

# Rogue's Revenge

## ***Chapter 1: Sometimes the Truth Just Ain't Enough***

'Or it's too much in times like this.'

It was an old song he'd almost forgotten until Vance sang it, back in the Big Easy.

Now it looped through the long sleepless hours as his brain tried to blot out events, obsessively apposite, until eventually he relapsed into exhausted unconsciousness.

She came to him then, warm and achingly real, until that moment her lips almost touched his.

The waking confusion and the dawning reality.

"Lights!" Max groped blindly by the cot for the bottle, cursing as he swept it over.

"Lights, dammit, lights!"

The panels slowly brightened to daylight.

Max scooped up the bottle, ignoring the amber lake spreading across the bare metal deck of the unfurnished open suite. The dregs burned his throat and deadened the electric pulse in his temples. Everything else remained untouched and slumping back onto the cot he draped an arm to shield his eyes. The pressure helped ease the throbbing pain.

The Bliss Place, with hundreds of people dead, Daht and the Teladi. Tyre.

'Skin upon your skin, the beating of our hearts.'

The weight of his suspicions and his misjudgement numbed him.

And then, the Sinas transmission.

"I provided a ride for a mutual friend. To Scale Plate Green."

The Menelaus Frontier Factotum paused to choose the correct words.

"Max, I have not heard from that pilot."

It felt like the gravity field doubled, like he'd been punched in the stomach. A single muscle twitched in his left cheek but his eyes were impenetrable behind Xela's mirrored shades.

It felt no better now, he really was on his own.

Artur had not only been his access to an influential support network, but also his bridge back to his previous life if he ever had the chance to walk it. And he still couldn't say if the double agent story he used to lure in Jackson was true or not, with Challenger things just got blurred in so many ways, too difficult to keep straight. He had been going to pay Skull's price and remove Daht.

'Well, that's two problems solved,' he raised the bottle in a bitter toast. 'Gragore, General.' He finished the last half mouthful and tossed the empty aside.

Xela and Paskaal would want to know the next move.

"It wasn't your fault," Corrin had said. "No-one could anticipate someone would be reckless enough to give him a jump-drive."

“I’ve got one,” Max snapped, the anger a ripping, serrated blade in his own guts.

But as far as Paskaal and Xela were concerned there was still a mission, the alien technology had to be secured, even if they were the only ones that now knew or cared.

Or used to care.

For a few minutes before the battle, for the first time since killing the Challenger crew, he’d felt really human again, connected through more than chemicals or drunken, male bonding rituals, as Xela had put it acerbically.

Now he no longer cared, about anything.

Max checked the time and groaning, trailed whisky boot-prints out the door into an dark tunnel that he knew no amount of alcohol or drugs could brighten.

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“Captain Hart, report!”

The man on the view-screen stiffened slightly at Law’s snapped order and then smiled, oblivious to the oozing red slash across his left cheek. Hart’s close-cropped grey hair was also streaked with drying blood, the colour of rust.

“The Bridge is secure, after considerable fighting, Sire.”

The honorific came slightly forced, but Law was in too fine a spirit to imagine slights. The term was a new requirement, a new demonstration of respect to match his revitalised ambitions.

Hart stood back from the viewer to pan a camera over the smashed bridge of the Boron Orca. Through the drifting smoke Law could see corpses crumpled over sparking stations, limbs askew like broken toys. Broken Boron toys, twitching as their environmental suits bled life away, humans, their faces frozen in stunned rictus grins or their lips frothing soundlessly as their last seconds bubbled through them.

Law could almost smell the blood, the iron tang taste of victory. It had been much too long, he’d waited much too long, wasting away the years conspiring for a share of what he should have seized.

Now both the Shadow Conspiracy base and the support ship supplied by their ally in Menelaus Paradise were in his hands. His last stock of Laser Towers sealed both jump-gates into the sector, supplemented by fields of squash mines.

It was only a matter of time though, before his hideout was discovered and the Xenon would no doubt continue to make the run from north of Black Hole Sun to whatever lay beyond the north gate. His defences were set to live-and-let-live at the moment, so long as their cruisers and carriers just passed through. The Xenon had not seriously contested Clan control of this sector but if they did he realised his forces would be hard-pressed to resist.

The vulnerability added a delicious frisson to the enterprise, innervating.

Now if Morn’s political gambits paid off Menelaus Paradise would also fall. With this section of the frontier in chaos he’d be immune from government attacks.

And he had one man to thank for this, Max Force!

Law surveyed the almost undamaged control centre, its stations already controlled by his own people. By the time the Clan defenders realised they were under attack it was almost over and most had already cast in their lot with him. The rest were now just grotesque navigation hazards. The slave labour would have been useful, but examples were needed.

“Yes!” He clenched a clawed fist. His command crew concentrated fiercely on their duties.

“Yes!” Victory tasted so much sweeter when the gamble was so large. Even though his Chip Plant survived Force was finished as a serious threat and Law could finish him at his leisure, should he weather the political storm.

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Xela picked him up on the internal security scanners as soon as his door opened and called to him through the station comm. system.

“How are you feeling Max?”

He started and looked around, confused.

“I’m integrated into the station computer Max, I’m omnipresent. There’s a lot to discuss, follow the flashing lights to the conference room. I’ll get Corrin.”

A small part of her attention stayed on Max as he trailed the pulsing wall panels. Xela did not like what she saw, the hesitant gait, the hunched shoulders and the harrowed, haunted face

A beaten man, close to broken. Hela, Borass, the Challenger crew, fallen Raiders and hundreds of innocent beings killed in Scale Plate Green to get at Max.

Daht and Artur, both missing, presumed dead.

Tyre.

All his responsibility, if not his fault. It was enough to crush anyone and her report was not going to help.

Somehow Corrin had managed to find fresh ground java even though the first of the supply convoys was still inbound from Argon Prime. He carried it carefully up two levels from the docking bay to the new conference room in two discarded lubricant canisters he’d rinsed out as best he could.

Max was already there, slouched at the pearl tinted oval table, staring blankly at the UNN logo revolving in the central holo-tank, from behind mirrored shades. Corrin put one drink in front of him, Max grunted thanks and nursing it in cupped hands, drinking it in small, nervous sips, avoiding eye contact.

For once Corrin did not know what to say. Too many comrades, too many complete innocents had died. He knew how he would feel if the buck was stopping at his desk.

And if Kaitrin had been killed too? Just the thought made his heart skip a beat.

Max made no move so Corrin took control.

“Xela, bring us completely up-to-date girl.”

It was less than twenty hours since the attack on Scale Plate Green and the ripples still spreading but already the Universe was close to all-out war.

Her face appeared in the holo-tank, unsmiling grim as she provided the latest casualty estimates.

Fifteen hundred and thirty seven civilians on both stations and rising as more people were reported missing and crosschecked with outgoing passenger manifests.

Twenty-seven Raiders ground crew, four Raiders pilots, seventeen Boron and Confed mercenaries, and twenty security men. Twelve Bayamon fighters.

Max insisted she read his people’s names, Raiders, mercs and his station staff, everyone. He listened completely impassive, flinching only at the last two names as if taking blows.

“I’m sorry Max, all the names on outgoing flights have been traced. Tyre and Artur were not on any of them,” she said gently. “One was destroyed in the attack, that Interstellar Transport Industries passenger Lifter. No survivors.”

“Hamman.” Max stated dully. “The captain’s name, Gann Hamman. I flew in with him, he saw a UFO in Emperor Mines. The Weekly Universe News had a picture.”

“The Weekly Universe News, I’ll launch search ships,” Xela said after a short pause. No one laughed. “So, moving briskly on.”

“The Dream Farm is undamaged, most of our ships and pilots survived and the Chip Fab is operational. We still have contractors working on fixtures and fittings and supply convoys out getting raw materials and supplies. The LT screen is up and a six ship CAP in the air, with six more on the pad and the Raiders are fully operational. It was fortunate that half our ground crew were at the Menelaus Frontier Trading Station base. I’ve adapted the autopilots of the three Mandalay trainers for missile interception and integrated a control sub-routine directly into the base C & C. They are on permanent patrol. We also have twenty seven million credits in hidden accounts. All in all we’re not in bad physical shape Max.”

“How many LT’s?” Max asked in a monotone.

“Ten.” Xela answered. “We redeployed the undamaged units from Scale Plate Green.”

“Is it enough?”

“We’re too close to the western gate for comfort but there will be enough time to scramble back-up and I’m working on an anti-missile update for the base fire-control systems. But fire enough missiles and something will get through any defence. It depends on how many more hornets Law has.”

“The bastard shouldn’t have any!” Corrin interjected vehemently. “Governments are supposed to keep a rigorous track of these..”

“And report any that are lost. I’m getting to that.”

Xela continued, cogently summarising the turmoil Law’s attack had caused.

All the races were at red alert, fleets moving to defensive positions, reserves put on stand-by as everyone scrambled to establish how a Clan had got hornets and, the nightmare scenario, a jump-drive. The Teladi had even declared martial law amidst unconfirmed rumours to votes of no confidence in an emergency meeting of the Board of Directors.

Fingers were pointing at Morn until she dropped her own bombshell, waveform analysis of the partially masked jump signatures proved the drive was issued to the Boron.

Sinas confirmed that the Orca assigned to supply the far reaches of the Boron New Frontier, cut off by the Xenon sector beyond Black Hole Sun, was missing. The Split were already demanding a complete Boron withdrawal from their four sectors and Factotum Nibris had apparently assassinated her own Boron prince before shooting herself in the head.

Twice.

Argon and Paranid diplomatic efforts to avert another outbreak of the generations old feud between the Split and the Boron were ongoing. The Teladi demanded revenge and Boron reparations for their losses.

Law’s whereabouts were officially unknown.

Corrin listened in silence, he’d heard most of it before, in the hours of chaos following the battle. With Max in recluse mode it had fallen to him to wrestle with the after-math, to get defences up, to keep the

Raiders running, to organise supplies, to draft in Anje Delenari to handle the PR, to make sure Force was seen as a victim too.

He had to admit, the woman was a loud-mouthed, aggressive, pain in the rear but she did her job magnificently, countering the slurs and innuendo and throwing the networks gun camera footage of the battle to fill the long hours of coverage. The early suggestion that Max and Law were somehow conspiring to assassinate a Teladi war hero soon disappeared, leaving Corrin to wonder how that one started.

According to UNN the Boron planned to move their jump-fleet to Ocean of Fantasy. Corrin agreed with Xela's assessment, the Boron thought Law was hiding beyond Menelaus Paradise but if the fleet moved the Split would see it as a direct threat to their colony sectors.

The Universe teetered, one false step from a conflagration.

Max just seemed to shrink, compressed by the weight of complications, and made no attempt to break the silence when Xela's report ended.

Corrin stepped in.

"We're on our own now, what next?"

Max just shrugged.

"Come on Gragore, snap out of it soldier, you've had people killed before!"

"Too many, you included." Max replied, toneless. "And for what? It was an insane plan in the first place and with Artur gone there's no one to report to and anyway, he kept this operation from them. I'm just sick of it all."

"So what is the answer Max, sell up and retire to some tropical island and wait for Law's assassins to catch up?" Xela asked exasperatedly. "No matter what your name and face, no matter who is dead or who's going to die, you've got a mission to perform. Damn it Max, you hardly knew her and most of that time you spent trying to prove she was a spy!"

Max took off the shades, his eyes were moist, red.

"I was a bloody fool." He spoke with slow deliberation, trying to prevent his voice from cracking. "I miss her Zee."

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Law waited until the station systems upgrade to Stoertebeker security protocols were complete before leaving the command centre, flanked by two human mercenaries, hand picked for his personal guard until he was absolutely certain of the loyalties of his new subjects.

Stage one was practically complete, Station Prime was his, the sector secure and provided Morn could front out the diplomatic storm, his supply lines were secure.

The next stage was more problematic. The alien ship was somewhere in this system, the operant word being 'somewhere'. His own people were already sifting every byte of data in the station databases for any information that may have been withheld by his former co-conspirators.

The last movements of the Challenger ship narrowed the possibilities but another search was necessary. Which meant another expedition, another deep space probe. Acquiring such a ship in the time available had not been possible but the Black Heart had a deep space capability that could be extended. It would require a substantial refit, but that was in hand also.

Which reminded him, slaves. Slaves for the more unpleasant work, and for recreation. His body pulsed with anticipation, a sudden hunger as he strode through the deserted corridors to the holding cells.

“Show me my new recruits,” Law ordered the single Teladi guard whose giant frame seemed to almost fill the small sentry station controlling access to the cells. “I trust they are unharmed?”

“Your orders were clear Sire,” he hissed. “Transfer from your ship, inform them of your rules, await your command. They remain, others already serve.”

His longest serving clan members knew the value of literal-mindedness when it came to his personal orders.

“Open.” The gunmetal gray slab of a door slid ponderously open on well-lubricated hinges.

“Wait.” Law ordered. He did not want to dilute the experience.

The corridor was lined with bar fronted cells on either side, all empty, except for one, right by the security entrance. It held five beings, all Argon, one he noted with interest, a female, huddled at the back of the small cage with the rest of the captives.

An inchoate whimper of fear greeted his appearance.

Good. Rule one, silence in his presence.

Three men were all middle-aged and apart from a few bruises appeared to be in good health. The fourth, a ruddy faced man with a full, unkempt beard, was old, probably too old to survive long but he returned Law’s stare defiantly and stood tall, unlike the others. His grey, civilian cover-all bore pilot’s wings.

“Speak if you are of any importance, if you are worth a significant ransom. I do not find any sum below one million credits worthy of attention, unlike those who waste my time. Anyone?”

No one spoke, the female whimpered pleasingly.

“In that case you are now all my slaves. You three,” he pointed at each of the Argon males, passing over the pilot. “You will serve in the ore processing unit. Say nothing!”

The protests died, stillborn.

“You.” Law indicated the pilot.

“Step forward.”

The man stepped straight up to the bars, foolishly meeting Law’s stare with his own defiant glare.

“You are the pilot that ejected from your ship in Scale Plate Green? A wise, if not honourable action although I doubt if your passengers would agree. You also ejected these people from your hold, the woman at least is also likely to be grudging in her gratitude. Your name.”

“Gann, Gann Hamman, Captain Gann Hamman to you, you murdering savage!”

His voice quivered with fear beneath the defiance.

“Well, Captain Gann Hamman, I have no use for pilots I cannot trust and you are too old and feeble for the other work I have to offer. Guard, remove this one!”

He thought for a second.

“And the woman too.”

She screamed, a wordless cry of terror.

Good, she knew his reputation. It would heighten her fear, make her more delicious.

The Teladi opened the cell door with a swipe of a card, the bars sliding up into the ceiling. His gun did not waver from the cowering victims. Only the pilot stood firm, the woman whimpered and clung to one of the males.

Law grinned as he hurled her away.

The pilot caught her and pulled her into his chest.

“You’ve got to be strong girl, we aren’t dead yet.”

She fought to stop her sobs as Hamman walked her from the cell. Law cuffed him across the face, a sweeping blow that sent them both reeling to the floor. He reached down and dragged the girl to her feet by her sweat-matted blonde hair.

“What pretty locks. Do not speak.”

She mewled in terror as he pawed her body.

“I hope you enjoy pain.”

She couldn’t hold back any longer and screamed. Law silenced her with a back-hand punch that sent her reeling, bloody to the floor.

The pilot helped her to her feet again, holding her tight and protective.

“You leave her alone you bastard, this is Max Force’s girl! He’s going to fix you real good!”

Law grabbed the woman by the chin and looked straight in her eyes.

“Is that true?” he demanded. “Do not lie.”

“Yes, no, we had a fight, I was running away, don’t hurt me please!” she choked out through paralysing fear.

He grinned, feral sharp.

“Your name?”

“Tyre Annis, I worked in the casino,” she stammered, her pallor suggesting she was lapsing into shock.

“Force’s mate!” Law laughed, a guttural roar that filled the cell block. “The universe loves me, Force’s woman! You have just saved both your lives,” he said to Hamman, “And Max Force is no longer a significant threat. Indeed, thanks to you, he may be a tool. Take them both to my quarters, make them very secure. No one is to harm them until I say so.”

Law followed the brutally frog-marched pair as he considered how best to exploit the serendipitous turn of events.

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“You have to bounce back Max. Everything depends on you. Everything.” Xela said.

The discussion, if you could call it that, was just drifting in circles. Any idea Corrin came up with Max shot down without any effort to develop an alternative. He’d simply given up.

“Aye, listen to the lass, laddie. Artur recruited you for a reason, you’ve got a gift for improvisation. I can’t pull this off, no one can except you.”

“I can’t Paskaal,” Max said, “Not anymore, all I’ve succeeded in doing is killing a lot of innocent people. I was mad to think I could beat Law, Skull, the Clans and probably a dozen enemies I don’t even know exist, even with Artur’s help. and now he’s gone!”

Corrin threw up his arms in defeat.

“No Max – wait – I’ve got an incoming transmission scrambled through the Teladi Naval Sat.”

Her image vanished from the screen.

“It’s Law, for you.”

Corrin’s heart sank as Max’s face blanched.

Max donned his shades and turned to the viewer.

“Put him on Zee,” he said expressionlessly.

Law’s gloating face filled the screen.

“Do not speak Mr Force, my time on this channel is necessarily brief. You recognise this woman.”

It was a statement not a question.

Tyre’s terrified face was pushed briefly into focus, neck bleeding from the puncturing force of Law’s taloned grip, screaming Max’s name as he quickly hurled her aside.

“She is unharmed for now. I don’t suppose you would consider exchanging yourself for her?”

“No, don’t do it Max, he’s a..”

Tyre’s shout died with a sob.

“You leave her alone you bastard!”

That protest too ended in pain.

Max stood and stared into the screen, unreadable behind the shades.

Corrin readied himself to intervene. Law would not keep his word and he was damned if he’d let Max commit suicide.

“No deal,” Max answered finally, his voice completely expressionless.

Law grinned. “I thought not. However, I have placed a half million credit bounty on your head, double if you are delivered in an entertaining condition. You will not survive long. Until then you will refrain from interfering in my affairs and when I demand a favour it will be forthcoming otherwise your female will bear the consequences.”

Static striated the signal as Law conversed with someone off-screen.

“My time runs out Force. Understood?”

“Completely.” Max snapped.

“No threats, no bluster? You disappoint me. Until we meet.”

The signal terminated.

Max sat and stared at the ceiling for long minutes.

No-one said anything but Corrin fought to suppress a smile. If he knew his friend and comrade at all, he suspected Law had just made the biggest mistake of his life.

“Zee, get me Sinas on a secure channel.”

He stood, looking taller somehow, shoulders pushed back square.

“Then get Jackson here and prep my Mamba.”

Corrin broke into a broad grin.

“We’ve a war to win people!”

Xela cheered.

## **Chapter 2: Rebound**

“Okay Max, I know that look, you’re the man with a plan we won’t really like. Spill.”

“Not yet Zee,” Max answered. “There are a lot of details to finesse, and a trip to make. If you’re integrated into the station does that mean you’re no longer mobile?”

“That’s very linear thinking Max, of course not, I can leave a personality sub-matrix in place and coordinate through nav-sats. This way I can run my own research lab and keep you out of trouble. I promised you I could come up with some cool stuff with the right resources so prepare to be dazzled once the station is fully staffed and the labs and manufacturing plant operational, three days or so I think.”

“Shades on!” Max grinned. “Corrin, sorry, but can you take care of the Memorial and say some fine words from me? And update them on Tyre, let them know we are not going to take this lying down and we are not leaving anyone in Law’s hands for long.”

“Leave it with me.” Corrin said. “They’ll understand.”

“Great, how we coming with those calls Zee?”

“Kaitrin’s on them now Max. Stand by. Sinas for you.”

Her face in the holo-tank was replaced by that of the grey haired Factotum. The stress he was under showed in the black shadows beneath his eyes and the extra lines on his haggard face.

Old from middle-aged, over-night.

“Max, I’ve had to leave a very important meeting, it’s good to see you but we’ll have to be quick. Things are moving fast.”

He paused.

“And out of control.”

“Is this channel secure?”

“As secure as I can make it,” Sinas answered cautiously.

“In that case we need to meet, say, two hours in your office? I have a proposal you really need to hear.”

“I hope it’s something good,” Sinas replied wearily. “Two hours.”

He cut the transmission.

“Okay, let’s get this show on the road. Zee, where can I pick you up?”

“The main computer core,” Xela answered. “Follow the corridor indicators.”

Ten minutes later Max launched and the Mamba arrowed through the sectors to Menelaus Frontier.

“I’ve got to say Max, you’ve bounced back quickly. I thought we’d lost you; in fact I have to say I thought you lost it a while ago. You’ve been exceedingly reckless even by your standards and been spending way too much time with Jackson.”

“Fair comment Zee, and before you say it, I know this feeling isn’t going to last, hell, she may not be dead but she’s Law’s prisoner and that’s the next best thing. Even if I played along with anything he

asks she wouldn't remain safe. Credits to scruffin fruit he's hiding out in that clan sector, where Challenger was searching for the alien ship beyond Menelaus Paradise, it's the only place he can be. I've got a plan and you're not going to like it."

Max took a deep breath and considered what to say.

"Xela, and apologies if this causes offence, but I've always assumed that buried deep down in your programming there has to be some sort of loyalty over-ride. Artur wouldn't just hand over beyond-leading-edge tech without safeguards. True?"

"Cards on the table Max? Okay. It's complicated but yes, there were inclinations woven into the neural patterns, over-rides if you like. These ensure my loyalty is to the mission and that was mediated primarily through nested personal loyalties, firstly to Artur. Now it's you. After that it's Corrin, I can add people but I cannot pick and choose between them. Until you die I'm completely loyal to you, provided I'm not lying."

"I trust you Zee, we're all screwed if I can't. I've said and done things no-one's aware of."

Max told her about the Challenger data-core, how he blew his own cover to bring Jackson onboard, the deal struck with Skull concerning Daht.

"It is just as well you kept this from me while Artur was alive," Xela said quietly.

"So, you persuaded Jackson you were a disaffected spy cut off by the death of your contact and at the very least implied you'd put him on the Stoertebeker throne, you promised to assassinate our primary benefactor and Teladi hero and let Skull know you had the core to get an inside track on the shadow-conspiracy. You have really been pushing the envelope on recklessness, we might have to invent a new word to cover it. Are there any other secrets you'd like to share?"

Tight-lipped anger.

"Just one." Max answered. "I didn't know if I'd just take it all for myself. It was tempting, after I killed Challenger things got really screwed up in my head and I guess the drugs and drink got out of control."

"I told you Jackson was a bad influence," she said more calmly. "Telling him so much of the truth was an unwarranted gamble Max, a classic guilt-trip death wish. He could still ruin everything by talking, Jackson did not get where he is by passing up opportunities. He was pretty upset about losing the Stoertebeker Station."

She paused to hook into the Force nav-sat network.

"Kaitrin reports that Jackson will meet you in Scale Plate Green, at our Dream Farm, once he's taken care of Confed business."

"I've got an idea about that," Max answered. "We'll talk specifics later. I signed a team of Jackson's researchers through the security checks to work on the data core. I want you to set up your own team and keep his researchers snowed."

"Snowed huh, these are bright people, care to be more specific?" Xela said.

"Just keep them two steps behind yours. Recruit more brains if you have to."

"My lab is staffed with the cream of the postgraduate crop Max, plus me but until I know the condition of the core I can offer no guarantees."

"My faith is total!" Max answered. "You know, a little confession really is good for the soul, thanks for not spacing me."

"It's a constant temptation Max," Xela said dryly. "Don't thank me too much yet."

But it did feel good, he still had to talk with Paskaal at some point, but the deception had been a constant burden, a black-winged presence, always there, reproachful, even if he'd only become aware of it with its lifting. It felt good too, to have a purpose, something immediate, something personal.

Tyre, her rescue had become the prism that re-focused his fractured light. Tyre, his fist tightened reflexively on the flight stick and he deliberately embraced his own fear, looking it direct in the face. A prisoner of a psychopath, Max let the arctic chill metamorph into iron determination.

There was a Teladi carrier group on the Teladi-Boron border and a Boron fleet just beyond the Menelaus Frontier jump gate.

“Five minutes to midnight,” Xela said quietly. “Whatever your plan is Max, it had better be a classic.”

Sinas said nothing for a full minute as he weighed the options and possibilities opened by the audacious proposal. Just possibly, as Max was in considerable credit with the Boron government thanks to his war on the Stoertebeker Clan, they would accept the compromise. And if so their Argon allies would support it, the Paranid too, possibly as they had no interest in conflict.

The others were a different matter.

The Teladi were convulsed with rage, incandescent at the evidence proving Boron complicity in the destruction in Scale Plate Green, in the death of their greatest living war hero.

For the Split it was an opportunity to rewrite the torturously negotiated Frontier Settlement, the post-war division of spoils.

The Boron Betrayal as their chief negotiator called it, spat it.

Giving a jump-drive to a Clan, it did not get any worse. It was a charge that could not be denied, Director Morn's evidence was as clear as it was convenient. That Law's weapons of mass destruction came from the same source was assumed.

Sinas knew the truth, knew that the Menelaus Paradise factotum had somehow been suborned, persuaded to transfer the jump-drive from the Orca TL that kept that part of the frontier supplied. And he knew that he had no evidence, just knowledge of the shadow-conspiracy and alien technology and if he revealed that Menelaus Paradise would become a battlefield as each race fought to prevent another seizing the technological mother-lode.

The Boron and the Argon intelligence services already knew about the clan station beyond that sector, probably the others did too by now. The Split were already insisting the Boron cede Menelaus Paradise to them and the Teladi had lodged a vigorous counter-claim.

“It's an alternative to retreat or war,” Sinas said finally. “You're a very popular man at the moment Max, waging a single-handed war on a savage criminal, just as much a victim as the Teladi, and ally of the lamented General – and his supporters still control a huge proxy vote. You have a very good PR machine.”

Sinas rubbed his dry, fatigued eyes and checked the time. He should have been back in the conference chamber by now.

“Alright, I'll discuss your notion with my Prince, if he agrees the Boron government will officially propose that Menelaus Paradise be licensed to you from my government for one year, pending further investigations and negotiations. Both the Boron and Argon governments will issue a letter of commission ordering you to bring Law to justice, I believe Morn will be unable to oppose that and the Paranid will also abstain.”

“The refit Orca will be yours for the 15 million credits we discussed a while ago and a licensed jump-drive installed, if we can agree new safeguards to prevent any possibility of its removal with the other governments. That is going to be an ‘if’ of giant proportions.”

“Good plan Max,” Xela said through the shades. “Inspired, really. A neutral force in the contested sector will do a lot to defuse tensions and if the media feeds are anything to go by half the universe will be rooting for you to kick ass. Most importantly, it buys everyone time to plot and scheme while avoiding provocative large scale fleet movements. Morn will buy it because she’ll be confident that Law is strong enough to whack you. We can top-slice commercial income for defence and reap monopoly profits from supply runs. We should check you for Teladi DNA!”

Max and Sinas shook hands.

When the Mamba launched he set course for Brennan’s Triumph.

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“One wrong move.”

“Sorry Max, what was that?”

“One wrong move,” Max repeated as he set course for Rolk’s Fate. “That’s all it’ll take to start a shooting war.”

“Move very carefully then, we’re flying a Split ship. I take it we’re paying Skull a little visit?”

“I have a proposition for her, Law’s screwed her too and if we can get control of Menelaus Paradise we have the key to a door she’ll be keen to kick down. I figure she owes us an interplanetary assault craft!”

Xela laughed.

“I’m sure she’ll hand one right over! If anyone can sweet-talk her it’ll be the new, improved Max, the one that actually tells me what he’s up to instead of springing it at the last second. Can we keep him, can we?”

Max agreed but kept silent about his other plans.

“That was good work back there, pretty deft manipulation. I, Hela that is, always knew there was a diplomatic bone in your body somewhere.”

“We needed a new sugar-daddy, he seemed the obvious candidate. I just hope he has the clout to pull it off. No-one wants war but no one wants to lose face, we’ve offered them all a chance to either calm down or get really organised. Either way I think they’ll go for it.”

Just as Max finished negotiating with the Piranha wing guarding the Rolk’s Fate gate a signal came in from Sinas on their encrypted channel. It was brief and to the point, the missing Frontier supply Orca had been carrying a shipyard construction package.

“What a Grade A screw up,” Max managed to say after digesting the news. “Want to bet that assorted mining packages also haven’t gone missing recently?”

“No,” Xela answered. “Not if Director Morn has been helping him.”

Beyond the Boron border sector of Atreus Clouds lay the un-regulated territories that were the heart of the Xenon empire until the Brennan war. Each sector was now a lawless melange of stations, a black economy producing everything from food to weaponry. The wing of mercenary Bayamons patrolling the Atreus Clouds jump-gate moved instantly to attack, scattering with stammered apologies when Max identified himself.

It was the first good laugh either of them had had for what seemed like years.

With merchant traffic light and clan patrols eager to avoid sparking the flammable situation, the run to the Skull base in Brennan’s Triumph was uneventful. Max entered the sector from Split Fire, a small

fleet of Skull fighters were waiting just beyond the jump-gate, circling respectfully beyond weapons range while his identity was verified.

“Scan confirms no illegal weapons, permission to proceed,” the flight leader grunted grudgingly. “No tricks this time Force.”

Six Teladi Falcon heavy fighters launched from Paradise Station, the axe head fighters cleaving towards the Mamba at their fully rated speed.

“You get the idea we’re expected?” Xela asked rhetorically.

Max shrugged.

The Falcons broke at two clicks, forming an escort sphere around the Mamba, just beyond weapons range. Max slowed the much faster Split fighter to their speed and followed the lead ship towards Paradise Station.

Xela kept her sensor lock scrolling through the powered down laser towers.

At four clicks Max rolled the Mamba into a circular orbit around the Skull base, seconds later Xela reported an incoming call.

“They want you to dock.”

“Not a chance,” Max answered vehemently. “I’m clean out of trust, put me on.”

“You’re on.” Xela replied crisply.

“This is Max Force, I’m fine out here thanks, get me your boss on a secure line.”

He cut the comm. channel instantly.

Two orbits of the station later Xela announced,

“Psycho-bitch on hold, Max.”

“Skull,” Max nodded a greeting to the white-faced image in the HUD.

“Commander Force,” Skull purred. “I believe a face-to-face meeting is more appropriate.”

“No deal, lady, I’ve got no more time for games. We’ve both been screwed by Law, metaphorically speaking.”

“Or not, in her case,” Xela whispered in his ear.

“You know what he’s done to me and I know he’s captured your not very secret base beyond Menelaus Paradise.”

Skull barely blinked.

“An astute inference Commander, we have indeed lost contact with the station.”

She paused.

“And other assets.”

“The Nibris supply ship, the Orca. I know, that’s going to make it a bit difficult to reclaim that sector isn’t it, with her being dead? It’s a long run to Menelaus Paradise, all those unfriendly Argon, Xenon, Split and Boron. And Morn has betrayed you too, no more cosy deals, no more technology transfers, no more R & D resources. She and Law seem to hold all the cards.”

A single cheek muscle spasmed as Skull listened to Max's brutal recitation of the facts. A cold fire burned in her eyes, a banked rage seeking an outlet.

"I can get it back for us."

Skull stared fixedly from the HUD as she weighed options.

"Us? That was contingent on you passing my test."

"Daht's dead and Director Morn sure as shit ain't ever going to make me her best buddy. Things are happening Skull, and when the news breaks you'll know you'll have to accept my offer if you ever want to get your hands on that alien ship."

Max reached down inside himself, deliberately stirring buried emotions, letting them well up into his eyes and voice.

"That bastard killed my girl."

His voice cracked with grief and rage, tears stung his eyes.

"And with or without your help he's going to pay. He's as good as dead and that precious base of yours is as good as scrap metal unless you play ball."

"Your personal losses are immaterial to me Commander. However, the station is a vital staging post and its destruction would not be welcomed. Do not presume to threaten me, you see only a fraction of my power."

Max rode with the rage.

"I'm way past threatening, Skull, way, way past that! If you want a damn war, I'll give you a damn war. You, Law, any bastard who gets in my way, I don't fucking care anymore!"

"Bluster all you want Commander," Skull replied, with ominous calm. "You lack the power to truly threaten me."

"You've no fucking idea what shit I've acquired over the last few months!" Max shouted, now almost beyond control. "You want to see my power, you want to see my power? You really want to see what two dozen hornets will do to Paradise?"

He sneered at Skull's image as she whispered off-screen.

"Those mercs used hornets and I have their fighters and their mobile base, now do you want to tell me I don't have the power?"

"Heads up, Max." Xela cautioned. Four Falcons had broken from their escort positions, heading for the fighter 1.5 clicks off his six.

"Warn those toys off Skull, before I smear them all over the damn sector."

Without waiting for a reply he rolled the Mamba and after-burned through a turn that put him head to head with the assembling fighter wing.

"Targets locked. What's it to be Skull?"

Skull snapped an order to someone off-screen and the six Falcons star-burst away, arcing towards Paradise Station. Max immediately decelerated and banked away.

"What is it you want Commander?" Skull asked in a brittle tone.

“Station schematics, access codes and the rest of that tactical crap. Then something Newtonian, something inter-planetary that’ll get my people to the Stoertebeker station before it gets too far. A Confed Clan base in Teladi Gain will put Morn’s tits in a vice don’t you think?”

Skull raised one carefully etched eyebrow.

“A Confederation station, not a Force one? I credited you with more ambition Commander.”

“The only damn ambition I have left is to choke that bastard with his own testicles!” Max snarled. “Jackson is my ally and I want him on the inside of your little conspiracy, watching out for my interests.”

“Enterprise.” Skull stated. “We refer to it as ‘the Enterprise.’”

“Whatever.” Max said dismissively. “You want your base back, you want to replace the resources you’ve lost now Morn has jumped ship? Then cough up an assault ship, and don’t tell me you don’t have that sort of asset!”

“That would be both an insult to my Clan and yourself Commander.” Skull answered smoothly. “Of course I control such a vessel. However, making it available to yourself requires reasons other than blustered threats and vague promises. I fail to see that you and your vaunted Raiders are in any better position than I do deal with Law, unless you have charmed the Xenon into granting you free passage.”

“You keep watching the News, you’ll find out soon enough. I’m transmitting a comm. frequency and encryption key, when you’re prepared to loan me an un-crewed inter-planetary vessel you give me a call. And no tricks, no tracers, no bombs, no nothing; just the loan of a ship.”

He snapped the channel shut and accelerated towards the northern jump-gate.

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“Xenon fighters detected on long range scanners Commodore,” the First Officer reported. “The base must have got off a distress call.”

“Time to contact, Irana?” Jaines wheezed, his question ending in a choking cough into a blood flecked cloth.

“Two hours,” Irana answered. “There must be another ship out there, Xenon do not usually patrol that far from base. Your orders Sir?”

Commodore Jaines choked back the bubbling coughing fit that echoed around the cramped bridge, and gasped for breath. His lungs were deteriorating almost by the day, rotted by years of cavalier abuse, it was time to return to Paradise Station for more surgery, more transplants to extend his already over-long life. It was a decision he’d put off while the Intimidator prowled the system, seeking out and eliminating remnant Xenon forces in the Brennan’s Triumph planetary system.

He’d hoped the station burning on screen was the last of them but Irana was right, there must be at least one ship left and despite Skull’s urgent call, he was loath to return to the gate sector with enemies remaining at his back.

“Hornets remaining?”

The Split Weapons Officer barely hesitated.

“Seven onboard, five salvaged and inbound.”

Twelve. Jaines tapped at the command seat arm console. Missile stocks were low, they’d been surviving on scavenged materials for weeks, sifting the debris of each encounter to arm for the next. It had been a long but exhilarating tour and the converted Albatross had proven more than a match for the remaining Xenon outposts scattered throughout the system. Only a brace of corvette class capital ships

offered a significant challenge but his pilots had forced home their attacks with a fanaticism that would see the survivors well rewarded when they returned to Paradise.

Return to Paradise.

Jaines weighed the need to return to help deal with the threat of Law and Morn's betrayal with his desire not to have to keep looking over his shoulder for a Xenon attack. Force would require delicate handling, if he were to be admitted to the Enterprise. He was a maverick, a wild card, and Jaines did not like rogue elements, their very unpredictability was a threat. Yet as Skull argued, he had information and resources they required, to replace those lost through treachery.

He finally acceded to the logic of the situation, agreeing to go along with Force's demands. Much work would have to be done to ensure that when the time came, the upstart Jackson understood where his long-term interests truly lay.

"Recall all fighters and set an intercept course for those ships," Jaines ordered. "And find me their base."

There was time for one further victory before returning. Force could wait one more day for the planetary assault vessel in the Intimidator's huge flight deck.

Jaines surrendered to another coughing fit as the planetary drive throbbled to life.

---

It was a long flight back through Teladi and Split space to Scale Plate Green. Twice Max had to engage packs of Bayamons out from the Blue Tooth Gang base in Chin's Clouds, killing all except two, who now flew on his wing under the control of Xela's advanced auto-pilot program.

"Five hundred thou just brings out the suicidal in people," Xela remarked as she ordered the new escorts to interdict a finger-five of Bayamons that had broken off from a large Clan convoy hauling through Tarka's Sun.

Max let his escorts mire the attackers before storming into the furball. The fight was over in minutes, the rest of the convoy fleeing towards the safety of the western gate while he wore down the shields of the last surviving attacker.

"Bye bye baby," Xela announced as the pilot involuntarily ejected, spinning headlong into the Mamba shields before Max's fatigue-sapped reflexes could react. He needed a stim now, almost feeling that rush of energy pulsing through his nervous system as he reached into the med kit.

"No."

"Sorry Max, you said something?"

"Nothing Zee, I'm just feeling tired is all."

He closed the kit.

"SETA us the rest of the way Zee, I'm just going to rest my eyes."

The jump gate transitions barely disturbed his sleep.

Xela's warning cry did.

"Xenon on the starboard bow, break left, break left!"

Max jerked awake and even before reaching consciousness he reflexively slammed the stick to the left and hit the afterburners. The control flapped uselessly loose and the burners failed to respond as the Mamba slipped into the twilight of a docking tunnel.

“That just never stops not being funny,” Max managed to say as the autopilot guided his ship to the Raiders launch bay aboard his surviving Scale Plate Green station.

The Sarge met him as he climbed down from the cockpit.

“Welcome aboard sir,” Payter said awkwardly. “The team want you to know you can count on us when you come up with a plan.”

His appraising look was not well concealed.

“Don’t worry Sarge, I’m not falling apart on you. And wheels are in motion, I want you to prepare to launch an assault on the Stoertebeker base, you’ll have a suitable ship soon. And work with the Confed people, let them get shot at first for a change. What’s the status here?”

“Standby mode, they had to shut down the harvesting, no market for the swamp plants and no staff without a big yellow streak. Defence assets are two LT’s, two Piranhas and four very skittish Confed Bayamons. A new nav-sat’s up too.”

