, Tews changed, he got quiet. Spaz gave him time to collect his thoughts. He wondered if he was struggling with his younger brother being eaten by the black bugs.

"Look at this Tews. It's some kind of fire suppression system. Must be something important ahead."

The two kept crawling and within minutes they began to hear bug hissing, clicking, and a range of smells. They removed their glow lights and scooted up to the vent cover. There were bugs moving every which way in the large room. Next to each walkway there were walls with what appeared to be dark holes carved into them.

As the two humans watched the activities, they could see the bugs crawling out of holes in the wall. They clicked and hissed at each other, and let off various odors. Some smells pleasing, and some not. Spaz knew from his own experience on various ships they were looking at a berthing area.

He decided they saw all they could see here. It was time to move on. He hand signaled to Tews, and the two started making their way through the passageway once again. Spaz reached the final vent cover situated at the shaft's end. He peeked into the room. It contained one hole in the wall, a display case, a table, and a body armor suit hanging from the wall. It had a red insignia on it. This room must belong to the captain. In the display he could see: a fleet rifle, a plasma burned helmet, and the cleaned skull of a human. There were also several pieces of scrap metal and over it all a screen playing a looped video of Imperial Station firing her defensive guns. The son of a bitch had a victory case!

Spaz was pissed. Tews touched his shoulder and motioned to move on. Spaz shook his head in the affirmative and led the way back to where the passageway split. They made several

trips placing the plasma rifles in the main vent for retrieval later. Spaz finished up by writing on the wall: Armory, Galley, Berthing Area, Bug Captain's Berth.

"Okay Tews. Let's go this way now."

"Spaz, something is bothering me about the bugs."

"Me too. The more I learn about them the more I hate them."

"No, I mean there's something strange. The bugs we are familiar with have tiny little brains. Yet they are able to recognize and remember different humans. They can even count, remember shapes, recognize danger, and much more."

"So what's your problem?"

"These beetles have evolved larger bodies with proportionate heads. I don't know if the brain size has anything to do with their intelligence. I'm sure their thought processes are different than ours. My problem is since bug ships are more advanced than human ships I expected to see more advanced technology throughout the ship. The only place I have seen or heard about their advanced technology is the ship's propulsion, shields, and weapon systems. It doesn't fit."

"You know Tews, you're right. Something was bothering me too. I couldn't put my finger on it until you said it. The way they pen us, the lack of security, the lack of personnel screening, the bug's crummy berthing quarters, the cheesy vent shafts, even their actions don't show great intelligence. We need to talk about this when we get back, but for now, let's finish exploring."

Tews stretched his legs a little more before they continued creeping along on their hands and knees inside the vent shaft. It wasn't long before they came upon another split.

"Want to go straight, or to the right?" asked Spaz.

"Let's go right. Give me a minute, my legs are killing me."

Spaz watched Tews rub his legs. He evaluated the entomologist's fragile physical condition. His friend was pouring sweat, stretching his legs, rubbing his knees, and arching his back. The hunched over crawl was taking its toll. Even his breathing seemed a little more labored. He's on his last legs, its time to give him a mental bone.

"Hey Tews. How about we do two or three more stops, and call it a day."

"Thank God. I didn't want to say anything, but I don't think I have much more energy left in me. I'm not use to all this physical activity."

He grinned and gave Tews some encouragement. "You did good."

Spaz grabbed the marker and drew a line attached to an arrow on the joining wall. They started their trek again. After several minutes of crawling they both began to hear the repeated pop from the alien singularity drive. The alien engineering department had to be ahead. From the next vent, the two humans peered into the engine room. It looked strange compared to human standards.

Spaz whispered in Tews's ear, "Fuck. Look. No wonder their ships are faster. They have two drives in tandem."

"Look at those bugs injecting green goo into that piece of equipment. I have no idea what they are doing. If I had to guess, I'd say it keeps all the equipment running. See, those small lines are attached to everything, including the two drives," said Tews.

"Look over by the wall. I'll bet that's their shield generator. See how big those lines are going into them? They need a lot of power, and the conduits to them come out of each drive. It could be why their shields are stronger than ours. They have more power going to them. We have to get Smitty in here to look at this set-up. Come on Tews, let's get out of here."

