

Altera



A short story based on the space trading
game Oolite and the final part of the
Oolite Saga

Drew Wagar

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Thanks to the Oolite Community for ten years of faith, encouragement and for being the friendliest place this side of Riedquat.

Author's Note

Ten years ago today I joined the Oolite Forum. I had done so because the week before I discovered that Oolite, a fan-remake of the original Elite by David Braben and Ian Bell, existed. It was May 19th, 2006.

It had been over ten years since the last official outing in the Elite universe, Frontier First Encounters, in 1995. In the intervening years, rumours of ‘Elite 4’ had come and gone aplenty, but it seemed unlikely that it would ever be made. How wrong we were!

Oolite was a little different. Unlike the original game it was ‘open-hooded’. You could tweak parameters, alter settings and, if you were clever enough, create ships and missions of your own. Many used this to create bits of the ‘lore’ of Elite that were missing from the original 8-bit games, the Tionisla Orbital Graveyard from the Dark Wheel being my favourite.

Ah, the Dark Wheel.

The novella that accompanied the original game; written by the late great Robert Holdstock. It set the tone for Elite, expanding on the sparse procedurally generated backdrop, promising more than just the obvious, creating myths and legends that still live on today. Despite no longer being recognised as canon in Elite: Dangerous it lives on. Who has not heard of the mystery of Raxxla?

Oolite already had a short story written for it, but I thought it deserved a bigger adventure and set about writing it. ‘Status Quo’ was the result. It was followed up by no less than three sequels, culminating in ‘Finis’ at the end of 2011.

That was going to be it as far as I was concerned. Enough Elite for me, an itch scratched. I started working on the first book in what was to become the ‘Shadeward Saga’ in early 2012.

Of course, the rest is history. You know about the Elite: Dangerous kickstarter that exploded onto the scene in late 2012, quickly followed by the writer’s packs. You probably recall the madness of ‘kickstarting a kickstarter’ that ultimately led, detractors and naysayers notwithstanding, to my official novel Elite: Reclamation. I aimed to write something “by a fan, for the fans”. I trust I did a good enough job.

But it wouldn’t have happened if I’d not found Oolite and the generous community contained therein all those years before. Those of you who only know Elite via Elite: Dangerous and have enjoyed my Elite novel owe a debt of thanks to a relatively small online forum, a few coders working late into many nights creating something out of sheer passion and absolutely no financial reward

whatsoever. Oolite wasn't the only fan led project that kept the flame burning in the long darkness between FFE and ED, but it was the one that burnt the brightest for me, and the only one that has stayed faithful to the original gameplay and the original lore.

So this little tale is my way of saying thank you to the Oolite community, and, by extension, the wider Elite community; thank you for the welcome, thank you for the fun and thank you for the encouragement and support that allowed me to write an official Elite novel, thus fulfilling a life's ambition and completing a circle that started when a thirteen year old boy first opened an overstuffed box on Christmas day and out tumbled a lenslok, a cassette, a ship identification chart, a keyboard overlay, a manual and a novella. That was where it all began...

...and this, my friends, is the end of the Oolite Saga.

Right on, Commanders.

Drew.

May, 2016.

Altera

By

Drew Wagar

3270

The ship was old; that much was clear. Its design dated back hundreds of years, but such was the versatility of the craft, they were still being manufactured even now. This one was ancient though, a relic of a time long past. Old-tech shield generators pushed power fore and aft, a single flux-stained gun emplacement graced the forward view. Since this ship had been in its prime governments had risen and fallen, systems had changed hands, people had lived...

And died...

Her hands shook on the flight controls, resulting in a slight yaw to starboard. She corrected it instinctively in the old-fashioned way, rolling and pitching the ship back into line.

The harsh and business-like tones of SysCon echoed through the bridge.

‘Cobra class vessel *Cor meum et animam*, you are cleared for approach to Coulter City.’

‘Ack SysCon.’