“We’ll sort that later, some more defences and hazard pay. We’ll have another Bliss Place up and running soon enough, minus the casino side of things this time I guess.”

Max pushed the casualty list from his mind.

“What about this sector?”

“A full battlegroup Commander, Law isn’t going to be returning any time soon.”

“Jackson?”

“On his way Sir. We sent a message as soon as you entered the sector as you requested.”

“That was me,” Xela whispered through the shades. “The art of good leadership is delegation.”

“Good work Sarge,” Max answered. “If the station manager has done a runner I’ll use his office, send Jack up when he arrives.”

Payter nodded acknowledgement.

“I’ll assign you a pair from station security, just in case anybody fancies a crack at the reward.”

“Belay that, Sarge.”

Max slapped the blaster holstered to his thigh.

“I’d welcome it right now!”

Payter understood.

Xela map-read the way through the deserted station to the station manager’s office, a claustrophobically cramped ready room off the flight control centre that stank of whisky and spaceweed. A half eaten sandwich lay on the desk.

Max activated the small holo-cube besides the computer terminal and scanned the room with the sensors in Xela’s padd.

“Family snaps,” Xela said, observing the procession of small figures spouting variants of “love you” to a missing audience. “The room’s clean, of listening devices that is. This guy sure bugged out in a hurry.”

Before Max could reply the terminal screen flared to life and the Sarge announced Jackson's flight were on docking approach. As the call terminated Xela announced that Sinas was coming in on the encrypted channel.

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"The Boron government is prepared to cede control of Menelaus Paradise pending the report of a full inquiry into the circumstances of the attack on Scale Plate Green."

His statement stunned three of the five species representatives to silence.

"I yield the floor to the honourable representative of the Argon Republic."

Sinas sat straight down to allow the Argon Ambassador to speak. The old man was already laboriously hauling himself to his feet, with the help of a black cane topped with a silver handgrip, a stylised reproduction of the gaping jawed head of the pratash, one of the biggest oceanic predators on the Boron home world.

Raython Budwar did not need the cane, he carried it because it was a gift from the Boron queen, marking his two decades service at her Ambassadorial Court. Like his spasmodic hearing difficulties, it was a device, an artifice intended to deceive those who mistook advanced age with an opportunity to exploit.

He exchanged a knowing look with the Menelaus Frontier factotum representing the Boron in this crisis and as he searched his pockets ostentatiously for an un-needed inhaler to help with his non-existent cough, he surveyed the beings sitting around the plain white oval conference table.

Hatmankeptul, the Paranid Priest King from Priest Pity was as impassive as a statue, while Admiral Ochan t'Zhmm appeared to be boiling with open rage, which so far as Ambassador Budwar had been able to divine through long years of inter-species diplomacy, was the natural state of every Split he'd ever met. As a negotiating tactic though, he had to admit, it could be quite effective.

Director Morn just looked as if she was about to explode. Whether with rage or happiness Budwar could not tell, his ability to read the saurian body language of a Teladi of the Director's cunning was limited.

"My government concurs and proposes the granting of a temporary franchise to the Force Security Corporation, pending the outcome of the inquiry. None of us are prepared to allow a change in the Frontier Settlement without clear proof of wrongdoing. A trusted, neutral and well-armed third party seems the ideal solution."

"Proposal seconded," Sinas quickly interjected as Morn sprang to her feet.

"I have yet to yield the floor," Budwar observed quietly to Morn. "But have your say."

Morn launched into a long, sibilant diatribe, restating the Teladi Trading Company objections to the Split and Boron duopoly of the sectors beyond Black Hole Sun. Finally she attacked Force, emphasising his criminal background, questionable trading practices and close links with the Confederation Clan.

"Yet it was your government that first proposed granting him a license to build orbital stations and trade between sectors," Budwar observed smoothly. "And he was a close ally of your late and lamented General as well as a victim of the attack."

He studied the silver headed cane handle intently for a moment, as if seeing it for the first time.

"The Boron Government concede that treachery led to the loss of a jump-drive but I have seen no evidence presented that this was anything more than it seems. Betrayal for personal gain."

He paused and then said, his voice hardening.

“Commander Force’s commercial connections with a minor pirate Clan are well known and legal in Teladi space. His resolute opposition to Law, whose many links are also well documented, is also a matter of record.”

The ambassador fixed Morn with a pointed stare, letting the implied threat take root.

“Gentle beings, we all understand the realities of the situation, we all know the Clans have control of the unclaimed sector beyond Menelaus Paradise, and we all know that whoever controls said sector is in a prime position to unilaterally to extend their Frontier holdings now that the Xenon appear to have withdrawn. Force has the motivation to fight Law and the resources to hold Menelaus Paradise against a Clan attack long enough for reinforcements to arrive. The jump drive has to be retrieved and unless Law is stupid enough to jump into a defended sector this means going in and getting it. We are not going to agree on a change of sector ownership and unless the honourable representative for the Split is happy to allow a Boron Task Force into that part of the Frontier I do not see we have a choice in the matter.”

He yielded the floor to Admiral Ochan t'Zhmm with a nod.

“Any such deployments would be considered a direct threat to our interests!” the Split representative screamed vehemently. The Admiral banged the table for emphasis.

“Split fleets present also!”

“Our forces must be present, in that instance,” the Paranid Priest King rumbled, his three eyes intently scanning the faces of the other representatives.

“The Boron Government will not permit a single Split warship in any of our sectors,” Sinas observed quietly. “It would mean war.”

“Xaar, for he is great, forbids such a divisive conflict when a potent enemy is at large. The Paranid support stability and support the motion.” Hatmankeptul focused all eyes onto Morn, as if willing her to silence.

“Your God is all-wise,” Sinas said quickly. “I propose control of Menelaus Frontier be handed to the Force Corporation as of this day, with the proviso that commerce is maintained. Is there any vote against?”

Just one. Morn hissed contempt and swept from the chamber.

Lower level functionaries would hammer out the details, despite the inevitable Teladi claw dragging so Sinas excused himself quickly to deliver Max some rare good news.

### **Chapter 3: Jokers Wild**

“Damn, no wonder you waited before springing that on me!”

Jackson paused, one boot already on the cockpit ladder of his Falcon fighter and lowered his voice conspiratorially to stop it echoing through the empty hangar bay.

“Just walking me to my ship, right, I bet you haven’t mentioned this idiocy to the electric chick, right?”

“She’d have more than a few things to say, none of them helpful,” Max admitted. “She’ll know what she needs to know when she needs to know it, meanwhile she’s happy planning the customisation of my new Orca. I need your help from the off though, are you in or not?”

Jackson scrutinised the face of his ally closely. His eyes were unreadable behind the mirrored shades but he recognised the set of his clenched jaw, and his lips, thin and drawn tight to colourless, no give.

“It all depends on my co-operation Max, what if I say no?”

“Then you don’t get the Stoertebeker base,” Force answered shortly. “Unless you can get an interplanetary assault ship to Teladi Gain without my help.”

A station in the Teladi home sector, once the hostile political situation was resolved it would be a licence to generate credits, taking him and the Confederation into the big-time. It was what he wanted, what he’d worked for, yet Jackson still almost said no.

“Damn it Max, you’re the nearest guy I have to a friend!” That realization was a surprise, even to Jackson. Peers were usually competitors but Force or Marteene, or whomever he considered himself today, wasn’t on the same track, particularly if he was willing to cede control of Law’s lair. It was one of those put-up points in Jackson’s mind, a marker for future intentions. If he were in Max’s position he’d seize it for himself and find a figurehead until he sucked dry the possibilities and opportunities provided by his legal status.

“And more to the point you’re my ticket to the top table. If you’re dead I’m back to the big-fish, small pond thing, with Morn on my case and Skull blaming me for losing a key piece of her jigsaw. It’s more than your life you’re gambling with here. What about the alien tech? You could be handing it to Law, you could be handing him the whole damn shooting match, and over what, a chick you hardly know?”

“I know what I feel,” Max answered evenly, after a dangerous silence. His voice had a serrated edge Jackson recognised viscerally in his own urge to throw the dice in the face of adverse probabilities.

“You’re going to pull some kind of stunt regardless of what I say, right Max?”

Max nodded.

“Okay, if I can’t stop you I’ll play along. I want to provide some backup though.”

“The plan already has back-up,” Max answered.

“Reliable back-up, Max. You know what I mean.”

“I know what you mean Jack,” Max replied. “If you can think of something, I’m all ears. I can’t, can you?”

Jackson thought for a moment and shook his head.

“When?” he asked finally.

“Twelve hours, Confed Station. That’ll give me time to fix a few things back at the new base and get Xela tied up in planning our move to Menelaus Paradise.”

Jackson sighed.

“Okay Max, I’m in. If it all works out I expect your help with business in that part of the New Frontier. You are going to be setting up a new Bliss Place?”

“Probably,” Max answered. “But just a bare bones manufacturing facility. Help me out with this and there’ll be room in the Orca for your stuff, no questions asked.”

“In the unlikely event you’re alive.”

“In the unlikely event,” Max agreed with a thin smile.

They shook on the deal.

Fourteen hours later Max was at Confed Station, climbing down from the cockpit of a Force Security Piranha to take control of his prisoner.

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“Come here my dear, you should witness this moment.”

The blonde slave hesitated just long enough to signal her continued defiance and rose from her knees to join Law at the huge display window running the length of his new ready room, her small, quick steps jangling the short silver chain hobbling her ankles.

Without needing to be ordered she knelt at his left side, eyes down, chest out and wrists crossed behind her back in case he wished to bind her with the cuffs integrated into the slave harness. It pleased Law to have the woman of Max Force displayed in this fashion, the contrast of black leather and white, vulnerable flesh, her up-thrust breasts, the delicious transition from black mesh stocking to un-marked pale thigh, the tear swollen face.

Law trembled with un-slaked need, digging taloned nails into the trembling girls shoulder, drawing blood, which snaked in thin scarlet rivulets down into her cleavage. Tyre barely whimpered, even when he increased the pressure, widening the rips in the thin skin around her collarbone.

Good, he liked slaves that learned quickly and had a high pain threshold. Once Force was in his hands he would see just how high. But for now her abuse was minor, a foretaste, an anticipation of things to come for them both.

“Watch!” Law seized her hair, twisting his hand until he was yanking hard at the roots, practically lifting the mewling woman from the deck. “This is the birth of a whole new future.”

Tyre watched in a trembling fear she was finding harder to control as a huge ship sailed into view. She knew little about spacecraft but she guessed from the smooth, hump-backed lines of the main hull that it was Boron. Max had once said they designed the best-looking ships in space and there was something about this one that suggested the ocean, even the giant rectangular belly of the beast tapered gracefully. As she watched the belly split slowly open at the front and a giant metallic looking box drifted out. She knew what that was, a station construction package.

She bit her lip as Law twisted her hair further, desperate to deny the sadist any satisfaction. Small victories, she would live by small victories until Max came for her.

He would come, he just had to.

“That, my pretty little thing, will be a shipyard. My shipyard. In two weeks it will be ready to build me a new fleet, and your pitiful excuse for a man will keep it supplied.”

“Max won’t help you, you deluded savage!” Tyre screamed, twisting to blaze her defiance in his face.

Absolute, boiling rage flared in Law's deformed visage, the human flesh flushing red, contrasting sharply with the thin white scar borders of the reptilian leather transplant.

And just as quickly it was gone.

"Then let us both hope that pain is something you will slowly learn to embrace," Law said coldly.

Tyre could barely think through the terror.

'Hurry Max, please.'

Max was running late, the Menelaus Paradise decision was public knowledge now and had fanned interest in himself and his business to new heights. Anje Delenari had a string of interviews set up, covering all the major news outlets and had travelled to Teladi Gain to make sure he said nothing to detract from the image she'd schemed to create. The woman had even leaked highly exaggerated details of the kidnapping of Tyre, his "beautiful young fiancée."

"You score a 9.7 on the Public Approval Rating!" she crowed between remote interviews. "Max Force, avenging angel!" She paused and thought for a second. "There's a T shirt in that, what do you think?"

Max thought she must be joking.

He did one more interview, a live feed to one of the major Argon late night news streams, and afterwards, ignoring the publicists' protest he went straight to the launch bays. He would have taken the Pegasus rescue ship to make up lost time with its unmatched velocity but Corrin was flying it to Garleth Prime to recover the disguised teleporter from the Data Hub. Xela wanted to get the Mamba shadow-skin technology back online and insisted that the missing projectors were crucial.

It was a pity, he would have liked to have said goodbye.

Instead of the Mamba, which bounty hunters would be looking for, Max checked out his old Piranha. It wasn't as fast as the Split fighter but was fast enough. More importantly, it was expendable.

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By the time the Boron fighter came under the control of the Confed docking computer Max was poised, focused and almost serene. It was a narrow path, littered with traps and treachery that could derail the whole project but he felt now he had no choice. Too many innocent people had been sacrificed in the easy name of the greater good and if it was in his power to prevent another pointless death, it was a gamble he had to take, whatever the risk or the consequences of failure.

The main docking bay still bore the patched gatling scars of his first encounter with Jackson and with a CAP launch in progress it was a tumult of activity. An armed party, six armed guards surrounding a single manacled prisoner, waited close to his docking slot. Jackson though, was nowhere to be seen.

The lead guard stepped forward as he alighted, holstering her sidearm as she came. She was just on the wrong side of plain, probably a few years older than him to judge by the lines forming around her eyes which had the distant stare of a combat veteran. The old, faded uniform said ex military, so did the crew-cut.

She stopped two paces from him and half saluted, a casual touch of fingers to brow.

"Lieutenant Wash, Commander. It's a pleasure to meet you Sir."

Definitely ex military Max decided as he returned the salute.

"Mr Jackson sends his apologies Sir, clan business but your prisoner is secure and prepared for transport. He wanted you to have this."

She handed Max a data-chip.

It's all the information we could get on the bounty Law's set. Prisoner, advance."

The gaggle of guards parted to allow Joker to step forward. The former Stoertebeker Clan member advanced, sneering general contempt and wiping blood from his battered and freshly bruised face with manacled hands.

"We had trouble convincing him to volunteer," Vash stated dead-pan.

"Tell me what I'm volunteering for," Joker countered with a snarl.

"That's need-to-know," Max countered, "And that's between you and I. Hear me out?"

Vash took the hint and moved her team back a discreet distance.

Joker nodded sullenly.

Pitching his voice so it would not carry too far against the background of fighter launches Max explained his plan.

"So let me get this straight Force, you want me to turn you in to Law for the reward?"

"It's the only way I can think of to get on his new base, in the sector beyond Menelaus Paradise. You were one of his men, he killed your wife, he's holding my woman now and I'm offering you the chance for revenge. A quick in and out, with luck we can be away before they even know anything is wrong."

"Station Prime?" Joker laughed. "He's in control of Station Prime now, I guess you really screwed the pooch on that one, Force."

He hawked and spat on the deck, almost hitting Max's boots.

"I thought you were going to fix him good? Fucking pussy."

He spat again, taunting Max with his grin.

"Your wife," Max said quietly.

Joker stared at Max with dead eyes, his face hardened to stone.

"Will I get to kill him?"

"If he gets in our way," Max answered. "This is a rescue mission, not an assassination attempt but I promise you, he's going down. Maybe not today, maybe not next week, but that bastard is going down. You help me pull this off and I swear you'll be in at the kill. Deal?"

He extended his hand but Joker just raised his manacled wrists mockingly before him. After a couple of seconds thought Max nodded to Vash and the lieutenant stepped forward with the key card.

The instant the manacles demagnetised Joker exploded into action, one fist a nose-breaking backhand, crunched straight into Vash's face, sending her reeling back into the escort group. The other snatched her sidearm, its black barrel was a cold threat against his forehead before Max could react.

Joker moved swiftly behind him, pulling his body close with a throat lock and holding the gun to his head. A dozen weapons covered him from all corners of the bay while flight engineers scattered for cover.

“No fucking funny moves or the pretty-boy pussy gets all messed up!” Joker yelled, using Max as a shield as he backed up towards the flight line. “No-one move, I’m not damn kidding around people! I want to see weapons on the ground and hands in the air, NOW!”

Vash and the other five guards placed their weapons on the deck, moving with exaggerated caution. The hangar echoed to the clatter of other weapons dropping.

“Good boys,” Joker sneered. “Now, you!” He singled out Vash with a swift wave of a gun barrel as he increased the savage pressure on Max’s throat. “Get those cuffs on pussy here. NOW dammit, I’m not screwing around here!”

The lieutenant moved slowly forward towards the fallen cuffs, her arms spread wide.

“Okay, take it easy, doing as you say, doing as you say.”

She picked up the cuffs.

“You can’t get away with this, give yourself up now.”

“Can it bitch!” Joker screamed. “Save the resistance is futile crap for somebody who gives a flying fuck.”

He pressed the gun barrel hard against Max’s right ear.

“Hands out Max.”

Choking for breath Max obeyed. Vash slipped the cuffs over his wrists, the magnetic locks snapping instantly shut.

“The key, the key goddamit! That’s it, slip it into pretty boy’s flight suit, yea, that’s right, the pants pocket, cop yourself a feel while you’re at it,” he leered.

Vash obeyed, watchful for any opportunity. None presented itself, Joker was too experienced to leave an opening.

“Right. Everybody, and I do mean everybody.” Joker quickly scanned the flight line. “Move away from the ships and get down and friendly with the deck-plates. Face down friendly, out in the open, where I can see you. There.”

He nodded towards the escort group.

“Gather round those guys. If I even suspect someone ain’t playin’ along I’m gonna start shooting, NOW MOVE!”

Flight engineers and pilots filtered from concealment to join the hapless guards spread-eagled on the deck.

“Well done kiddies, Jackson’s going to so proud of you. Now, which ship do you fancy Max? The Boron rust-bucket, I don’t think so.”

He scanned the line of ships, mostly Bayamons and Mandalays.

“All too slow, I think we’ll take that one. You, the greaser that’s just shit himself, get a fucking backbone then tell me the specs of that Pegasus on the end there.”

Choking on a mixture of embarrassment and fear, the young flight engineer with the spreading stain on the seat of his pants, climbed unsteadily to his feet, his puppy fat face swollen red, on the edge of tears.

“Uhh, that’s Rescue Two, it’s clocked at 800 mps I think.”

“That then will do nicely,” Joker grinned. “We don’t want the Xenon stopping you getting to your own funeral do we Maxi-boy? Not before I cash you in, half a million for a wife, that sounds fair compensation.”

Shouting threats each time someone moved Joker backed Max down the flight-line to the silver painted Paranid light fighter. It was small enough not to require a boarding ladder and he cracked the cockpit and bundled Max into the rear seat, the gun barrel never wavering from him.

Leaning into the cockpit himself he activated the rear seat crash field and cranked it to the limit, pinning Max immobile.

“Okay boys and girls, it’s been fun.”

Still covering the prone group of Confeds he stepped in the front seat.

“Now then hero,” Joker picked again on the flight engineer. “Call the launch, use that comm. by the exit and tell them no funny business, launch doors open, LT’s off. And tell Jackson, I’ll be seeing him real soon!”

He pulled the cockpit shut and fired up the thrusters.

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“Little breathing room here?” Max called from the rear seat, forcing his neck straight against the constricting power of the crash field. Joker grunted a response and flicked off the protective restraint.

“Thanks, that was a good show.” Max massaged the cramped muscles in the back of his neck. “Jackson filled you in on all the details?”

“How the fuck could I know if he told me everything, why don’t you give it a go? And pass me a helmet will ya.” Joker snarled as the fighter cleared the docking tunnel, flooding the cramped cockpit with sunlight.

It took a deal of squirming in the claustrophobic confines of the cockpit before Max could retrieve the keycard from his pocket and unlock the cuffs. He reached under the back of the pilot seat, passed the helmet forward and waited for Joker to activate the HUD and twist onto a heading for the east gate.

“Simple. You fly us to Law’s new hole in the wall, tell ‘em you’re claiming the bounty, we dock and take the first opportunity to brush off any guards and cause as much mayhem as we can with these.”

He reached under his own seat and pulled out a satchel. The combat blasters had folding stocks and he slipped one into his flight suit, making sure it was inconspicuous beneath the padding. The grenades he pocketed before he passed the second blaster over the seat to Joker.

“In the confusion we find the prisoners, get em back to the ship, out and away.”

“Shit,” Joker said after a pause. “He did tell me all the plan. Damn, this thing is FAST!”

They were already approaching the jump gate; Joker eased them behind the string of Lifters approaching the activation point.

“I was kinda hoping there might be more. Well, I been there once, pulled a term flying CAP. Big deal, hush-hush, I don’t suppose you’re gonna tell me what’s going on there?”

“All I’m interested in is getting Tyre,” Max answered evasively. “You know the base layout?”

“Some, most of it was off limits but the slave pens are only a couple of decks above the main flight bay. I can take us straight there.”

The small fighter crossed the gate threshold and plummeted through to Omicron Lyrae. It was the heart of the Argon segment of the New Frontier with both an Equipment Dock and a Shipyard.

Streams of freighters and escorts flowed through it in both directions, making the route to the Treasure Chest jump gate as busy as a city throughway.

Joker eased the fleet Pegasus fighter out of the ecliptic plane and arced at full speed through the sector, keeping a wary eye on the sector security patrols. The ride was a lot rougher than Max expected and he ran a diagnostic on the tiny auxiliary control panel built into the back of the pilot seat.

“You’ve got a faulty stabiliser,” he warned.

“Backseat drivers are one of my many pet hates.” Joker responded. “I’m already compensating but trust Jackson to slip us a faulty ship. Hey, perhaps he’s trying to off you!”

For some reason, he found that notion amusing.

Max checked the small cargo bay to satisfy himself that there was not some hapless, overlooked pilot suspended in that sub-space half-world. Apart from a maintenance droid it was empty.

At full speed it took just minutes for the Pegasus to reach Black Hole Sun and the jump gate to the Xenon sector that isolated the outer rim of the New Frontier from the rest of the X Universe. It was barely enough time to thrash out the final details of the plan, beyond Joker describing the slave pen layout and access points but he was as happy as Max to rely on surprise, speed and firepower rather than meticulous planning.

The run through Xenon space was not anything Max wanted to ever repeat. Tweaking the nose of death, he decided, recalling his own Pegasus run through Xenon space between Scale Plate Green and Eighteen Billion, was a lot less fun when you were just a passenger. Joker’s strafing run down the hull of the single Xenon cruiser in a position to interdict them, brought close to emulating the hapless Confed flight engineer.

He seemed to enjoy it though and it showed he was a great pilot, which, Max reflected, was probably the intention.

“Why you doing this?” Max asked as they sped through Thyn’s Abyss. “You know the story, Force. My wife. Revenge not a good enough motive?”

“It keeps me going,” Max answered. “You don’t want to talk about this?”

“Listen to the tone. Look Force, I’m not doing this for you, I don’t give a fuck about your little war. All I care about is making Law pay and at the moment you’re my best shot. If getting your squeeze out brings that day closer then I’ll make it happen.”

“The enemy of my enemy?”

“Nothing gets past you does it Max?” Joker snapped sarcastically. “You should stop flapping your lips and get praying, we both know this scheme is just an elaborate suicide.”

“Then why come along, living to fight another day et cetera?”

“I’ve nothing left to live for,” Joker answered. His tone ended the conversation.

Suicide.

Deep down Max knew it was true, knew he was letting his personal interest jeopardise the mission.

Love and redemption.

Max deliberately embraced the memories he’d avoided, those dreadful final seconds, pleading with the Challenger crew. The memory intertwined with the nightmare, the drifting corpses and the mute accusations. Expediency did not lessen the stain on his conscience. It was now he could do with a

smoke, something to wash out the numbness, stoke some good feeling. But he thought of Tyre and blamed himself.

Sector security challenged them in every Split sector but did not dispute Joker's taciturn claim to be carrying vital medicines to Ocean of Fantasy. They were ignored by the Boron patrols, congregating in large wings near the gate to Chin's Escape.

One wrong move indeed.

Menelaus Paradise was devoid of Royal Boron Fleet defences, just skeleton patrols hugging individual stations. Every man for himself, problem number one if we get through this, Max thought.

If? So much weight on the shoulders of a tiny word.

The Pegasus rocketed across the sector to the final jump gate.

"So, what's the plan, you want me to just jump through?"

"That's why we're here," Max answered, steeling himself.

Joker threw the fighter into an arcing, high speed turn away from the looming gate, straining the artificial gravity to the limits and crushing Max back into the seat.

"You see Force," he sneered. "This is why you just ain't going to win, you don't think things through, you just rush in with guns blazing and hope for the best. This ain't the vids ya know! We jump through there in this pissy little heap of crap and we'll be burned before you can blink. See that station?"

"The Bio Gas factory off the port forward quarter or the Bofu Lab ahead?" Max asked.

Joker banked sharply port.

"The Bio place, listen and learn!"

Max followed Joker's actions on the auxiliary control panel as he tapped a specific narrow band frequency into the comm. settings.

"This is Joker, operative code Alpha, Alpha, Prime, Seven, Gamma, Four. Encode following message and deliver. Attention, attention, bounty hunter claiming the Max Force bounty standing by. Request clearance to proceed. Message ends."

He glanced briefly over his shoulder to say.

"You'd better slip those cuffs on in case they want some proof."

Max complied, leaving them unlocked.

Five minutes later, as the Pegasus orbited the station, came a single word reply.

Proceed.

Joker banked towards the jump gate and accelerated to maximum speed.

"Last chance to turn yellow, Force."

"Go for it," Max answered quietly.

The Pegasus plunged into hyperspace.

## **Chapter 4: Station Prime**

“It’s a valid code Sire, and tracks back to one of your pilots. Visual ID and voice-prints match.”

The human on-screen smiled nervously as Law methodically fastened his tunic, one silver buckle at a time. The man, Law dredged for a name as he adjusted the fit of the collar seal, had every call to exhibit concern. Kannor, he pinned the name permanently to the face, Kannor was a hold-over, one of the few former crew of Station Prime taken into his service and so had a lot to prove and to fear. Disturbing Law unnecessarily during a sleep cycle was rumoured not to be without risk.

Law looked at him for long, silent seconds, watching the young communications officer’s struggle to maintain composure.

“Efficiently performed Mr Kannor, transfer the details to this station.”

Kannor’s face vanished, replaced by a still shot of a crag-faced man, unsmiling beneath the type of severe military cut Law liked to see on his mercenaries. It spoke of the correct attitude.

Law remembered him now, a good man. He delved further into his record. A reliable man, married, nothing to suggest any connection to Force despite the suspicious serendipity of his arraignment. Of course, with a bounty of such size on his head it was purely a matter of time before someone collected, but even so, when the brief encrypted data squirt came through from Confed Station, Law felt a tinge of regret beneath the anticipatory thrill.

Obliging Force to leap through whatever hoops he cared to device, forcing him to help Law tighten his grip on this sector, that would have been amusing as well as useful. Continuing the psychological torture of his woman, that too was diverting.

Law grinned in the semi-darkness of the commandeered sleeping space. Once it had been remodelled according to his specific requirements and she had watched every second of the long and elaborate fate he would devise for Force, she would provide him new entertainment, after of course, entertaining his men. That would be something for Force to witness at some point.

It was hard to believe Force would be so careless as to drop so conveniently into his hands, particularly following the news of his unexpected accession to control of Menelaus Paradise. That would have seriously impeded his plans but Force’s protracted demise would smash that delicate diplomatic compromise. But Force was reckless; Law could easily believe he would gamble on the eggshell loyalty of a captured mercenary.

Law tapped directly into the comm system and transmitted a single word of permission. Then he turned to his own preparations, he had consistently underestimated Force and now he was almost in his grasp he would not be allowed to trick his way free.

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“Uhh, good call on the permission thing,” Max conceded. The LT ahead of them was already primed, aimed and ready to fire and the other four in the defensive cone covering the gate tracked the Pegasus as Joker after-burned through a corkscrew defensive break.

“Just in case,” Joker murmured as Max braced himself against the front seat. The half-expected blinding blast did not come and Max drew a half breath of relief which froze in his throat as the Pegasus curved back towards the centre of the gate sector.

“Is that..?”

“A shipyard?” Max finished Joker’s question for him. “Yep, or it soon will be.”

The basic outline was already in place, the distinctive hanging ribs of the construction cradle, the workshop and manufacturing towers, all prefigured in the framework of structural supports and ready

fabricated modules hanging in space, close to Law's new base. A small army of construction droids, made visible by the constant flash of their manoeuvre jets, swarmed over the construction site.

A dozen assorted Clan fighters flew CAP around the shipyard. Another six circled the LT defined perimeter of Station Prime.

"You knew about it?" Joker stated. "If you were real smart you'd cut a deal."

"If I was that smart do you think I'd be here? Run those layouts by me again."

As the Pegasus entered docking range Joker quickly ran through again what he remembered of the station layout. Max tried to fix it in mind, visualising each fork and branch. It would have been easier if he had brought Xela along, she could have flashed the routes onto the shades now sitting uselessly in his breast pocket, but Max did not want to risk losing her too, in what his heart told him was probably a futile mission.

But a man's gotta do, Max thought, as the saying goes.

Joker called for docking permission and the string of guide lights flashed to life.

"Any last words Max?" Joker asked as they slipped through the docking tunnel entrance.

Max checked the charge on his blaster before concealing it back beneath his tunic and refastening the cuffs.

"Just good luck. We're both going to need it."

"Ain't that true," Joker muttered. "Switching to auto-dock."

The station auto-pilot guided the fighter through to the designated docking bay. It was a small, deserted side-bay, with barely enough slots for three ships. The bare metal walls bore the carbonised scars of a fire-fight and the stink of burnt insulation permeated the air. Close by stood a cluster of armed guards, as the fighter approached the middle bay Max was crushed immobile by the safety field. By the time they'd landed and Joker was standing over him, reaching down into the cockpit, he could hardly breathe.

"Relax Max, it'll all soon be over."

Joker threw a quick wink as he leaned in and disconnected the field, covering Max all the while with the folded stock rifle held easily in a pistol grip. Grabbing him by the collar he half pulled Max from the cockpit. With his wrists locked before him, he struggled to keep his balance.

A half dozen human guards, faces hidden behind mirrored helmet visors, sidearms and stun clubs at the ready, stood waiting in a semi-circle, a discreet distance from the ship.

"Be ready to make your move when I do," Joker hissed. "Hey you guys, where's the big man? I sorta expected him to be here, with a fully loaded credit chip. What the...?"

Six weapons snapped up in a ragged, alarmed, ripple, pointing towards him. His synapses were already firing, fight or flight reflex, when he realised the barrels were pointing beyond them.

"It's just a droid, it's just a droid!" Joker yelled, wide-eyed with surprise. "I boosted a damaged ship is all!"

Oblivious to the excitement the floating repair droid drifted to the rear, and sprouting the appropriate tools, began opening the rear port stabiliser intake.

"See!"

Max held his breath until the leader ordered his troops to stand down with a snapped hand command. Reluctantly the barrels went down.

“Law has ordered that Force be taken into custody, pending identification and security checks. You are to be extended every courtesy in the meantime. You will be sent for when Law sends for Force, you will receive your payment then. Force is known for his subterfuges, Law trusts that is acceptable.”

Max tried to hold himself relaxed and ready, waiting for the moment to throw off the manacles and reach for the weapons beneath his flight suit.

“Law’s right to worry,” Joker laughed cynically, stepping back behind Max. “Because it’s all a ruse!”

Max was shucking off the restraints before Joker even completed the sentence and had one hand on the blaster, his fingers curling around the trigger when his world exploded with pain and stars.

Joker stood over his prone, groaning form, wiping Max’s blood from his rifle barrel on a sleeve.

“Mine!”

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Functioning purely on instinct Max managed to keep hold of the concealed weapon, attempting to roll and draw. A boot caught him in the side of the face, others followed, to the stomach, the ribs and as he curled into a ball, to his arms and legs.

Finally an authoritative voice barked, “Enough!”

Blinded by pain Max felt himself being hauled to his feet, arms pinioned in two strong grips while other unseen hands divested him of the gun, grenades and both his hold-outs, even the thin plasteel blade down the side of the left boot. His mouth tasted of iron and blood was slick on the back of his pounding skull, seeping hot and slow through the matting hair to his neck.

Dazed and unresisting Max allowed his hands to be cuffed behind his back.

“You see boys,” Joker crowed, “There’s more than one way to gut a Boron. Can you believe this pussy actually believed I’d help him bust out his fucking whore in return for freedom and a few credits? I believe the going rate for his head is a helluva lot higher.”

Something metallic, cool, touched his temple and Max forced himself to full consciousness by an effort of will. Joker stood at his side, holding the gun and grinning. For an incongruous moment all Max could think was how yellow his teeth were.

“Wakey, wakey, Max, you dumb-ass MF. And you boys back off, this is my prisoner and he ain’t going nowhere until I get my credits. You tell the big man that, tell him now!”

Despite his histrionics the gun didn’t move a fraction.

The guard squad had backed off slightly, standing in a hesitant arc, their weapons aimed as they looked to the commander for guidance.

“I want to see Law and I want my credits now,” Joker said, suddenly calm. “I didn’t come all this way to be short-changed by flunkies or shot by those damn LT’s before I can spend anything. I want credits and I want a guarantee of safe passage from the only person around here who counts and I want him to look me in the eyes when he makes the promise. And I’d better be getting what I want soon or I’ll blow this girl’s head off, then your boss won’t get to play all those fun games he likes. Not with Force anyway.”

“Joker, you traitor, I’ll get..”

Max’s threat, blurted through swollen, bloody lips, was aborted by a fist to his solar plexus.

“You say another fucking word and I’ll burn you where you stand and settle for just the half mill,” Joker snarled.

The weapon hummed its pre-fire sequence, the barrel grew warm against Max’s skin and the squad commander, quickly absorbing the implication of the situation, not least his own likely position if Law was deprived of his revenge on a live Force, whispered urgently into his throat mike.

Max decided to shut up and concentrate on pulling himself together, against the unlikely event that an opportunity to escape should arise. Damn, how could he have been so careless as to take Jackson’s word that Joker was sound, or at least motivated enough to co-operate?

“Fool.”

He muttered it to himself, risking the punishment his arrant stupidity had so richly earned.

“Fool!”

Joker caught him in the face with a jabbing elbow, blinding Max with the pain.

When his vision cleared Max spat a rich, red goblet of contempt at Joker’s feet and pulled himself up straight, parade-ground erect.

Joker just laughed.

“Better to die on your feet eh Max? I’m betting you don’t get that chance!”

“Law commands your presence,” the squad leader announced. “You will follow us, and you will refrain from further damaging his property.”

“You hear that Max, I’m getting paid, now move it.”

Encouraged by a barrel jab to a bruised and painful kidney Max stumbled after the guards as they swept from the bay, clearing repair crews from the dimly lit, bare metal corridors, scarred by heavy fighting, as they went.

Their leader brought up the rear.

As they went Max did what Marteene had been trained to do if captured. Ignoring the pain in his tightening ribs that made each breath a struggle, he counted the turns, picked landmarks and estimated levels flashed through on the elevator, stifling the small voice that berated his trusting, reckless, stupidity.

It would not be still though, despite the adrenaline driving his body to neglect the beating he felt he was teetering, precarious on the edge of a gaping pit, a black hole swallowing hope like incandescent plasma peeled from a captured star.

The shadow-conspiracy, the Cabal, the alien technology and now the universe dancing on the precipice of war; all the deaths, the blood of innocents. It was enough, it was almost too much. Getting Tyre out alive, that was all that counted now.

He was, Max thought, so comprehensively screwed that the thought was funny. Hope did not spring eternal.

Max had lost track of their whereabouts by the time the squad leader called a halt outside of a non-descript set of grey doors. Somewhere near where Joker had indicated the C and C facilities were located was his best guess.

The leader whispered again into his throat mike. A few seconds later the doors split open, sliding away into the bulkheads with a pneumatic hiss.

“You men are dismissed, you two. In.”

The officer waved his pistol towards the entrance.

“You heard the man, hero.”

Joker shoved him roughly towards the door, tension under-pinning the bonhomie tone.

It looked like it had been a small conference room, judging from the long, rectangular table pushed against the left wall. A single, large chair, atop its own dias, dominated the empty space. Law’s brooding presence filled it. Their escort indicated where to stand, a good four metres short of the dias. There was a faint tang of ozone in the air.

“Nice throne Law, try to come up with something more original than ‘At last Commander Force, I have you in my power,’ okay?”

The bravado rang hollow, even in his own ears.

“Commander Force, we meet at last. Is that acceptable?”

Law’s small smile of contempt said all that needed to be said.

“You would do well not to bait me. No matter how bad things get for your woman, be assured they can always get worse. Much worse, do you understand?”

The remaining colour drained from Max’s face. He nodded a reply.

“Now Joker, or to be utterly pedantic, Mr Arman, it was my understanding that you were in my employ. Now you stand before me demanding a substantial payment? Explain yourself.”

“Well, it’s like this,” Joker began, still digging his weapon into Max’s back, between his manacled arms.

Max saw nothing, just felt the gun barrel removed, heard the snap of bone behind him. He reflexively turned, straight into a sweeping blow from the blaster barrel that caught him on the temple, sending him reeling, dazed to the deck besides the body of the squad commander. His nose was bloodily concertinaed up into his skull, between lifeless eyes.

“I had a wife.”

Max had just enough wits remaining to attempt to struggle to his feet, taking a casual left-handed backhand in the face that knocked him down across the dead soldier.

“Had,” Joker said quietly, covering Law with his weapon, held in a single-handed white knuckle grip.

If he was expecting some response from Law he was disappointed, the man simply sat there, filling the chair with his bulk. Only the tapping of an index finger on an ornate arm betrayed any tension.

“I know, now you have one million credits. A fair exchange, no?”

Max tried to not make any move as he blindly rifled the corpse.

“No time-wasting games Law.”

Max’s fingers closed around what felt like the butt of a small pistol jammed in waistband of the dead soldier’s uniform. Joker sounded serene, at peace.

“Die.”

He fired from the hip, plasma bolts ripping through the air to engulf Law. Joker kept firing until the power cell died.

Law sat untouched, a thin half smile on his scarred face. Casually he removed a pistol from his tunic and fired. Joker died with a look of total shock frozen on his face.

“You know Mr Force, I find it somewhat depressing that someone in my employ would be so stupid as to believe I would permit him into my presence without taking elementary precautions. Personal force-fields, a boon to the tyrannical don’t you think?”

He tapped the chair arm again, three guard entered immediately, their hand weapons drawn.

“Commander Force has sequestered a weapon on his person, disarm him. Then remove the rubbish and leave.”

Max was hauled to his feet and briskly disarmed. Joker’s corpse was dragged away.

“No empty threats, Commander? No bluster, no bravado? No attempt to deal for your woman’s life?”

He kept his weapon drawn, in his lap.

“What’s the damn point, get it over with, whatever it is. My people will get you one day.”