The engineering passageway was a dead end. The two started crawling back to the main vent when Tews stopped. Spaz didn't have to ask why. The symptoms spoke for themselves:

frequent stops, he talked less, had a headache, and a feeling of weakness. Tews was on the verge of exhaustion. He watched his friend go through his ritual. He rubbed his calves, stretched his legs, arched his back, and massaged his neck. He sat without saying a word while he tried to find more strength. He felt bad for Tews, but if they wanted their freedom, he had to keep moving. A lot of people were counting on them.

Tews broke the silence. "You know, this ship is huge, but we haven't seen as many spaces as we should have by now. There must be other vents isolated from ours".

Spaz felt surprised. His friend never seemed to stop thinking. "You may be right. There have been a couple long lengths of vent shaft between rooms. Makes you wonder what else this ship is carrying. If that's true, how do you suggest we explore the entire ship?"

"You don't want to know, but I'll tell you anyway. We would have to go out a vent, and into a room. Next, we would have to leave the room and travel perpendicular to the passageway, find another vent and remove the cover. Hop in and begin exploring again. We'd have to do it all over again to get back to the pen."

"I have to tell you, I'm not a fan of your idea."

"I'd calculate our success at less than ten percent."

"We have to find another way to explore the ship because that's not going to happen," said Spaz.

"If we could take over and hold engineering, our chances of success increase to about thirty percent."

"What if we poison the crew before we take control of engineering?" asked Spaz.

"That is a great idea. I would guess our chances of success increase to about forty percent."

"One more question. If you round forty to the nearest increment of fifty what would that be?"

"Fifty, I know you're not that stupid. What are you getting at?"

"I'll tell you what I'm getting at. Stupid me just increased our odds of success to fifty percent, and I can live with fifty-fifty odds."

Tews shook his head. "Come on. Let's get going."

"Do you want to go back to the holding pen?" asked Spaz, hoping Tews would continue on instead. He didn't mind the rest stops, but their lives were at stake. They needed the intelligence. He crossed his fingers, hoping Tews would push on.

"Man, I'd like nothing more than to go back. My head's pounding, my body aches, and I have sweat so much I'm starting to smell like you."

"Be careful, my musky smell is what attracts the females."

Tews burst out laughing. "Yeah, maybe female dung beetles."

Spaz started crawling towards Tews. When he was close enough, he grabbed his head, and started pulling it towards his armpit.

"Stop. Stop it. You win. I'll keep going, you little rat bastard."

Spaz released Tews, smiled, and said, "What made you change your mind?"

"If I'm going to pass out, it may as well be on my terms, not yours."

"Come on buddy. Let's go find a way to kill more bugs."

Spaz held out his fist. Tews smiled and gave him an exploding fist bump. They started to crawl again. When they got to the main vent, Spaz labeled the arrow on the wall with the word engineering. The glow sticks still put out a decent amount of light, but not enough to see down the long main corridor.

In time, they came upon another T.

“Which way Tews?”

“Let’s go left.”

“Okay, but I have a bad feeling about your choice.”

“So we go right instead.”

Spaz grinned at Tews. “Okay, but I have a bad feeling about that way too.”

Tews couldn’t help but laugh. “Did I ever tell you my parents wanted me to study psychology? This caused a great conflict within me, because I wanted to focus on bugs. My solution was to study both fields at the same time. In the end my parents accepted my love of entomology. Why is this important you might ask? I recognize crazy when I see it. I also know you’re trying to distract me from my physical pain with what you perceive to be witty wordplay. You must have learned a few simple medical tricks in military field training.”

“You know Tews, a simple thank you, would have been fine. Did it work?”

Tews stretched his back and rubbed his neck. “I’ll be darn. My headache is gone.” He smiled at Spaz as he patted him on the shoulder. “Thank you.”

The two friends kept crawling. The length of vent seemed to go on forever. Spaz passed an isolation point in the air moving system. Something important was ahead again. He stopped to let his partner catch up. “Do you want to rest?”

Tews stopped and sat in silence for a moment. “Can you hear the clicking? It’s bugs. They’re talking to each other.”

“I can’t hear shit.”