Her voice sounded tired even to her own ears. She needed rest.

I'm not as young as I used to be...

She bit her lip for a moment and then chuckled to herself. Well over a hundred years! She couldn't tell whether she'd spent more on ship outfitting or skin regeneration. She had pushed back the aging process, defied time itself as best she could. But even with the technology of the 33rd century, there were limits. Would she see the 34th? That was the plan.

Not young by any stretch of the imagination!

Age spots dotted her hand and her grip wasn't as steady as once it was. The green glow from the scanner console lit her face in an unflattering way. She could see it reflecting in the cockpit windows.

An old woman...

Grey hair, with just a hint of brown, simply brushed into two neat folds on either side of her head. There was little else of note; she wore no earrings or adornments.

And this last trip was just too long a time in the void...

She looked down at the scanner, seeing the hyperspace routes she had laboriously plotted; a track across the stars to the edge of the galactic arm. Thousands of jumps traced all the way back here to the old worlds.

Riedquat. Hope I never have to visit that godforsaken system again.

The comm systems buzzed for attention.

‘You are cleared for landing on pad 42.’

‘Confirmed.’

Focussing her concentration she adjusted the trim of her ship and watched as it slowly cruised into the enormous Coriolis space station. There was a familiar rumble as the ship passed through the energy barrier that allowed the interior space to be pressurised.

Wasn’t like that back in the day...

The old ship descended towards its allotted pad and settled gently in the weak artificial gravity. A faint clunk signalled the ship was secure.

‘Docking successful. Engines disengaged.’

She leant back in her pilot’s chair, surveying the scene. The sight of the central corridor of the station wrapping around her to meet itself half a kilometre above her head always felt reassuring. The strange flatness of a planetary surface always felt a little ‘wrong’ somehow. She was a creature of space, born there, her family had made their living in the void for three generations.

True, but there are five generations now...

She had never had children, she’d never found the time. Her older brother had though, he’d met some pretty woman and they’d settled planet-side on Tianve. They’d had kids, and those kids had grown up and had their own children. She had four nephews and nieces, and more than a dozen great-nephews and great-nieces. Not that she’d seen most of them.

I’m just the mad auntie they warn them about I expect. Always ‘out there’ somewhere...

She had tried, but she wasn’t the family type, and when she’d lost...

Long time ago now.

It still hurt though. He'd kept her grounded, kept her wanderlust under some kind of control. Sure, they'd had adventures across the charts and across the core worlds, but there had always been a reason, they'd made things better, or made some kind of difference.

We had forty years, many don't get as much...

Afterwards she'd spent a long time depressed, bereft of any meaning to her life. She merely watched the holofac news vids, the appalling, flaccid and cheaply made entertainment shows. She saw the end of Galcop, the rise of the Alliance, new technologies arrive, mature and become obsolete.

And then the rumours started...

She'd written notes about the time before. Those strange dreams of her youth where things were similar, but they just weren't the same. The dreams had been so vivid it was as if they were more tangible than reality itself. Talking creatures; felines, crustaceans, birds... and bugs.

Sometimes she reread those notes, just to keep the dream alive. It felt important somehow, as if they were a real memory... a memory that had, for some unknown reason, been pushed aside in favour of something new.

This universe she lived in now... it felt... wrong, as if it were missing ... a crucial ingredient; a flavour that should have been present. She could never quite figure out what it was. There was an ethereal feel to her life, which had grown with the advancing years. It gnawed at her. There was a secret here. Something had changed... and she hadn't.

The rumours... of the bugs...

She'd awoken from her torpor. A purpose again! She would find out what had happened, chase the rumours.

She'd chased them all right, trying to ascertain their veracity, but every clue led to a dead end. Every sure fire certainty dashed. What her dreams had told her was commonplace turned out to be elusive. Decades of her life spent chasing... was there really anything to chase?

They used to drag us out of witchspace. Attack with droned ships. Eight-sided shapes, organic and fluid, yet malevolent...