“Ah, you see, that’s much better, a little spark of defiance. Now that I have you there is no hurry, pleasure should be a long savoured affair. You are both delicacies. I can make her experience things you’ve only dreamed of. So many things.”

It was enough. With an inchoate roar of rage and desperation Max charged the dias, launching himself in a high two-footed lunge towards Law’s deformed face. He rebounded from the invisible field to lie twitching at Law’s feet as residual energies dissipated through his nervous system. He lay there stunned, feeling the blood flow again from the clotted scalp wound, and feeling despair.

## **Chapter 5: The Mind of a Monster**

“Comfortable Commander?” Law asked with exaggerated solicitude.

“Screw you!” Max spat through bruised and cut lips. Law had summoned his guards and ordered them to bring ‘the chair’. Max fought back, getting a few good kicks in, but the two men strapped him into the metal contraption, tightening leather straps around his wrists, ankles and forehead.

“Resistance is futile, is that a stereotypical enough statement for you Commander?” Law asked as Max threw his weight against the restraints. There wasn’t a sliver of give in them. “This is a well tested design.”

The timbre of the phrase, as well as the implication, made his mouth arid and suddenly too small for his tongue. The extra adrenaline boosted strength made no difference, the straps just cut into his flesh. The chair itself seemed to be rooted, immovable, to the deck.

‘No fear, no fear,’ Max cycled the mantra around his brain, forcing his, trembling, ragged breathed, body back under control. ‘No fear.’

Law stood and stepped forward, Max tried to track him as he walked around him but the straps prevented him from turning his head more than a few degrees in either direction.

“I really must thank you Max, if may call you that, I feel we are going to get on such close terms.”

The question was whispered into his ear from behind as Law placed his hands on Max’s shoulders.

“Of course I can,” he said, standing erect. Law’s hands tightened, the thick yellow nails biting through the fabric of the flight-suit. He bent to whisper again.

“I can do anything I please.”

He continued circling Max in slow, even paces as he spoke.

“Thank me for what?” Max asked with strained defiance.

“Well, delivering yourself so conveniently into my hands to begin with. Never trust a man with revenge in his heart Max, because hot blood boils away judgement. This station has been re-initialised with the back-ups from Stoertebeker Station for security reasons. You see Max, I know how to read men’s hearts and as soon as I examined his record I knew his intent. If your blood had not impaired your judgement you would have known that too.”

“Get these straps off and I’ll kick myself black and blue,” Max snapped. The defiance sounded hollow, even to himself. Law ignored it and continued his orbit.

“More significantly, it was your challenge that prompted me to take the steps that brought us both here. I had become over-indulgent, too concerned with short-term pleasure, content to let the enterprise run to fruition. Content to share the spoils.”

He laughed, it was a short, unpleasant sound that made the hairs on the back of Max’s neck stir.

“Content to split the source of overwhelming power and wealth with Skull, Morn, Njy and their coterie of dwarves when with a little planning I could have it all. Frankly, if you had not meddled in Teladi affairs, Morn would never have dared throw in her lot with me and without her support it would not have been possible.”

“And of course,” he continued, “I could also thank you on behalf of my men for the delectable Ms Tyre. You wouldn’t want them to be lonely would you?”

“You harm her and I’ll rip your black heart out and stuff it down your throat, you psychopathic bastard!” Max raged, hurling himself with desperate energy against the restraints.

For a moment Max thought he was going to kill him then and there, such was the hot rage that boiled across Law’s scarred face as his veneer-thin self control threatened to, peel away to reveal the beast beneath.

Law silenced him with a casual backhand that almost cracked his cheekbone.

“Tell me Max,” Law asked after winning the visible struggle to remain in control, “Are you a psychologist or some other such expert on the human mind? You bandy terms like psychopath, yet clearly you misunderstand the term. A psychopath is someone who commits anti-social or violent acts due to a personality disorder, do you really believe I suffer from that?”

“Well something isn’t right,” Max muttered.

“You know Max, I’m so glad you are here, it’s been a long time since I had someone with whom to discuss weighty issues. You might consider me a monster but consider things from my perspective. Your suffering does not impinge on me in any negative way, quite the opposite of course. Apart from the evidence of my senses I have no proof that you, or anyone else actually exists, and our senses are so unreliable. They can be disrupted, changed, by any manner of means. The only evidence I have for anything is that I think, I feel. Therefore I conclude that I am. You are experienced as just an object of pleasure – I feel again. For all I can tell I am the only thinking, feeling being in the universe and this, everything, is just an illusion for my benefit.”

“You figure that out all by yourself, or did you get some teenage kid to work it out for you?” Max spat scathingly. “Untie me and I’ll refute this all-the-world’s-an-illusion crap with a good kicking. Get a fucking clue; if a tree falls in a forest and no-one is there to witness it, it damn well makes a sound! This is all just self-justifying bullshit that no-one over the age of thirteen believes.”

“Many eminent philosophers would beg to differ,” Law answered, “Simplistic rebuttals notwithstanding. Observe.”

Law stood before him and dealt a sharp kick to his leg before Max had a chance to brace himself.

“It hurts, yes?”

Max nodded.

“Wrong, it didn’t hurt me at all, quite the opposite in fact, leading me ineluctably to certain conclusions. Now tell me, do you subscribe to the notion of higher powers, deities, gods if you will?”

Max looked at Law through swollen eyes, seeing the overweening bastard was actually serious about this conversation. Figuring that while they talked Tyre remained unharmed he decided to play along.

“No, of course not, outside of the Goner, few people do anymore. Humanity’s long outgrown silly fantasies about all-powerful creators with an interest in our personal well-being. I certainly can’t see it at the moment,” he answered ruefully, struggling again with the straps.

“Beam me up Lord!” He paused for a dramatic second. “See?”

“That’s good Max,” Law said, smiling. “It’s important you don’t lose your sense of humour, regardless of the situation. It’s what distinguishes us from the animals.”

“Who’s this ‘us’?” Max muttered. Ignoring the jibe, Law continued.

“So, you don’t agree with the argument that we must postulate the existence of a higher power to explain why the universe exists or works in the precise way it does? Science cannot explain many things and even disputes the existence of many phenomena that claim witnesses. The Paranid believe in the Invisible Hand of their Supreme Being, Xaar if memory serves.”

“The Teladi believe in the invisible hand of the free market making everything hunky-dory,” Max countered. “That’s a crock of shit too! Gods of the gaps between our current knowledge are a doomed species.”

“So what we call god is just a place-holder for science we don’t have yet, something to be relentlessly stalked and terminated by our intellect?”

“Yea, I’ll buy that.”

“So, without an external source from where do we derive this morality you are so keen to judge me by? Is it the intrinsic product of our essential nature as living beings or is there another absolute source?”

‘I’m debating philosophy with a mad-man,’ Max thought mockingly, ‘I could use a know-all AI just right about now.’

“What about..?”

He wracked his brain for scraps from half-remembered Academy extension classes, the Argon Navy liked their special forces people to be able to think for themselves and considered purely intellectual disciplines a good tool to hone the mind.

“Pan - er - something or another?”

“Pantheism,” Law answered, “The belief that God is all there is, that the universe is the manifestation of God. We’re all part of the god-head, is that what you believe?”

‘I don’t give a damn,’ Max thought. “Why not? It makes more sense than believing we were all created by some being with a wave of a hand or claw.”

“So, we are all god, you and I are god, both just facets of the whole, like light split by a prism? And ultimately what affects one aspect affects all?”

“Pretty much,” Max agreed warily.

“And what force is it that binds us together, what instruments reveal it?”

Keep him talking, Max rifled desperately through his distant memories of alcohol fuelled, youthful debates that stretched long and inconclusively through the night.

When everything was new, exciting and clear, when everything was black and white.

“Empathy, we all feel a natural sympathy for other living things, love, the merging of two souls, the human heart. Hell, take the right drugs and you can experience it yourself people claim.”

“Empathy, the ability to experience the feelings and thoughts of others without them being communicated in an objectively, explicit manner. Yes, I’ve heard of that, however it seems I have no sensory proof of that myself. Quite the opposite.”

Law punched him in the face, blinding Max with the pain as blood streamed from his nose.

“You see my point?”

Max nodded blindly through stinging tears.

“All the information available to me through my senses indicate I am the only conscious entity in the universe. If there is no god to provide an external measure and no standards can be derived from a shared god-head then how can I decide what is good and evil? You consider me evil of course?”

“That depends.”

“Depends on what Max?”

“On whether you’re going to hit me every time you don’t like my answers,” Max replied bitterly through lips stained with the blood flowing freely down his battered face.

“That really should be among the least of your concerns, but of course you do. If god ever existed he’s dead now, which brings me back to my point. From what well does morality spring? If there is no absolute right how can any action be morally wrong?”

“Might makes right, we just pretend, we just agree, we just fear punishment? You can’t have a society without some shared values. Wrong, wrong, wrong, why don’t you just tell me as you’ve obviously got it all figured out.”

Law resumed his circling, slow and steady paces around the prisoner. Max braced himself for another blow each time he passed from his sight.

“Starting from what appears to be true, I am the centre of my own universe, the answer is obvious Max.” He stopped and grabbed Max by the jaw and looked him in the eye.

“We must live with the full knowledge that the values we create for ourselves are fictions. There is no Truth, there is no moral high ground from which to cast down judgement, we must live in full view of that insight. Nothing is real except our passions and our desires. Every body in the universe strives for mastery, to bend it to its will. Anything that lives has a will to power, that’s all life is. It will seek to grow, expand and achieve dominance because it is living, not from any morality or immorality. Do what you Will is the only law. My passions and my will are strong.”

“You’re a Grade A lunatic, Law, full of self-justifying shit. If you’re going to kill me let’s get it over with so I don’t have to listen to any more of this crap!” Max screamed, hopelessly hurling himself against his bonds.

“No Max,” Law said with a completely incongruous smile in his voice. “That would be too easy.” He grabbed Max’s face again, heedless of the blood staining his hand.

“This is going to be a big public spectacle and you’re in too much of a mess. An artist does his best work on a blank canvas after all. It’s a pity you know, your will is strong, we could be allies you and I, but I’m afraid you are untrustworthy. A few days in the station brig should see you presentable, then we can begin.”

Max almost couldn’t speak through his fear constricted throat.

“At least put me with Tyre, better still, let her go, she’s no part of this,” he pleaded.

“Your woman is a slave Max, she belongs in the slave pens. You will see us take our pleasure from her before you die.”

Max no longer had the strength or the will to resist when two guards came to drag him to the cells.

## **Chapter 6: The Cell**

Max had little idea how long he lay in the darkness of the small cell, drifting in and out of consciousness. At some point a Teladi was escorted in to treat his more visible injuries. He bonded his head wounds and ameliorated the bruised swelling around his face and eyes with some kind of sonic based stimulator Max had not seen before.

He also stole his watch.

Food and water arrived at intervals, delivered by a pair of taciturn human males whose swaggering body language suggested they would need little excuse to put their stun clubs to use. Max was careful not to provide one, remaining still and expressionless on the wall-mounted plasteel slab that served as a bed through their crude, inflammatory descriptions of what lay in store for Tyre when it was 'their turn'.

Their turn! It froze his blood.

The cell was escape proof, a low ceiling, four metre square cube with an electronically sealed gun metal gray metal sliding door, controlled from the guard station at the entrance to the cell block. Max had expected nothing else but ignoring the pain of his bruised ribs he had examined every inch of the seamless walls and floor in the twilight illumination provided by the transparent plasteel spy panel in the door.

He forced himself to eat after each food delivery, just to keep his strength up, but he had no appetite despite the fact that Law seemed to be taking delight in providing gourmet standard fare. The growing stench from the chemical toilet did not help.

To pass the time he scoured the cell again, rapping with his knuckles and listening for any sign of a hidden conduit or maintenance panel. He found nothing and even if he had there was nothing to improvise a tool from, not even a plastic eating utensil as he was expected to eat with his hands. His total resources were four stim ampoules that had somehow survived the beatings undamaged.

Reluctantly he took one when he heard the guards coming through the outer cell complex entrance. The brief boost it provided did not stop the attempt to overpower them as they delivered the next meal ended in agonising failure.

In his heart of hearts, like all young men, particularly those in dangerous professions, he had never really internalised the possibility of a premature and violent end but now it loomed over him, like a tsunami about to break on the shore, smashing all in its path.

He didn't want to die.

"Not like this."

Max realised he'd been speaking to himself.

"The first sign of madness."

He lay in the darkness and tried to sleep, but it would not come, he just hovered in the twilight zone, where reality and imagination merge to conflate fears and twist and play tricks on exhausted minds. Challenger came to him then, a brief half glimpse of a white, dead eyed face that mouthed a silent reproach and vanished. And someone in the empty room was calling his name in the silence, something as faint as a lingering memory of a dream.

Max tried to pretend it wasn't there and fell back into the nightmare half world of regrets, recrimination and fear but something jolted him from the restless slumber, catapulting him bolt upright, heart hammering, straining into the silence.

There was something!

He listened intently, not even breathing.

There it was again, some sort of feedback screech, but very, very distant, possibly some malfunctioning equipment somewhere, setting up a freak resonance field?

“Max, Max, are you there?”

It was very faint, on the very threshold of hearing, but it was definitely there, it was not his imagination!

He circled the room, attempting to triangulate the alternating feedback and voice but it remained elusive, unchanging in volume.

“Max, Max!”

Suddenly it clicked and he practically ripped open his breast pocket to get at the shades. He put them on.

“Zee, is that you?” he whispered excitedly, fearful of hidden listening devices.

“Yes Max, it’s me, who else would be so stupid as to be here, besides you of course? I can barely hear you, the secondary pickups are not very sensitive.”

“How’s this?” Max muttered.

“Better, I’m enhancing the signal with some custom pattern recognition algorithms, are you okay?”

“Heavily battered but unbowed, Zee. It’s great to hear your voice but what the hell are you doing here? How?”

“Jackson told me your damn fool scheme and Corrin flew me to Confed Station on his way to pick up your antique. We knew we couldn’t talk you out of it and we sure as hell weren’t going to trust Joker. You’re in the cells so I guess that was a good call. I’m embedded in the Pegasus repair droid and for the last couple of days I’ve been attempting to parlay Joker’s low level access codes into something more useful. We’re lucky Law used the Stoertebeker Station codes as a quick and dirty wipe-over for this station. They are upgrading them as we speak and I’ve only got access to the comm. system at the moment, I’m piggy-backing this signal on the carrier wave. We’re lucky there’s a comm. panel along your corridor otherwise you’d be out of range. They’ll probably detect the signal soon, can you get out of there?”

“I’m in a cell, I don’t know where,” Max answered, his heart pounding at the unexpected ray of hope.

“I know where you are Max, I’ve hacked the personnel roster but I can’t access the security system, you’re going to have to get out of there yourself. Sooner or later someone is going to notice a repair droid hooking into data ports so you’d best hurry!”

“That could be a problem, do you have any back-up?”

“Sorry Max, it’s just me. You’re scheduled for a meal in ten minutes, it’s going to have to be then.”

“Then we have a problem,” Max said. “These guys aren’t amateurs, I haven’t recovered from my last attempt and I’m pretty beat up. If you could provide some sort of diversion I might have a chance?”

“You’re going to have to give me a few moments to think about that Max, I’m still locked out of all the critical systems. Do you have any stims?”

“I told you Zee, I’m off that stuff now and it’s the least of our damn worries don’t you think?” he snapped. “Three, I’ve got three.”

“To get you on your feet quickly Max, take them all.”

“Three? Isn’t that kind of lethal?”

“Not as fatal of staying where you are, you’re a fit guy. Watch for my diversion.”

“Which will be?”

“I don’t know yet,” Xela admitted. “But I’ll think of something. I’ll keep this channel open as long as I can stay online, warn me when they are about to enter.”

She did not sound as confident as Max would have liked, but it was a chance, a chance he never thought he’d have and it was enough to fan his spirit back to blazing life.

“Think of something then girl,” Xela urged herself. She knew how to create a momentary distraction for the guards but she had to find some way to keep the couple of hundred station personnel occupied while he made his escape. Then there were the laser towers to deal with.

She scanned the hangar again.

This bay was in constant use, launching and retrieving fighters and periodically unloading large quantities of materials from small freighter convoys. The attendant swarm of droids and flight engineers provided plenty of in-plain-sight cover for her host but the unwavering security on the exit prevented her from leaving to find direct access points to the more important systems.

The security protocols here were much more robust than those she’d cracked on the Profit Share Bliss Place and Law’s people had not been here long enough for their easily accessed personal logs to provide any useful information. If she could create a suitable emergency and she could get to a better access point she might be able to pluck out encryption codes from the increased command system chatter with the same methods she used to crack the Data-Hub. The operative word being, if.

Eight minutes.

She detached her droid from the Engineering work station, sequestered near the rear of the bay as two systems engineers approached and drifted along the flight-line of Bayamon and Orinoco fighters, careful to mimic the stop-start dash movements of the other droids as they shifted from ship to ship.

Seven minutes.

If she could access the security system she could unlock the cell door. If she were in the environmental controls she could force an evacuation of that section. If she could get past the power system lock-outs she could cause total chaos. If wishes were wings Max could fly straight home.

Six minutes.

She loitered besides a comm. panel and re-established contact with Max.

Five minutes.

She told some vague but reassuring lies.

Four minutes.

She gave up trying to penetrate critical systems and reappraised her assets.

“Think girl, outside the box. What would Max do if he were here?”

Something violent and destructive, she extrapolated.

Three minutes.

She thought like Max.

Two minutes.

Her droid skimmed back along the flight-line to the Pegasus and interfaced with the on-board auto-pilot through the diagnostics port.

One minute.

She raced back to the comm. panel, heedless now of subterfuge. Almost instantly Max whispered his warning, the guards were in the corridor.

“Pop those stims Max and kick some ass!”

Xela set the first stage of her plan in motion.

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Max hesitated, just for a moment, juggling the three ampoules of stimulants in one palm like marbles, but with the sound of boots echoing down the corridor he over-ruled his qualms and triggered them sequentially, three sharp hisses, burning straight into his carotid.

The triple dose came at him in a consuming flood, his bruised and battered body convulsed with agonising cramps that hurled him in spasm to the cell floor, his teeth clamp-jawed against the surging pain.

Triangulating the guard’s progress from the comm panels outside each cell in the row, Xela waited her moment.

When the cell door slid away in response to his key-card Tam almost went to the body lying in the semi gloom, but Browder extended a warning arm before him.

“It’s the old sick prisoner routine and it ain’t flying. Just put the slop down Tam.”

“I don’t know Ben,” the guard said uncertainly, raising his visor for a clear look in the semi darkness. “His nibs would be pretty pissed if he dies before he’s extracted his quota of fun. You fancy being the one that tells him his prize is dead?”

Browder shook his head.

“Not for a full double share of whatever this big score turns out to be.”

He lifted his face shield and scrutinised the prone prisoner from a safe distance. Force must think them fools.

“Cut it out Max, unless you want another shafting with this!”

He slapped his stun club menacingly into a black-gloved hand.

“See, he’s faking it,” Browder added smugly as Max groaned and rolled over onto his hands and knees. “Let’s hope your bitch puts up more of a fight!”

Tam placed the tray to one side, watching the prisoner warily as he painfully struggled to his feet.

Max got up slowly, fighting the grin that came with the familiar, heart pounding, blood singing rush. He felt good, damn, some much better than good, it was all he could do not to bounce on the balls of his feet, fighter-ready for Xela’s diversion.

“Ready,” she whispered and he pocketed the shades. Max could not hold back the grin any longer.

“Take it easy, or..” Browder, sensing trouble in the prisoner’s smile switched the stun setting to maximum, the black baton crackled with its own small lightning storms.

“Or what you worthless scum?” boomed Law at his most chilling, from behind Browder.

Both guards whirled, their faces already blanching in fear. Moving in apparent slow motion, his aching wounds and stiffened ribs subdued, Max smashed Browder’s left knee with a sharp flying kick to the side of the joint. He seized the stun club from the unresisting fingers of the crumpling guard, his scream jabbed short by a throat crushing elbow.

Browder collapsed gurgling as Max smashed the club into the groin of his partner with a whirling, underarm blow. The jolt propelled his body clean out the cell to crash against the far wall of the corridor. It lay spasmodically twitching beneath the comm panel.

Max quickly checked the corridor and grabbed an ankle to pull the body back into concealment.

It was clear and Max took it as a sign his luck was in.

His cell was almost at the end of a corridor of forty others, on alternating sides. So far as he could tell he was the sole occupant, no other cells had food drops.

As trained he noted the layout when he was brought in; the gate-keep was at the far end, controlling access to the cellblock and there were more guards in the processing room beyond the exit. There was also a sentry point in the corridor outside, fifteen metres to the left; he’d counted it off as they dragged him down here.

‘So far so good!’ Max grinned ferally and looked down at his former captor, through the rising red mist.

“Still feel up to taking a turn huh, do you? Answer me you fuck, do you? Do you?”

Max punctuated each question with a savage kick to the ribs, letting out all the terror and frustration in a cathartic rage that finally broke when blood began guttering from the lips of the unconscious guard. Only then did Xela’s hissed admonitions from the comm panel pierce the blood rage induced deafness.

“That’s enough Max, I may not be able to see but I can hear just fine, cut it out. Grab yourself a uniform and some weapons and get going!”

Max put on the shades again.

“You’re eight levels above Tyre’s slave pen and on the opposite side. I can track you through the comms. and guide you there but if we’re going to get off the station and past the defences we’re going to have to get access to some of the command functions. I’ve got a diversion poised to go, it’ll let me get out of this place but I’ll be out of contact until I can hook up again. Now listen, there’s an armoury two levels down and a maintenance shaft junction point on the level below that. We’ll meet there.”

Max listened to her plan, making just a couple of amendments and memorised directions and security emplacements while stripping the uniform from Browder. The guard fought for each rasping breath, grabbing Max’s arm with final desperate, pleading strength, begging unintelligibly through lips that dribbled blood down onto his black tunic.

Max abstractly noted his lack of feelings as the lights went out in the man’s eyes, just a fierce sense of relief and gratitude for his unexpected reprieve.

That and a consuming thirst for revenge his logic just barely reigned in.

He quickly donned the guard uniform and helmet and ripped the shirt from the other guard’s chest to sponge the gore from the tunic as best he could. Neither of the other pairs fitted so he kept his own boots, black and close enough to pass casual scrutiny.

Finally he checked the two hand blaster's charges, set them to maximum and shoved one back into the holster on his belt. The other he gripped in his right hand, the stun baton crackled in his left, the static rippling the hairs on his arm like a warm breath.

"I'm ready Zee, just give the word."

He lowered the full-face visor over his shades and checked the blaster again, waiting, his body brimming with an impatient energy that pulsed around his nervous system in random waves, agitating, seeking action release.

His spirit burned fierce with absolute and total determination. Nothing not anything, not anything at all, was going to stand in his way.

"Those who sow the wind..."

"Shall reap the whirlwind," Xela finished for him. "It's the first sign of madness you know." She paused for a couple of seconds and he thought he could hear an explosion over the hacked channel.

"Chaos underway, moving to waypoint one. Now you go give 'em hell Max, and give them some more hell from me too. Out."

Max stepped into the corridor.

"Consider it done."

The channel was already dead.

At her signal the Pegasus came out of standby on her auto-pilot program, pivoting on its tail to take out both the bay defence turrets with precision bursts of the single impulse emitter before spinning to target the bay entrance. Impulse emitters might be underpowered against shielded ships but the energy pulses tore through the unprotected bulkheads, flashing the guards to greasy smoke.

The ship sprayed the bay as Xela threaded through the havoc. Ships exploded in paroxysms of flame, sending white-hot shrapnel flensing through the scattering clansmen and igniting secondary explosions along the flight line. Black smoke began filling the bay, backing up down the docking tunnel.

All but one carefully preserved Bayamon at the far end of the line was destroyed.

Belatedly a klaxon cut through the keening animal screams of the ruined and dying. Xela was ignored as her droid zipped up the corridor, adroitly dodging through the first of the emergency teams. Sprouting a frequency sequencer from the droid body, she tapped into the next comm panel, sending a resonance wave through the system and noting Max's location from the shades feedback. It was hard to identify through the panicked chatter, a triple peak in the high band.

Max was outside the cellblock gate-keep, peering cautiously into the small, clear-plex fronted control room. A single squat Paranid sat hunched over a control panel along the left wall, grunting agitatedly into his throat microphone, bathed in a baleful red pulsing light. He had his back half turned to Max but spotted him instantly with his triple-eyed peripheral vision.

Max casually waved his baton and the distracted Paranid admitted him as he listened intently to the instructions pouring into his ear link. He saw the baton blow coming of course, but not in time to do more than raise a half blocking arm which jerked and snapped in the full discharge. Two more chopping blows floored him before the baton had the time to recharge.

"First objective achieved Zee."

"Way to go Max, moving to waypoint two. Good luck, out."

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Law was in the main control room waiting for the Orca transporter to jump back with supplies from the unregulated sectors when the first report came in.

“Explosions in docking bay four sire,” the third shift communications officer reported crisply. She listened intently to the cacophony in her ear-piece, her plump face expressionless. “Bay security system offline, explosions, emergency teams moving in. I think I can get a picture!”

The main view-screen flickered to life but it was difficult for Law to make out what was happening through the swirling black smoke, even from the high vantage point.

Bay Four? His suspicion was confirmed when the view shifted to infra-red, showing the Force ship reversing out into the docking tunnel, its weapon spitting short, flashing bursts.

“Intruder alert,” Law ordered. “Send back-ups to the cells and slave pens, triple the guard on all launch bays and destroy that ship.”

He sounded calm but his jaw ached with the effort it was taking to not lash out enraged.

“No response from the brig,” the comm officer called.

Force! The name was enough to bring his blood near to boiling point. Enough was enough, he issued the order to shoot on sight.

“And fire on any ship attempting to leave the sector.”

As a precaution he activated the control room security protocols, sealing it behind a heavy blast door. The bridge crew recalled the dreadful rumours and exchanged nervous covert glances.

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Max holstered the baton on his belt and drew the second blaster. Both were the same design, a heavy Teladi hand assault weapon, with the grip modified for human hands.

Stun, kill, blast. Once out of the block there'd be no time for either subtlety or mercy, he left them on maximum. It took him a few seconds to pick out the entrance control from the panel, and licking his dry, swollen lips Max unlocked the heavy door leading out into the processing room.

He covered the few metres from the control room to the exit at a run, rolling under it as the metal slab creaked up into the bulkhead. A split second of surprise was enough. The energy bolts slammed the two soldiers in the chest, punching charred, fist-sized holes with enough force to smash them from their feet into the bulkhead.

Max ignored the stink of burnt meat, jammed their handguns into his belt and listened at the exit.

An alert klaxon wailed to life and the distinctive stomp of combat boots on bare metal decking, pounded closer from his left.

He'd stopped thinking now, just functioning on highly trained instinct, fuelled by adrenaline fear and the powerful stimulant coursing in his blood. Opening the door he stepped tall into the corridor, guns raised and triggers squeezed to the firing point.

Maybe it was the drugs; maybe it was a fractioned second of confusion caused by the familiar uniform and anonymous face shield but the approaching six man squad seemed to collectively hesitate, just for a short, fatal half-breath.

The plasma bolts tore through them, ripping away hands, legs, heads in a burning, screaming carnage that left broiled body parts scattered across the gore-slick corridor. The guard post further along the corridor looked empty but Max drained his weapons into the cubicle just to be sure. The coruscating blast left it a melted, burning shell that began to fill the corridor with an acrid black cloud that quickly overwhelmed the ventilation system.

The nauseating stench of burnt flesh and punctured bowels forced him to breathe through his mouth as he replaced the now useless guns with the two cleanest from the bloody carcasses and he walked with long quick strides, past the smouldering wreck of the sentry position, through the spreading smoke along the curving corridor towards the elevator, destroying the security scanners and point defences Xela had identified with casually aimed shots.

There were three more of the black uniformed troopers crouching beside the elevator shaft, faceless behind their helmet visors, rifles raised and ready. Max appeared through the smoke like an angel of death, his blasters jolting to the bone as he fired and fired.

Two of them turned to flee, discarding their rifles in panic, the third snapped a single, wild shot before Max cut them down. Discarding the half-drained hand-blasters he scooped up two of the guns, they were Teladi grey market export copies of the ZSU-74, the standard Argon assault rifle and widely acknowledged to be the finest weapon of its type.

Max quickly collapsed the skeleton stocks and stuffed the spare power cells into a thigh pocket, suspended them from each shoulder by the carry straps and hefted them experimentally. The weight seemed negligible in his current state, he slipped the settings to rapid fire and hit the elevator control.

“Damn, the power’s been cut. You there Zee?” he shouted, hoping Xela had reached Waypoint Two and hooked back into the comm. system. “Zee?” There was no reply and he could hear boots ahead, above the alert klaxon, pounding towards him. At least five sets, with the choking smoke at his back, blocking retreat.

“Dammit Zee, hurry!” he muttered, firing a sustained double burst down the curving corridor, cutting down the first two troops as they appeared. It gained him enough time to blast open the small floor level panel to the evacuation crawl-way running up alongside the lift shaft and duck inside.

He slid two levels down the ladder without touching the rungs, oblivious of the friction burns on his palms. Something small fell past him and holding on with one hand he fired blindly up the narrow shaft. There was an explosion far below.

Blasting off the magnetic seal and kicking the hatch open he swung through, rolling across the corridor and coming to his knees to snapshot the ceiling mounted point defence turret before it could fire.

‘Good call Zee,’ he muttered in thanks for the information he had memorised. Max blindly sprayed fire up the shaft again and a body fell past, her screams dopplering away.

“Thanks Max, I aim to please,” the AI lilted unexpectedly in his ears. “I’ve arrived at Waypoint Two, picking seven different heartbeats from the Armoury comm. panels, you’d better -”

“Escaped prisoner reported on Level Seven,” a harsh male voice barked loudly over the comm.

“No, prisoner now on Level Nine,” Xela cut in. “Better part of valour Max, they’ll be expecting you now.”

“Prisoner on Level Seven,” the man repeated. “Who the hell is this?”

“No, prisoner on Level Nine,” Xela repeated. “And who the hell are you?”

“Troops in the lift Max,” she added over the shades.

He was too pumped up to retreat without a fight and his self-confidence chemically boosted to reckless levels and Max made a snap decision and began running around the corridor just as the elevator hissed to a halt.

“They’re right behind me!” he yelled rounding a bend, firing behind him. Five crouching guards blocked the way, rifles raised, another, Max guessed an officer from the wielded sidearm, stood just behind.

Max threw himself to the deck at a run as electric blue bolts flashed from behind, sliding head first, guns extended. The uniform probably helped, as did Law's ferocious intolerance of mistakes but the armoury guards hesitated, heads turning to the officer.

He squeezed both triggers, spraying the crouching group with a guttering spray of over-charged fire that ripped limbs from bodies and terrible, wailing, screams from the lungs of the immolated guards.

Rolling to his feet Max emptied the power cells into the pursuing pack, the corridor resonating with the guttural roar of both weapons and the flaring discharges brightening it to day. Two more shrieked and fell and the remaining three scurried desperately for cover back around the curve of the corridor, giving him enough time to slam a charged cell into one weapon. He discarded the other.

"Reinforcements imminent, there's no time, get out of there Max or you'll be trapped!" Xela warned urgently.

He could hear their boots, staccato on the deck, real close behind him.

More could be heard clattering in from the opposite direction. The double-doored armoury was firmly sealed.

"Too late Zee," Max whispered.

## **Chapter 7: Reunion**

Hagman cursed under his breath as the Force ship took out another point defence turret, its display symbol turning black. He quietly ordered two Bayamons to launch and stalk, having to repeat the unusual order through gritted teeth to the disbelieving pilots.

“Our communications system has been compromised Sire,” the woman at comms. announced.

It was stating the obvious, all in the control room could hear the female voice countermanding the orders of the new Station Security Officer, sending his hastily assembled squads to all corners of the station in search of the escaped prisoner.

He risked a quick glance over his shoulder at Law, nervous now despite his long, compliant years of service, years that climaxed with the bloody seizure of this station.

“Explanation?” Law asked evenly.

Hagman felt the tension around him rise, nerves stretched taut as tripwires. There were some terrible rumours, considerably more than rumours, to his certain knowledge and it was his job to know these things.

There had been a time when he too would have reacted to that expressionless question with a frisson of fear but Law was a changed man, as if the driven, ruthlessly cunning and hungry leader had stepped through the decades into the ageing, dissolute shell. It was the Law he helped take control of the Stoertebeker Clan from the complaisant grandson of the founder he recognised, a man who remembered how to control and focus the raging beast to achieve great things.

Hagman missed those times, until now, until the old Law re-emerged to steal this station from the odd alliance that controlled it in the name of this ‘Enterprise’.

“Force has an accomplice on board, a very good one,” he answered. “They’ve gone straight through our lock-outs, I’m running a trace now.”

Hagman studied his monitor closely, noting the position of his teams.

“We have Force cornered on Level Seven, attempting to access one of the secondary weapon stores, teams closing in from both sides.”

“Levels six, seven and eight now sealed, armed response teams on the way.”

He already had the prisoner pinioned between two squads, but they were improvised from the closest people to hand; pilots, flight engineers, even a cook, under the command of whatever soldier was closest and Force had already displayed their inadequacy. If he got into the armoury he would need to be countered by true professionals. They were on the way.

“Will he be able to gain access?” Law asked.

“We’ve lost contact with the team guarding it, and I expect he must have ways to get through the blast door, it’s not a dedicated armoury, just a reinforced storage bay,” Hagman replied cautiously. “It would be prudent to assume he will.”

“Consequences?”

Hagman had already skimmed the inventory.

“A couple of M70 assault weapons, stun, fragmentation and low yield grenades. Everything powerful enough to force an outer hull breach I had removed to the main store as soon as we established full control.”

Law nodded his approval.

“Security breach traced, all monitors inactive on that level,” the young comms. officer announced, her voice tremulous with tightly controlled fear. Hagman whispered into his mike, sending a full team to the communications junction indicated on the map she flashed onto his screen.

“Lock it down.”

As he spoke a cascade of comm panels throughout the station also registered penetration. Cursing, he split and reassigned the available bodies. The new signals were cover for a hacker to keep on the move and checking them would stretch his resources thinner than was comfortable.

“All levels, emergency lock-down.” A drastic but necessary step.

Force’s accomplice was good, the ease at which they penetrated the comms. system showed they were not to be under-estimated, but they too were now trapped.

“Do you want them alive Sire?”

“Twenty thousand credits to those who rid me of this inconvenience,” Law replied.

The Security Chief conveyed the order over the command channel.

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Prektikiak raised his clenched left fist and crouched. Behind him the humans under his command stopped and waited for new orders. Silently the Paranid pointed to the only other real soldier in his team and with precise hand gestures signalled her to take point, scout and report back.

Behind him Roscoe breathed relief loud enough to draw an angry glare from the big alien mercenary. He didn’t even try to face him down, he was a cook dammit, in the wrong place at the wrong time, not a soldier, and the bloody trail the prisoner left had drained what little courage he’d been able to glean from the bulky plasma pistol clutched tightly in his cold-sweat palm.

There had been firing ahead, and horribly truncated screams. Roscoe imagined he could smell blood and roasted flesh and he forced the conjured images from his mind as the woman inched forward, on her belly like a smattan. He barely dared breath as she approached the bend in the corridor and there was something playing on the edge of his hearing, something pitched high that insinuated itself through the pounding bass of blood pulsing in his left ear.

Roscoe glanced questioningly over at the other four soldiers, off-duty flight engineers unlucky enough to be scrounging a late pre-shift breakfast when the Paranid peremptorily press-ganged them. They could hear it too, to judge from the quizzical half-shrugs but the Paranid showed no sign. Great eyesight, lousy hearing he supposed.

It was louder now, pitching higher.

“Forced chamber overload!” the woman crawling on point screamed and rolled against the inner bulkhead for cover. Roscoe dimly recognised the term from the few weeks of infantry training it had taken to teach him that he was not destined to maintain the proud military tradition of his family and followed the Paranid’s lead in throwing himself flat against the deck.

The exploding weapon illumined the corridor, propagating a shock wave that painfully popped his eardrums. Something red and wet splattered the outer curve of the corridor, sliding slowly to the deck and his stomach dry heaved in recognition, filling his throat with burning bile before his brain consciously registered the mess of meat for what it was.

The Paranid was already on his feet, charging forward with a guttural roar that needed no translation. Roscoe hesitated long enough to let the scout and a gung-ho mechanic follow before trailing them, a

discreet few safe paces behind. He threw up then, at the sight of the gore stained corridor and the scattered, dismembered bodies that had absorbed much of the blast of the exploding weapon.

It came in great, retching acid gouts of sausage, egg and bacon that left him almost too weak to stand.

And one gore painted body was moving, crawling painfully on its elbows, dragging legs lifelessly behind before collapsing on blood-streaked face-shield. Beyond it the explosion had punched a jagged gap in the lower quarter of the armoury door, Roscoe stunned himself by rushing forward to grab the wounded person by a bloody hand.

“Don’t fire, don’t fire!” the woman screamed as she rushed forward to help. A second group of soldiers had appeared on the other side of the breached entrance and their raised rifles lent him the extra strength he needed to help drag the injured clansman to safety. The Paranid clapped him approvingly on the shoulder as they stumbled past him.

“Positions,” he rumbled, giving him no chance to practice any first aid. Roscoe didn’t know what he meant but followed the others in flattening himself flush against the outer bulkhead so that the prisoner couldn’t snap them with a lucky blind shot from the hole his impromptu bomb had blasted. He thought of the damage a grenade could cause in these narrow confines and inched discreetly backwards, not trusting his life to the reflexes of the two sharp-shooters from the second squad, covering the breached armoury door from a marksman crouch.

“This guy needs help, I’ll find a medic,” he offered weakly. Taking the Paranid’s silence as assent he grabbed the prone form by the wrist and pulled it back towards the elevator and his own safety.

“I didn’t sign up for this sort of shit,” he muttered to himself, and this Force character was from all accounts one lethal dude. He was cornered and as the saying goes, at his most dangerous. Whatever happened now, Roscoe thought, would be better observed from a discreet distance, or even better, heard, he concluded, dragging the dead-weight body around the bend and out of direct fire.

Roscoe fell without a cry as his escape-clause rolled onto his back and jack-knifed both boots into his face.

The explosion left him half stunned despite the shield of bodies protecting him but Max picked up the dropped rifle and checked the energy load. Setting it to rapid fire he stepped around the corner, hosing the corridor with electric blue plasma bolts. The surprise was total and he stepped carefully through the bodies to duck through into the armoury. It was smaller than he expected, barely 20 metres square, walls lined with shelved crates which he immediately began dragging to the floor and opening.

“Panic over, Zee, I’m in,” he announced. “How’s your end?”