“Let’s keep going. I want to see what they’re up to,” said Tews.

Spaz stopped crawling when he came upon a small cavity offset from the main vent. He stuck his head into the dark tiny room. It seemed loaded with high tech electronic equipment. “Look at this. It’s some kind of transmitter and receiver. It’s hard wired and has a back up power supply. What’s it doing in a vent?”

“Its placement had to occur during the ship’s construction. Someone wanted to hide the equipment. There has to be hundreds of locations better suited to place this antenna system,” said Tews.

“Do you think they have bug spies on their ships? Man, look at the little antenna. I’ve worked with hundreds of transmitters and receivers in my military career. I have never seen anything so small. What are they transmitting and receiving? Communication systems placed inside a ship with all this structure around it has to have all kinds of interference. I know they don’t think like us, but no human engineer would put a transmitter and receiver deep inside a ship.”

“We aren’t going to solve the issue here,” said Tews. “Let’s keep going.”

Spaz led the way once again. When he got to the point where he could hear the bugs clicking at each other, he stopped. Both he and Tews removed their light sticks to avoid drawing attention to themselves. In darkness, they crawled to the vent cover. Jackpot. As the two peered through the vent slats they could see the ship’s bridge. A 360-degree view screen showed a planet and two other bug ships sitting stationary.

Spaz counted fifteen bugs on the bridge. At the center of the open area sat an elevated spoon shaped chair with a big bug in it. The chair swiveled left and right as the bug clicked out orders. The one in the chair had to be the captain. It hissed and clicked some more. Two bugs appeared on the screen. These had to be the other bug ship captains. Each captain clicked and hissed. It looked like they were arguing about something.

The ship they were on rocked as if it collided with another ship. The air entering the vent smelled as bad as one of Tews's farts. Alarms started sounding. The captain hissed and clicked. Spaz looked at the 360-degree view screen. One alien ship was being blown to pieces! Spaz resisted a cheer as he saw six human ships and scores of fighters with weapons blazing. They caught the bugs with their shields down. They must have jumped knowing the bugs were here. Spaz couldn't move as he watched with awe. The fighters were firing at their ship. The battle's action absorbed all of his senses.

The bug captain pulled a lever. The ship jumped to life, and maneuvered as it fired at the humans. Spaz wanted to help but Tews was tugging on his arm. Spaz forced himself to leave his view from above. When they crawled a little ways into the main tunnel Spaz said, "What are you doing? I want to see the battle. We have to help them somehow!"

"If we can get back to the captain and attack the ship from within, I calculate success at fifty percent without rounding. Are you listening? That's only true if we attack the bugs during this battle!"

"Why you sitting here yacking? Let's tell the captain," said Spaz.

With adrenalin pumping through their veins, the two friends scurried to the holding pen like hungry rats to food. By the time Tews and Spaz got back to the pen, everyone knew something major was happening with the ship. The captives could feel power surges as the ship maneuvered. They also felt strong jolts knocking them off balance.

The captain assembled representatives from each group of captives. Everyone listened as Tews and Spaz described their findings. When they talked about what they saw on the bridge moments ago, it got instant attention. Smitty agreed with the vent crawling duo, it was the time to strike, while the crew was distracted. For once, everyone agreed. Urgency forced them to develop a hasty plan of attack. They would take over the pen, engineering, and the bridge. They would also send a team to the armory to acquire more weapons and cause general havoc.

They split the weapons. Ten weapons would stay with those in the pen and fourteen would go with the engineering group. Of those remaining, fourteen would go with the group attacking the bridge, and six would go with the armory group. The pen would get two additional rifles when they killed the guards. Each vent team would have thirty humans. Each team preselected riflemen who dipped their fingers into the blood Tews brought back. Each team also took a small container of blood, in case they needed more riflemen.

Smitty and his group were already heading towards the vent. Their mission was to take control of engineering, neutralize the ship's weapons, and isolate the drives. The second team started to crawl toward the bridge. The pen captives began to count to three hundred. At three hundred, two flashes from plasma rifles lit the pen walls. Both guards slumped into the arms of their captives. Spaz grabbed one rifle and another captive with blood on his finger took the other weapon. They moved toward the pen door.