The official stories didn't tally with what she thought she knew. Outside of legend and myth no-one remembered them. There were no artefacts, no alien-items. Nothing but stories of a half-concealed conflict that no one really believed anymore. They'd laughed at her.

Yet I remember fighting them, killing them. They hurt me... yet as real as it might seem, it was only in my dreams...

Memories or imaginings flashed in her mind. Chitin covered carapaces. Multiple limbs, ammonia...

Ragazza!

She rubbed her shoulder. It ached whenever she thought about them.

But it turned out we were the aggressors, we fired the first shots, we tried to exterminate them...

She'd followed every rumour she had heard, making many trips out into the darkness. Every single one had been fruitless. She had spent months, even years, out in the void with nothing to show but a catalogue of new worlds that no one had ever visited, but none of them had shown anything more devastating than a few benign microbes.

So, where did they go? I remember a battle here, in this very system, but the history books are blank. I tried, but the evidence to prove my dream eludes me. I can't manage another trip. This will have to rest for someone else to uncover, if there is anything to uncover. Maybe I'm just crazy. A crazy old woman chasing ghosts...

She shook her head and cast her mind back.

With nothing to show for her efforts in the void she had turned back to the archives. Most were inaccessible, at least legally, and it had taken a while to work around those restrictions. Credits always worked eventually, it was just a matter of finding the right individual. What she had found were only footnotes, vague references and anecdotes. She had found nothing that substantiated her dreams at all, just some strange and unconfirmed rumours of the Alliance being involved... and records of a mysterious ship.

Polaris.

The system was still permit locked, and it wasn't the only one it was impossible to reach.

Something is being concealed. Proof might be thin on the ground, but I have found some evidence. They did exist. One day someone is going to find them again. I must prepare them for that...

She leant forward and tapped the holofac. Her fingers fumbled on the controls, activating the ship's status panel rather than the comms unit.

Combat Rank: Elite

Explorer Rank: Elite

Trading Rank: Elite

She sighed and jabbed the correct controls.

Not Elite enough though. Can't even hit the right damn switches anymore!

A three dimensional projection appeared before her with the image of an annoyingly young and fresh-faced man.

I used to look that young...

‘Communications. How can I help you?’

‘Tionisha Historical Society.’ Her own voice sounded gruff and unpleasant.

‘Just connecting you.’

She waited as an irritating jingle played out. It was the same one she’d heard last time she’d been here.

‘Priest’s perfect protopolyps! Tuttle’s tasty therapsabladders! Last real food before witch-space!’

Don't they ever change those ads?

The holofac cleared and the jingle faded out.

‘Dan Mayweather speaking. How can I help you?’

She leant forward. ‘I have something for you. A document. It’s important it is filed correctly. Here’s my ID. That should make things clear.’

A series of text and markers scrolled up the holofac display. The man at the other end examined it and then blinked in surprise.

‘Oh...’ The young man swallowed, his eyes flicking back and forth as he read the text on his screen. ‘Yes ma’am.’

‘That’s Commander to you.’

The man swallowed again, but didn’t say anything.

‘Here’s the document.’

She flicked her fingers towards the projector and the words ‘Last Will and Testament’ appeared alongside a document graphic.

The young man looked pale even through the holofac projection.

‘The graveyard? But I’m not sure that’s even allowed... are you sure?’

She smiled. ‘It’s all been arranged, trust me.’

‘But if they allow you to do that, it means...’

She contented herself with a smug smile and waited. There had to be some compensation to being old after all.

‘I’ll get that stored straight away ma’am... I mean... Commander.’

‘You do that.’

She saw the acknowledgement trace come back.

Just a few more things to do.

She looked around at the cockpit. It looked as old and tired as she did. The ship was a veteran of more trips through the void than she could count, with more lightyears under its engines than anything else she knew, even the long distance exploration vessels.