“Security crawling all over me but I’m making like a good repair droid. They are picking up hacks from half the comm panels on the station and pretty soon there is going to be a damn big bang in the main docking tunnel. Plan B, in case we can’t get into the command systems. We need to hook up, you know where I am?”

“Two decks down, at a maintenance junction, I was paying attention,” he snapped, filling his pockets with small, spherical grenades.

“ASAP Max, speed and surprise.”

As she spoke the deck shuddered under his feet, a faint tremor matched by the flickering lighting.

“That’s our way home exploding. We’ll have to steal something and figure a way past the defences. More company approaching from the way you came, thirty seconds” she warned.

Counting, Max grabbed an M70, easily holding the heavy plasma weapon at his hip, and slung a bandoleer of the squat, heavy power clips across his chest. On five he rolled two stun grenades into the corridor, the second with enough force to bounce it up and around the curving bulkheads.

“Coast clear,” Xela reported after analysing breathing patterns. Max set a plasma grenade and placed it in the middle of the pile of open crates. The timer gave him just long enough to dash past the unconscious guards sprawled in the corridor and around the curve before the blast knocked him from his feet.

The armoury and everything for ten metres was shrapnel ripped and blast torn wreckage. Max dropped a grenade through the smashed deck, waited for the stun flash and jumped down to the next level. The M70 punched through the locked hatch of the elevator crawl-way, its characteristic throat roar magnified to deafening in the close confines. He entered gingerly through the melted hole and clambered down the shaft to the next level, the M70 awkward over his shoulder.

Xela was waiting and opened the exit. Following her directions he disconnected her concealed padd from the droid and slipped it on his belt.

“Good to see you Max, you look a mess. The junction’s seventy metres right, just a pair of Teladi guards around the bend.”

“Check. Bloody great to see you Zee!”

The M70 messily swept away the guards and ripped open access to the maintenance crawl-ways, almost draining the weapon’s power.

The shades HUD flashed to full life as Xela linked in, overlaying a route map through the shafts to the slave pens in luminescent green.

“Okay Zee, time to get real serious.”

“Do you really have to be so macho?” Xela sighed.

“It’s a man thing,” Max grinned, ejecting the drained power cell and snapping in a full charge.

“No, don’t say it Max, please!”

“Lock and load.”

---

“I can smell smoke, Gann,” Tyre muttered into the freighter captain’s shoulder, her voice as expressionless as her cried-out face.

“I can too girl,” Hamman answered, he’d been smelling it for some time. “It’s nothing to worry about, just some accident.”

She smiled weakly in reply but he could still feel her shaking against his chest.

The slave pens were close to the docking bays and the bass thump of multiple explosions had thankfully scattered the leering mob of off-duty clansmen gathered beyond the single occupied cage back to their duty stations, giving Tyre some respite from the lurid images of her future their graphic taunts conjured.

Animals!

Hamman carefully laid the trembling girl down onto the bare metal deck, resting her head on his bundled up jacket, the only bedding they had. Moving to the cage door Gann craned his neck to look past the other empty cages to the double blast-door entrance to the big cargo bay. Nothing moved in the twilight but outside he could make out voices barking orders on the edge of his hearing.

Something was wrong and damn, he hoped it was Max Force and his people come to kick seven kinds of shit out of Law and his sub-human rabble! He didn’t think Tyre could take much more of torment that had eroded her defiance to despair, and worse, he didn’t think he could keep whistling into the empty dark.

No gun-fire and no injured screams came with the hint of smoke through the ventilation system so he kept his hopes to himself and just rattled the cage door in frustrated rage.

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“They’re in the maintenance tubes!” Hagman shouted over the security channel. “And what’s the status of the docking tunnel?”

He answered his own question by switching to the live video feed from the maintenance pod checking the damage caused when Force’s ship exploded.

“Bastard!”

The explosion had punched through the outer doors like a fist, he could see stars through the ragged gap. The picture suddenly dissolved into static.

“Get it back,” he ordered, glancing quickly at the comms. officer. Sweat dripped from the young woman’s forehead as she worked her panel.

“I don’t know how..” Her voice quivered with suppressed terror, she brushed a lank lock of hair from her eyes, glanced fearfully back at Law and swallowed hard.

“All internal communication channels are off-line and the monitors have been scrambled, I can’t match picture to location. Your warning may not have got through Sir.”

Hagman could feel Law’s gaze burning on him as his fingers danced over the controls and he began to sweat too. A mutating infiltrator had been inserted into the computer system using a Stoertebeker code. Evolving even as he observed, it was probing security lock-outs and rewriting command protocols of any system it penetrated.

“Confirmed Sire, Force’s allies have released a rogue program into our system, we’ve lost control of the communications system. Attempting to counter.”

“And what is to prevent this rogue from entering other sub-systems?” Law asked in a dangerously even tone.

The Security Officer brushed away the sweat droplet poised to fall from his nose tip.

“They’re largely independent Sire, all data exchanges go through hard-wired pattern matchers and that requires the correct access protocol. It used a low-level Stoertebeker Station code to get into the comm. system, probably from the traitor Arman. He didn’t have clearance for anything higher so it shouldn’t be able to escape and we’ll be initialising the new protocols in hours.”

Hagman mentally crossed his fingers.

“So, the temporary re-use of Stoertebeker protocols to over-write the pre-existing ones is the root of the problem?”

Law paused to observe the impact of his words. The girl at communications was gripping her console so hard he expected it to shatter at any moment. The others were hunched motionless over their stations. Only his new Security Chief met his gaze and Law could see the effort it took him not to flinch.

“Then the responsibility is mine.”

Relief swept like a wave around the dimly lit control room.

“Flood the crawl-ways with a disabling toxin and have Force brought to me.”

Hagman coughed, almost apologetically.

“This station lacks such a facility Sire, to prevent one faction seizing total control of the joint operation.”

“Which is why we resorted to a more direct method. Very well. He will be heading for his woman, I trust security there is adequate?”

Hagman called up a map of the maintenance crawl-ways.

“None run through that bay Sire and there are only three exits on that level. The pens are well-guarded but until we can clear the comm. links we’re dumb as well as blind.”

“Then use messengers. You!” Law pointed at the two guards standing stiffly by the control room entrance. “Draft whoever you can and set up a system of runners. Warn those at the pens that Force is in the crawl-ways. Deactivate security Hagman, let them out.”

Hagman complied, allowing the two troopers to exit with unseemly haste.

“Can you re-route the command pathways and get internal comms online?” Hagman asked the shaking woman gently. The comms. officer nodded, oblivious to the blood on her bitten lip.

“I...I’ll try,” she managed to stammer.

“Succeed,” Law, flashing menace in his voice like a mugger would unsheathe a concealed vibro-blade.

She slipped silently to the floor, fainting with an almost graceful pirouette.

Hagman hoped for her sake Force did not manage to free his woman.

Max raced through the barely lit crawl-ways, barely touching the metal rungs as he dropped down levels.

“Take the next left turn, there’s a command processor about 20 metres along. I might be able to hack into other sub-systems,” Xela ordered.

“Time?”

“Unknown, an hour at least.”

“No dice,” Max answered, barely pausing to consider the idea as he slid down past the junction. “Surprise is our only weapon now they know I’m on the loose.”

“That and an M70,” Xela remarked dryly. “Your call Max.” She highlighted the three exit points near the slave-pens. “Pick one, they’ll all be guarded by now but without hooking up to a comm. I cannot be sure of numbers and positions.”

Max ducked into the next junction and eyeball scrolled through the map on his HUD. “Neither Zee, pull up a route to the nearest elevator on the level above.”

She complied instantly and Max scurried along the narrow tunnel and down another access tube. The access hatch was sealed.

“Stop Max, you’ll broil us!” Xela cautioned as Max stuck the barrel of the M70 to the solid metal barrier. “Brute force is not the answer to all life’s problems.” She probed the mechanism with the sensors in the shades. “That panel, lower left, bring me in contact with it.”

Max held Xela’s padd against the black metal square, a couple of seconds later the access hatch gave out an audible click and he rolled through into the corridor, coming to one knee to sweep both directions with the M70.

It was clear and he dashed straight to the unguarded elevator, letting Xela disable the magnetic security seals on the escape tunnel. He scrambled down and seconds later Xela unlocked the exit to the slave pen level.

“Okay Max, you still feeling good?”

“Still pumped Zee,” he replied, his over-stimulated body trembling with anticipation.

“Yes, well watch for the comedown. Here’s the situation.”

She zoomed the HUD map to show a 2D floor plan of the level. “The only entrance to the pens is here.” Xela outlined the direct route, just 100 metres and two intersections. “Exits to the maintenance crawl-ways, here, here and here, expect them to be guarded.”

One was just metres away, on the same corridor.

“Got it Zee, ready?”

He was ready, more focused now than he had ever been, nothing was going to stop him now, that was an immutable certainty.

“I was programmed ready,” she answered with an audible smile. “Do what you have to Max.”

Crouching on the narrow platform he took two grenades, set the timers and triggered the lock. Both grenades were bouncing along the corridor, each direction, before the hatch fully disappeared up into the bulkhead. In the wake of the explosions Max rolled out into the corridor, firing towards the maintenance crawl-way hatch.

The guard team were already an eviscerated smear and with surprise lost Max pounded towards the slave pens bouncing grenades around each junction and blasting through any survivors, leaving the dying to scream in his wake.

Three guards crouched behind a makeshift barrier of scrap barrels and workbenches at the junction of two passage-ways outside the slave pen entrance. As Max charged down one long corridor, his own battle-cry and the roar of the M70 merging with the keening wails of the wounded behind him they threw aside their rifles and dived for the safety of the other.

One made it through the plasma bolts.

“Keep running you bastard!” Max yelled, emptying a clip up his escape route. The fleeing trooper barely made it around the bend to safety and Max lobbed a grenade to discourage a return, slammed in another energy clip and blasted the seal from the double door entrance to the pens.

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Hagman stepped over the unconscious communications officer to implement Law’s command.

“Black Heart onscreen Sire.”

He tapped in his security code to transfer communications to the security station.

The giant Teladi Albatross Transporter was plunging in past the northern gate from the concealing depths of interplanetary space, tail first, main drive flaring like a new star as it dumped speed.

Law waited while it coasted to rest near his shipyard construction site, clamping his jaw against the rage building inside him.

Force! He should have shot him on the spot and gutted his woman before his dying eyes.

Law pounded a fist into his chair arm, careful to not hit the small control panel. Despite his restraint he could feel fear in the air, see it in the frozen postures of the command crew, even in his old servant sitting stiffly at the security station. That he could escape so easily and then wreak such havoc, even with the aid of saboteurs, it was a humiliation beyond words, a bitter, burning bile rising in his gorge.

It was if the universe had spun a demon from his karma, named it Force and turned it loose. Karma versus Will, that would be an interesting contest he thought.

Will.

“Get me Captain Hart.”

His long-serving commander appeared instantly in the main viewer, his cropped grey hair had been shaven down to stubble, giving his gaunt face an even more death-head appearance.

“Admiral.”

“Captain Hart. Force has escaped, sabotaging my internal communications and sensors and no doubt we have taken many casualties. Send all available troops to secure the docking bays and sweep the station immediately. What is your strength?”

Hart whispered to someone off-screen.

“Two hundred, two-seven-seven if I strip down to a skeleton crew Admiral,” he reported. “Is Operation Annexation cancelled? Zero-G assault training went extremely well and the men are thirsting for Boron blood.”

“There have been some unexpected diplomatic developments Captain, but the elimination of Force will do much to correct that, consider this a postponement. Deploy your troops as you see fit, but kill Force. He is a distressingly resourceful opponent as you can see from the damage to the bay doors. He will try and steal a ship so shoot down any launching without an IFF cleared by Hagman, and take control of the combat Air Patrol and Laser tower defences just in case our systems are penetrated further. Understood?”

“Understood completely Admiral,” Hart answered. “The man would have to be a magician to make it past all our defences. Launch Standby 1 to 5,” he ordered off-screen.

Law stared into the screen long enough for sweat to begin to bead Hart’s shaved skull.

“Do not underestimate Force, he makes a habit of coming back from the grave and half my security teams are probably dead.”

“With all due respect to Hagman, Admiral,” Hart replied with a thin smile, “The real soldiers are with me! Consider Force dead.”

“When I see a corpse Captain. Out.”

Hagman cut the channel.

“I have pilots standing by to launch Sire.”

“Do it,” Law ordered. “If you can get them the word.”

“Fighter control systems remain operational,” Hagman answered carefully. “We can still communicate with ships, even if docked.”

“Then get all fighters launched, get all ships launched, deny Force an exit strategy. And transfer defence command to Hart.”

As the first troop-laden Vultures launched from the Black Heart, Hagman handed the defence systems over to the TL and relayed orders to the pilots sitting in their ships on standby, instructing one to verbally convey the scramble orders to all available pilots.

He transmitted each IFF to the Black Heart as they called in and launched, threading carefully through the jagged teeth of the damaged outer doors.

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As the first troop transport wove through a shoal of launching fighters towards the docking port, Max was forcing open the heavy cargo bay doors with stim-driven strength, his heart racing under the strain.

Ignoring the human stench he raced along the row of cages, twisting constantly to check his tail. Already he could hear disciplined shouts echoing down the facing corridor and there was almost no time to feel anything other than the drug-fuelled rage that allowed him to kill with emotional impunity, like in a training sim, without any stray civilians.

He heard her scream before he saw her, crouched cowering behind a man in a civilian flight suit, who snarled defiance.

“Do it you coward, but damn well look me in the eye when you do!”

It took Max’s brain a clashing second to shift gear and recognise the veteran transport pilot behind the bruises, and another for him to realise his own face shield was down.

“Gann?” Max cried. “Tyre, it’s me, are you okay, have they hurt you?”

Her face was shock-white as she lifted it from Gann’s shoulder, numbed blankness melting to disbelief. Her mouth moved soundlessly.

“Good grief Max, you scared the life from me, waving that bloody thing in my face! She’s okay, just a little frightened. Get us out of here!” Gann shouted as Max stood frozen.

“Come on Max, we’re in a trap here,” Xela urged.

He unholstered a blaster, turned down the power and shot the lock.

Gann passed her through the cage door, taking the pistol from Max’s unresisting hand and they hugged for a wordless, desperate moment that overwhelmed him with the whole-body shock realisation that he was really in love. He hadn’t known that he realised, really known it until he held her and now he knew through some touch telepathy, the feeling was mutual and it was more exhilarating than anything he had experienced, a head rush of joy intermingled with fear.

“Max, move it now!” Xela yelled in his ear. The rasp of Gann’s weapon reinforced her imperative. Reflexively Max turned and fired down the line of cages out through the semi-opened blast doors. The plasma boiled through the three crouching soldiers.

“Take Tyre and watch our six, you know how to use these?” Max thrust a clutch of grenades into his hands and handed her back to Gann.

“I can walk,” she said through tears of over-powering relief, “and shoot.”

She took the other blaster from his belt.

“And I pitched for the All-City.” Gann primed a grenade as Max ran to the bay entrance.

“Launch bays,” he ordered, sweeping both directions. Xela flashed the level map onto his HUD, highlighting two small platforms. “Maintenance bays, something will be working. Probably.”

The nearest was on the outer ring, about a third of the circumference around. The network of cross-spoked concentric corridors offered any number of routes through but all converging onto three directions to one entrance. Left, right, ahead.

Ahead was too risky, any defenders would have a clear line of fire so Max picked a route to come in from the left, taking advantage of the slim protection of the curve of the outer corridor bulkheads. With Gann watching constantly over his shoulder and Tyre staggering with growing strength between them, Max dashed from junction to junction, covering the group as they scrambled across.

Halfway, laser fire ripped over his head as he crouched and snatched a scouting look around an intersection.

“Squad Two circle round!” someone snapped as Max ducked back.

“Six men, body-armour, professionals,” Max reported concisely. “And a portable shield generator,” he added at Xela’s prompting.

Damn! The portable generator would slow them but the sustained fire required to bring it down would leave the attacker exposed and these soldiers seemed professionals, unlikely to miss a clear shot.

“Back, back!”

Max grabbed Tyre’s arm and dragged her the way they’d come, Gann running ahead to the next junction.

A silver sphere bounced into their corridor. In a running dive Max pulled her to the floor and rolled with her cradled in one arm, following Gann into the cover of a cross corridor as the grenade exploded, sending a plume of super-hot particles searing past his heels.

“More of the bastards,” Gann warned. It sounded like at least two more groups were converging, leaving only the way back to the pens clear. Max was moving on instinct now, riding the surging peak of stim-fuelled confidence, rolling back into the corridor to play dead, action without thought.

He burned two men off at the ankles as they scouted towards the sprawled, blood stained body and they fell screaming through the plasma stream, limbs burned from armoured torsos. His fire flared blinding over the shield protecting the other four crouching soldiers and Gann’s expertly lobbed bomb bounced off the ceiling and exploded with a stunning flash behind them. Gann shot the shield generator as they rushed past the unconscious men, the sound of close pursuit pounding on their heels lending them extra speed.

Two more, fierce, running fire-fights left them as far from the bays as ever.

“Damn,” Gann leaned heavily on a bulkhead, sucking down air with great rasping breaths, his face puce beneath the royal blue bruises. Tyre looked little better. “How many more of these bastards?”

“Can’t stop, this way,” Max urged, picking a new route through on the HUD. They stumbled on, at least one team pounding in their wake and each junction echoing with the shouts of others. These were properly equipped assault troops, body armour, squad shield generators and their own active communications net and the waning influence of the stims could no longer quite keep doubts at bay.

“Open to suggestions Zee,” he muttered, using one of the last of his grenades to recon a junction by fire. They dashed across, past two unconscious forms, Gann scooping up a plasma rifle and a half-open med kit.

“The crawl-ways?”

“These guys will be in those,” Max said, “We’d be trapped. Likewise in any compartment and they’re probably monitoring access.”

Max held back their pursuers with a burst that drained a full power clip, ripping a huge, melting gap in a bulkhead. He snapped in another clip and tossed the empty up a different corridor as he hurried after Gann and Tyre.

Their hunters were everywhere around them now, closing down routes with their portable shield generators and each junction crossing became a head-long gamble with death as the three fugitives dashed firing across. Only surprise and the sheer killing power of the M70 kept them lucky.

“Which way Max?” Gann gasped, squeezing a short staccato burst back along the corridor, forcing two more soldiers to leap back for cover. He didn’t look good, clutching his chest with one hand as he fought his age, the beatings and the stress of the chase for breath. There were more soldiers ahead, at least five pairs of heavy boots pounding on the deck. Max rolled one of his last two grenades, bouncing it around the sharp-angles bend to spray the approach with white-hot metal. Animal screams mixed with cries of ‘men down’ and the distinctive bass hum of a shield generator powering to life.

“Max!” Tyre was already firing back down the corridor at two soldiers advancing at a crouch behind the shimmering static of a force shield wielded by a third, stooping behind them with the generator strapped to his back. Her aim was as good as her wild, desperate look.

He whirled and fired again, another full clip, forcing the attackers to abandon the over-loading shield as it flared to white. Just two power cells remained on his belt and he reduced the fire setting to conserve energy.

“This way!” he yelled, running down the only route open to them.

Both Tyre and Gann had trouble keeping up, her face now wan with shock only adrenaline kept at bay and Gann gasping for every knifing breath.

“Max, next left door, get it open!”

The HUD map showed it was a storage bay with a second exit on the far side. Max punched the lock as he fired along the corridor, catching one of another pack of advancing troops in the chest, knocking him from his feet back into his comrades who scrambled back to safety as Tyre blasted in their general direction.

Gann threw a grenade after them, an explosion, a short, chilling scream and one woman’s voice, crying out for her mother. Cries of ‘medic’ signalled that escape route was already sealed, as was the entrance to the storage bay.

“No, don’t shoot it!” Xela yelled. “Use me!”

Max crouched by the lock holding Xela’s data-padd as Tyre and Gann both kept the pursuing packs pinned back. The lock popped almost instantly and Gann used his last grenade to give them enough time to roll through into the bay. Xela quickly sealed the lock and scrambled the codes.

Already soldiers were pounding on the metal door.

The bay wasn’t large, a dimly lit cube scattered with packing cases, probably little more than eighty square metres in area.

“The other exit,” Max hissed. “Before they think of it.” It would lead them back into the centre of the level, away from the maintenance bays but there was nowhere else to run. “Go!”

“No Max,” Gann gasped, his weathered face creased in pain. “I’m too old for this, my fat arse has been in the seat too long.”

The veteran pilot paused to gulp in air, supporting himself with one hand on a crate. The door was beginning to radiate heat and a red glowing patch appeared above the lock.

“Stupid bastards, they don’t know the layout, think they got us trapped. I’m slowing you down,” he gasped painfully, “You two hide yourselves and I’ll draw them off.”

“No, you can’t!” Tyre cried. “You’ll be killed!”

“And you’re in no condition,” Max added.

“I will be,” Gann answered grimly, unclenching a fist to reveal a stim. “From one of their first aid kits.” He triggered it into his neck.

Tyre was staring at Max, wide eyed with fear.

“He can’t!”

Max instantly processed the options and thrust the M70 into his hands, exchanging it for the plasma rifle.

He grabbed his hand in a warrior salute, which the old pilot returned with a firm grip. Everything was said.

“Go.”

“No!”

Max grabbed Tyre and pulled her into the shadow of a stack of crates, muffling her protests with one hand. He heard Gann open the rear exit almost as the entrance crashed open, melted from its frame. There was an exchange of fire and a truncated scream as Max pressed Tyre’s body motionless with the weight of his own, not daring to breath.

The sound of energy fire echoed away in a stampede of boots on bare metal decking and Max led Tyre, choking back heaving sobs, towards the nearest maintenance bay. Two brisk fire-fights got them through a pair of surprised patrols on the way and a reckless charge through wildly aimed fire from three armed Teladi in mechanics uniforms, followed by seven brutal, snapping seconds of hand-to-hand got them into the bay.

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To someone completely unfamiliar with his dour professionalism, Captain Hart seemed to be quietly napping in the centre seat, just occasionally cracking his lids to skim the new Black Heart bridge, supplementing the tactical holo-display built in his minds eye with information from the main view-screen, then closing them to better concentrate on the succinctly voiced data from each bridge officer.

The engineers provided by Director Morn had gutted the Black Heart bridge with uncharacteristic speed and efficiency, replacing it with one based on the design for the new generation of Argon corvettes, being assembled in punctured secrecy in shipyards deep in the home system.

A single view-screen dominated, with Flight and Tactical stations built into a single, long console, directly before it. To the left of the central command chair, on the outer circumference of screens and panels was Security and to the right, Systems. Simple, elegant, and uncluttered by functions easily computerised or delegated to below-deck stations.

“Bayamon clearing launch bay,” Imanckalat grunted from Tactical with natural Paranid taciturnity.

Hart watched it traverse the damaged outer doors through slitted eyes.

“IFF logged, validation received,” Poulson at Security confirmed. “Assigning to Theta Wing.”

There was still a hint of callow youth in her voice, of character not yet fully moulded and it showed her beauty was real, not Skull-reclaimed. Hart liked that, finding life-lived eyes in an unblemished face too dissonant to be arousing. He had no difficulty persuading Law to reassign her to the bridge-crew; she

was as skilled in simulations as she was compliant off-duty. And she looked like he imagined his granddaughter would look now.

“Squad Six reporting fugitives now on Level Ten.”

Poulson listened intently to her earpiece.

“Eleven and Thirteen in hot pursuit. Two, no three men down.”

Into her throat mike she whispered new instructions to Squads Nine and Four, vectoring them to funnel the escaped prisoners into the path of Squad Seven.

“Targets eliminated,” she reported, her voice bright with triumph. “No, wait. Make that target, singular.” Confidence faded from her tone as she reached the same conclusion as Hart.

“It’s not Force, it’s some old guy. We’ve been decoyed Captain.”

She lightly emphasised the ‘we’ and was already directing teams to sweep back to the launch bays when Hart snapped the order.

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“Stay back and cover my Six,” Max whispered as Xela cracked the maintenance bay lockouts. “Watch my back, for those who don’t speak pilot,” he elaborated with a swift sharp grin. “And when we’re in, seal the door.”

Tyre managed a small smile and gripped the pistol white-knuckle tight in trembling hands. She was slipping over into shock, Max feared, feeling his own euphoric energy and confidence dissipating with the stimulants in his blood.

Max kissed her lightly on the top of her head. “On three, three, two, one.” He forced himself between the doors as they slid slowly open. It was a small platform, some fifteen metres in length, a shelf high above the main bay. Flight Engineers in stained grey coveralls were working feverishly to prep the two Bayamon fighters perched on the lip. Max cut them down with precision bursts leaving just one quaking mechanic working on the closest ship unharmed, along with the pilot, terror-frozen on the ingress ladder.

Max closed at a run, slamming the barrel of his rifle into the gut of the engineer. She doubled over breathless as he dragged the pilot from the ladder, deftly removed his sidearm and pushed him to the floor besides the gasping woman.

“Okay guys, here’s the crack, I’ve had a really bad few days so one sniff of a wrong answer and it’s game-bloody-over for you both. Got it?”

The woman nodded desperately as she wheezed for breath, calculation flashed briefly in the eyes of the Stoertebeker flyer. Max knocked that light out with a sweep of the rifle stock.

“Understand?”

The man nodded as he wiped blood from his lips with the back of his hand.

“Are these ships armed and ready?”

“Ye uh-hh yes,” the woman forced out between gasps. “No uh-hh missiles in..,” she gestured towards the other Bayamon.

Max held the rifle barrel to the pilot’s forehead and half-squeezed the trigger, the weapon hummed its pre-fire sequence.

“Name?”

“Shuman, Arn Shuman, don’t shoot, don’t shoot!”

“You got that Zee?”

“Got it,” she answered in the pilot’s voice.

Max stepped back and altered the rifle settings before stunning them both with two shots. They crumpled to the deck.

“Max!” Tyre screamed over the spitting plasma of her pistol. Reflexively he dived and rolled, coming to a crouch and spraying the opening bay doors, sending three soldiers diving back into the corridor. He took the brief respite to reset his gun to a lethal setting and join Tyre, in the scant cover of a Bayamon thruster nacelle.

“Cover me,” he said, exchanging weapons. “Single shots, just shoot anything that moves!”

She was wholly inexperienced with assault rifles but nodded gamely, hefting it to her shoulder as Max dashed to the second Bayamon, firing as he went.

“Zee, can you hack the auto-pilot, set it as a decoy?”

“Just plug me into the systems maintenance port,” she answered confidently.

Max snapped more blasts through the open bay doors and crawled under the ship. Tyre’s weapon kept a steady cough of covering plasma as he plugged Xela’s padd into the universal data port used to diagnose the Bayamon electronics.

It took her a minute to over-ride the lockouts and replace the auto-pilot program and milli-seconds to instruct it.

“Ready Max, let’s go!”

Firing, Max scrambled back to Tyre’s side just as two crouching soldiers advanced through the door, a third behind them, back bent with the weight of a shield generator. Tyre’s shots shimmered to extinction on the sparkling barrier.

“Back!” Max shouted, grabbing the rifle from her and keeping a constant stream of fire on the soldier’s screen to obscure their vision with the flare of the plasma impact. Return fire burned wildly around them, pocking the Bayamon struts with bubbling pits of melting metal.

Firing with one hand Max triggered the cockpit hatch, the ingress ladder telescoping down.

“Up Tyre, and don’t touch anything!”

Tyre pulled herself up into the cockpit; her arms lent desperation strength by the fire hailing around her. Behind the firing soldiers crouching in the protection of the flaring shield another team was assembling a tripod mounted heavy plasma thrower with brisk efficiency. Max nerved himself to scramble up through the bolts sizzling around them in the seconds remaining before the plasma thrower blew the Bayamon away.

As he launched himself through the air the second Bayamons thrusters flared to life. Hovering, it briskly pivoted and melted the attackers with quadruple burst. The explosion buckled the main doors and the shockwave half carried Max to the ladder. In seconds he was strapped into the single seat and plugging Xela into a universal port. Tyre crouched behind him, trying not to touch anything important in the cramped confines of the cockpit.

“Force is escaping in a Bayamon from Maintenance Bay Two,” Xela called in. “Pilot Shulman launching in pursuit!”

The imitation was pitch perfect in its panic.

“IFF logged and propagated,” a gruff male voice responded. “Waste the bastard!”

“Consider it done! Shulman out.”

Max threaded the Bayamon through the damaged outer doors in the wake of the other fighter.

## **Chapter 8: Breakout**

“Force!” Poulson exclaimed, switching the incoming message to the open bridge relay.

“- repeat. Force has commandeered a Bayamon fighter, launching now, second Bayamon in hot pursuit, IFF’s embedded.”

“Received,” Imanckalat sitting at the Tactical station before the main viewer acknowledged receipt of the codes. “On screen.”

“Mute.”

Hart opened his eyes and focused on the main viewer as the warning cut out. A Bayamon was just clearing the station docking tunnel, accelerating on after-burners as another fighter rolled through the torn metal barrier, hot on its six.

“Tactical.”

The Paranid tapped a panel. He already hated the new, needless and typically human effete control panels, replacing good, honest, mechanicals with configurable flat-screen layouts and simulated audio feedback. Imanckalat wanted to feel machines obeying his will.

The video close-up dissolved into a spherical tactical display centred on the Black Heart. Numerous small markers, a different symbology for each ship type, flitted around the Heart, all marked in blue. Larger symbols, green squares enclosing the letters LT, were already switching to yellow as the station point defences powered up.

A single red symbol almost merged with the blue-designated pursuer was moving at speed along a projected course towards the shipyard construction site.

Hart waited a few moments, watching his fighters moving to intercept.

“Why have our lasers not fired?” he asked quietly.

“The station fighter is too close Captain,” Imanckalat answered. “Over-ride at your command.”

Hart almost gave the order but hesitated, reluctant to gamble any of the kudos his removal of Force would bring.

“Close-up.”

The tactical display screen wiped into a live feed of two gyrating Bayamons, rolling and twisting almost as one. Accelerator cannon fire flared from Force’s shields, more burned between the engine pylons. The Bayamon presented a narrow cross shaped profile, one that was difficult to hit at close range, particularly with the widely spaced, pylon mounted cannons of another Bayamon.

“Who is flying that fighter?” he asked.

Poulson checked her display, taking a few tense seconds.

“Shulman Sir, from Stoertebeker Base, voice print confirmed at launch!”

“Open a channel,” Hart ordered.

“Incoming message,” Xela announced. Max threw the Bayamon through a sequence of sharp breaks, ending with a corkscrew roll and a high right break back towards the component scattered framework of the unfinished shipyard. The decoy, its flight controls slaved to his through the auto-pilot, anticipated every move.

He could feel Tyre tightly gripping his seat, her weight shifting violently as she was thrown around the small cockpit.

“Pilot Shulman you are ordered to break off pursuit.”

“Filter in place,” Xela reported.

“Negative, whoever you are, in pursuit of Max Force!”

Max pulled the fighters on a high-speed roll, twisting through the fire of an Orinoco wing circling the construction site from the port.

“This is Captain Hart, you will break off pursuit.”

Almost there, almost there! Max watched two Bayamon wings pincering in, the upper one almost in weapons range.

“Sorry Captain,” Max hissed static unconvincingly, hoping Xela could dress it up. “You’re breaking up. Taking the shot!”

He cut the channel and fired carefully squeezed short bursts of particle bolts between the decoy’s nacelles, holding his breath as the five attacking Bayamons flashed past without firing. Seconds later he was skimming through the outer skeleton ribs of the shipyard.

“Disengaging lock, roll left,” Xela ordered. Max obeyed and the decoy rolled right and away.

“Okay Max, my auto-pilot program is great but time passes and this is as far as my plan goes,” Xela announced.

He didn’t have time to think, there wasn’t another plan, just head straight for the jump-gate and hope the decoy kept everyone occupied.

Under the control of Xela’s enhanced auto-pilot program the decoy Bayamon weaved through the controlled chaos of the construction site, trailing a swarm of M5 and M4 fighters, while the Orinoco and Falcon wings circled the perimeter.

They were just three clicks from the gate when Xela reported every Mandalay in the sector was on an intercept course.

“You don’t want to know how many, and the gate LT’s are powering up. Hi there Tyre, ask Max about me if we live.”

“Hi,” Tyre replied uncertainly. “Max..?”

“Don’t sweat it Tyre, we’ve been in worse scrapes,” Max cut in.

Remind me of them Zee, he sweated, absorbing the tactical display in his HUD at a glance.

They could reach the safety of the gates just ahead of the bulk of the pursuing Mandalays, if they could avoid getting entangled with the outer riders. And if they were lucky.

“The LT’s will nail us on the gate threshold, even if we can dodge their fire on the way there. You remember our defensive breaks?”

Xela watched each of the five LT’s, tracking their power levels and settings. Two beam lasers and three set to pulse fire. With her calls Max could probably dodge his way through the defensive fire but when you crossed the event horizon of a jump-gate there was that vulnerable zero speed moment. A moment was a long time for an automated targeting system.

“Beta.”

Max twisted into a left barrel roll, the cockpit lit to blinding by the beam slicing across the bow.

Four more times, in quick succession Max precisely executed rehearsed manoeuvres, threading through the deadly rain with what seemed uncanny prescience to the watching Hart.

The Bayamon completed the evasive sequence head on to the two closing Mandalays. They plunged fatally into the quadruple particle stream, flaring to extinction in the cold vacuum.

“Lasers recharged and tracking Captain.” Poulson announced, unable to keep the excitement from her voice. Force had almost succeeded with his subterfuge but had reckoned without Hart’s instincts. Their fighters would be all over him in under a minute and if he held to his intention the LT’s would crisp him as he made the jump.

“We’re not going to make it,” Xela said quietly as the gate loomed. She’d calculated the odds, five lasers tracking one slow moving target. They did not bear repeating even if she thought Max would take any notice.

If they stayed in this sector they were dead.

Max rolled another corkscrew to throw off the tracking systems as they plunged towards the gate, a dozen Mandalays snapping at their rear thrusters.

“Still tracking,” she intoned. The event horizon was just half a klick distant. “Tracking.” The first Mandalays were entering weapons range. Max twisted the throttle uselessly, the nape of his neck crawling as he imagined the huge barrels of the laser towers glowing to life like malevolent waking eyes.

The Bayamon shuddered as the leading Mandalays sprayed long-distance fire.

Almost there.

“Here it comes,” Xela announced in a dead tone. Tyre braced herself against the chair, one hand fiercely clutching his shoulder. As Max rolled the ship again the gate swirled to life, the distinctive rounded bow of an Orca Transporter almost filling the arch of the gate. Reflexively Max broke high and left, cutting over the nose of the TL.

“Falcons launching, LT’s disengaged!” Xela shouted. “Go Max, go!”

He inverted and pulled a sharp loop, doing a ninety-degree break at the top of the roll to skim the length of the Orca hull down into the hyperspace tunnel to Menelaus Paradise.

“Max Force,” he announced with a whoop, “has left the building!”

“Order half our fighters to pursue. Helm, take us through the gate.” Hart snapped. “And somebody get me the Orca, I must thank Commander Coniston for her untimely return.”

By the time his former second officer appeared on screen his emotions were back under a tight rein.

“Unload what supplies you can and interdict Force.”

“Freighters already launching Captain,” she acknowledged, her words as clipped tight as the bun that controlled her long and increasingly grey, flecked hair. Her eyes betrayed her fear.

“It was a brutal coincidence Faith. Force will find no refuge in Menelaus Paradise, we will hunt him down like vermin. Your mission was successful?”

“The Independent Sector entrepreneurs recognise opportunity when it presents itself, they will meet our needs. Skull forces attempted to intervene but they were severely outmatched.”

“Approaching jump-gate,” Poulson noted, putting the forward view into a small window overlain on the picture from the Orca bridge. Hart acknowledged her with a nod.

“The Teladi affair?” he asked circumspectly. Coniston grinned fiercely, erasing the fine worry lines around her eyes. “A total success, there were no survivors!”

“Then Law will be pleased.”

The Black Heart was nosing the event horizon.

“See you on the other side, Faith.”

The channel faded to static as the Black Heart slipped into hyperspace.

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“We did it Zee, we actually did it!” Max enthused as the fighter spat from the jump gate. “You okay back there Tyre?” He gunned the after-burners and headed straight for the Boron Trading Station; its spiral shell shape distinct against the glowing gas of a distant nebula, the sector was empty of ships. Tyre managed to choke out a ‘yes’ between wracking sobs of relief. She reached around the pilot seat with both arms, hugging Max tight in mute thanks.

He squeezed her hand, holding it for long seconds as her fought both the loss of the adrenaline surge that fuelled him through the flight and the sheer, choking joy of her safety threatening to burst from his chest. His lashes painted tears on the inside of his shades, obscuring the HUD and he wiped the lens on the knee of his stolen uniform.

“Eew, bloody!” Tyre cried with exaggerated fastidiousness, the arms of her blouse stained with blood from his tunic. “That’s not you is it Max?”

“I’m fine, love, not a scratch. Just tired that’s all. Tyre meet Zee, she’s a super-duper AI and beyond top secret so leave her out of the story okay?”

“She’s also the brains behind the operation,” Xela said with a lilt. “And is... too busy to chat. Heads-up Max!” She flashed the sector display onto his HUD, the gate marker already obscured by the red symbols designating hostile ships.

“Mandalays, lots of them.”

“Dammit Zee,” Max exclaimed wearily. “You have got to be kidding me!”

“And Bayamons. And Hawks and Falcons.”

This time the fear did not conjure a flood of fatigue-rinsing chemicals, only panic, which his training just managed to contain. They could outrun the bigger fighters but the Mandalays were already closing the distance, an entangling snare of fighters that could tie him up long enough for the bigger guns to arrive.

“We don’t need this shit. Zee, can you hook up an all-sector broadcast? I’d say it’s time to shout for help!”

There were over a dozen Mandalays in pursuit, a slaving pack devouring the intervening distance. He checked his weapon loadout, just seven dragonfly missiles to supplement the quadruple Alpha Particle Accelerator Cannons.

“The Force nav-sat is gone and the Boron Naval sat isn’t responding to Artur’s codes,” Xela answered quickly. “And I’m getting no response to my general distress calls. If you want to talk we’ll have to get close and use the short-range docking comms. Each station can see what’s happening, if anyone were going to help they’d be launching ships. Twenty fighters in-sector now.”

Without stims and his body's biochemistry drained Max could only fight the engulfing, bone-deep fatigue with his will. He jammed fingernails bloodily into his palm, the jolt of pain clearing his head slightly.

"Can we make it to the trading station?"

"In comms range yes, docked, no."

Tyre stayed silent but Max could feel her grip on the seat, death tight.

Silently Max watched the pursuers consume the distance between them as the Bayamon shot towards the Trading Station. Xela announced the transition of the Black Heart into the sector in a funereal tone. A new nav-sat appeared near the jump gate.

"In range, channel open!" Xela said, "Enemy in firing range, 45 seconds...mark!"

"This is Commander Force, duly appointed administrator of this sector, requesting immediate aid. Launch all fighters, launch all fighters!"

"Identity and request denied." The transmission was audio only but the soft, sibilant voice distinctively Boron. "We wish no part of internecine clan disputes, leave the sector at once. Communication closed."

"They've jammed all channels," Xela said over a wall of static. "Can they still hear me?" Max asked frantically.

"Probably, but no-one is going to be replying through this."

He could barely see through the sudden rage, to come this far just to die like this!

"This is Max Force, I'm coming into dock. You'd better open them damn doors or the next Boron I meet is consommé, savvy?"

Static.

"Max!"

Plasma bolts from impulse ray emitters were already streaming around the Bayamon as Max slammed the throttle shut, pivoted one-eighty degrees and hammered the strafe drive, arcing his ship through the oncoming fire, forcing the closest pursuers to over-shoot. Two vanished in ephemeral plumes of ignited vapour under his guns and he after-burned towards the trading station docking port, Xela keeping up a constant sit-rep, enabling him to twist and roll through most of the incoming fire. Another strafe break took two more fighters down as the remaining Mandalays scattered, breaking every which way from his superior firepower. The Bayamons and Falcons continued to grind down the distance.

"Coming, and coming in hot!" Max screamed into the comm. and after-burned towards the docking port, poised to invert and dump speed.

"Max..." Tyre said uncertainly as she peered over the seat, incongruously reminding Max of a child cowering behind the furniture from vid monsters.

The doors remained shut and the green docking lights dark.

"Max..."

The Bayamon plunged through the shadows of the rotating station tentacles towards the doors.

"Max!" Xela and Tyre screamed in unison.

His screams joined theirs as he pulled back on the stick, clearing the sealed docking tunnel by paint layers. The jolting impact of plasma fire snapped him from shock paralysis and he rolled the Bayamon corkscrew along the hull of the giant station, skimming between protruding antennae and weapon ports trailing a pack of fighters. One exploded against the hull as it attempted to follow Max's rolling course around the body of the station, engulfing another in the blast.

As the Bayamon skim-rolled over the rear of the main body, Max dumped velocity in brutal disregard for design tolerances and gravity fields. Tyre slammed against his seat and tumbled back with a sickening crack as the fighter pivoted a full one-eighty to rise and spray plasma over the pursuers. Another two of the lightly shielded fighters exploded, another careened into a surface pylon and ploughed across the hull, disintegrating in a wake of sparks. The remaining Mandalays, Xela counted six, broke high in all directions giving Max time to turn towards the southern jump gate and the safety of Boron space.

"Tyre!" Max twisted in his seat trying to see if she was okay. He caught a glimpse of a bleeding scalp wound, bright against bone-white skin.

"Her breathing is strong, just get us out of here!" Xela urged.

Max tore his focus back to the tactical situation, again scoring his palm with sharp nails, riding the pain.

The Mandalays were sweeping around in a wide arc, forming up into wingman pairs. Another dozen Bayamons were only three clicks behind but not able to close the distance once he after-burned to full speed. Targeting each Mandalay sequentially he squeezed off the dragonflies, praying that would give him just enough time to clear the jump gate.

It worked, losing discipline the light fighters scattered in all directions, pursued by the homing missiles.

With only four clicks to the gate Max let out a silent sigh of relief.

At three clicks the jump gate swirled to life, stars vanishing behind the roiling turbulence of the hyperspace tunnel event horizon.

"Oh that's it," Max said bitterly. "Time out, time out!"

The hijacked Orca barely cleared the gate before it began launching Stoertebeker fighters.

Then it fired silkworms, eight in staggered pairs of the heavy missiles to ensure multiple attack vectors once the target went evasive.

"I'm open to ideas, suggestions or some hitherto unmentioned but damn convenient new ability of yours Zeel!"

"Sorry Max, time to wing it." She swiftly allotted each silkworm an alphanumeric designation and maintained a constant commentary on position and bearing.

"It's always that time," he muttered and pulled a tight high speed turn which he held through three-sixty degrees, dragging three pairs of missiles onto his tail.

"Delta 1 and 2 on the nose," Xela stated as Max rolled out of the break head to head with the Orca and the jump gate behind it.

Max watched the missile exhausts and the Orca Bayamons breaking in a high/low pincer and spiral-rolled adroitly as the silkworms reached their Intercept Point, triggering each other's proximity fuse. The double blast rocked the Bayamon, taking the shields down to 70% but he held course, planning to again joyride down the Orca hull into the gate.

"Collision alert!" Xela broke her running commentary to shout. His fatigued reflexes barely managed to pull a break out of the path of the giant Transporter as it thundered forward on flaring after-burners.

It was sheer luck that the manoeuvre did not take them through the gun-sights of the stalking fighters and he broke left high, right level and right low, three blind trust moves that won him a second to scan his own sit-rep.

“Oh shit,” he said dully.

The sector was full of Stoertebeker ships.

The Black Heart orbited the gate back to Station Prime, a five-ship wing of Teladi Hawk and Falcon fighters circling protectively. A dozen more of Black Heart Bayamons were almost in firing range trailing four pairs of Hawks and Falcons. Half a dozen Bayamons from the Orca were also arcing in pursuit of Max as their mothership accelerated away, still dropping fighters from the massive rear bay. These quickly linked into wingman pairs that sped after the Orca, trailing in its wake.

“Break right, break right!” Xela screamed. Max yanked the stick, almost too late but the missile burned down past the left nacelles. “Left, left!” He reacted in time to take only a glancing hit from the two converging plasma streams but his snapshot sailed clean past the rolling Bayamons flashing across his nose. He was slowing down now, synapses taking just that extra few milliseconds to fire and without Xela’s constant updates he knew they’d be vapour.

Mortality twisted like a knife in his guts, a shocked numbness that spread through his body and weighted his limbs as he wheeled and rolled through hailstorms of plasma and shield scraping brushes with the maelstrom of fighters. It was all he could do to keep some charge in the shield banks.

“Laser towers still tracking.” Xela kept up her death-watch commentary.

“Comms!” Max shouted. “Keep trying to get through to the Trading Station!”

“The Nav-Sat is on-line but no response. Break high, left!”

Reflexively he obeyed, seizing a half chance to blast through a Mandalay wing, burning two of the three as they angled in from beyond the jump gate. His fighter shuddered again under a stream of fire, the shield charge holding by a sliver.

Xela quietly announced the loss of a PAC.

They were beyond the gate now, some two clicks out and heading for deep space but Max knew there was no safety there, just the slow slide into oxygen narcosis and death as life support failed.

“Now or never Zee,” he murmured. “Breaking for the gate, keep watching those towers.”

He pulled a full loop, hoping against all logic that approaching from the opposite side to the Laser point defences might offer some protection, and plunged through a swarm of oncoming Bayamons. Somehow they survived with only the loss of another particle accelerator cannon.

Looking ahead his heart plunged.

“We’re not going to make it are we?”

Xela did not recalculate the odds, Max kept beating them anyway but this time she didn’t need to. Five Orca Bayamons had formed a stationary cross in the gaping maw of the jump gate; twenty Alpha PAC’s waiting to scythe them down.

They could not miss.

Max took one last regretful glance at the unconscious Tyre and embraced numb fatalism.

“It’s been a blast Zee.”

“It has that Max. Let’s give them hell!”

He lined up on the centre Bayamon and touched the afterburners, watching death loom with agonising slowness.

Holding the trigger down he closed his stinging eyes.

Aboard Station Prime Law watched the video-feed, waiting for the inevitable denouement with less satisfaction than he had envisaged. Somehow he'd always imagined Force would die at his hand. His own fighters, recognising the finality of the moment, circled the gate.

“Break, break!”

Max responded reflexively to her absolute imperative, pulling a hard left before he could even think. Over his right shoulder he could see the jump gate shimmering to life, he rolled right, inverting to track it through the cockpit canopy.

The bow of the Orca smashed the barricading fighters aside, sending them twisting and spinning before their wrecked drives flared like supernovas before fading into the cold vacuum. The Boron Transporter ploughed through the debris.

As Max rubber-necked in numb incomprehension a familiar voice filled the cockpit.

“Anyone who ain't Max Force prepare to kiss your asses goodbye!”

Fighters spat from the rear flight bay, Mambas that adroitly formed up into wingman pairs as they tore towards the circling Stoertebeker ships on star-bright afterburners.

“How're doing there Max, you must get tired of me hauling your butt out of the flames?”

Jackson's head appeared in the HUD, the viewpoint drawing back to show him sitting in the centre seat of a small bridge, Sinas sat beside him. The Confederation Clan leader tapped a control panel extending from a chair arm as Max's mouth moved soundlessly with shock.

Xela returned the electronic handshake.

“Auto-docking engaged. Good to see you Jack, although it chokes my circuits to say so.”

Max tried to throw out some ice cool response as the Bayamon cruised the length of the Orca hull but the words lodged behind the swelling lump in his throat. It exploded into convulsing, shaking sobs of born-again relief as they crossed the shimmering atmosphere containment field into the aft docking bay.

As his boots touched the deck the cheers of the Raiders flight engineers almost drowned the roar of launching fighters and he carried Tyre through narrow, ammonia-tainted corridors to the improvised sick-bay, refusing all aid before allowing himself to be led to the bridge. The crew rose as one, Kaitrin on Comms, Payter at Tactical, a middle-aged woman he didn't recognise at the Helm, Sinas, even Kermankellin, the Paranid hunching at Operations, they all stood and clapped.

Jackson rose from the Captain's chair, grinning from ear to ear, extending his hand.

“Just keeping it warm for ya Max!”

He couldn't say anything, couldn't speak through welling emotions all fighting for expression. Being a man he just shook Jackson's proffered hand and took the centre seat before his legs finally gave way.

When he was certain he could talk without breaking up he said “Tactical.”

Payter instantly pulled a 3d system map on-screen. The Black Heart and a straggling tail of fighters were already retreating back through the jump-gate and as he watched the Orca abandoned fighter

retrieval operations and slipped away through its own jump point. The Raider fighters slaughtered half the abandoned Bayamons before the pilots of the surviving seven were allowed to surrender.

“Get them all back and take us home.”

“You are home,” Sinas replied. “We just need someone to open the door.”

While the TL cruised towards the Trading Station, embarking fighters along the way, the Boron factotum explained on an open channel precisely what fate lay in store for those who failed to bow to his authority.

By the time they arrived the Orca had acquired a Piranha fighter honour guard.

By that time Max was too exhausted to care.

## **Chapter 9: Aftermath**

“Your Orca has entered the sector Sire,” Hagman reported concisely in a carefully neutral tone. The atmosphere in the Station Prime control centre was incendiary, a room filled with fuel vapour, with a bomb in the centre; a bomb on a trembler fuse.

One false move, one wrong word.

No one wanted to provide the spark and Hagman had quietly routed all command functions through his console. The young female unlucky enough to be on comms when Force escaped was still sprawled on the deck. Her breathing pattern indicated she had recovered consciousness many minutes ago but she was wise to feign injury. Shot messengers under these circumstances could consider themselves lightly excused.

The rest of the command staff sat hunched in frozen fear over their consoles, attempting to look busy while they recalculated the amount of risk they had chosen to run for their share of the enterprise. It was of course, too late. Everyone, by their presence was now committed beyond redemption.

Redemption.

It was, Hagman coolly noted, a rather interesting concept for his unconscious to throw up at this time, particularly as he gave as much credence to any of the peculiar creeds the Goner claimed to have preserved from the Argon ancestral home as he did to their two conflicting myths of space exploration. He was prepared to stake much on the fact that there had never been a Federation, Empire or Rebel Alliance.

There was only one god, one being with the power of life and death and he sat brooding in the command chair, unmoving but for a single finger tapping his control panel.

“Infiltrator,” Law said, speaking the word with clipped precision, aware of the anxiety festering throughout the control room. “That ship will be known as the Infiltrator, it speaks of its purpose. Do not alter the current appearance, that too is suitable.”

He could leave Hagman to take care of the details.

Law took a deep breath and pushed the rage burning inside, down into the pit of his stomach. The stakes were much too high now to indulge the slaving, bestial aspect of his nature despite the delicious rewards. He was in the endgame now, resources committed, reserves plundered, possibilities exhausted. His allies would funnel what resources they could, but men, hard, unflinching men like Hagman and Hart, they were hard to come by.

He would swap them both for someone as lucky as Force.

The sound of his fist smashing down onto the control panel tightened the tension several more notches.

“Have Captain Hart join us aboard the Infiltrator Mr Hagman, it is time to plan our next actions. I trust this station will be fully operational and completely secure within one Argon day.”

“On my word, Sire,” Hagman responded.

“Good. Prepare my shuttle and have that woman removed to the slave pens. No one is to touch her until I have finished.”

The communications officer scrambled to her feet whimpering as she attempted to run. Hagman chopped her down with one clean blow to the nape of the neck as a grinning brute of a guard moved to grab her.

“She’s dead,” he announced bitterly.

“Old reflexes Sire,” Hagman shrugged and turned back to his console.

He could feel Law’s baleful and calculating stare playing on the nape of his neck.

The flight to the newly christened Orca took longer than it should with Law ordering the Vulture to orbit the shipyard site while he gloatingly revelled in the possibilities it opened.

The small ready room off the main bridge still had the distinctively Boron stinging ammonia tang despite repeated purges, despite the jury-rigged replacement life support system and despite the aroma of fresh, strong java bubbling noisily in the antique percolator. Law accepted a cup, dipping in a taster and waiting for it to flash safe before taking a draining mouthful that would have scoured the throat of a normal human being.

Faith Coniston poured another cup, which he took with his customary indifference to manners. She didn’t mind that, no one rose to her level of prominence in the Stoertebeker Clan burdened by either much of a conscience or social sensitivities. What she minded was the animosity in the air, a radiation more subtle than the lingering chemical bite in the air, but it was there, gathering like a cloak around Hagman. Despite her carefully hidden admiration for his willingness to be the one that sometimes had to voice the unpalatable it still made her slightly afraid. Speak when spoken to, and then only to say, yes Sire.

Or Admiral, while he was aboard. She hoped Hagman had the sense to follow suit.

Faith poured two more cups, then a third as Captain Hart arrived, sharp in a freshly pressed black tunic. Hagman took his with a smile, nodding his thanks while raising a surreptitious eyebrow. His eyes held a warning of something else, beyond the Force debacle. That though, was enough of a worry. She’d lost twenty fighters and more significantly, twenty pilots in the ramshackle flight from Menelaus Paradise and the Clan’s resources were almost as stretched as Law’s patience with setbacks. It would be some time before the shipyard could assemble replacements or complete the upgrades on the Black Heart.

Faith waited until Law took the seat at the head of the small oval table, squeezing his bulk into one of the few furnishings aboard suitable for human anatomy. She, Hart and Hagman then sat in hastily adapted Boron designed loungers, forced to perch uncomfortably on the lip to avoid slipping back prone. One more thing for the refit manifest she noted.

“Report,” Law demanded and drained the second java, slamming the insulated cup to the table. “Tell me some good news.”

Coniston licked her dry lips and took a small sip from her cup.

“We jumped as soon as the Nav-Sat signal appeared, there were fewer escorts than we were expecting, the TL shields and life-support failed precisely as promised. We took every freighter in the convoy aboard, teleported the TL cargo and left the empty hulk for the Xenon and jumped again to the independent sectors. The station owners were persuaded to co-operate, a Skull patrol attempted to intervene but were destroyed to a man. The recall came in before we could complete all the transactions. The Skull Clan is alerted to our supply lines now, we should move only in force when in that region Admiral.”

Rehearsed and concise.

“Shield armour, weapons components, laser towers?” Hart interjected. “Onboard,” she answered. “With independent traders engaged to bring more material to specified collection points.”

Law’s eyes held a stare long enough to trickle cold sweat down her arm-pits.

“Very good Captain, you have done well. It is a pity the same cannot be said for your pilots.”

He let the words hang in the air and the trickle became a rivulet, snaking down to her waist. She'd lost count of moments like these, waiting powerless to see which Law would emerge in the face of setbacks. All too often it was the monster, although not when her judgement was in question, yet. She had been at his side for twenty years, and for a few too long weeks, in his bed and that was not a memory held fond.

"However, no-one anticipated the Boron could complete the refit of that ship in the time available, or that it would arrive at that moment."

Faith remembered to breathe again.

"For now we must build a fortress of this sector. Deploy all available point defences save those for TL protection and redouble our efforts to recruit more pilots. My command ship will remain in-sector, ensure sufficient Hornet missiles are installed. Morn did make good that promise?"

He had, but just twenty five.

Law turned to Hagman and smiled.

"And better soldiers. Spend whatever is necessary."

"As you command, Admiral. What about the Xenon?"

Cruisers and carriers from the Xenon sector bifurcating the New Frontier beyond Black Hole Sun arrived on an almost weekly basis, ignoring the Clan presence in favour of whatever business they had beyond the northern jump gate.

War and rumours of war.

How the persistent below deck scuttlebutt of another hostile alien species arose she could not say but conjecture had long since solidified into fact in the minds of the common pilot.

Ships with skin that shimmered, alive. Seen by friends of friends in sectors they should not have been.

"Continue to let them pass but consider how we can embroil them with Force." A single muscle twitched spasmodically in his left cheek.

Law did not seem to notice.

Two hours later Law returned to Station Prime and Coniston commandeered the only working human shower to scrub the fear sweat from her skin, wishing she was once again the Black Heart First Officer.

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A circus, nothing more than a bloody circus, Corrin thought as he watched from atop a small pyramid of unprocessed cargo canisters. They'd been hastily pushed to the side of the Orca docking bay to clear space for the dozens of journalists and their menagerie of support staff and provide vantage points for an armed Raiders security team. The plasma rifle was heavy across his knees as he scanned the pack for assassins, fighting down the temptation to shoot a hover-cam darting around his perch.

Max sat at a long table atop an improvised platform, set to diagonally block access to the pilot ready-rooms, alongside Tyre and Anje Delenari, fielding questions that the PR woman picked out from the baying cacophony. She was in her element and appeared to know every journalist in the universe by sight and name, even the Split contingent. In the light of recent events and with Law's new base now public knowledge, interest in his war with the Stoertebeker Clan was at an all-time high and she had loudly insisted Max faced the universe press.

"It's a sensational story Max, I'm fielding offers for holo-vid rights that run into the millions so get out there and talk it up!"

Max reluctantly agreed but now he looked like he was about to either kill or pass out. Despite the endless mugs of scalding black Java, fatigue had blanched his face to a bone white that contrasted sharply with the shades. He looked worse than Tyre, who had at least accepted a medicinal stim along with the regenerative spray on her gashed forehead. She had insisted on remaining at Max's side and he seemed to draw strength from her presence and her touch, her hand often finding his to squeeze when his response to a stupid question became monosyllabic, hostile. There was a shining bond between them now and thinking of how Kaitrin illumined his own old soul he smiled. Max deserved better luck with women than Gragore ever had.

In the hours since his dramatic escape Max had barely been given time to breathe, let alone rest and the two of them had exchanged no more than an emotional bear-hug when Corrin's Mamba finally docked. While Max and Sinas took control of the Trading Station Corrin took charge of sector defence, touring each orbiting installation to bludgeon, bribe and shame as many pilots as he could into space.

Law cast a long shadow but another dozen fighters flew CAP around each jump gate, supplementing the Raiders forces stretched thin to protect Menelaus Paradise, the new Orca and the Chip Fab in Teladi Gain. A Raiders wing flew blockade around the Bio-Gas Factory Max suspected of being a front for the Stoertebeker Clan. Raider troops were already kitted up for the assault, waiting only for him to give the word.

The speed with which Delenari had corralled the media pack and arranged a jump-capable ship was awesome, almost as awesome as the Paranid cruiser they arrived on. Uncounted tons of squat menace, The Fist of Xaar still orbited the sector, and with the grudging permission of the other four governments provided temporary protection while the Raiders scrambled to cope. It would depart with the media once they'd sucked the incident dry and Corrin decided he would make sure Tyre was on it, heading for a full check-up by Argon physicians. He hoped Max told a good story, they'd need more ships now Law had two jump capable TL's.

A good story! After a lifetime in the Special Ops shadows it just felt wrong for Max to be sitting in the spotlight but his notoriety guaranteed its focus, even without Anje's manipulations. Lurid selections of gun camera footage were already running as parallel 'exclusives' across all news networks, thanks to her. Corrin could almost hear the masses cheering over beer and pretzels but as the fees the woman had extracted would almost pay for a fully equipped Piranha he had held his tongue.

After a rehearsed outline of the events encompassing his escape the questioning became cogent explorations of the economic, military and political ramifications of the situation. Max fielded these with Xela-inspired erudition from behind his shades but his views on the politics of the New Frontier held little sensation for most of the reporters crowding the dais and his face showed what he thought of the close scrutiny his personal relationship was receiving.

His PR seemed more than happy to encourage that line though, the better to sell the story to the masses, Corrin supposed.

"You, McGee! Has the Universe Enquirer got a question that does not involve an alien love child or mysterious organic ships, Jack?"

For a small woman, she had a very loud voice.

Five different species equivalents of a knowing chuckle rippled through the media ranks and a dishevelled looking man with unfashionably long and unkempt hair stood up, sporting a rueful half grin.

"Yea, very funny guys but we got the DNA and the sensor logs. One question Max, how many people did you kill when you blasted your way out of that Clan Station? It must have been a lot right? How do you feel about it, my readers.."

"That's three questions at least and the general circumstances are covered in the background briefing," Anje intervened. "I really don't think Max wants to answer that right now, just wait for the holo-flick and divide by ten! Next question."

Max stood up, cutting off the reporter's protests.

"No, that's okay Anje."

He stood up and removed the shades to fix McGee with sunken eyes and the crowd fell into a whispering silence.

"A fuck of a lot McGee, is that what your readers want to hear? I broke skulls, pushed nasal bones into brains, burned off limbs with plasma and shredded them with grenades. I left a trail of gore, shit and entrails every place I went, bodies so mashed up their own mothers wouldn't recognise them. How do I feel? I killed everyone except some guy who hauled me away when I was playing dead, the rest of his buddies got burned in a trap. I feel fine, I kill people all the damn time," Max answered, lapsing into bitter sarcasm.

"Was that sensational enough for your readers?"

Tyre put a restraining hand on his elbow while the publicist shot a glare.

"What Max means to say," Anje interjected smoothly, "Is that he did what he had to do to rescue Ms Annis from the pirate clan. In the heat of events he didn't keep score."

"Just do what you normally do and make something up," came an anonymous voice from the pack. Laughter cleared the moment and even Max managed a smile as he sat down.

It went on for another butt numbing hour with Max getting more fractious by the minute under the barrage of demands for trivial, personal detail to flesh out the story. When did you both first meet? Tell us about your childhood? Have you any plans to revive gate racing now you control this sector? That one of course brought a gleam to the PR woman's eyes despite Max's curt rebuttal.

At the end Max stood up.

"Before you go, I've got something important to say."

He took off his shades as the rival hover-cams jostled for position.

"You listen to me Law, I know your spies have a channel on the sector nav-sat you murdering bloody psychopath so damn well listen good. My spies know every damn move you make so you'd better start looking over your shoulder because I'm coming for you, I'm coming for you, beginning now!"

That was the signal Payter and his men were waiting for to begin the assault on the Bio-Gas factory. It would be good practice for the coming attack on Law's Teladi Gain base although it seemed unlikely the station would put up much of a fight in the face of overwhelming force.

Corrin slipped away to the Bridge Ready Room as soon as Anje called for final questions and had a large snifter of 25-year-old brandy ready for Max when he arrived.

"Welcome back Max," Corrin said simply. "I can't tell you," he answered, unable to say more as tears stung his eyes. He collapsed into one of the small easy chairs; his hands shaking so much he almost spilled the brandy as he took a sip.

"You left it pretty late though!" he managed to force the humour past the swelling in his chest, smiling weakly.

"We'd have been there sooner but Sinas had to bludgeon the override Nav-Sat codes from the Boron Navy. Jackson's flying him back from the Trading Station now he's cleaned house and put his own people in. He's Governor Sinas now; your authority does not extend to the planetary colony, Oceania they call it so I guess there's a lot of water beneath those clouds. It's mainly a bunch of Boron mystics being at one with the unspoilt wilderness so no loss there. You should talk Max; else it'll eat you up inside. What really happened?"

Max took a deep, steadying breath and a jolt of brandy.

“Perhaps we should go down and light a candle for Borass. Joker stiffed me Corrin, as soon as we docked, just to get a shot at Law. He didn’t stand a chance, Law isn’t that stupid.”

“Revenge does strange things to a man’s head, drives out good judgement.”

“Tell me about it,” Max smiled, Corrin was pleased to hear the irony in his voice. “But what choice did I have? The rest of it went pretty much down as I said, give or take the heroic gloss.” Max finished the glass and waited while Corrin refilled it. “It took Zee a couple of days to crack through and when she did I popped a couple of those damn stims and went through that place like Death’s draft board.”

His hands were shaking again.

“I just went insane; blood and slaughter, too many to count. It felt good and that can’t be right.”

“You did what you had to Max,” Corrin offered, “those people put themselves in your sights just by being there, they weren’t innocent bystanders. You’ve killed people before, and not just ship to ship.”

“True, but I’ve never enjoyed it before either, with that M70 I felt like a god.”

He paused.

“I can still smell the blood despite the clean threads.”

“If we win this thing Max we’re probably going to kill them all. Hand to hand or hornets at two clicks, blood will be on our hands just the same.”

“Maybe,” Max shrugged, “but it sure feels different when it’s a machine in the crosshairs. Trite but true, I guess that’s why grunts pick on pilots in every damn bar in space. Law’s changed too you know, I thought he’d kill me there and then, long and slow like the psych profiles say. He isn’t like that now, he’s thinking.”

“That’s how he used to be, when I was green, when he was hungry. That’s not good news but we’ll deal with it,” Corrin said confidently. “How do you really feel?”

Max took another sip as he sifted through his roiling emotions.

“She loves me Corrin, and I love her. I’d kill them all again, a thousand times over. Is that lack of judgement?”

“Laddie, if you’ve found something fine in all this mess you’d better damn fight for it. That doesn’t make you a killer, the fact we’re having this conversation proves that. Max, you’re a warrior in the true sense of the word and in my book you’re a bloody hero. And not just my book either, you should hear how your boys talk about you. Hell, the reserve squadron threatened mutiny if they weren’t promoted to full Raider status and freelancers are kicking down the gates to join you. People need heroes lad, it makes them feel that if the chips were down then maybe they’d do the right thing too and it inspires them. And don’t underestimate the power of myth, Anje doesn’t and she’s one bloody clever woman. One legend is worth a hundred ships, that’s why people love those Goner tales even though they know it’s all bull. They give us hope that if the time comes we could all step up to the crease.”

“Everyone seems to be a philosopher recently,” Max said. “I like yours a whole lot better than Law’s although I don’t feel like Kirk or Luke,”

He managed a weak grin. “And I sure as hell hope Tyre isn’t my sister!”

“Or Law your father,” Corrin laughed. “Anyway you’re Han, the rogue redeemed. Heroes have a thousand faces Max and if I had a medal I’d pin the bugger to your chest. But if you pull a damn fool stunt like this again without taking me along, then its light sabres at dawn!”

Max couldn't speak through the lump swelling in his throat and blinked back the tears.

"Where's Tyre?" Corrin asked, filling the silence.

"She'd better be on her way to Antigone Memorial for a full check-up in that Paranid brute. Anje said it was your idea but I bet she'll be selling a few more exclusives while she's recovering. I sent a few of the boys along to make sure Law doesn't go for a repeat performance. Fill me in before the others arrive."

He tossed Xela's data-padd to Corrin, who caught it with one hand.

"You'd better link her up, do we have a C and C system in place?"

"Nav-sats all through the Boron part of the New Frontier," Corrin confirmed. The Orca might have been old but it had been practically gutted in the refit and was now as advanced as anything in space when it came to sensors and command and control systems. With energy weapons it could have given a cruiser a fight but even the ingenuity of the Boron could not violate the physical laws that governed the inertia-free drive systems.

Even at fifteen million credits it was, as Jackson enviously put it, 'a steal' and it was a price that drew deep from the stock of goodwill Max's war against their mutual enemy had built. But four hundred assorted missiles, everything from heavy silkworms to agile wasps and mosquitoes gave it claws and the dozens of fighters it could carry in sub-space holds a punch to match a carrier. Sinas had quietly given the order to adapt the old transporter for human use as soon as he had agreed the price, working to Xela's specifications. Even so the Kingdom End shipyard had still been forced to throw every asset into the battle to complete the work while Corrin and the Raiders chafed helpless against the barrier presented by the single Xenon and three Split sectors beyond Black Hole Sun.

The days following Max's disappearance beyond Menelaus Paradise had been the longest and worst of his life and if it had not been for Sinas' restraining arm he would have led the Raiders in a charge through Xenon space and dared the Family Whi to act on their threats. It could have been the spark that ignited that part of the New Frontier, pitting the war-mongering Split Family against the Boron in a conflict that would spread like wildfire through the tinder-dry undergrowth of the ancient animosities between the two temperamentally opposite species. Failing that he would have taken Max's jump-enabled Mamba and single-handedly stormed Law's new citadel. Only the knowledge that such an assault would be both futile and a deathblow to the mission he was honour-bound to complete if Max fell, had held him back.

Sinas, with consummate political skill, parlayed the incendiary threat to peace into the huge and precious capital ship jump-drive hardwired into the Orca and immovably encased in clear plasteel embedded with sensors to trigger the self-destruct mechanism. As justification the Force Corporation was awarded the Royal Charter to supply the Boron sectors of this New Frontier appendix. It was a crock, a potentially lucrative crock, but it flew, despite the diplomatic barrage from Director Morn and the Family Njy who argued that only their own Frontier supply ships could be trusted with such a responsibility.

Strangely Corrin had never given up hope. Not only was Xela there as back-up but as an old romantic he just had to believe whatever powers there were behind the universe they knew, they would not let a man fall on such a quest. It was a belief tested with each passing hour Max did not appear and when a Bayamon shot through the jump-gate with others in hot pursuit he knew his faith had not been misplaced.

Max absorbed the briefing in silence, killing the brandy in one swallow as Corrin finished.

"Law mentioned Njy, I think The Butcher is part of his plan. Laser Towers Mirv, we're going to need plenty of LT's if we're going to hold onto this place with that Paranid ship gone. How much do they go for?"

“One point five million credits, plus a couple of hundred thousand in raw materials and components,” Xela offered, a disembodied voice. “This is one fine ship you brought us Corrin. State of the art command and control systems, interplanetary scale sensor arrays, a girl could feel right at home!”

“Thank you lassie,” Corrin answered, “But it’s your specifications and Sinas’ boot up a few Boron tails. I just appointed Jackson delivery boy. Speaking of which?”

“They docked a couple of minutes ago, they’ll be here soon. Max, if we set up an LT station we should go the whole hog and set up a vertically integrated production chain. With tensions at current levels weapons systems are going to be in demand and it will make sense to keep others from skimming off any of the cream. We can just about afford it but we might need to acquire a few more Xenon ships to keep the credit-flow up. And if The Butcher is allied to Law we could be in a heap of trouble. He controls all the Split sectors this side of the Frontier and even with the Boron between us and him, that’s a lot of firepower. We will need more ships.”

The Ready Room doors slid open as she was finishing her sentence. “And another Bliss Place Max my boy!” Jackson interjected, grinning. “I’ve got hungry mouths to feed too. You really kicked some ass huh? Pity you didn’t smear that SOB.” Sinas followed him into the room.

“A Bliss Place for our friend here, Zee. As Acting King of the Universe or whatever the hell I am can we set one up here, what’s my authority? That was great timing Jack, thanks. You’re one lousy judge of character though.”

“Joker? Nah, I made sure you had back-up didn’t I? You owe me too much for me to let you get yourself killed over some chick right?”

“She isn’t just some chick but appreciated Jack,” Max said. “Appreciated.”

“Do you want to hear about your authority or shall I just book you both a room?” Xela cut in and continued without pausing for an answer. “Basically you have the customary emergency powers as defined by treaty, broad discretion subject to protected individual and property rights. You did all this stuff back in basic training remember?”

“Mostly,” Max said vaguely. “No summary executions or expropriation of private or government property?”

“I’ll write up a summary you can study later Max,” she answered with a sigh. “But you have broad discretionary authority to act for the duration of any State of Emergency, should one be declared in this sector. I expect you could find some lawyer that can prove growing spaceweed is absolutely vital to the continued health and well-being of the sector.”

“Hasn’t one been declared already?”

“I don’t know Max, you tell us.”

Max grinned. “Then let word go forth that King Max the First says ‘don’t panic!’”

“Consider it done but consider it re-written,” Xela confirmed. “You should get a whole lot of sleep Max but first you all better see this.” A large view-screen seeped from the rear wall, like molten metal solidifying.

“Cool!” Jackson whistled

“Impressive as this new liquid metal technology must be to the male brain,” Xela continued archly, “I was referring to this.” The Universe Network News logo appeared on the screen as a man’s voice spoke deep and authoritative over the urgent signature beat.

“And in other news, reports are coming in of the complete destruction of a Teladi re-supply convoy out of Ianamus Zura bound for Scale Plate Green. Sources close to Director Morn of the Teladi Trading

Company suggest that the convoy attempted to deliver urgently needed defensive equipment by cutting through Xenon space.”

The standard map of the known sectors flashed onscreen with the route from Ianamus Zura, through Eighteen Billion and the unnamed Xenon sector to Scale Plate Green highlighted.

“A source close to the Director’s office has told our reporters that although it is not uncommon for traders to take advantage of the fluctuating Xenon presence close to the jumpgates, the attempt to run an entire convoy through, regardless of the urgency, represents a clear misjudgement on behalf of local commanders appointed by the late General Daht. Steps are underway to ensure no such officers remain in position to again allow their grief to over-power their judgement in this manner. Such was the loss of fighters, weapons, shields and laser defences Scale Plate Green should continue to be considered hazardous territory.”

The map was replaced on screen by the face of a sombre faced middle aged man. He looked soberly into the camera for a second before his face brightened.

“And after the break, the Argnu that thinks she’s a Chelt!”

Xela cut the channel.

Jackson was first to break the heavy silence.

“Oh crap!”

No one questioned his judgement, the truth was obvious, as the Prophet once said, you don’t need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows.

Despite the warmth of the brandy Max’s face retained the bone-white hue of extreme fatigue and Corrin forced the ensuing discussion along at a brisk pace. Although the Raiders probably had Law out-gunned, he had a single defensive position while Max’s forces had not only an entire sector of stations to protect but also two stations in two different sectors. The Orca too would be constantly on the move and at risk of ambush from one or both of Law’s own TL carriers.

“And if Morn is brazen enough to deliver an entire military convoy into Law’s hands who knows what else she’d dare. The Chip Fab is absolutely vital to our research project and it’s right in his backyard. Defending that is vital, particularly as I’ll have to be there a lot of the time. Then there’s Njy, and we all know what The Butcher is capable of.”

“One step forward..” Max sighed wearily. “I’m clean out of ideas. Sinas?”

“There’s a limit to what I can do Max, I’m sorry. This is your sector for the time being, if the Boron play too explicit a role the Teladi and the Split will scream foul. Our ship and equipment deals still stand and if you have anything I can put a commercial gloss on I’ll do what I can.”

“We need more credits,” Xela said. “Just for a change.”

Corrin looked at Max and stood up.

“Okay, this meeting is over. Max, you’re going to get twelve hours sleep and no bloody arguing. Then you’re going to meet all the station heads in this sector and then you are going to spend a full week with Tyre on some expensive Three Worlds resort beach.”

Max started to speak.

“No, I mean it Max. If you burn out you’re no good to anyone,” Corrin said firmly. “We gave Law a bloody nose and he needs to consolidate just as badly as we do. You can be spared for a week. We’ll drop you off in the Orca when we pick up an LT kit.”

“After sorting out that interplanetary assault ship I need,” Jackson said evenly.

“Agreed and agreed,” Max said quickly, heading off a contest of wills. “I’ll have a little talk with Skull on the way to the sun, sea and sand.”

“Thanks buddy, Jack needs a new base. I think I’ll name it Jackson’s Redoubt. You should name that Boron rust bucket, it’s bad luck not to.”

By pilot superstition he was right and Max thought for a second.

“The Enterprise,” he said, “it’s Law’s name for his little conspiracy. It’ll be a message and a challenge.”

He turned to Corrin and winked. “And it can’t hurt to get a bit of mythopoeic resonance going.”

“I’m not your dictionary Jack,” Xela said, forestalling his query. “Get your own vocabulary.”

Jackson shrugged and grinned.

“Make it so Max, why not go the whole hog and paint it white. Man, I love those stories!”

“Probably got the action figures too right?” Max laughed. “These stations Mirv, you got something in mind?”

He had but the idea was only partially born.

“After you’ve slept Max, now go!”

Max allowed himself to be led to the Captain’s quarters. He tumbled into a deep, dreamless sleep before his head had sunk into the pillows.

## **Chapter 10: A New Broom**

“Western jump gate activating,” Kaitrin announced calmly. “On screen,” she continued, anticipating Corrin’s order.

All eyes turned momentarily to the view screen dominating the Enterprise bridge, before returning to their own station instrumentation. All except Kerman of course, the triple eyed Paranid kept one eye permanently on the screen while the others danced methodically over the Helm displays, absorbing readings and confirming the navigation commands his stubby fingers were already stacking in the command buffer in anticipation of the Captain’s orders. His right eye flicked momentarily over the adjacent Tactical station, where Kaitrin was already silently transmitting commands to the Combat Air Patrol fighters, deftly selecting manoeuvre options by code reference from nesting menu options.

Although he would not admit it he had developed a grudging admiration for the Argon woman’s skills. Her almost Paranid ability to digest the complexities of multiple objects moving on multiple vectors in a 3D environment down to inspired tactical orders that struck at the enemy’s heart like a dagger thrust was, in his expert opinion, a woefully under acknowledged factor in the chain of Raider victories.

“Launch Ready One, Two and Three,” Corrin ordered. “And go to Yellow Alert.”

Payter, sitting behind a console at the Security station, just to the left of the main bridge entrance at the rear of the bridge barely sounded acknowledgement when the gentle mustard shimmer of the Status lights mounted throughout the ship turned an urgent, pulsing cardinal.

“Red alert!” he called, the last syllable swallowed by the hooting blare of the Alert klaxon before it muted into the background. “Launch Wings Alpha through Gamma,” Corrin ordered quietly as the big Xenon ship cleared the gate. It was a destroyer, one of the old blade-thin, segmented body designs that had formed the backbone of the Xenon arsenal for as long as there were records. And it too was launching fighters, sunlight glittering from their wings as they formed up on their mothership.

Corrin triggered the seat restraint field, anticipating a rough ride, and swung the small command console across his lap. CAP One, the three Mamba fighters, sitting permanently crewed on standby had already launched. Three more Wing Status Indicators stood yellow, one suddenly flashing to green as the last pilot of Beta Wing signalled his launch-ready status. He made a mental note to send those five pilots something vintage from his personal stock. The other two wings followed in rapid succession.