Been around the galaxy more than once!

A tarnished nameplate fixed below the main scanner caught her eye, the text illegible. She reached down and rubbed at it, the grime of many years pushed aside after a few vigorous attempts.

Super Cobra: Eclipse Class. Apocalypse Engineering Special Edition, 3142.

That made her chuckle again.

Super Cobra? Once perhaps, but not anymore! Time has passed us both by my old friend.

She shut down the remaining flight systems and eased herself out of the pilot’s seat, her knees protesting with the effort. Even the seat was saggy and worn.

She made her way through to the mid-section, switching the on board systems into their respective maintenance modes.

One scarred panel made her pause. The switches were long since dead. She flicked them up and down just for the nostalgia, memories surfacing in her mind.

Torus drive.

‘Should have taken that out decades ago, hasn’t worked since... damn it. Too long...’

She caught sight of the old manufacturers’ names on the other panels with a twinge of

sadness. Many of these companies didn't exist now, gone bust or acquired by bigger corporations. The ship was a relic of another century, maybe even the last of its kind. A time when things were very different; less complex, less repetitive, more compelling, a time when everything seemed possible.

Ingram, Lance and Ferman, Kruger, Irrikan, Zieman, Cowell and MgRath...

She rested her head against one of the bulkheads for a moment to steady herself.

You've been a good ship. Now you have just one more job to do, but you can rest a while before that last duty.

She triggered the external hatchway. With a clunk and a hiss of equalising pressure it lowered itself slowly to the ground. A set of steps folded out.

She walked down, stepping onto the floor of the pad, looking back up.

The hull above her was tarnished and scored, the victim of too much fuel scoping in the blazing coronas of stars beyond count. There was even the squat dome of an energy bomb housing she'd always meant to remove. She had never got around to it, not that it mattered. It hadn't been a viable weapon for decades.

She could still remember when the ship was new, the duralium hull bright and shining, untainted by the radiation soaked void. It didn't seem like that long ago.

She walked over to the maintenance bay, where a lone supervisor was working at some kind of console. He looked up as she approached.

'I hope you're not expecting me to be able to repair that thing,' he said. 'I'd have to dig out my grandsire's old repair manuals and I can tell you now that we don't have any parts in stock.'

She glared at him.

'What was your grandsire's name, boy?'

'Carruthers. Malcolm Carruthers.'

'I remember him. I can see the family likeness.'

'You knew my grandsire?'

'I knew him,' she replied.

And he was a flux-stained arsehole too.

'How old are you?' the young man demanded, turning to look at her more closely.

‘It’s rude to ask a woman her age. Didn’t they teach you that?’

‘Sorry ma’am.’

‘It’s Commander, dammit!’ she snapped. ‘Time was when Elite combateers used to command a little respect around these parts.’

‘Elite? You are Elite?’

The incredulity in his voice made her fists clench.

‘I’ve killed more pilots than you’ve had stim packets, kid. I know they’ve messed with the rating system but I’m Elite whichever way you look at it. Now, are you going to stop yapping and ask me what I need?’

‘I’ve already told you we can’t fix that old...’

‘I’m not asking you to fix it. I just want it cleaned up.’

The young man spared a glance towards the battered ship behind her.

‘Is it even worth it? You’ll never sell it, except to a museum maybe.’

Years ago she’d have punched his lights out, but it wasn’t an option for her now. She walked up to him, craning her neck to look into his eyes, fixing him with a stare that made him recoil immediately under the gaze of brown eyes that were cold, hard and brutal.

‘You get it bright and shiny,’ she whispered, ‘and I’ll ask Commissioner Hughes to let you keep your job, how does that sound?’

The young man gulped.

‘You know... the commissioner?’

She grinned. ‘Oh yes, I know him. And he owes me a favour or two.’

She left him with that pleasant thought, and limped away, cursing the stiffness in her legs.