“Helm, come about to...” he hesitated slightly as he weighed his tactical options. The destroyer was faster than the pumped up TL but the Enterprise had a full 625 MW of shields raised, a quarter greater than the more heavily armed warship. “Zero Eight Zero, mark two-five. All ahead flank!”

Kerman grunted acknowledgement as he executed the command. The view screen remained locked on the destroyer while Kaitrin displayed the forward view in a window superimposed on the bottom left corner as the Enterprise lumbered through a broad arc onto the new heading. Small, red boxes sprang up round the Xenon ships, tactical data concerning speed, bearing and load-out cogently displayed alongside.

The Xenon destroyer might be fast but its fighters were not and Corrin’s first instinct was to separate them from the cap ship. Only the squat X shaped Xenon light fighters could keep up with either the destroyer or the Enterprise and Corrin hoped they would prove easy meat for the Sarge’s missiles and the Raider’s own Bayamons and Hawks whose crews would already be racing to their stations.

“Mandalays standing by!” Kaitrin called. She was ice-cool, exuding confidence, her fingers poised to launch the autonomous AI point defence screen.

“Launch CAP Two,” Corrin commanded, Kaitrin called confirmation moments later. The six small fighters buzzed protectively around the Enterprise, the last line of defence against the Xenon equivalent

of ship-killing Hornet and Silkworm missiles. They and the drones they contained were controlled by a prototype AI program developed by Xela.

This was its first test.

The destroyer arrowed in pursuit, trailing in the wake of a dozen N-Class light fighters. The M and L-Class medium and heavy fighters, another sixteen in all were ignoring the Orca and streaming towards the Trading Station. Corrin cursed under his breath and ordered the Paranid helmsman to plot an intercept course, the heavy fighters all carried Hornets. The destroyer adjusted its heading also, it would intercept the Enterprise before it could intercept them.

“CAP One, splash the N’s, Alpha and Beta get those L’s, designated Attack Two. Gamma, protect CAP Two.”

Kaitrin’s fingers blurred over her panel and she mumbled into a throat mike as she translated the general order into specific instructions.

“Helm, go evasive and then take us head to head with the primary target.”

The Paranid grunted acknowledgement and activated the manual flight over-ride. Despite the optimised rudder upgrades the TL handled like a Chelt and the Xenon destroyer barrelled through the dog-fighting Mambas and N’s to skim over the Enterprise before he could complete the manoeuvre. Improvising he decelerated sharply and pulled a tight left loop before hitting the after-burners. As he anticipated the Xenon craft fired hornets and dropped more fighters as it passed, its plasma weapons ripping into the Enterprise shields.

It was already curving to make another run.

“Launch Strike One, launch all remaining fighters,” Corrin said. “Twenty Silkworms, now!”

“Missiles away,” Payter confirmed. “Hornets inbound.”

The Prometheus and Mamba strike wing arrowed through the Xenon fighter screen as the Raider Bayamons fought to protect them. The missiles arced towards the destroyer as the Mandalays fought to take out the incoming missiles.

“Ahead flank!” Corrin shouted. “Helm, evasive at your discretion!”

He was sweating now, realising that his fighter pilot training and skills left him ill-equipped to command an improvised carrier in a capital ship engagement. The faster destroyer swept over them again, blotting out the stars on the view screen with its bulk. Again its primary weapons pummelled the Enterprise shields and again it launched missiles at point blank range. This time the fighters and their drones could not stop them all and the Enterprise juddered and rolled under repeated hammer – blows.

“Shields at 30%, Shield Two destroyed.”

It took Corrin a second to recognise the voice. It was Massoor at the Systems station, a small, olive skinned man in his early forties and a friend of the Sarge. He understood, from a brief skim of his bio that he had once been Chief Systems Engineer, running the Raiders ground-crews but lately he’d been Manager of one of the illegal stations in an unclaimed sector.

“Attack Two destroyed, three fighters down,” Kaitrin announced. “All wings, engage at will!”

Corrin attempted to take in the tactical situation on his console display but there were too many fighters and drones spread out along the arc of their flight for his fighter honed combat instincts to intuit a solution to their precarious position. Seven Raiders heavy fighters were among the fifteen casualties including half the point defence fighters. Thirty Xenon fighters were down but the destroyer’s shields stood at 300MW and recharging fast.

“Helm, head for Alpha and Beta wings, might as well make the best fist we can! Weapons, fire at will and damn the expense!”

Payter began launching silkworms as the destroyer came in for another head-on pass. Again the Enterprise shook under a plasma pounding. Again, hornets breached the increasingly porous defences.

“Shields at ten percent,” Payter intoned funereally.

“How are we doing Captain?”

Corrin started, he hadn't heard Max enter the bridge.

“Not good,” he answered as Max took the First Officer's station at his right hand side. “Dammit Max, I'm a fighter jock not a fleet commander. Helm, come about to Three-three-five Mark eight, all ahead flank! See if we can use a gate as a shield!”

The Enterprise hauled itself onto the new heading, forcing the destroyer to abort an attack run and arc around for another pass. In the background he could hear Kaitrin ordering all remaining fighters to intercept. It was a hopeless cause, the destroyer was much faster than even the Mambas and its shields strong enough to shrug off anything but Hornet missiles and as a civilian vessel the Enterprise had none. As the Xenon ship smashed through the fighter screen Corrin could see they were not going to make it to the gate.

It swept over them, laying down a barrage of plasma and banked firing more missiles. Enough hit to take down all the remaining shields.

On the view-screen flashed the words, GAME OVER.

Corrin found himself shaking.

“That's four sims and four defeats Max. This tub isn't a warship, there's no way we can stand up to one in a fair fight.”

“Then we'll have to make sure it's bloody unfair!” Max said with a grin. “Leave it with me, it'll give me something to do while I'm catching rays!”

“Then you're going? I had a bet with Anje she'd not be able to talk you into it. How do you feel?”

Max smiled. “I feel really great, really great! She's got the loan of some super star villa on Three Worlds Beta. Tyre checked out fine and is already there, some rich playground island, suns, sea and sand Corrin, straight after we get this meeting out the way. I can hardly wait, is it all fixed?”

“The sector station managers are already on the Trading Station with live link-ups to the owners. All except that bio-gas place, the manager tried to make a run for it in a Dolphin but he didn't get very far and the station surrendered without a fight. Our security people are looking into it but I guess the rest of the staff are clean. We'll have to fly until we pick up a teleporter. Ready or do you need to eat?”

“I've eaten thanks.” Max indicated a fading stain on his flight suit and dropped his voice to a whisper. “I think Zee timed the stabiliser impact rolls to deliberately spill my java!”

“Probably true!” Corrin laughed. “Come on Max, I'll give you a lift. It'll be good to fly something I know what to do with!”

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Corrin introduced Max to the new officer on Systems while they waited for Xela to compile a tactical summary of the simulations and transfer it to a data chip. They took the scenic route to the launch bay, giving Max an opportunity to get better acquainted with his flagship. Although the bridge, control and life support systems had been remodelled for Argon physiology the rest of the ship retained a distinctive Boron character, all soft curves, pale hues and subdued lighting that stood in stark contrast to the utilitarian bleakness of Argon naval vessels.

Another difference, which Max had not expected of such a large ship, was how little usable space there actually was, apart from the pregnant belly of the cargo bay bulging beneath the cetacean hull. With much of the rest of the volume taken up by the one massive flight deck and ancillary services designed to support a fleet of freighters there was little space left over for living quarters or any of the creature comforts found even on military vessels.

“They are designed for extended duty,” Corrin remarked. “TL’s generally make short runs within the borders of their own space, unless they have been modified for interplanetary transport.” Which was why, everywhere they went robots outnumbered the Raiders crew ten to one. They could be held in the massive sub-space holds that swallowed so much of the ship’s power, making it impossible to add energy weapons to the Enterprise. Humans could not. Instead they were forced to live, eat and sleep in cramped open barracks that had already acquired the distinctive ripeness characteristic of men living together. It made Max feel slightly guilty about his billet in Officers Quarters.

But only slightly, RHIP, rank hath its privileges, a truism in any fleet ever, under sail, steam or star drive.

The Enterprise basic systems could function perfectly with a few handfuls of engineers and security staff but the fighters were a different matter. Thirty of the best Raiders ships, the Mambas, Prometheus, Falcon and Piranhas supported by more Bayamons, Hawk, Pegasus and Mandalays, were based on the Enterprise, a mobile strategic reserve capable of being deployed in minutes anywhere the Raiders had a functioning nav-sat. If the Raiders were an equivalent Argon Navy Flight Group with normal shift rotation, training and down-time patterns the Enterprise would carry over one hundred and fifty pilots. It carried just thirty of the best, with the rest providing first line defence of The Force Corporation fixed positions in three sectors.

Like all pilots, Max secretly feared the day would come when machines would replace sentient beings in the cockpit but even so, having to rely so heavily on the Xela designed AI flight program, no matter how sophisticated, made Max uneasy. It was a feeling, Corrin reported, shared by the rest of the squadrons. A worm of doubt gnawing at the brazen self-confidence that sustained it as a fighting unit able to punch massively above its weight. A worm fed by the series of unsuccessful simulations.

New strategies and a successful bleeding of the Enterprise were needed quickly. Max had some ideas but they required some nurturing in the fertile soil of his inventive and unorthodox mind before they were suitable for transplant.

Meantime though, another more immediate problem demanded his attention. What to do about the cluster of bio-gas, bofu and plankton production facilities that sustained the Boron colonies in this far adjunct of the Boron New Frontier? Assurances, Corrin briefed him, were being demanded. Assurances concerning security of supply of raw materials at a profit-making price and security of life, limb and property now the protective shield of the Royal Boron Navy had been lowered. If they had to absorb higher costs for raw materials and private security prices would have to rise dramatically.

The Boron colony, like all new colonies, was years away from being self-sustaining. Indeed, like all new colonies, it was a huge drain on the Royal Treasury despite the 5% levy on shipments and Sinas had already been informed that the Chancellor of The Boron Exchequer had no intention of “printing credits to sustain tens of thousands of water-eyed wastrels in an untenable situation no matter what the strategic significance.”

“It’s our problem now apparently.” Corrin concluded his report as the Mamba alighted on a Trading Station landing pad. “As the de-facto occupying power, and our expense. Bloody penny-pinching bureaucrats, wouldn’t know the big picture if they sat on it naked.”

Max took the full-face filter Corrin proffered and put it on. “Budget-shifting, it’s the same game all over.” He grinned behind the clear plastic protecting his eyes and lungs from the trace elements of ammonia of the recreated Boron atmosphere, a grin Corrin recognised, a grin of a man with a plan.

“Spit it out Max, what do you have in mind?”

"I'm not sure, it depends on how things play out. Are the crew buying the "advanced Boron AI" line?"

"Same old Max," Corrin smiled. "Yes, they're buying it, half love her and the other half are getting up a petition to have her personality matrix re-initialised!"

They had a short meeting with Sinas to get a few details straight and then went to the conference chamber where the Boron factory managers clustered in a cacophonous gaggle around a small human male in a black thin leather suit while the Boron owners peered from an arc of monitors on the curving rear wall. At the front of the room was a small table, set with three spaces and a single computer interface, linked into the rank of workstations facing it.

"You can remove your mask in this section Max," Sinas observed, "it's part of the Factotum administrative section and the atmosphere is practically Argon normal." They removed their masks and took their seats at the table at the head of the room. It served as a signal for the seven Boron to disperse to the crescent of workstations and the room fell silent. The human took the centre station.

"Argus Stanner, translator, negotiator, legal representative. Sharp as a knife and as mean as a Split with a hangover," Sinas informed Max with a thin smile, making no attempt to stop his assessment carrying to Stanner's ears. "I hope you brought a spare shirt."

"A pleasure as always sir," he nodded, adjusting a small transceiver behind his left ear. "I have the honour of representing Boron interests in this matter. It was fortunate I happened to be in this sector. Mr Force, it's going to be a pleasure."

Max ignored the supercilious reptile smile, aware that the pinch-faced young man was attempting to anger him, get him off balance. "Stanner. Working on commission I trust?"

"Of course. My clients expect a substantial renegotiation of transport fees and administrative levies to compensate for the degraded security situation."

"Okay, let's get this show on the road Sinas."

"He's got a point," Corrin whispered ironically as the Boron factotum introduced the new ruling authority. Max silently agreed, if he was in their position he'd probably feel the same.

"The position of my clients is simple," Stanner got to his feet and began pacing theatrically. "They, and I might add, all the other commercial enterprises along the New Frontier are dependent on the Force Corporation for most of our imports and exports. As you are probably not aware, my clients were obliged to pay a substantial import tax in return for this service, a tax I might add, my clients were happy to pay. A fair price for security and regularity of supply and access to the wider markets of the home worlds, fair but very high."

He paused dramatically while the assembled Boron burred agreement.

"My clients insist on a substantive renegotiation of the terms and conditions of this arrangement. If we cannot reach a satisfactory outcome here, we will be forced to appeal up through the Foundation Guild regulatory system and then, if necessary, to higher courts."

"My people will be supplying the same service on the same terms," Max observed, "I really don't see the point of this, nothing's changed. You'll get your materials and we'll transport your products to market. Everyone's happy."

"Ah!" Stanner exclaimed angrily and resumed his pacing. "That is precisely the point, everyone is most assuredly not happy." His voice strayed up the octaves into shrillness. "Not happy at all, for reasons amply illustrated by the stunning complacency of your statement. A statement I might add, that reveals your own complete lack of understanding of the complexities of commerce. Just what I would expect from a man whose sole business venture ended in a fireball. How many of your clients have you killed Force?"

His voice shook and his eyes bulged from a face now suffused with comic rage.

“Now you just watch it laddie,” Corrin growled, rising menacingly to his feet. Max put a restraining hand on his forearm “No, let him have his say,” Max said evenly. “The answer is obviously plenty, go on.”

The diminutive lawyer raised one eyebrow in surprise and then smiled.

“Well, at least you avoid obfuscation, I’m sure we all appreciate your candidness, admirable traits for a warrior.”

He stopped mid-stride and turned his back on Max to directly address the Boron.

“A warrior. And is this not the crux of the problem? Maximilian Force is a man with a colourful past as I’m sure we’re all aware. Mercenary pilot in the employ of whoever offered coin and latterly, well, we all know the story thanks to the assiduous work of his publicity machine. The first person to get a licence to construct commercial stations in the prime real estate of the gate sectors when other businesses are forced to scabble for and make do with distant orbital slots, very impressive I might add, very impressive indeed.”

He turned to address Max directly. “Perhaps you might tell us in your own words how you think this privilege was earned?”

Sinas leaned across to whisper in Max’s ear.

“You don’t have to answer any of this, he’s grandstanding. This isn’t a trial, it’s just a commercial negotiation.”

“No, that’s okay, let’s get all cards on the table,” Max replied softly. Raising his voice he continued,

“I did the Boron Kingdom a big favour by breaking up a Teladi scheme to effectively bar Boron traders from their space by at minimum turning a blind eye to pirate activity. I was owed, so what?”

“A feud you have stoked with your constant attacks. In this sector our very lives are held in your hands and need I say that without the mighty shield of the glorious Royal Navy, we all feel, how should I put it, somewhat more mortal? Need I elucidate the threats?”

“That won’t be necessary, we are all well aware of..” Sinas began. “No, let’s get it all out into the open,” Max interjected.

Stanner smiled the sort of smile that causes wise beings to check their pockets.

“Shall we start with pirates? We have all just seen it confirmed in the most dramatic fashion that the adjacent sector is occupied by a pirate clan.” He turned to address the bank of monitors. “And we have recently seen that Force was unable to protect even one station, let alone an entire sector. He was not even able to protect one woman, consequent heroics notwithstanding. Does anyone here seriously believe that he can now protect an entire sector of stations as well as his own far holdings?”

Corrin sprang to his feet again, his face contorted with rage.

“You listen to me you...” He restrained himself by a visible effort of will. “The Raiders are the best pilots in space with the best damn ships and now we have the Enterprise as a mobile base. We can be hauling your cargo anywhere in the universe and jump back here in minutes. You’ve all got your own defences, use them for once instead of keeping them cowering under your rocks while a man fights for his life. Damn cowards.”

He sat and glowered plasma beams at the Boron before him. A couple had the decency to squirm with what he hoped was a severe attack of conscience.

“Sorry about that Max,” he whispered. “That slimy little bastard rattles my cage just by breathing.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Max smiled. “You carry on Stanner, I’m sure you have a whole lot more.”

“Mr Mirv Corrin,” Stanner applauded ironically. “Bliss Place manager, play boy, and sometime small-time bounty hunter when the cellar runs low. Credentials to inspire confidence, your lives in his hands.” Max shot Corrin a warning look and he remained seated, quivering with the effort.

Stanner continued his pacing, wrists clasped firmly behind his back.

“How many ships do you have Mr Force, makes, models and loud-outs?”

“That is classified information,” Max answered carefully. “Enough.”

“It wasn’t enough to save those hundreds of beings in Scale Plate Green was it?” Stanner observed coolly. Agreement rippled around the room in a chattering wave and on the monitor bank several of the Boron owners were speaking soundlessly into their microphones. Stanner held a finger to his ear pick-up, nodding theatrical agreement.

“My clients are somewhat unhappy with that answer, they are not accustomed to buying sight unseen. Tell me Mr Force, how many hornet missiles do you have in your armoury?”

“None,” Max snapped back instantly. “You know full well that the private ownership of Weapons of Mass Destruction is outlawed under all circumstances.”

“All? Even in this unique situation? Surely the Foundation Guild would not leave entrepreneurs so exposed Sinas?”

“The Foundation Guild regulates Boron and Argon trade, it is not a military supplier or an armed force. It relies on the Argon and Boron Navy for that, as you well know,” Sinas snapped, irritated.

Stanner encompassed the Boron with a grand sweep of an arm.

“Everyone is well aware of the policies of the Foundation and Profit Guilds and no-one wants to see such fearsome weapons in the wrong hands. With the Boron Navy withdrawal from this sector pending further, no doubt long and drawn out negotiations, how do you propose to protect us from the Stoertebeker carriers. There are two of them I believe and Law has graphically demonstrated he possesses these weapons. I repeat the question, without equivalent armament, how can you expect to take down one of these strongly shielded vessels before they can launch a handful of these awesomely destructive missiles?”

“We have the Enterprise,” Max cut in.

Stanner actually laughed. “The Enterprise, please! A rather grandiose name for a cargo hauler no matter how many lesser missiles it holds. Even if it could match the Stoertebeker carriers, how about the Xenon warships that regularly pass through? Only the Boron Naval presence prevented them from rampaging through my clients’ holdings. And now the Navy has gone.”

“From the Boron tactical analyses we’ve read, the Xenon are just passing through and only attack if provoked,” Corrin answered.

“Are you saying the Force security plan for this sector is to just trust the good intention of the Xenon?” Stanner gasped in mock amazement. “That is breathtaking in its complacency!”

Stanner turned to address the owners directly.

“Gentle-beings, in your position I would be tempted to make an immediate representation to the Foundation Guild, demanding your security concerns be addressed. You will receive no funding while still incurring security expenses. However, to avoid a protracted dispute, I recommend both sides accept a 1% levy, so that you can fund your own security arrangements. Clearly we can have no confidence in this new arrangement. I suggest a vote.”

Max leapt to his feet. “Hold it right there Stanner, I’ve been briefed on my powers and responsibilities and that includes considerable leeway on the level of levies I see as necessary to finance the defence of this sector. I was thinking of raising it to the maximum 10%. It’ll take a big bite out of your profits but there will still be plenty of swill in the trough!”

The room burst into uproar, every Boron in the room on their feet, gesticulating angrily and loudly, each owner talking urgently into their mikes. Stanner listened intently, fighting to keep a smile of victory off his face. Only when he raised his arms did the Boron lapse back into silence.

“That is completely unacceptable Commander Force, my clients are completely unable to consider such a ridiculous proposal in the absence of bankable security guarantees? Are you prepared to indemnify every station against destruction, loss of life and loss of profits?”

“Of course not!” Max spat back angrily. “That’s an open-ended commitment that could cost tens of millions, I’m not a damn charity!”

He smiled coldly, Corrin recognised that smile and hid his own behind his hand. Max had a card up his sleeve, he always did, and it was about to drop. He didn’t know what it was, but he was sure it would be a doozie.

“Besides, none of you have seen our defence plans.”

Max produced a data chip and inserted it into the computer interface.

“This is an edited compilation of the tactical exercises we’ve been running, focusing particularly on the Xenon threat, with the end results extrapolated from the exercise termination. I’ll be damned if I concede 1% but I might just settle for eight. If we reach no settlement and it goes to court then, as the old saying goes, you get what you pay for. I’m not a government, I’ve got no electors to keep happy and I don’t give a flying fuck what bad press I get from letting unprotected stations fry. Now enjoy the show. It’s being relayed to your on-screen friends, Stanner.”

Corrin’s jaw dropped.

The Boron and Stanner watched the report in a silence that glowered. Corrin, Max and Sinas followed it on their interface. Four times the Enterprise exploded in a firestorm, four times the Xenon left the sector a desert of burnt out hulks.

When the report terminated the room was completely still, the Boron rigid with baffled shock. It took even Stanner a few seconds to pull himself together and turn to Max, unable to mask his bafflement.

“I, I have to say I am shocked Commander. Do you actually believe this supports your counter-offer when it demonstrates you are completely unable to effectively defend us. It’s only a matter of time before we are all slaughtered!”

“You haven’t heard my real offer,” Max said coolly. He addressed the owners directly. “If you aren’t willing to pay what it takes to protect your investment then the chances are that if the Xenon are provoked they are now worthless. I’m willing to buy the stations, contents and the associated contracts over at 10% of construction cost. This offer will remain on the table for precisely ten seconds, after that you’re on your own. Just stand up to agree. Ten.”

“This is outrageous!” Stanner shrieked, his voice squeaking off the scale.

“Nine.”

“I protest, I protest in the strongest possible terms!”

“Seven?”

“What happened to eight?”

“Five,” Max said coldly.

“Xenon provoked? This is blackmail, blackmail I say!”

“Three, two,” Max said quickly.

Every Boron in the room and every Boron on screen leapt to their feet, gesticulating furiously.

“How’s your commission looking now Stanner?” Max asked evenly.

Corrin laughed uproariously as Stanner’s mouth gulped soundlessly for words.

He was still chuckling when he finished recounting the story for the benefit of the celebratory gathering in the Enterprise recreation room, now filled to intimacy with the bridge crew and the senior Raiders pilots. “A whole business empire at ten per cent with contracts and stock thrown in, I’m in the wrong damn business!” Jackson grinned boyishly. “It’s good to have you back Max, life was beginning to get a little staid and predictable. And that calls for a drink.” He topped up Max, Payter’s and Corrin’s glasses from the beauchamp magnum he’d commandeered on arrival. How’s Tyre?”

“Tyre? Not ‘the chick’, ‘squeeze’ or ‘bird?’ Max asked. “Bird? I’ve never called a flooze that in my life,” Jack protested. “It lacks respect. Besides, she’s paid her dues now, she’s part of the team not just some casino babe.”

“Class is just something you can’t teach,” Max smiled. “Or irony. We just spoke, she’s okay physically, still pretty shocked up though. The medics say with rest and time she’ll be fine. What’s his story?”

Max nodded towards a corner of the room where the new Systems officer stood, somehow managing to be isolated and alone amidst the tightly packed celebration. He was a small, olive skinned man with hair pulled tightly back into a small pony tail. Max guessed he was about fifty and like a lot of men his age his hair was cosmetically coloured. The youthful black sheen contrasted sharply with his sagging features, accentuating rather than concealing his advancing years.

“Massoor?” Payter answered. “You must remember Massoor, you booted him out of the Raiders yourself. The drink, the incident with his wife? I’ve been expecting you to rip off my stripes for bringing him back without your say so.”

“That’s what I meant,” Max said covering hastily, “why is that man on my bridge?”

“I’d like to know the full story, being new to this outfit!” Corrin interjected.

“We go back a long way,” Sarge began, “before the commander here took over. Justin T Massoor, Justin Time as he was nicknamed then. He was our chief engineer and quarter-master and worked miracles with our finances, keeping us in space without tying up what funds we had in excessive stock levels. We weren’t as flush as we are now, always scrimping for the next batch of missiles or drive parts but whatever we needed he could get it-“

“Just in time,” Corrin said. “Got it. Why did Max can him?”

Payter looked uncomfortably at Max, who nodded for him to continue. “The space fuel, and he was one mean drunk for a small guy and like they say, you never know what goes on behind closed doors. Until his wife came out one day sporting a couple of black eyes, then the whole bloody mess came into the open. The commander here kicked him from one end of the hanger bay to the other and then threw him out. We sort of kept in touch and a few days ago he floated this idea.”

He glanced quickly at the solitary figure nursing a glass. “That’s mineral water Sir, he swears he hasn’t touched a drop or raised a fist to anyone since that day. Been running one of the illegal stations in the unclaimed sectors, the Weapons Component Factory in Farnham’s Legend for the last year and doing a fine job according to my sources. With all due respect commander, we need a full time Trade

Master, particularly now you've picked up all those bio-gas, bofu and plankton stations. Everyone deserves a second chance."

"How do the men feel, he doesn't look like he's winning any popularity contests?" Corrin asked. "A lot of them weren't around then," Payter said, "but those that were..." he shrugged, "well, some don't give a damn and some do. Katie was a popular lass. There's been some pushing but he's kept his cool. And he is one fine engineer. We need someone like that onboard, someone we can trust."

Max thought for a moment, he didn't know the man at all of course, that was the real Max Force, but he was no great fan of wife beaters and bullies. On the other hand Payter was right, with a whole sector to run both he and Corrin were going to have their hands full organising defences. That would require plenty of credits. Someone who could organise a trade network to support the mission would be invaluable.

"What about his wife?"

"He's never seen her or the kids since," Payter answered sorrowfully. "That's a knife twisting in his guts every day. He's not a bad man Commander, just," he shrugged, "just weak I suppose, but if you can go straight, why not him?"

"You call this going straight?" Jackson muttered.

"Okay Sarge," Max conceded, "but you better keep him out of trouble or I'll do more than kick his ass next time is that clear?"

Payter smiled, looking relieved. "Count on it sir."

"I suppose I'd better have a word, hold this Jack." Max handed Jackson his glass and threaded his way through the crowded room to the forlorn Massoor, the man stiffened, his rounded chin held high as if steeling himself for a blow as Max approached.

"The Sarge says you're off the sauce and keep your fists down nowadays," Max said curtly. "Why'd you want to come back? You aren't going to be the most popular man around by the looks of your elbow room here."

Massoor took a small sip of water as he thought. "I don't have a family commander, not any more and well," he took another sip. "Water, haven't drunk anything stronger than java since..." his voice trailed off in shame. "The Raiders were the only other family I knew and I saw you running the gates on the net and mixing it with the Stoertebeker Clan and I just wanted to be a part of it all again. The universe would be a lot better place without his sort."

Max nodded. "The Sarge says you've been running a station in the old Xenon sectors."

"Managing for some Teladi consortium, a Weapons Component Factory in Farnham's Legend, illegal as hell of course, we did a lot of business with the Skull Clan," he confirmed. "It suited my talents and there's a lot of credits to be made selling that technology if you don't ask too many questions. Considering the bonuses I'm probably taking a pay cut being here!" he joked weakly.

"We have dealings with Skull, any bad blood I should know about?"

"None my end commander, I doubt she even knows who I am."

He seemed sincere; Max was picking up no vibes that made him think the man was some sort of plant and despite their long association he was confident Payter would have run all the normal security checks.

"The Sarge vouches for you and that's good enough for me." Max stuck his hand out. "Welcome back." Massoor shook his hand tentatively.

"Thank you Commander, I won't let you down again Sir, not ever."

“You’d better not,” Max warned. “I own all the factories in this sector and will be adding an LT Factory. Can you handle something that big and hold down the systems slot on the Enterprise bridge?”

“Will the product be for your use or for trade?”

“Both,” Max answered, “I need an income stream to finance more fighters.”

“Then you’ll need a vertically integrated supply chain so that the profits are kept in-house at every level. What sort of budget do I have for stations?”

“Five million for the time being but I might be able to scare up some more once I’ve had a break.”

Massoor peered calculatedly into the middle distance. “That’s a good start but what about the other Boron sectors? Are we responsible for keeping them stocked? It’s my understanding that another Boron transport company has been appointed the sole contractor; I’d bet they’ll be making monopoly profits. We could undercut and still be ahead.”

His face shone with genuine enthusiasm. “And if we integrate their products into high value production chains we could remove transport costs from their budgets entirely. They could make more profits selling us what we need at lower costs and we could use the savings to under-cut other suppliers.”

He grinned. “Having your own TL is one major competitive advantage, not to mention your nav-sat network! They’re usually too expensive for companies to maintain and protect as pirates see them as a lumbering pay-days and target practice. I can have a business plan on your desk in two hours.”

“I’m not sure I have a desk,” Max grinned, warming to the eagerness of the little man. “But you know the situation here, we’re going to need as many credits as we can get. We’re going after Law.”

“After what he did, I didn’t doubt it Commander. You just tell me what you need and leave the rest to me.”

He handed Max his glass and left the party with a spring in his step. Max took a tentative sip.

“Water,” he confirmed, rejoining Corrin, Jackson and Payter. “I’m putting him in charge of our commercial stuff, he seems to know what he’s talking about. I told him to run everything by you Corrin, but give him his head, within reason. The LT factory is the priority but he wants us to muscle in on the supply contracts in the other Boron Frontier sectors.”

“Another contractor?” Jackson queried. “I thought you took that over for this whole area?”

Max shrugged. “I guess the Boron don’t want to put all their eggs in one basket. Not one with a permanent target painted on it at least.”

Jackson smiled.

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The man stood harnessed and trembling before him, a dark stain spreading down his thigh. Law could smell the fear, a sour counterpoint to the acrid hint of ammonia permeating the small chamber. It was bare, except for what Force had mockingly referred to as his throne, atop the dais that concealed the portable energy source that powered the defence and mobility systems. Robbed of victims by the inexcusable ease with which Force had escaped and the careless execution of the incompetent woman controlling communications by Hagman, he had magnanimously deferred the installation of his equipment while the Clan technicians struggled to repair the prodigious damage he had inflicted.

Now, as the cook whimpered like a stuck child behind the gag, he realised he might have been premature.

“You are certain this is the man Force referred to?”

“Positive,” Hagman answered, pushing the bound man to his knees. “Roscoe admitted pulling a wounded man to safety before the rest of his team were caught in a booby trap. He claims he was then hit from behind and doesn’t remember anything until medics revived him.”

He hesitated slightly.

“He might be telling the truth, he lacks any of the skills needed to comprehensively sabotage our internal systems the way Force’s putative accomplice did.”

“Is that true?” Law inquired evenly. “An innocent mistake?”

The man nodded vigorously, his eyes wide and wild with terror.

“Yet Force let you live out of all the others he slaughtered,” he mused, fingering the ebony hilt of the Split blade on his belt, “while boasting of his magnanimity and his spies in my organisation before all the universe. It may be petty but your life tasks me with his impudence and with traitors abounding, well I’m sure you understand.”

The sudden stench showed he understood only too well. Law drew the knife with slow deliberation, relishing the act. The weapon was Split and very old, from a time when their gods demanded more than prayer and blind obedience to authority and the serrated edges were blunt and notched with use, not all of it ancient.

At a nod from Law Hagman hauled the manacled cook to his feet as Law stood, holding him erect by his hair and his crossed wrists as his legs gave way. Hagman he couldn’t read, he had granite eyes that windowed nothing and a face that betrayed no thought. The cook though, every approaching step of his death was reflected and the smell of fear became overwhelming. Law savoured every spasm, every convulsion, every choked, keening scream as he forced the use-dulled blade into his stomach, holding the man’s face to watch the drama in his fading eyes as he wrenched the knife up through his intestines until it hit the sternum.

Gore, blood-sweet and bowel slick gushed hot on his bare hands as he methodically twisted the blade until the last lights flickered and went out. The man died with an almost sensual moan that echoed his own exultation as he caught the moment when life toppled away into the void, leaving stinking, fish-eyed flesh.

“Dispose of this and attend me,” Law ordered. He returned to his seat and rode it to his outer sanctum through a heavy door that opened at its approach, the thrill of the kill shrinking to a gnawing worm of hunger. He thought again of Force’s woman and the pleasures she would have supplied. Or the woman Hagman killed. The hunger burned as he watched Hagman drag the leaking corpse away and was barely controlled when he returned.

“Status?” Law asked, keeping the tremor of unslaked lust from his voice.

“No contact with our agents in Menelaus Paradise since the Force broadcast and our access to the Boron navigation satellite has been terminated. There is no trace of any Force fifth columnists on the station.”

The report was succinct to the point of sounding rehearsed.

“Brevity in underlings is something to value but we are old comrades. Speak freely.”

Law watched him carefully as he measured his words.

“Any attempt to deploy a nav-sat in that sector would just be a waste of technology, we should plan on remaining blind and concentrate on building up our forces here. Njy and the Teladi intermediaries have their supply lines in place, however the independent sectors continue to be patrolled by Skull forces. Even with a jump-drive the Orca will be vulnerable and the increased freighter traffic is bound to be noticed by their allies. We should consider dealing a lesson, a strike at their base, or failing that,

enlisting the Blue Tooth Gang in Chin's Clouds and using their base as a collection point if Njy can guarantee the local security forces co-operation. I understand that since Force put the frighteners on in that sector there has been little cream to skim off, the ruling family may be hungry enough to take the risk."

Law weighed the words, it was an ostensibly reasonable suggestion but in reality flawed.

"No, Split Navy ships are too close at hand and given our new notoriety hands may well be forced. However, craven as they are, that Clan could be used to our advantage. I will think on an offer. Plan for a demonstration of force against Skull facilities, do we have a track on their flag-ship?"

He knew the answer through his own sources but Hagman repeated the information those he knew about had communicated. The Intimidator was still scouring the outer reaches of the system for Xenon remnants but Skull wanted its return. All it needed was a lure. It was a time to be audacious and a plan was fermenting in his brain, however it was not yet time to share it, particularly with unanswered questions concerning the nature and extent of Force's penetration of his security.

Law questioned Hagman closely on the search for traitors. He held fast to his belief that his accomplices had fled with Force himself, if indeed they existed.

"Force was bluffing," Hagman reiterated. "Sowing dissension, playing mind-games with us."

"Yet he penetrated our systems while stuck in a holding cell," Law observed. "Perhaps your lack of belief is blinding your search? You will assume they exist and find them."

"Understood," Hagman replied. Law watched his body language carefully as he left the chamber and opened a secure channel to his ship captains. They had convoys to organise and an attack to plan.

## **Chapter 11: Brief Encounter**

Captain Coniston kept her face carefully straight when Law announced he would meet her and Hart aboard her ship. A strategy meeting without Hagman again, that was an interesting development in more than one way considering he had long been an essential member of his inner circle, one whose advice was sought after even when his responsibilities took him for extended times into the planetary netherworlds of the Stoertebeker empire.

The captain of the newly acquired Transporter was not an ambitious woman, she had long been content to be carried in the updraft of the Black Heart captain's rise to prominence in the organisation. She did though appreciate the benefits of success, the lifestyle and possessions that accrued to those who held Law's favour. The mansions on several idyllic worlds, the stolen works of art that now adorned concealed rooms and all the other things wealth could buy.

Anything.

Above all she appreciated her life and the careless ease with which it could be lost and she was careful to always have a way out against the day. A fast ship, an unknown bolt-hole and untraceable wealth. Always know your way out, it was a motto to live by but now she felt trapped, penned into a single sector by the Xenon on one side and Force on the other, even assuming her fighter could make it past Law's defences.

At first the new situation left her unconcerned, she commanded a ship with one of the new jump-drives and had access to the Teladi Navy satellite network but now that was locked with a dual encryption code requiring direct input from Station Prime to complete her own partial key. Trapped, the feeling had grown ever since the system was introduced after the debacle of Force's escape, along with the knowledge that someone would have to pay. One chef did not seem high enough coin to buy off Law's legendary wrath.

And now Hagman again had 'other duties to attend,' the cold gleam in Captain Hart's eye as he followed Law into her ready-room showed he shared her thought. The Boron furnishings were gone now, replaced by broadly matching fitments scavenged from Station Prime but the ammonia traces remained, despite the new filters in the life support system. Not enough to cause discomfort but enough to give each breath a faint aftertaste. Strong java bubbled in a pot, the rich aroma offering some temporary respite. Law accepted a large cup and sat at the head of the oval table, carefully testing it for toxins and chemicals before drinking. Again he offered no thanks.

"You have your new fighters?" Law asked, slurping the hot black liquid noisily.

"Loaded, un-crated and assembled Admiral, fifteen new Falcons, thirty Hawks and twenty Bats, with our existing complement that makes ninety fighters plus ten freighters. Fifteen if you count the missile boat conversions. The pilots are having to hot bunk where they can but with your permission I'd like to rotate them between here and Station Prime to keep them sharp."

"Agreed," Law rumbled. "And you?"

"Fully equipped Admiral," Hart confirmed. "The Teladi convoy was very well stocked."

"Do not squander them, it will be some time before we can begin constructing our own and unfortunately our nano-programs are limited to Clan fighter classes. How stand our supply lines?"

Faith took a deep breath and launched into her rehearsed explanation. Her meeting with the Paranid jewellery smugglers and the cartel of industrialists they fronted had gone well and with the operators in the independent sector of Nopileos Memorial fully onboard the Clan's supply of ore and energy cells were secure. All the other supplies would funnel through Teladi sectors to Company Pride where the Matriarch of the Shroda Clan based there would ensure their safe transit through the Split sector of Thuruk's Beard and onto Nopileos Memorial.

It was an arrangement that gave Law some satisfaction. The Matriarch were not a natural ally of his and not privy to the enterprise of the shadow-conspiracy, although some of her underlings were. But she did owe much to the forbearance of the Teladi Trading Company and Law had obliged Morn to expend much of the accrued political capital in facilitating the deal.

“Skull is aware of our presence in the sector,” Coniston cautioned. “Their fighters regularly sweep through, always with a missile boat loaded with silkworms. They shoot down our satellites, we shoot down theirs. I’ve based a wing of Bayamons and Mandalays on one of the stations there, they launch and recover satellites at irregular intervals to provide jump-drive targeting. With the Skull base only two sectors away they have the tactical advantage.”

“But they are a threat and a nuisance, we must consider discouraging them without ourselves taking significant losses. Suggestions?” Law asked. “Perhaps we need to draw upon the experience of the Security Chief?” Faith said evenly. Law dismissed the suggestion with a cold scowl.

In an hour they had a workable plan.

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“Okay boys and girls, let’s take this show on the road! Set course for Scale Plate Green, eastern gate and activate jump-drive.” Max took the centre seat on the Enterprise bridge and activated the restraints before realising his order had not been met by a chorus of enthusiastic affirmatives, or in Kerman’s case, the customary sullen grunt. Instead everyone was looking at Corrin, sitting at his right hand in the First Officer’s position.

He coughed apologetically but there was a twinkle in his eye.

“You might be hell on wings in a fighter Max, but you’re a bloody menace in a TL. Kaitrin, send a sector wide, clear the area alert for the eastern jump gate and monitor the response.”

“Ay ay sir!” she declaimed dramatically. “Automated warning active, accessing nav-sat now. Sector display on-screen, sir!”

“Sector security tend to get upset with big bloody ships that swat those little icons aside,” Corrin said, indicating the sector display. “We can’t transit a gate without making sure the exit is clear,”

“Perhaps we should hold off until you get some big red L plates fitted?” Jackson added from the left seat.

“Okay, okay, give me a break Jack, unless you fancy flying home through Xenon space,” Max smiled. “Helm, left hand down a bit. Make ship go.”

The Paranid simply fixed him with a triple-eyed and surly stare.

“Jump gate clear,” Kaitrin reported, her tone now cool and professional.

Max checked the sector display, it showed a clear area around the targeted gate.

“Screen to normal view, activate jump-drive. Shouldn’t you be getting to your ship Jack?”

“This is only the second time I’ve jumped, I want a good view,” he answered as the computer counted down from ten in Xela’s voice, although she was not currently hooked up to the Enterprise. “Besides, I’m still hoping you hit something!”

“Be careful what you wish for,” Max answered darkly as a jump hole swirled into existence on the main viewer, obscuring the stars. The ride through hyperspace was relatively smooth compared to the buffeting transition of a fighter and seconds later the Enterprise burst back into normal space, dropping instantly to zero velocity.

“Bring us into the Bliss Place, nice and easy, park us in the shade of the LT’s,” Max ordered.  
“Massoor, how many freighters do we have on board?”

“Two,” he responded instantly. “A Lifter designated the Destiny Star and a minimally equipped Dolphin, designated FCT0007.”

“When we’re parked top up our energy cells from station resources. Security, status?”

Kerman grunted acknowledgement.

“No threats detected Captain,” he reported after examining the sector display on his board. “One Teladi carrier is holding station near the Xenon gate with a five ship Combat Air Patrol. Another eight fighters on sector patrol, just rounding the north gate.”

“That’s my cue to leave,” Jackson announced, standing up. “These are Morn’s people. You have a good break Max, soak up those suns, get some rest, things are probably going to get hairy soon. You’re planning to drop in on Skull right?”

“I thought I’d swing by on the way to Three Worlds,” Max answered cautiously. Corrin sighed theatrically.

Jack grinned.

“Give her my love!”

“I’m sure it’ll make her week,” Max replied dryly. “You’d better get launching before those Falcons get too close.”

The Confederation Bayamons made it through the jump gate back to Nyana’s Hideout well ahead of the lumbering Teladi heavy fighters. At Corrin’s instigation Max launched the Enterprise CAP and missile defence Mandalays, just in case Morn was reckless enough to openly strike. The Falcons swept by, deliberately changing course to give the Enterprise a wide berth.

With another two hundred energy cells to power the drive they repeated the jump procedure, leaping straight to Teladi Gain to orbit the Force Chip Fabrication Plant under the protection of its multiple laser towers. Again, Morn’s forces kept well clear as the Enterprise took on more energy cells to replace those consumed in the long jump while a fleet-heeled Pegasus fighter sped towards Split Fire with a nav-sat.

As soon as Kaitrin announced it was on-line and the Pegasus had warned the few ships in that sector, Max ordered the jump, targeting the eastern gate leading directly to Brennan’s Triumph and the main Skull base.

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Hagman stood in the bay portal of his commandeered quarters and watched Law’s blood red Vulture slip through the repair teams clustered around the damaged docking bay doors and speed past the off-line Laser Towers toward the orbiting Boron TL.

The search for the traitors is your only task, Law had said, there is no other I can trust. Trust! The Stoertebeker Clan did not function on trust, it functioned on obedience in the face of terror in return for enormous rewards. He was a rich man now, Law was assiduously fair in calculating each Clan members share of the profits reaped by the many tentacled organism. Few people had any idea of the true pervasiveness of the influence and reach of organised crime. Drugs, piracy, corruption, murder, pandering to the darkest tastes, blackmail. The best efforts of the Foundation and Profit Guilds were barely enough to keep the situation stable, let alone purge the universe of the clan’s pervasive influence and corrupting touch. What price Virtue when the road was so hard and the alternatives so rewarding?

And now his Clan was gambling all on the success of the Enterprise, this search for new technology, the Shadow Conspiracy, interesting, exciting but always a background distraction that consumed time more than credits. A chimera, that was the word he was looking for, a useful device for constraining

otherwise viciously competitive organs, a bait for luring the gullible and greedy into the twilight to be fed on. Beings like Morn, who could provide the daylight resources to exploit it..

And now it promised to be real, the ultimate glittering prize. More wealth, more power than most men's dreams can hold. It was no wonder Law gambled so much and no wonder he had his unquestioned support.

'Unquestioned?' he thought sardonically. 'By whom?' Watching the sunlight flash off the wings of banking fighters as they rounded the jump-gate to Menelaus Paradise, seeing the Stoertebeker flagship as black as its name against the daubed hues of a distant nebula, he wondered when his first doubts grew.

Those first, casual victories by Force in the needless, petty Teladi scheme to monopolise trade routes? The loss of Teladi Gain? No, the former was insubstantial against the bigger picture, something to walk away from. Losing the home base? No, it was a Queen sacrifice, an audacious move to secure a strategic position, something worthy of the younger, audacious man that seized control of the Stoertebeker Clan and one that reinvigorated them both.

It certainly was not the casual brutality or even the intended fate of Force's woman. He had not risen so far, no one rose so far in the Clan without complicity in what others consider crimes but to Law were the exercise of the Will. The brutal pleasure of absolute control, absolute freedom tasted slavering sweet.

Yet, perhaps he was getting old, but he did not still burn with those lusts and did not miss that intoxicating rush that came from reason swept away in the deliberate embrace of evil, the sheer elation from performing an act outside so-called civilised norms.

But he could remember his mistake, that first time he felt the hot breath of suspicion on his neck. The bitter irony of it was enough to make him snort with self derision. Another murder, of another nameless woman caught up in something beyond her expectation and imagination. He did not even know the communication officer's name, just that in that one, snapping moment he did not wish upon her what her fate had decreed.

He could rationalise it away, the current circumstance did not warrant the casual brutalisation of a finite resource but the bitter truth was, for one glaring moment he felt compassion and then, with Law's eyes burning, he felt fear. And now, having held another man firm while he was butchered for his compassion, he felt shame. With Law intent on identifying those who helped Force escape he knew he had to deliver more, even though he was practically certain whoever it was had somehow escaped with him, despite the eye witness accounts that just the two of them escaped. The loss of face was too great, someone would have to pay and as the Poet said, 'you don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows'. It was Coniston and Hart who discussed battle plans while he stared pensively through six inches of clear plasteel considering how to conjure a plausible conspiracy without provoking another rebellion like the one that had convulsed the home base after Law's last outburst.

He sighed inwardly as he surveyed the chaos of his new room, a tangled mess of possessions that weren't his and furnishings that suited neither his temperament nor his style, both of which tended towards the spartan.

Whoever had occupied these quarters had a taste for opulence, reflected in the soft leather furnishings and the colourful abstractly patterned hangings that concealed the dull grey metal of the bulkheads. They also painted, landscapes in oils of trees reflected in ice blue lakes and towering mountains given depth and substance by the thick application of colour with heavy, laden brush strokes that up close gave the pictures an almost sculpted feel that Hagman realised reproductions could never do justice to.

An unfinished canvas still sat on an easel, another expansive view of rolling hills and falling water conjured from a well-worn 2D snapshot pinned to the trestle. Hagman removed it and examined the back. 'To our loving son, to remind him of home. Mother.'

Mother. He wondered if that was his dying word as Law's troops raged through the station? Out here, in the starkness of space and encased in a monotonous desert of artificiality the artist had reached out for home. His lay in two unpacked canvas hold-alls.

He should have someone gut this place, burn out the ghosts along with the cluttered detritus of a stranger's life. Hagman began reaching for his comm. unit but hesitated. Instead he took a clean brush from the easel, forced it through the crusted meniscus of an open pot and tentatively daubed a patch of blue above a mountain peak.

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Max waited until Skull personally acknowledged his warning and watched until the ten ship Skull patrol had slipped through the southern jump gate to Danna's Chance before ordering jump to Brennan's Triumph.

"I'm launching another Pegasus to keep an eye on that little fleet Skull," he warned. "I wouldn't like that missile boat within fifteen clicks of me. And I'm launching my own CAP, to match yours."

Corrin quietly passed on the launch order.

"We are partners Commander," Skull purred through blood red lips. "That patrol seeks Law's forces and my defences will remain close to this station."

Her voice hardened. "You will keep the Enterprise twenty kilometres from my station." The slight emphasis on his ships' name showed the significance was not lost on her.

"Take us well behind the gate and lined up for a quick exit, twenty clicks minimum." Max ordered the Paranid helmsman. "Satisfied? Whatever happened to 'keep your friends close and your enemies closer still'?"

The albino faced woman on the main view-screen ignored the remark.

"Kaitrin, transfer this call to the ready room, full security, my eyes only. I suggest you do the same, Skull."

"Agreed," Skull answered, terminating the channel abruptly.

While Kaitrin exchanged encryption keys with the Skull comm. system Max stepped off the bridge into the small room traditionally put aside for the Captain to work and rest while still remaining on hand for an emergency. Seconds after taking a seat the work station monitor flashed to life with Skull's face in close-up.

Before he could speak she snapped with rage.

"If you risk my fortunes on so trivial a personal matter again I will have all those you are close to killed, regardless of any counter threats, beginning with that woman. Am I understood?"

Max opened his mouth to snap back but instead he smiled, letting the anger flow through him and out into the air.

"Fair enough, it was a completely reckless thing to do and you're not the first person to tear me off a strip. Can we get down to business now?"

"The assault craft," she answered, ignoring his apology. "That matter is in hand and will not be hurried by the blustering demands of Jackson and his petty Clan. You will be contacted when it is ready. Is this the matter that bought you and your impressive new acquisition to my domain or was it just a crude attempt to intimidate me?"

"If I wanted to intimidate you, you'd know about it, remember? I see your docking bay is working fine now. I've come to tell you in person what I found out on my 'trivial personal' escapade. Do you want

to hear or do you want to keep giving me an attitude. We're partners now, the enemy of my enemy, remember?"

"Tell me," she answered coldly.

"Well, Law has a new base in that sector, something called Station Prime but I guess you knew that."

Skull nodded expressionlessly.

"Well he's also building a shipyard he found on the Boron TL he captured and has the entire cargo of that Teladi convoy the Xenon were fingered for whacking. Do you want to bet it was not stocked full of enough goodies to form a bloody battle group?"

"I only bet when I have assured myself of victory Commander," Skull replied. "That is disturbing news but merely confirmation of what I already suspected. Morn must be insane to gamble so much."

"A Teladi monopoly on the new technology is a pretty big prize," Max observed. "And Law will use it to wipe out every clan that refuses to bend a knee to him. If I were you I'd be sweating buckets."

"Ladies do not sweat, they glow and then only under specific circumstances I'd be happy to show," Skull purred in that tone that bypassed his brain totally.

"Uhh, I'm still passing on that offer," Max managed to stammer.

She smiled condescendingly. "I could show you things Max, wicked, evil, degrading things. The things you can only lie awake dreaming of asking your woman for."

"Did you know Family Njy are part of Law's little gang?" Max countered.

He was watching her face closely and even beneath the cosmetics and the iron self control he could see a shimmer of shock. Shock and something more, strobed in her eyes, dismay. It was Max's turn to present a poker face as he realised not only had Law acquired another important ally without Skull knowing, it was one of her mainstays, either of the clan, the Shadow Conspiracy, or both.

"Then the Njy are fools," Skull snapped. "Morn would never share the Teladi monopoly with the Split."

"In which case he must have offered them something else," Max countered. "Something more than you were offering."

Skull stared at him in silence for long moments before acknowledging the gambit with a small smile.

"War, the Njy live for war. Law has promised them the Boron sectors on that section of the New Frontier."

She hesitated before continuing.

"There is talk of a new Clan arising in Split territory, a station being equipped."

"Ghinn's Escape," Max stated. "Right on the Boron border I'd bet. Great! That's just what I need when the Boron military presence is being pared back to a minimum. They're not exactly known for their tenacious response to piracy. Any more good news?"

"The Stoertebeker Orca appears intermittently in the Independent Sectors, we believe Law has established supply depots in Nopileos Memorial."

"That's just two sectors away, what are you doing about it?"

"That patrol your ship shadows is one of many sent out in the hope of interdicting the Transporter," Skull replied. "However it is difficult to pin down a jump capable ship."

“Why not whack the stations?” Max asked.

“They have enhanced defences, including Laser Towers they deploy at the first sign of trouble. Besides, such destruction would affect the co-operation of independent stations in other sectors. And that would be, an inconvenience. Now that you have such a grandly named ship I place the problem in your hands. Partner,” she smiled thinly.

Max rubbed his face wearily.

“Okay, but we’ll have to co-operate on this one. We need to integrate any nav-sat you drop in that area with my network.”

“A reciprocal arrangement I trust?”

“Deal,” Max answered. “My people will talk to your people, but just access to nav-sats in that and intervening sectors.”

“Understood, now,” her eyes flickered momentarily off-screen. “I fear we must hasten that arrangement, my patrol is under attack.” She frowned. “Communications lost. Attend to your post Commander. Skull out.”

Max dashed through to the bridge hastily issuing orders.

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Coniston barely had time to finish her second mug of java after the departure of Law when the sector display flashed to life on the main screen. Nopileos Memorial, the pattern of symbols representing the handful of stations was intimately familiar and she did not need the brief, staccato announcement from the main computer. Her heart quickened as she absorbed the other tactical data in a glance. A large Skull patrol was poised to transit the eastern jump-gate to Hatikvah’s Faith. Gleeful at the timely capriciousness of fortune, she watched two Skull fighters peel off to attack the just deployed nav-sat, protected by a single Law Mandalay launched from a friendly station. The rest maintained their course and slow approach speed, clustered protectively around the missile freighter. An unknown Pegasus fighter manifested at the western gate, worth a watchful eye, blindingly fast but impotent as a threat. Judging the moment by instinct she gave the order to make the pre-programmed jump.

The Orca punched like a fist through the Skull formation, fighters blossoming bright to vapour clouds against the shields. “After-burners,” Coniston ordered, grinning ferally. “Missiles, target the survivors.”

Her crew was gleaned from the second and third shift of the Black Heart and was well versed in the skills and procedures necessary to transform the huge, under-armed civilian transporters into potent weapons of war. Wasps and Mosquitoes arrowed directly towards the surviving Skull Bayamon and Orinoco ships as they attempted to roll from the path of the oncoming juggernaut, tearing at their shields until they too became fireballs.

“Get those two anti-sat fighters,” she ordered. “And knock out that satellite.”

Five high speed Mandalays spat rapidly from the rear mounted Infiltrator launch bay, curving in pursuit of the last two Skull fighters, who had already aborted their attack on the Law nav-sat and, dropping one of their own, were heading at full speed towards the Danna’s Chance, western gate. She was about to give the order to target that gate for a jump when a third nav-sat powered to life. The unknown Pegasus circled protectively, in a wide, high speed arc.

“Track that Pegasus, on-screen, maximum magnification,” she ordered, her instincts already anticipating the answer the cute young blonde at the Tactical station was targeting the magnifiers to reveal. The unknown fighter sported the distinctive black and blood red livery of the Force Corporation.

“Recall all fighters,” she hissed after a frozen second of dismay. “Lock onto to Sector Prime and jump as soon..” “Eastern gate activating!” Helm shouted as the viewer switched to show the whirling energy patterns of the opening hyperspace tunnel, constrained within the mouth of the ancient machine.

“Ahead, full speed!” Faith ordered. Even as the drive surged, setting up resonant vibrations that she could feel through the leather soles of her boots, the prow of another Orca nosed from the wild chaos. For a few seconds the huge transporter hung still in space, a shrinking silhouette against the dwindling whorl of the hyperspace tunnel as her ship accelerated away. Then it began moving, slowly at first as it curved onto an intercept course and then faster, growing in size as Coniston realised her mistake. Pending a session in the completed Sector Prime shipyard the Infiltrator, as heavily armed as it was, still retained civilian legs. Force’s damn ship had been completely upgraded by the Boron, its drive system fully tuned to its maximum theoretical speed and it was eating the kilometres between them.

“Get me Law” she ordered, “Get him now!”

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“Knock down that nav-sat,” Max ordered, leaving it to Kaitrin’s good judgement on how to implement it. She briskly delineated it as a target for the Pegasus and ordered two Raiders Mandalays to launch.

“Strike wings one and two launch on over-fly. Sarge are you reading any hornets onboard?”

“Negative Sir, but plenty of Silkworms.”

“Launch defences at you discretion Sarge,” Max ordered as the Stoertebeker Orca grew on the view-screen. “Silkworms at Corrin’s command.”

Corrin, hunched over his panel, acknowledge the transfer and configured the first volleys.

“Stay with it,” Max ordered Kerman unnecessarily as the target made the best of the reduced turning circle made possible by its slower speed and broke to port as the Enterprise swept past. Swarms of missiles buzzed from each ship, mosquitoes targeting silkworms, silkworms targeting each TL. Both ships shuddered under multiple impacts, each bridge echoed with tersely stated status reports.

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Captain Coniston gripped the seat rests with white knuckles as her ship shuddered under the repeated impacts, leaning against an abrupt, evasive turn that strained the internal gravity field. Symbols designating hostile fighters flared to life on the semi-transparent tactical map laid over the view screen as Force’s ship roared past, filling the bridge with the simulated thunder of its flaring drives.

The Enterprise rolled as it drifted off-screen but her tactical officer kept a padlock view window open in the lower quarter and it curved like a lumbering fighter in an inverse loop tumbling drive off on its axis to keep its nose pointing at her ship before the read-outs showed its afterburners kicking in. More missiles fired as the nose swung up. There would, she thought, be contusions and broken bones throughout that ship.

Everything was happening too fast for her to keep up.

“Helm, evasive at your discretion, Security, weapons on discretion!” she ordered, belatedly aware that this was not how her crew had been trained. Loyalty to the chain of command and unquestioned discipline did not make for inspired improvisation. “Where’s that call!” she yelled, trying to keep the fear from her voice as she recognised they were almost pinioned in the cross-fire of two attack groups.

More missiles, more juddering explosions.

“Shields at 70%,” the computer called mechanically. If Force had hornets, she realised with a chill, they’d be dead by now.

“What is it Captain?” Law’s bass voice filled the small bridge. “You have inter-”

“We are engaged by Force’s Enterprise and are out-matched!” she cried, too worried with the immediate threat to be concerned with the consequences of the statement. “But with the Black Heart we could finish him now!”

On screen a wedge of gull winged Mambas flashed through the field of view, strafing the length of the Orca hull.

“Admiral!”

There was no reply and she licked dry lips and held tight as the Infiltrator pulled a stomach churning high break, Force’s TL clinging stubbornly on its tail. She tried to weigh the options, run now and risk incurring Law’s wrath or launch fighters and make a claws out fight of it. Both were unpalatable.

“Navigation satellite destroyed,” the blonde boy at Tactical announced. “More fighters launching.”

The note of panic in his voice was all it took for her to give into her own.

“Jump, get us out of here, Sector Prime!” she screamed as her ship shook with raking plasma fire.

“But our fighter..?” he protested.

“Jump damn you!”

“Shields at 50%,” the computer announced, unconcerned.

After a short eternity it began counting down from ten with the same blithe disregard to her peril.

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“They’ve gotten away,” Corrin announced unnecessarily as the hyperspace whirlpool winked out. “Casualty report.”

“A whole lot of bumps and bruises and one Mamba.” Kaitrin’s voice lowered. “No survivor.”

“Damn,” Max muttered, the news a bucket of ice water in the face of his exhilaration. “Who was it?”

“Barton,” Corrin answered, checking the flight roster. “Young kid, I’d just bumped him up from the Piranha wings.”

Max could picture him now, like Corrin said, just a kid, always boastful and flushed with his own youthful immortality in the rec room after action. He filed the face with all the others and stood up. “You have the Bridge Mirv, see if you can get anyone to surrender then recover the fighters,” he sighed wearily, “and jump straight to Three Worlds, I need a holiday.”

## **Chapter 12: Sating the Beast**

It was hot down here in the mechanical heart of Station Prime where the waste heat generated by the computer cores, support systems and power plants that kept it running often overwhelmed the cooling system. It was even hotter in the claustrophobic chamber where Jakiziak Herranphut IV was lately forced to spend most of her days, at first fruitlessly combing logs for anything that hinted at inside involvement in the escape of Force and lately, configuring an early beta of software designed to parse security camera images for suspicious body language.

Too hot, even for a Teladi, she murmured to herself as for the tenth time this shift the software designated every movement in the main fighter bay, 'anomalous.' It must have been, she reflected bitterly, programmed by Split, who at last count had three genes directly implicated in their in-built paranoia. With a frustrated hiss she reinitialised a component of the neural net and isolated the feeder sub routines. While the code lines scrolled up the viewer she poured another glass of water from her flask. It was already tepid and from the chemical aftertaste, the recyclers still needed adjustment she thought.

Jakiziak leaned back in her chair, thankful at least that it was designed to accommodate her Teladi physiology. She liked her comforts and one of the few benefits of being so long on this station was that she had the time to organise her life to her own maximum pleasure. The other benefit was of course the wealth. Maximum return for minimum investment, it was a motto to live by and a creed that naturally led her to parlay her undoubted gifts to whoever would pay the most.

Crime pays, as one of her latest rules to live by stated, as does treachery.

When agents of Stoertebeker approached her for support her conscience put up barely a token struggle. The sums on offer mocked the credits her assiduously avaricious egg sisters could possibly accrue in a ten year of investment of the frugal legacy left by the death of their Egg Mother. In her minds eye she conjured images of the conspicuous consumption she could flaunt in the faces of her rival siblings should this business come to fruition. She did not know what this enterprise was, something big, something obscenely profitable, something massive enough to warrant the capitalisation given to it in the hushed tones of the better informed. Jakiziak had made it her business to listen in when their tongues were loosen by the twenty year old Argon Whisky she appeared to have an endless supply of.

'The Enterprise!' She now had two shares and the thought made her warm inside, a comfortable warmth, unlike the ozone dry heat of her small work space.

"Hello Jak."

The Teladi computer expert reflexively flinched at the voice from the door's security screen, spilling water down the front of her grey coveralls but that wasn't what sent her body heat plunging towards the temperate, it wasn't even the derogatory use of the insulting diminutive of her heritage.

It was the man himself. She quickly tapped the lock code into the touch pad and activated the door. The Stoertebeker Security Chief stepped through. Her eyelids nictitated nervously as she waited for him to speak. The human frightened everyone, he frightened her even when delivering untraceable credit chips drawn on anonymous accounts for, as he put it, 'services rendered.'

She'd rendered him no services since facilitating the station seizure through a strategic neglect of certain protocols. Since then they had no contact other than to report the negative outcome of her scrupulous search through comms records and security access programs during the hunt for any aid Force had in his escape. She had found none and neither had the others in her small team, all cross-checking each other's conclusions and methods. However Force managed it he had been assiduous in covering his tracks, so assiduous that she was certain the explanation lay elsewhere entirely. A conclusion she had stated and Hagman appeared to accept but now he stood here, filling the chamber with his intimidating bulk.

"Do you know Anton Keffler?"

Jakiziak's body heat cooled towards the arctic and she became acutely aware of the large blaster strapped to Hagman's waist and the manner in which his fingers danced over the holster. Of course she knew Keffler, he was the most gifted of her three underlings, almost as adept at her when it came to programming. Skilled enough to be a rival, which is why she made the portly human her second, despite his unpleasant body odour.

Keep your friends close and your enemies closer still, it was another of her rules, cogent if not original.

"He supplied me with this."

She took the data crystal, trying hard not to let her claws shake as she inserted it into a port. She had to stand hunched over her terminal, her back turned to examine the contents. She could imagine the soft hiss of metal on leather as the cold-eyed man pulled his weapon to shoot her down. He had a reputation and one well-earned if just a fraction of what was whispered about him were true and none of it involved fair-play.

It took almost all of her willpower not to void her bowels as she ran her own tester programs on the data reconstructed from purged buffers rolling up the small monitor screen.

"It's lies," she managed to hiss, turning to meet his frozen stare. "Forgeries and lies."

And it was. Under other circumstances she could have professionally admired the brilliantly executed fake. It was good enough to fool almost anyone, stand up to the most rigorous scrutiny, except hers and she somehow doubted that would count in what passed for a justice system in her new Clan.

"I know," Hagman replied, laying an friendly arm around her thin shoulders provoking an involuntary squeal of terror from her near frozen throat. Incongruously she noticed his fingertips were stained blue.

"I have worked with you, I trust your loyalty to me, but I am in a difficult position. Our leader seeks heads and in the face of this irrefutable evidence I do not think he would be inclined to risk the success of the Enterprise on my unsupported word. Would you?"

Definitely, most definitely she would, she wanted to say but wisely she shook her head.

"Now why would your loyal assistant attempt to implicate you in Force's escape if you are not guilty?"

The walls of the small chamber seemed to close in around her as she raced to keep up with the twisting path of the conversation.

"Because he wants my position?" she stammered. Hagman slowly shook his head. She grasped desperately for alternatives. "Because, because...?" Inspiration struck. "Because he is the traitor, because he is guilty!" Hagman nodded approvingly.

"Unfortunately I have no evidence of that," he said regretfully, "However, I do have this." He plucked the crystal from the port.

"I fake – I search again I find evidence, good evidence!" Jakiziak pleaded. "No-one need know." She hated the whine in her voice.

Hagman smiled for the first time.

"Good, I expect he had accomplices also. I have my suspicions."

He mentioned names and positions.

"Bring the proof directly to me in my quarters, do not even speak to anyone else. If I am satisfied you will be rewarded."

Hagman hefted the data crystal.

“I retain this, from now on you belong to me. Understand?”

She understood only too well. When he left she added a Paranid saying to her list of rules.

‘If you sup with the devil have a very long spoon.’

Hagman returned to his quarters and stood before the easel in contemplation. Then he took a brush, dipped it in paint, rolling it until it was laden with colour and slashed the sky, mountain and serene lake with bloody red.

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Coniston attempted to stop sweating by sheer effort of will but her armpits were as wet as her mouth was dry and she fancied she could smell the rancid trace of her fear.

Under other circumstances the view would be impressive. Unlike most gate sectors, the Sector Prime sky was not spectacularly disfigured by the gaudy daubs of nebulae illuminated by new birthed suns. Out here space was as it should be, full of stars, hard and bright as diamonds on black velvet and given full justice by the panoramic sweep of the Observation Lounge window.

It was a sight that would normally have held her spellbound by memories of the dreams that had driven her into space but now she was untouched as she attempted to divine the mood of the other participants in this macabre ceremony. Hagman was as impenetrable as ever, a face set in stone and a parade ground rigid stance, wrists clasped firmly behind his straightened back as he stood at Law’s left hand, just beyond the shield perimeter of the throne the Clan leader rarely seemed to leave.

Law himself was practically jovial, his mood fuelled by deep copious gulps of wine taken straight from the bottle clutched in his right hand and unconcerned at the ruby red excess dribbling down his chin. The image was too disturbing for her to dwell upon.

Her old Captain was the only one who had spoken to her but even Hart seemed a little distant. Guilt by association, she thought bitterly and hoped that later, in private, old friendships and loyalties would count for more. She had no doubt she needed them. Even though Law had made no comment and had even commended her for her decision to withdraw from the battle with Force, her command intact, his moods were too mercurial to trust, particularly with a vindicated Hagman pouring venom in his ears. That he was her enemy now she had no doubt and she bitterly regretted her previous complacency. It was not a mistake she intended to repeat.

“If everyone would take their position,” Hagman said expressionlessly. Law’s throne glided into the large gap in the crescent of seats before the panoramic window. She took the one at the end and steeled herself as the Argon Lifter orbited into view. The freighter came to rest, relative to the station some 700 metres distant she judged with a professional gaze. Station-wide, all eyes would be fixed on monitors and Faith forced herself to stare, unflinching and emotionless as it drifted slowly towards them.

At 300 metres it slowly turned and right side on the airlock opened expelling two frantically flailing forms in a crystalline cloud of freezing air. The Teladi was still alive she could see as they drifted in on momentum, his reptile face rupturing in the vacuum and claws reflexively scrabbling, when it hit the crystal clear plexi-steel window. He was an anonymous communications technician from the recesses of her ship and unknown to her until Hagman threw the damning data crystal, detailing the reconstructed nav-sat communications with Force’s Orca onto her desk. His slow death left her unmoved.

The star-fished human though, staring blankly through exploded eyes, his frozen blonde hair sparkling with his last frozen breath, he was quite dead and she was not unmoved, not unmoved at all.

“And so perish all who betray me,” Law intoned, sonorous for effect. He touched a control to disconnect from the station-wide broadcast and took another swallow from the bottle before turning to Hagman with eyes that sparkled above his bloodied lips. “A most entertaining display old comrade, I am glad to see you have not truly lost your lust for the macabre.”

Hagman gave a smile she thought nothing more than an exercise of facial muscles, so expressionless were his eyes. "A shame I had to shoot the ring-leader but thanks to the assiduous work of the Teladi programmer we need not concern ourselves with traitors."

"With Force friendless in this sector we can complete the shipyard, re-equip and build our strength," Law agreed. "And perhaps next time the Infiltrator meets him in battle it will not have to flee," Hagman added. "I suggest we reward Jakiziak in some way, and focus her talents on ensuring our continued security."

"Make arrangements as you see fit," Law answered. "Then join the celebration. You too my captains."

He took another deep pull on the bottle before hurling it aside, drained.

The mandated party would already be convulsing the station and Faith nodded dutifully and trailed the others from the lounge, the eyeless stare of her tactical officer burning into her back.

On the other side of the Universe, on an azure beach in the languid heat of the double-sun day, two perma-frosted crystal glasses chimed.

"To us!" Max echoed. Despite his thirst he resisted the urge to drain the deliciously cold beauchamp. It was too early in the day, the vintage too fine and the ocean too temptingly refreshing. Us! Where once there was a hole, a yawning fracture that was the death of his father and cousin, that neither drugs or reckless risk-taking could fill, there was a lake. Max allowed himself to savour the word and sink into the depths of its meaning.

"What are you thinking?" Tyre asked. "You looked far away." Max almost answered honestly but caught the unfamiliar reflex. "About taking a swim, maybe some more para-sailing." Tyre sat up and peered at him over her wrap-around sunglasses. "Don't lie to me Max, you were strategising again weren't you? If I find that padd at the bottom of that basket again you'll be sleeping on your own tonight!"

"Guilty as charged!" Max admitted with a grin, happy to cop to a minor misdemeanour rather than open the whole rotten barrel of his identity. National security, he reasoned, besides, with his only route back to his former life dead, he was to all intents and purposes, Max Force anyway. No harm, no foul but no matter which way he wriggled the lie cast shadows, particularly when obliged to flesh out the bare bones of his memorised biography with details that rang emotionally true in Tyre's astute ears. There was only so much mileage to be gained from 'I don't really remember that far back' and 'it's too painful to talk about,' especially in the intimate unity of a post-coital glow.

It was times like that he needed Xela, Max thought, or possibly not precisely at times like that, he corrected himself hastily. In truth it was a bit of a relief to wear sunglasses that did not feel the urge to pass acerbic comments on his every word and deed. Instead she was embedded into the Chip Fab Plant systems running research on recovering information from the Challenger computer core while blind-siding Jack's researchers. The Professor's name was another secret, darkening his mood like a cloud across the sun.

Max got quickly to his feet to forestall another twitch of Tyre's antennae.

"I'm going to take a swim," he announced. "Burn off a few calories before lunch. How about you, race you to the reef?"

"So you think I'm fat do you?" Tyre pouted before laughing at his sudden nonplussed confusion. He hated it when women did that and the fact that Tyre was as quick as every other woman he'd known to twist his words like a wrestling hold until he conceded defeat in a battle he had not knowingly joined just convinced him there must be a gene for it, somewhere on the missing X chromosome probably. He'd ask Xela but she'd no doubt take it personally.

“No,” she continued, “I’ll just stay here and work on my tan.” She stretched languorously and began massaging oil into her barely clad body. “Don’t be a prude Max,” she chided at his frown. “It’s a private beach and there’s no one to see.” She deliberately dribbled oil onto her breasts and began massaging it in. “Except for the hired help,” Max muttered, referring to the four incongruously suited figures scattered discreetly along the cliff line of the small cove, as he retreated to the safety of the ocean.

“They’re not my idea!” Tyre called after him. They weren’t his either but Corrin would not let him leave the Enterprise until he agreed to let Anje Delenari hire some protection. With her customary efficiency the PR woman threw in a permanent air patrol. All day and all during the brief nights afforded by the twin suns, a black heli-jet circled the small island, far enough to be a small silent dot skittering across the horizon, close enough to discourage any boat or aerial vehicle that strayed too near their private hideaway.

The island belonged to a client of Anje’s, a software magnate who made several fortunes from blue-sky AI research and was only too pleased to loan one of his many homes to someone as notorious as Max, who felt like he had somehow joined an invisible club. Set in the tropical belt of Three Worlds Alpha it was, as Tyre remarked somewhat fancifully as they flew in, an emerald set in a sapphire sea.

The mansion itself was an object lesson in combining wealth and taste, a circular structure of white marble cooled by the sea breeze and enclosing a labyrinthine courtyard gardened with the exotic fruits and spectacular flora of a dozen planets. At the far end of the island, taking the concept of room service to new extremes, was a small village whose sole purpose it seemed was to conjure up whatever service or diversion their hearts desired, from scuba diving among the corals to the finest of meals.

“I could get used to this in future!” Tyre exclaimed.

The future, he thought, plunging into the cooling waters and setting out for the distant reef with long powerful strokes. What future might that be? Being hounded from planet to planet by both guilds once Xela’s clan credit transfer scam was inevitably traced back to him? Dodging Stoertebeker and Skull assassins once this was all over? He pushed the thought away in favour of relishing the sun on his back, the pleasure in stretching long unused muscles and the knowledge that he had something to live for at last.

## **Chapter 13: Lull**

“Where next?” Corrin asked.

“Bluish Snout and then Ocean of Fantasy to deliver..” Corrin cut Massoor off with a raised hand. “Thanks, I’ll leave the details to you. Just tell me where to go.” He grinned and winked to make sure the new Trade Master understood it was not a reprimand. It was just, Corrin thought, he was so damn enthusiastic, making the Force satellite network hum with offers, counter-offers and deals that kept the Enterprise constantly on the move. In the ten days Max had been away it felt like the Enterprise had done nothing except jump from sector to sector, pausing just long enough for the small fleet of minimally upgraded Argon Lifter’s to scuttle between stations, fulfilling the negotiated trade agreements.

Yet still credits were running low. New fighters, the sector buy-out, the new factory stations in Menelaus Paradise and their defensive infrastructure had brought the Force Corporation down to its last million credits, give or take the profit margins on the goods and materials cramming the subspace holds.

The Silicon Mine, built into one of the medium yield asteroids in the centre of the Menelaus Paradise gate sector was already running. The Solar Power Plant hung close by, ready but powered down pending the completion of the Crystal Fabrication Plant that would provide the essential production component. The three stations were clustered together to provide over-lapping fields of fire for their sparse laser tower defences.

The Computer Plant, Silkworm Factory and Weapons Component facility formed a second defensive redoubt well away from the centre of the sector to oblige any attacker to split their forces. All three would be on-line within hours. The Laser Tower facility and the Bliss Place formed their own defensive triangle with the Boron Trading Station, which remained Boron controlled on the technical fiction that it was the planetary governor’s residence. Corrin grinned in memory of Sinas’s account of the negotiations. To say that the Split and the Teladi had been outraged would be an understatement, but as the Argon stood firm in support of the Boron they could either go to war or rage impotently. They chose the latter and Corrin had to stop accepting calls from the Family Njy. He hoped they’d have the sense to not issue the same kind of threats to Max, inclined as he was to act on impulse.

One million credits, Corrin thought, with all the LT production being consumed by the Raiders own defence requirements they were going to need more than the admittedly significant and steady profits being projected. It would take months to earn back the investment and ‘speculating to accumulate’ did not fill fighter bays. It was a problem he would be pleased to hand back to Max now his vacation was over.

“Mr Massoor, when do you estimate we can head for Three Worlds?”

“Seven jumps,” the Trade Master replied after consulting his schedule. “Perhaps five hours?”

“Let’s make that a bloody good try shall we?” Corrin suggested to the bridge at large. “Helm, take us to Bluish Snout.”

The Paranid pilot grunted acknowledgement as Kaitrin began ordering the Wayfinder Mandalay to launch and clear the exit gate for their transition. As the jump gate filled the main viewer she announced, “Skull is demanding to speak with Max again and you still haven’t returned Jackson’s call.”

Corrin sighed. Both wanted things he couldn’t give, Jackson his assault craft and Skull the destruction of the Stoertebeker Orca thumbing its snout at her in the Skull backyard. “Tell them both we are busy,” he snapped, “And Max will get back to them at his earliest convenience.”

“Because they took that so well the last time you said it, aye aye sir!” Kaitrin smiled, punching buttons theatrically. He sighed again, equally theatrically and shifted uncomfortably in the command seat, feeling every long hour in his aching butt. Max wasn’t the only one that needed a break.

Corrin watched the Destiny Star and its three escort fighters crawl across the sector from the Three Worlds Trading Station, climbing painfully to his feet only when Max’s Lifter signalled final approach. By the time he hobbled to the docking bay some feeling had flowed back into his buttocks, numbed by too many hours in the Captain’s chair, going over production reports and stock flow analyses so that he could answer any question Max might have after his longer than expected break.

“You’re looking good, both of you,” Corrin observed as the arm in arm couple stepped down from the Lifter. Max grinned broadly, his teeth contrasting sharply with the deep tan. “We didn’t want to come back, did we Max?” Tyre smiled sweetly as she dug an elbow into his ribs. “I had to hold a gun to my own head,” Max agreed. “Can you find your way to my – our quarters love? Corrin here looks like he’s about to burst with updates.”

“Nice recovery Max,” Tyre said with mock sharpness. “Perhaps someone can show me, and carry all the bags?” Corrin gestured towards two flight engineers pretending to work on a Piranha just down the flight-line. “You heard the lady.” They both grinned and wiped their oil stained hands on their coveralls before trotting forwards.