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She sat in one of the less salubrious bars on the station, hidden in a dark corner. The bar was just below the axis, the artificial gravity was lower here, she found she couldn’t tolerate much above half a gee any more. She took a sip from her drink, annoyed at how her hand shook when she did so.

A plastic ‘glass’. Anlian gin was still her favourite, even though it was hard to come by nowadays. You couldn’t serve it in actual glass, it tended to dissolve it.

Once I liked to be left alone, now I’d prefer not to be ...

She scolded herself. Choices had been made and her life had taken the course it had. She had few regrets other than not having more time with... She took a generous gulp of her drink.

Across from her a news holofac was blaring out quick snippets of information. She ignored them for the most part, but the sharp trumpeting sounds of an Imperial announcement jolted her out of her reverie and she looked up.

‘...And the Empire congratulates Senator Algreb and Lady Loren on the birth of their first daughter Corine. Dignitaries are already enroute to the Haoria system to celebrate...’

Haoria? Never heard of it. Damn overstuffed Imperials. Not that the Federation is any better. Wish we were back in the good ol’ Galcop days...

The years prior to the collapse of the old political institution had been shambolic and uncertain. No one quite knew which side they were supposed to be on. Then the Federation and the Empire took over, the hyperdrive routes were unlocked. Whole new organisations had appeared, the Alliance being the most notable one.

Politics. I hate politics. Everything has changed.

She’d even taken a trip to Earth once. She’d found the planet where humanity had originated rather underwhelming, pretty much everything had been manicured to remove the evidence of the tortured past of the planet, there was little evidence of what had gone before. It was too touristy for her liking.

Achenar, seat of the Empire, was more enchanting, but the overbearing imperial attitude, baroque architecture and oppressive culture got to her after only a few short days. She had never felt welcome in Imperial space anyway.

And the Alliance? The new kids on the block were just that; young, idealistic, full of energy... and making exactly the same mistake as their forebears.

I’m just a trader by heart, lone-wolf, just me and the void. That’s all I ever really was any good at. Me and a ship against the galaxy...

The news channel flipped over to a tech story.

‘...Dramatic new progress has been made with a revolutionary new hyperdrive mechanism.

Known as ‘frame-shifting’, it is believed that if early prototype tests are successful, the new units have the potential to cut transit times from days and weeks to just seconds, heralding a new dawn for interstellar commerce and exploration. It will be years yet before the technology leaves the research labs, but it promises a revolution in space travel unseen since...’

Good luck getting that to work! Seconds though... that would be something to see.

Somebody sat down opposite her, she looked up with a faint smile.

‘You took your time.’

The figure was cloaked, their face concealed behind a bland face close-fitting face mask, only the eyes were distinguishable; grey and cold.

‘You couldn’t elude us forever.’ The voice was muffled, probably modified by the mask to conceal the identity of the owner. A man though.

She chuckled. ‘I’m surprised an old lady like me managed to give you the slip for so long.’

‘You must not reveal the information you have acquired.’

‘Oh?’ She leant back, taking a sip from her drink, ‘And why is that?’

‘You know why.’

‘Because it might reveal the truth? People might find out what you’ve been concealing all this time?’

‘The time is not right...’

She laughed. ‘The time is never right is it? Was it the right time when Galcop collapsed? Nope. How about when the Alliance came to power? No, not then either.’

‘Secrets last longer than lifetimes, longer even than yours. They, and we, operate on a timescale far longer than mere decades.’

‘Glad to hear it,’ she replied. ‘But people have a right to know...’

The man shook his head. ‘People are better left in ignorance, getting on with their petty little concerns without knowledge of a greater narrative that would freeze their hearts and cause panic across civilised space.’

‘And who appointed you arbiters of humanity’s destiny anyway?’

‘We did.’

‘Convenient that. Don’t you see the slight flaw in your reasoning?’

‘Are you going to comply?’

She leant forward, fixing her gaze upon the man.

‘You know me well enough to know I don’t give an overcooked trumble for your compliance. I am going to do what I think best.’

‘You know we will have to take steps to... deal with you.’

She smiled. ‘And you think I haven’t already taken that into consideration? Do you take me for a fool?’

He didn’t respond for a moment.

‘Even I don’t know what I know,’ she said with a smile. ‘I made sure of that as I went along. Trust no one, not even me! I dealt with your agents all along and I know your tricks. It don’t matter if you kill me or torture me, I’ve made sure the clues will come out someday and there is nothing you can do about it.’

‘We will not torture you,’ the man said, after a moment’s consideration. ‘You have served us well for many decades, only now...’

‘Now you realise that I despise what you stand for,’ she snapped. ‘Why not kill me? No one is left who would care, or even notice.’

The man paused and regarded her for a moment.

‘We never waste anything with... potential.’ He leant back and folded his arms. ‘I suggest you finish your drink.’

‘Going to zap my mind again are you?’

He nodded.

‘Yes, we are.’

###

She had enjoyed being a librarian. It had been a long but uneventful career. She had worked hard in the Ferenchian research institute for her entire working life and now she had finally retired.

Oh, it wasn't much, but it was enough to live on, to see out her final years in comfort, perhaps take up a hobby or two and rest after a life well-lived.

Her co-workers had given her the obligatory send off. She had been rather overwhelmed, truth be told. They had suggested she go home early and advised her to rest. She was only too happy to go along. Two of the younger librarians had escorted her in an aircar. She watched out of the window, looking at the spacecraft that flitted overhead conducting their business from the nearby spaceport. Space had never interested her. Keep your feet firmly planted on the good soil, that's what her father had said. Those memories were vague now, she found it difficult to recall her past. Age, of course.

Everything seemed remarkably quiet when she returned home. Neat and tidy; somehow newer and more pristine than she thought it ought to be. Somebody must have cleaned and prepped everything. Her colleagues were so kind and thoughtful, if a bit intense.

Retirement suited her. As the months passed she gained a little more energy, relaxing from having to do the chores of work. She would receive visits from her colleagues and the doctors. They always had some new pill for her, a booster injection or some such. It broke the monotony of the days which otherwise would have blended together into an undifferentiated blur.

One such day she sat down when they had all left to find she had received a message. The holofac receiver showed a small indicator, slowly spinning in the air.

She hadn't received a message before. It was odd. She had no family left. Her parents had died long ago and she had no brothers or sisters. Most of her friends had long since passed away and those that remained would come to see her in person. She had hardly ever used the comms system.

'How strange,' she muttered.

She gestured towards it and a little envelope icon appeared in the air before her, spun and then turned into a short string of characters.

I advise you to sit down and pour yourself an Anlian Gin.

She blinked in surprise.

'Anlian gin?'

It was a tipple she was fond of; quite hard to get hold of and very expensive. Quite how she'd got a fondness for it she couldn't remember anymore, it was long ago.

But no one knows my little foible... surely!

Guiltily she looked towards one of the storage lockers in her apartment. She walked slowly across and took out a plastic decanter.

With shaking hands she poured some of the liquor into a plastic shot and then signalled for her chair to come across to her. She eased into it and lowered herself into a comfortable position, looking at the text again.

She gestured.

The text vanished, replaced with a holofac image.

She frowned.

It was her.

Her own face looked back at her and then smiled.

‘Hello me, this is you. The real you.’

Her image looked rather smug and self-assured.

‘Whoever you think you are at this point, I’m afraid I have bad news. Everything that you think you know is false, manufactured in the diseased mind of one of their agents. Do not reveal this message to anyone, do not trust anyone, even those you consider your closest friends or family. I have no idea what your life may be like at the moment, so I can’t really advise you. What I can tell you is who you really are...’

A cruel joke obviously. Some sort of prank call. She paused the recording and was almost about to delete it...

But nobody knew about the Anlian gin, nobody!

After a moment she signalled for it to resume.

‘You were born in the year 3122 in orbit of the Tianve system. You are a space-pilot, an Elite combateer of some notoriety. You can gauge the truth of this assertion by contacting the Tionisla Historical Society and asking for the last will and testament of...’

Her image spoke a name.

A name that she was sure she’d never heard, but somehow it resonated in her mind.

Another word came, flickering though her mind, meaningless and obscure.

Ragazza!

‘...In the Tionisla system you will find your... our ship. The documents will educate you and tell you what you need to do. There’s a hundred credits for expenses. You’ll find another message waiting.’

The image took on a softer expression.

‘I am sorry for what this message must mean to you. I do not know what life you think you have led, how happy or sad you are with your present situation. All I know is that whatever you think is real... is not. There is a story here which has been suppressed, a story that should be told and has been quite deliberately hidden by shadowy powers operating beyond the law. You, me... us.... We’re part of it and they’ve tried to stop us. Be in no doubt that it is something very important. And be careful!’

Her image flipped her a jaunty salute.

‘Good luck, fly safe and... Right on, Commander.’

The image faded, with a quick flash showing the location of the Tionisla system itself. It was many lightyears away.

She was trembling, so she drank the remainder of the gin in one hit.

For minutes she stared at the now silent holofac without moving.

Something jogged in her memory. A dark-haired man, a young woman with brown hair; space, love, adventure, lasers firing... missiles! A green dark-hued ship almost silhouetted against a backdrop of stars. Snatches of some kind of remarkable saga amongst the stars.

Can’t be true...

Tionisla was such a long way away. A trip into space, at her age?

Her heart jumped in her chest, surprising her. A fierce joy surged through her as visions flashed through hr mind: distant stars, a sunrise fading into blackness, the flash of spacecraft hulls against the dark. A calling... no, a yearning!

She got unsteadily to her feet. Another phrase came to her mind, not quite realised.

Elite combateers, we always... always...

There was a mischievous grin on her face.

‘Well then... let’s go make a difference!’

Epilogue

May 3302

An unusual event occurred recently, which hasn't been seen for over a hundred years. A new ship was introduced into the Tionisla Orbital Graveyard.

Originally a final resting place for the fantastically rich and famous in the 3100s, the graveyard fell into dis-use after the general economic slump that beset the Old Worlds at the time.

Something of a backwater today, Tionisla was once a major trading hub and communication complex in times past. With the graveyard itself having fallen into disrepair, with many of its relics vandalised and looted, it came as something of a surprise when a request was received by the Tionisla Historical Society (a non-profit making charity who are now custodians of the graveyard and hope to one day restore it to its former glory), by persons unknown, to inter a recently deceased commander.

Despite the odd circumstances behind the request, the Tionisla government has surprised observers by moving swiftly to ensure that the application was processed forthwith. Tionisla administrative red tape is typically appalling even for hardnosed bureaucrats. In this case the individual appears to have been some kind of celeb, perhaps warranting a fast track of some kind.

Just before the vessel was moved to its final resting place an on-board beacon briefly activated, transmitting a series of curious characters in a repeating sequence. This continued for a few minutes until a power failure silenced it. The significance of this transmission, if any, is unclear.

"I shouldn't worry about it," said Grace Mayweather of the THS, "We see this sort of thing all the time. A last bit of mischief - tricks, codes - even traps for the unwary sometimes. Pay it no heed. They're just messing with your head from beyond the grave! People go mad trying to work these things out, they never mean anything."

The identity of the Commander in question is not recorded in public archives, but the ship itself was identified as an antique 'Eclipse Class' Cobra Mk3 with the unusual hull registry of "Cor meum et animam".

About the Author

Drew Wagar is a British science fiction and fantasy author. He lives in Kent with his wife, two sons, a dog and a cat. His favourite colour is dark green. He doesn't require a conservatory or any double glazing.

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