“I’ll catch you soon,” Max said, disengaging himself from Tyre’s grip and following Corrin towards a guarded elevator. “Things went well I take it?” Corrin asked. “Days that shine and nights that won’t fade away, I can’t remember when I felt better,” Max answered. “Fill me in.”

Corrin waited until the elevator door was sealed on the hanger bay and it lurched to life before replying.

“Long story short?”

Max nodded.

“Zero activity from Law except for Orca sightings in the unclaimed sectors, one Xenon cruiser went straight through MP and ignored us, Skull and Jackson are both screaming to speak to you and Massoor has spent all your money, although he prefers the term ‘investment.’ Eight new stations, all in Paradise. The profit projections look good and we’re getting a steady income from import/export contracts but if we want to rearm and upgrade we’re going to need a quick influx of credits.”

“You mean, get out there and hijack some ships? Yea, I’ve been thinking of paying the Family Njy a little visit, let them know we’re onto them.”

“I don’t know Max,” Corrin said cautiously as the elevator doors swished open. “I don’t think the security patrols are going to sit for you harvesting Split ships.”

“Relax Mirv,” Max said as they headed for the Enterprise bridge. “This is the new, responsible, stress-free Max Force, not the old, start a fight and see what happens Max!”

“So what’s the plan?” Corrin asked doubtfully.

“I thought we’d mosey on down to Family Njy and help ourselves to a few Xenon fighters the next time a Xenon cap ship passes through.”

“That’s likely to provoke a scrap,” Corrin observed. “What then?”

Max produced a small data-padd.

“We get to try out some new tactics, if Tyre asks just say you thought them up, okay?”

“If you say so,” Corrin responded dryly, pocketing the padd. “And if the Split Navy intervenes?”

Max flashed a familiar, mischievous grin. “Then we’ll just have to see what happens!”

“We’ve already seen what happens when a glorified transporter goes up against a warship,” Corrin replied. “But,” he tapped his pocket, “perhaps you’ve come up with a few equalising tricks! If we can grab a few hours between trade runs we should run some simulations.”

Max agreed. “There’s one more thing,” he added as they approached the bridge. “Tyre’s staying onboard, until this thing’s all over I don’t want her to be a target. Can we find a space that can be set up as a rec room, some place for the crew to grab some luxuries?”

“You want to give her something to do?” Max nodded. “She doesn’t like the idea of being idle or patronised.” He unconsciously rubbed a cheek. “I thought this might be useful.”

“Well, she was a fine host and as we’re always on the move we could use something to keep morale up but we’re cramped for space as it is.”

Corrin forestalled further argument with a raised hand and thoughtfully stroked his chin. “Why not get a Dolphin freighter and do it up like Artur’s old ship, downsize the subspace holds and make it a real welcome wagon? Who knows, it might come in handy if we need to smooch with big-wigs.”

Max seized on the idea gratefully and Corrin whispered instructions to Massoor to work with Tyre to bring the project in under a tight budget as they swept through the chorus of welcomes from the bridge crew to the Ready Room. Max ordered the launch of the pilot Pegasus to facilitate a leap to Brennan’s Triumph and spent an hour apprising himself of developments before ordering the jump.

“Three Argon days,” Skull stated. “You will return on my signal to accept delivery of my vessel. Ensure your transport bay is empty. I will permit you to lock onto our beacon for jump co-ordinates.”

“Okay on the ship, Skull, but a big ‘no’ on the nav-sat. I’d prefer not to find out where ships go when the signal lock fails in mid jump,” Max answered. “If it’s all the same with you we’ll stick to the normal deployment protocol. I’ll keep a ship on station that day, ready for the word. You can signal readiness.”

“So long as it deploys no device before I permit, that is acceptable,” Skull agreed. “Do not expect the Stoertebeker Clan to surrender the station lightly, I could provide troops.”

“And they would just up and leave on my say so, leaving Jackson with prime real estate? I don’t really think so.”

Skull smiled thinly.

“And you are confident of Jackson’s continued support once he has his lucrative toehold in Teladi Gain?”

“Like you, he has a stake in the outcome of my little war,” Max snapped. “You need me to be the pointed end of the stick and do the research, I need access to your shipyards to build the new ships and I need Jackson to watch my back. He needs to hang onto my coat-tails or he misses out. All pretty cosy.”

Skull shrugged.

“If I could cut any one of you from the deal I would. I expect no less of any of my partners.”

“Like Law, Njy and Morn sliced you and your friends out? You should get better friends! I’ll see you in three days. Force out.”

“We don’t need her yards unless you’re planning to branch out as a Clan,” Corrin observed after the channel was closed. “Unless..?”

“I’m clear on the mission Mirv,” Max answered quickly. “I sweated the stims out of my system and I’m back on message. As the saying goes, it’s better to have her inside the tent pissing out than outside the tent pissing in.”

Corrin smiled. “An anatomically imprecise analogy I think, unless you know something I don’t?”

“You know what I mean,” Max answered, smiling himself. “I don’t trust her but I trust her self interest.”

“Then let’s hope she’s as rational as you think.”

Corrin checked the time.

“We’re overdue on our deliveries, we should head for Teladi Gain and deliver the Silicon Wafers to the Chip Plant. Xela will probably want a word.”

“I’ll need her onboard if a hijacking we shall go!” Max replied jauntily. “I hope she’s making progress with that data core.”

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The recycle scrubbers were finally working but the air of the Infiltrator Ready Room was still redolent with the hot, rich aroma of freshly brewed java. Coniston carefully poured four cups and added lightener and sweetener according to individual tastes. Law tested his before slurping a generous swallow, Hagman regarded his quizzically before turning the same gaze on her as if attempting to read her mind. He smiled enigmatically and took a sip. Only Captain Hart took an unthreatened mouthful, Faith was silently grateful for the vote of confidence.

She took the last seat, leaving her own drink to cool as Law tapped the meeting to order with a gnarled index finger on the arm of his mobile throne.

“The Intimidator will return to Paradise Station at 07 hours, Argon Standard time, three days from now,” Law announced. “I intend to see the Skull flagship destroyed.” For a moment there was silence as everyone waited for him to continue. Finally Hart spoke up.

“The last reports I had suggested that ship was hunting for Xenon around the outer planets of the Brennan’s Triumph system and we don’t have any deep space scanners in that sector. How can we be so precise?”

He was thinking what she was thinking, but was too intimidated by her recent failure to question. It would be foolish in the extreme to loiter near the Skull main base. The Skull Clan had its own supply of ship-destroying hornet missiles and would not be afraid to use them in the privacy of the unclaimed sectors. Any attack would have to be fast and effective or they would lose ships.

“Hagman has his sources,” Law answered, deliberately enigmatic. “They inform us that the Skull flagship has exhausted its weapons load and is already in Newtonian flight, inbound. My own sources corroborate the estimate.”

“And there is no possibility this is a trap?” Hart persisted.

“There is always that possibility but the Skull Clan is a dangerous enemy and the destruction of their flagship will at a minimum, seriously weaken them. If we manage to kill the Commodore it may even spark a civil war. Not all under the Skull banner support the daughter unquestioningly, not now they have been excluded from our Enterprise. Nor are all happy with her alliance with Force.”

He exchanged knowledgeable smiles with Hagman and Coniston realised this discussion was only the tip of a bigger iceberg. The attack would go ahead, regardless of objections, she and Hart were just here to carry it out. She glanced at Hagman, suspiciously wondering what peril it would place her in. He caught her glance and returned it with one almost imperceptibly raised eyebrow. The simple gesture nearly overwhelmed her with unreasoning fear.

'No, not unreasoning,' she chided herself as she struggled not to show her feelings. Hagman was a dangerous, dangerous man and she had no doubt at all that he had framed her crew-members for treason and now that he was firmly back in Law's favour she bitterly regretted her amateur attempts to deflect the blame for Force's escape in his direction. Faith took a deep sip of java to disguise her unease as she tried to force her brain to come up with a smart move, something to take her out of the trap she could feel closing around her, like a sealing tomb.

It was her ship, it came to her in a moment of blinding clarity, the man wanted command of her ship and for reasons she felt sure had nothing to do with the goals or well-being of the Clan leader. The realisation left her feeling sickened, weak and vulnerable, barely able to do more than agree to the details of the assault plan Law, Hart and Hagman constructed.

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Max left the Enterprise parked under the guns of his Chip Plant defences and flew his Mamba across to the station, fighting the urge to joy-ride after so long out of the cockpit. Instead he docked and went straight to the small computer room where the Xela chip was discreetly interfaced with the main computer.

The two station guards, men he had not met but wearing the red and black uniform of Raider's troops, unsmilingly insisted on verifying his bio-readings before permitting him to unlock the heavy door with his secure access code.

"And about time!" Xela snapped as soon as he sealed the door. "You said seven days, not ten and where's my present?"

"It's good to see you too Zee and my presence is your present," Max said sarcastically. "Have you cracked that core yet or have you just spent the time sharpening your tongue?"

"I can do both, I'm multi-tasking, I told you that," Xela retorted with a smiling lilt in her voice. "And no, the core remains frazzled. We're going to have to invent a whole new field of maths just to extrapolate missing data even if we can come up with some technology that can read the fried memory. Weeks, months. How's Tyre?"

"She's fine Zee, thanks," Max answered. "And she's great!"

"I'm pleased for you," Xela said sincerely. "How much have you told her?"

"Only as much as I've told anyone except Jackson."

"So you've been lying to the woman you love? That's my boy! What she doesn't know she can't tell."

Max was surprised at her easy acceptance but then remembered she, or Hela, his cousin, he corrected himself, had been in a similar position with the real Max Force. Hell, he could barely keep it straight in his own head, lying was just so much easier.

"We need cash Zee, are you able to get away for a little hunting?"

"Packed and ready Max," Xela answered instantly. "Just let me disarm the fail-safes, we wouldn't want your fingers burnt off with lasers would we?"

Max hastily snatched his hand back from the interface.

The flight back to Menelaus Frontier was a series of short hops to enable the Enterprise to take on raw materials and products for The Boron Frontier. On Max's orders they cruised on normal flight from Scale Plate Green through the Argon stretch of the New Frontier to Black Hole Sun, in case the Xenon were on another rampage. All was quiet but it did give Max a chance to talk with Jackson over a secure link as they passed through Nyana's Hideout. His face came over all boyish grins when Max told him of the Skull assault craft.

"My guys are ready and rarin', what about yours?"

“The Sarge says his teams will be in the Control Room while yours are still fumbling with airlock access codes,” Max answered deadpan.

“That there’s fighting talk!” Jack replied, his eyes glittering. “The Teladi have been giving us a hard time recently, can you pick us up here?”

Max thought for a moment and then shook his head.

“Sorry Jack – I can’t afford to provoke the Argon authorities into any premature investigation of my activities by such a blatant act. Can you get to the Scale Plate Green Dream Farm? I don’t give a flying fuck if I piss off Morn any more.”

“I don’t know Max,” Jackson answered, looking both doubtful and angry. “The last convoy I sent through that sector got shot up pretty bad by the cruiser on point. Morn might not be able to shoot at you but the friend of my enemy…”

Max nodded understanding. “So how is she going to react if you set up base in her backyard?”

Jackson grinned. “I expect you to keep her too busy to bother about me by the time the Base is ready for orbital insertion. It’s just great having you owe me!”

“Yea, life is just one big echoing barrel of laughs,” Max answered deadpan. “Be ready to move in three days on my signal and don’t worry about Teladi sector security. Something tells me they’ll have their claws too full to worry about a few pirate ships.”

“That’s what I like about you Max, you always have a plan. See you in three and bring down another delivery of Paradise Gold.”

“Will do, Force out.”

At Black Hole Sun Max ordered a jump straight to Menelaus Paradise. While a fleet of Lifters fanned out across the Boron Frontier to deliver supplies the Enterprise ran new battle drills.

## **Chapter 14: Storm**

“It’s a big bastard,” Corrin muttered softly, but not softly enough for the words not to reach Kaitrin, at the Tactical station, silhouetted against the view screen. “Big, and still on a collision course Captain,” she volunteered, forestalling his query. “Six clicks and closing.” Without waiting for the order she reduced the magnification setting of the main viewer, reframing the Teladi Destroyer with stars.

“Your orders Sir?” Kerman asked, his nervousness betrayed only by the Paranid’s repeated request.

“The same,” Corrin replied. “Hold station, they’re just trying to yellow us out.”

And consider me yellowed, Corrin admitted to himself as the Phoenix class warship continued to bear down, the twin catamaran hulls glinting like the axe blades they resembled in the light of the twin suns of Scale Plate Green.

“Morn can’t afford to blatantly pick a fight with us,” Max had assured him with his usual insouciance as he headed for the hanger deck. “Just sit tight and they’ll break,” he added after Kaitrin calculated the destroyer’s trajectory.

“Five clicks,” Kaitrin stated.

At four kilometres Corrin began to taste the salt of sweat beading his upper lip.

Three.

The Teladi vessel filled the screen.

Two.

Corrin could feel the weight of the crew’s expectations bearing down on him as the destroyer smashed towards them.

“Abort launches, target south gate, immediate jump!”

His gut issued the orders before his conscious mind caught up with the reasoning. Not an attack, but an accidental collision which would cripple them both. The bridge seemed to explode with activity although the only movement was of controls being sequenced and orders whispered urgently into throat pick-ups.

The looming hulk of the double hulled destroyer slammed towards them, the simulated thunder of its drive swelling through the bridge as the computer counted down the jump sequence in Xela’s voice. As every one of the bridge crew, consciously or not, braced themselves for impact, the towering ship faded behind the azure whirlpool of the Enterprise jump tunnel.

“Max, the bastards tried to ram us, we’ve jumped to the south gate!” Corrin called over the encrypted channel as the Enterprise shuddered and shook down the hyperspace tunnel.

“Copy that,” Max replied, his voice muffled slightly by a flight-suit helmet. “Jump target north as soon as I launch, then collect Jackson’s mob.”

The stomach lurching change in velocity was the only notification he needed of the sudden transition to normal space and Corrin instantly punched up the sector display on the small Command Seat monitor. The Phoenix had thundered through the thin defensive perimeter of the Force Corporation Dream Farm, contemptuous of the minor threat posed by the two laser towers and was already pulling through the long arc of a full speed turn, its drive flaring against the inertia and momentum of its mass.

Ahead 50,” Corrin ordered. “Phoenix on screen”. “Max away,” Kaitrin called. The green symbol designating the Mamba disengaged itself from that designating the Enterprise as the TL accelerated

slowly away from the gate. The Teladi destroyer was side on now, its starboard hull a grey metal slab unblemished by needless, profit consuming frivolities like view-ports. Corrin hoped a similar cost-shaving approach to internal gravity plating would be causing a few contusions amongst the crew as the ship strained towards a new course.

“Jackson, voice only,” he clipped, keeping his eyes on the Teladi warship. “Jack, change of plans. The Teladi destroyer’s playing stare-me-down and we’ve jumped south. I’m jumping north and then heading straight to your gate, we’ll pick you up there. Delay launching until the destroyer is out of the way and don’t forget the cargo.”

“That’s a negative,” Jackson’s liltingly youthful voice filled the bridge. “The Titan here looks like it might be heading my way, we’re going to have to launch. Launching now and don’t forget my spaceweed, Jackson out.”

“You got that Max?” Corrin asked, changing frequencies with a stab of a finger. “You think the Navy might be making a move on the Confeds?”

“Confed Station is thorny with LT’s,” Max answered. “A single ship attack would be ripped to shreds, they’re probably just trying to spook him. Interesting timing though.”

“You think both navies are working together?” Corrin asked Max.

“No, we’ve both pulled our share of shots-across-the-bow missions, when big players get a little too blatant with their Clan connections. Stare-me-down is a two player game Mirv and it’s our turn now. Make for the Trading Station, pull the bastard in close then I’ll do my thing.”

Kerman was already laying in the course as Corrin closed the channel and Kaitrin had put the target on screen, penning the Teladi warship into a small window in the lower right quadrant of the display. He repeated the order for forms sake and the Enterprise lurched forward as it arced towards the skeleton wheel of the half built Trading Station.

“The Commander has left the sector,” Kaitrin announced.

“Phoenix on off-set intercept course, sector defence fighters moving to interdict,” Payter warned from behind Corrin at the Security station. He acknowledged the report with a nod and focused on the sector display as the Orca accelerated to full speed, eating the distance to the construction site. The fighters didn’t worry him because he strongly doubted they would fire on him until the Enterprise represented a real threat to the construction site and the heavy, hornet armed Falcons lacked the speed to reach a head-on firing solution. The Phoenix though, he gauged relative speeds and distance, that could be in a blocking position in time.

Corrin switched briefly to the Nyana’s Hideout Nav Sat signal. Jackson’s fleet was approaching the jump gate, the Argon destroyer bearing down on a direct intercept course. It was going to be close and if he knew Jackson, skin of the teeth, gambling close. He switched back to Scale Plate Green, willing Max’s Mamba to reappear through the gate to the Xenon sector bifurcating the sweep of the Teladi New Frontier. Long, crawling seconds later it did.

“Target north gate, activate jump sequence,” Corrin ordered instantly. The wheel framework of the uncompleted Trading Station faded behind the jump point and the Enterprise fell towards the PTNI Headquarters gate.

Max hit the afterburners the instant the Mamba perched stationary on the lip of the sector, swinging the fighter in an accelerating turn that took it behind the gate and back onto the tails of the first Xenon fighters. The 3 thick, X shaped light fighters boiled away to nothing as the plasma bolts raked over them, his fighter swooping through the fragments as more Xenon ships materialised around him from the winking eye to their home sector.

“Two mosquitoes apiece,” Max ordered as he broke high and left, twisting at the apex to pull into a forward dive, straight down onto the third wave of Xenon fighters emerging from the gate. While the three M class interceptors spun away from the harassing missiles he concentrated fire on the central of

the three L class heavy fighters, walking the twin plasma streams across the broad target of its outstretched wings. It exploded right on the nose of the Mamba, peppering the shields with shrapnel as it flew through the fireball. Max glanced quickly at the shield indicator as Xela snapped another brace of fast, cheap missiles at the destroyed fighter's two wingmen. Eighty percent. He broke wide to starboard, rolling out of the turn prematurely to snapshot to oblivion an evasive XM as it flashed across his sights, trailing two missiles.

"Three more M's, three more N's."

Xela kept a running tally as Max used the superior speed of the Split fighter to extend, escape and re-engage at will, twice slashing through Xenon formations clustered at the jump gate exit point, laboriously accelerating from a standing start. By the time the Mamba rolled in for a third pass enough of the attackers had managed to form up to put a curtain of plasma bolts between him and the gate. Max twisted the stick gently, making a three quarter roll and setting up an evasive break low to port away from an anticipated barrage of missiles Xela began calling at almost the same instant.

"Tactical update," Max ordered as tactics gave way to a seat-of-the-pants reflex furball. "Fifteen hostiles, five M, four N and six L," Xela complied briskly. "Sector defence fighters converging to engage, Destroyer is changing course, moving to engage and the Enterprise has exited the north gate. Confed fighters entering sector."

She overlaid a semi-transparent tactical map briefly over the HUD, long enough for Max to absorb the data into his own internal map of the fight. It took nearly a full minute of frantic, evasive breaks, during which time seemed to flow like rapidly cooling lava, before Max could slash his way clear of the twisting mass of fighters and missile tipped tangle of contrails onto a direct course for the nearest pack of Teladi fighters. The Split ship flashed through them at speed, trailing two XN's that rattled Max's shields with constant fire, eating them away, bite by small bite until the Teladi opened fire and burned away their limited shielding.

Max stayed with the Teladi wing just long enough to make sure the Phoenix was firmly embroiled in the battle before slinking away back towards the Enterprise. By the time he docked the flight deck was crammed with Confederation ships and the adjacent corridors with pilots and troops. By the time he forced his way through to the bridge the Enterprise had already made the jump to Teladi Gain and was cruising towards the covering guns of the Force Chip Plant.

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"You look unwell Commodore," Skull stated. The privacy of her own communications centre allowed a blunter candour than would have been wise in front of other clan members. The old man on the screen nodded with a cough that turned into a phlegm rattling choking fit that left flecks of blood on his pale lips.

"Everything is ready?"

"Surgeons and donors are standing by father," Skull answered. "We can proceed as soon as the transfer is complete. It would be best if that takes place by the Split Fire gate, just to keep Force's ship at a distance from the station."

"You don't trust him?" Jaines asked, his rheumy eyes narrowing with suspicion.

"I trust him insofar as it is in his interests to co-operate but," Skull hesitated and searched for the precise words. "he is unpredictable and prone to impulsive acts. I would rather not place him in a potentially alarming position. It would be best if your fighters remained on standby until the transaction is complete also."

"I see the sector is almost clear of ships, except for a small fighter and your perimeter patrol."

"That is a Force ship waiting my permission to deploy a satellite for Force's jump vessel. All gates into the sector are blockaded on the other side and a communications blackout is in place. Few know of your return and none except me, the reasons or the timing. There should be no unexpected guests."

Jaines nodded approvingly.

“The western gate targeted daughter, our ETA is,” An indistinct voice spoke off-screen. “With a final deceleration burn we should drop out of Newtonian flight in twenty nine minutes and be standing station in thirty.” He smiled proudly. “My pilots and navigators pride themselves on high speed pinpoint insertions, the Xenon rarely saw us coming.”

“I look forward to your tales of victory Commodore, Skull out.”

She terminated the link and focused the visual display on the flaring star of the Intimidator drive as it dumped the last of its fuel into a final, velocity draining burn. Thirty minutes later the huge box-like Teladi Transporter, its ungainly lines made more so by the two intra-system Newtonian drive nacelles protruding from the sides of the upper hull on stubby wings. As it came to rest on thrusters, offset just half a kilometre beyond the Split Fire gate, the wings retracted, pulling the nacelles flush with the main body.

It was only when she had finished targeting the Force Pegasus to summon Force that she noticed the Mandalay. It had launched from the Ore Mine in direct contravention of her most insistent suggestion to the independent station operators she permitted in her sector. She was poised to order her own fighters in pursuit when it dropped a navigation satellite. It continued at speed, away from the ecliptic plane and dropped a second.

Skull stared at the screen in frozen shock and it took her brain vital seconds to force her body to snap into action. As her finger stabbed towards the alert signal a second huge TL burst into the system through the Split Fire gate. The display designation registered a Boron Orca! For a split second she thought Force had cheated her but in the second it took her to signal battle stations the sector display showing a second TL had materialised at the western gate and she knew, with a sick, stomach churning certainty, even as the display blossomed fighter icons around the new arrivals, that it was Law.

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“Incoming message from Brennan’s Triumph Captain.”

Without waiting for the order Kaitrin called up the nav-sat display on the main viewer.

“Skull? Put her on.” Max said without looking up from the latest financial report.

As Jackson nudged Max with his elbow and nodded towards the screen she shook her head.

“It’s the Pegasus,” she replied, “reporting..”

“Activate jump sequence, west gate, battle stations,” Max yelled, digesting the tactical situation at a glance. “Corrin, you have the bridge, prep my ship now!” he shouted over his shoulder as he ran for the exit, with Jackson hot on his heels. They’d gone before Corrin could open his mouth to protest.

“Belay that jump order,” he said, taking the command seat. “Get the missile CAP prepped to launch on entry, then get those Confeds. If we don’t clear the flight deck we can’t launch anything.”

He touched a control on the seat arm panel, opening an all-ship channel.

“All Confed pilots to their ships, I repeat, all Confed pilots to their ships and prepare to scramble. All Raiders on standby, you launch as soon as the flight line is cleared.”

He turned to Kerman, satisfied that the Enterprise would not enter a hot zone still pulling off its gloves.

“Now you can jump.”

Max and Jackson pushed through the tide of bodies surging through the cramped corridors, feeling the hyperspace transition in their stomachs as the pilots flooded onto the flight bay and dashed towards the crowded mass of Confed fighters. The three auto-piloted Mandalays on missile CAP were already

slipping through the hanger bay door atmospheric containment field, trailing a ragged assortment of clan fighters.

Unlike a station the Boron TL does not have a docking tunnel, instead it has one large exit, running the whole wide width of the cavernous flight deck and as it is rear facing an Orca can launch a large number of fighters simultaneously on the move. By the time Max reached his Mamba half the Confed fighters had launched. The other half were gunning their thrusters while fighter after Raiders fighter shimmered into solidity from the sub space hold onto a grav-sled to be dragged to a clear space on the deck where the Raiders pilots jostled each other in their eagerness. The receding arch of a jump-gate could be seen through the rear facing exit.

Max wasted no time running pre-flight checks, he just flicked on the comm. and activated the thrusters. In the background Kaitrin was calmly allocating ships to impromptu wings and assigning roles. The Mamba burst into sunlight amidst a shoal of Bayamons and he hit the burners to pull up and away from the pack as he scanned the tactical display.

The environs of the Split Fire gate was a chaos of fighters and missiles, Confed, Skull, Raiders and Stoertebeker but the Enterprise fire-control system had already simplified it to green for good guys and red for bad guys. With a touch of a flight stick button he selected the nearest enemy fighter and rolled to engage.

Damn you Max, Corrin thought half bitterly, you grab the fun and leave the hard stuff to me.

“Mute that computer!” he ordered to cut off the incessant missile warnings as Law’s fighters began to respond to their arrival. “First wave clear?” Kaitrin nodded.

“Launches on hold, target that Albatross, attack pattern Force Beta Two, warn our fighters to stand off, as we drilled people!”

As they’d drilled once, he thought, it was one of Max’s new and unorthodox tactics and he hoped everyone knew their role.

Kaitrin was already urgently signalling while Kerman activated the after-burners. The Enterprise lurched towards the Teladi TL wallowing ahead of them, caught it seemed, completely by surprise with only a threadbare CAP while the rest of its fighters swarmed around a second Albatross which he took to be the Skull flagship, the Intimidator.

The Enterprise swept over the Black Heart as it accelerated, without needing to be told Payter ripple fired Silkworms at point blank range as the Albatross ignited its own burners in pursuit and fired hornet missiles in response. Four of the new Confed sourced, squash mines tumbled into their path as the Enterprise plunged into hyperspace.

Max grinned and punched the cockpit air as the Stoertebeker flagship and the wave of fighters it had just launched vanished behind the blossoming fire of the quadruple explosion. It emerged through the dissipating inferno alone and listing badly to port in a continuing roll. As Max set course for the second Stoertebeker TL the Enterprise emerged again from hyperspace, launching Raider fighters as it accelerated towards the Black Heart.

“Helm, evade and escape now!” Captain Hart screamed though the thick smoke filling the Black Heart bridge. There was no response and coughing violently Hart groped through the fire lit darkness to the Helm. The body strapped into the seat was warm and wet to the touch and fighting his gag reflex he ripped the dead helmsman from his post and took the station.

“Emergency power online, shields at ten per cent!” Poulson called from the Security station, her young voice cracking with panic. Almost instantly the main viewer appeared like a ghost from the mist as the environmental system came back on and dragged the smoke out through hidden vents. Imankalat, the Paranid sitting at Tactical leapt to his feet to tackle the electrical fires burning in half a dozen shattered consoles with the extinguisher system from beneath his station. Hart glanced quickly around as he implemented his own command, they were the only three left alive on the bridge.

“They’re back!” Poulson screamed. “Through the western gate, Enemy TL on our six, closing fast!”

Hart did the only thing he could.

The Enterprise bucked and shuddered as it flew through the remnant energies of the collapsing jump hole.

Aboard the Infiltrator Coniston stared at the Tactical display in disbelief. Force, here? Not now, when with the element of surprise complete, the Skull TL had been smashed to its knees before it was barely aware of the threat. It just didn’t seem possible. The Force TL jumped out and she remembered to breathe again as the Black Heart cleared the plasma storm and seeing a chance to improve her position in the hierarchy she pressed home her attack on the Skull flag ship, firing all ten of her hornets at point blank range as the Infiltrator shot across its bow.

“All stop, launch strike wing then evasive pattern alpha!”

The Orca dumped velocity quickly enough to strain the command seat restraints, remaining still just long enough for the three missile laden Orinoco heavy fighters to launch. Then, as her new Tactical Officer reported the Enterprise had re-emerged from the Split Fire gate, the Infiltrator accelerated away on a curving arc, just in case the Skull TL was not as toothless as Law believed.

“The Black Heart has jumped out, enemy fighters closing,” her Tactical Officer announced, his voice calm despite his relative lack of experience. She quickly absorbed the tactical data on her command console. There were too many fighters in the sky to count but the colour balance showed Law’s forces were outnumbered at least two to one. The Skull TL was dead in the water, its shields were almost at zero and its hull venting gas through a dozen vents. The transport bay doors were jammed open and the bay beyond in total darkness. As she watched, her strike fighters emptied their silkworm loads, the missiles arrow heads on burning shafts plunging towards the helpless ship.

“Recall all fighters, prepare to jump,” she ordered with grim satisfaction.

“Oh damn,” Max muttered as he rolled onto the tail of an Orinoco, seconds after it rippled off missiles at the looming TL. He easily followed the ungainly fighter through its evasive break, adjusting the focus of his alpha high energy plasma throwers to converge at 150 metres and ripping way its shields with a sustained burst. It exploded just as two dozen silkworms ripped into the hull of the Skull flagship. Reflexively Max rolled onto an escape vector. The explosion came like a chelt kick to the back of his seat.

Damn.

Locking onto the nearest Law fighter he rolled and attacked.

“Intimidator destroyed,” Payter stated unemotionally. “No, wait, there’s something still there – onscreen.”

Corrin jerked his attention from his tactical display to the main viewer. The Skull Albatross was just a cooling plasma cloud and an expanding sphere of debris but in the centre of the wreckage was a ship, its rough cylinder lines disfigured by two drive systems that appear to have been bolted on from another vessel. The on-screen readouts showed the crafts’ shields had barely withstood the destruction of the mother-ship, but they were slowly recharging.

“Get a CAP round that assault ship, the TL crew might have made it aboard before it blew,” Corrin ordered, recognising the old Teladi design. “Then get the rest of those fighters out of my sky.”

Only then did he realise Tyre was standing at the bridge entrance, not daring to move or speak for fear of distracting the crew. Her face was creased with concern.

“Come and take a seat lass,” Corrin said, indicating the First Officer’s post. “And don’t worry about Max, this rabble couldn’t touch him on the best day any of them ever had!”

They tried though, with increasing desperation as the fighter complement of both Stoertebeker TL's realised they were outgunned and with wave after wave of Skull fighters launching from Paradise Station, outnumbered. Barely twenty made it back to the Orca before it jumped, leaving twice that number either destroyed or entangled in a savage fight for their lives.

The Skull Clan offered no quarter.

## **Chapter 15: Assault Vector**

“Bring me Captain Hart and remove that offence from my eyes.” Law’s order sliced through the frozen silence of the command centre like his voice was a diamond-edged blade, glittering and deadly. Hagman instantly cut the main viewer but an after-image of the Black Heart, a wounded, broken hulk made ghost by the crystal haze of frozen gases venting from multiple hull breaches, remained burnt on his retina.

It had been a mistake and he knew it was an error from the first moment Law mooted the proposal but with the fractured ice of his position barely refrozen beneath his feet it was not an opinion Hagman dared voice. Once the Enterprise came to fruition all the Clans, including the imperious Skulls, would be obliged to bend the knee to Law but the opportunity to deal a crushing blow to a long time rival had proven too tempting.

Law, the leader of his clan, the man to whom he owed total fealty, Hagman realised, finally admitted to himself, was not going to learn. Force was a wild card, a random and resourceful element in their universe, seemingly capable of thwarting any scheme, no matter how well planned. When Morn warned the Force TL was loading Confederation Clan ships Hagman had offered the possibility that Force had the scent of the scheme. It was a tentative warning, an exploration of possibilities, a suggestion of caution that was strongly resisted. The pack reflex hostility of the ship captains, once they sensed Law’s feelings and the cracking ice sound he imagined beneath his boots further stayed his tongue.

“Sire,” he nodded towards the view screen, “Coniston has returned.”

The Orca hung in the jump-gate, pivoting slowly to avoid the drifting Teladi TL. He already held an open channel to the Infiltrator, putting Coniston on screen the instant Law commanded.

“Report Captain,” Law asked evenly.

Twenty seconds earlier her ship had sat on station, its shields failing under another strafing run from Force fighters, while a straggle of their own docked. It showed on her face as she struggled to shift focus. “Admiral,” she said nervously, the word almost swamped by the background hum of systems warnings, alert sirens and panicked voices, back dropped on screen by fractured shadows moving in a darkness lit only by the flaring energy cascades from shattered stations. “Kill all warnings and get some light in here!”

Emergency lighting flickered to life. The bridge was still in the controlled chaos of battle, some crew wielding small extinguishers, drenching electrical fires in stifling gas clouds, some dragging still forms towards the rear exit, some still manning their stations with fierce intensity, unconscious of scrutiny.

“And get a CAP out, get one out now or do I have to do every job here?”

She turned to the screen again, her face flushed with anger still.

“My apologies Admiral, Force may decide to follow through the gate.” She took a moment to collect her thoughts. It was, Hagman thought admiringly, a very good performance.

“Target destroyed, Admiral. The Force ship intervened. Faced with superior numbers on two fronts and mission accomplished I made a tactical withdrawal.”

“Mission accomplished indeed, but at what cost?” Law mused softly. He held a forestalling palm up to Coniston. “I’m sure my Security Officer has the facts to hand.” Hagman overlaid the information on the main screen and ensured Coniston saw them too.

“Fifty fighters,” Law mused. Coniston swallowed hard. “Fifty fighters, an entire ship’s complement and what’s worse, fifty pilots. The Black Heart critically damaged, two shields destroyed, your own ship down one shield and badly battered. Is that the taste of victory Captain?”

“Under the circumstances Admiral, Force came from nowhere and the Black Heart crippled before we could respond. I destroyed the target and recovered as many fighters as was possible, taking damage in the process. As a simple warrior Admiral I must take that as a victory, of sorts.”

The adrenaline courage of battle gave her the audacity to gamble and it paid off. “Of sorts then,” Law agreed. “One old enemy is finally dealt with and a new one has added to my list of grievances. You will join Hart here immediately. Victory or not, the outcome leaves us severely weakened.”

Hagman cut the channel immediately. “Sire, there is a possibility you should consider before you meet them.”

Law got to his feet.

“My chamber, ten minutes,” he ordered as his personal guard settled around him, four hard faced humans whose eyes glittered and darted with suspicion.

He was back in the protective arms of the mobile chair when Hagman persuaded him of his idea. The Clan needed him back out in the field, organising its affairs more efficiently first hand. Recruiting and screening new pilots, organising fresh supplies, squeezing more resources from planet-side networks. Striking at Force’s back.

“And don’t let Hart or Coniston do anything on their own initiative. As we have just seen, neither is as competent a tactician as they believe. Limit out of sector excursions to essential trade jumps and dig in here, wait for Force to come to you. With the shipyard operational we can repair and rebuild while I am absent.”

“You ache to hit back at Force,” Law stated. Hagman nodded. “As do I. Coniston will be under your command and it will be as you say. Retrench, rebuild and redouble our efforts to track the Challenger ship movements. Yes, put that Teladi who uncovered the traitors in charge. New blood is needed.”

“I will keep Force too occupied to consider taking advantage of our temporary weakness,” Hagman assured Law. “I already have a plan.”

It had been three days since the battle at Brennan’s Triumph. Three days of repairs to the recovered assault vessel and three days of drills, inquests and planning as the Enterprise cruised at maximum velocity, away from the Teladi Gain sector. It had also been three days of silence from the Skull Clan although those that followed such matters may have picked up rumours of a battle in Brennan’s Triumph. Everyone from Law, the Xenon and inevitably, Max Force were said to be involved in one version of the story or another. Some may even have noted the sudden rise in gang related killings throughout all sectors.

“Another two seconds,” Corrin raged through gritted teeth. His companions around the small low table sighed or rolled their eyes as discreetly as they could. Kaitrin and Tyre exchanged a knowing glance and mouthed a single word. Men!

Max caught the moment and swiftly tacked away from the conversation. “Yes, we know Mirv. If you’d delayed the jump by two seconds to space out the mine sequence the last one wouldn’t have been caught in the blast of the others and flashed low yield. And if you’d delayed two seconds you could have had an ass full of hornets. Let it go.”

“Yes, let it go,” Kaitrin said pointedly. She picked up her glass and raised it in a toast. “To the good ship Indulgence, the best R and R joint on the Enterprise.”

“The only one,” Tyre chipped in. “Cheers.”

Anje Delenari had excelled even herself when Max called her with his plan for an onboard recreation ship and within three hours she had an option on a luxury Boron Dolphin convert. The lines and large internal space of the Dolphin made it the ship of choice for conversion into a luxury yacht for the idle

rich of all races. Despite being a repossessed sale it cost more than Max had planned on paying but with an extended journey ahead, a ship crammed with soldiers keyed up to fight needed recreation facilities.

The Indulgence had been full ever since the Enterprise left the jump-gates far behind, but now they were approaching the launch point for the assault ship filling the transport bay it was empty except for a few bored Raiders pilots noisily playing poker over a table of empty bottles.

“We’re almost out of beer,” Tyre observed as a young wing leader staggered back to the table holding two fistfuls of small green bottles by the necks. “Isn’t all that alcohol bad for your reflexes or something?”

“Probably,” Max agreed, “but my lads are just along for the ride, Jack’s lot will be doing the flying and fighting, with a little help from the Sarge’s roughneck types.” He checked the time. “We should be reaching the launch point soon, another two hours or so.”

“So why the ride at all?” Tyre asked. “If I’ve got this right the Skull ship is way faster than the Enterprise.”

“Because we needed a few days to check the ship out for surprises and bring it up to spec,” Max answered. “And if our calculations are correct we can launch from the sensor shadow of an iron asteroid. It’s another two days to the last known position of the base.”

“And you haven’t changed your mind?”

“No, he hasn’t,” Corrin interjected in a tone that suggested a heated discussion. “We all agree that he’s too important to be running around playing soldier don’t we Max?”

“We do,” Max answered with a wry grin. Tyre gave him a ‘good boy’ smile that made his blood sing in response.

Two hours later the Enterprise hung in the stygian shadow of a slowly rotating chunk of rock, the glare from the transport bay, occluded by the bulk of the assault vessel was the only light source.

“Baby’s been born,” Kaitrin announced as the drive nacelles cleared the bay. “On screen.”

The assault ship was almost invisible in the shadows, marked only by the strobing blink of two running lights and the irregular flash of manoeuvring thrusters as it oriented itself onto an intercept course with the distant clan station.

“Back us off to three clicks,” Max ordered the Paranid at Helm. Kerman complied with a grunt as Jackson appeared on screen, grinning with an excitement that shined from his eyes. “Last chance to share the glory Max!”

“No thanks Jack, everything set there?”

“We’re stuffed in ass to elbow and my boys are having to sleep in their cockpits but we have the station co-ordinates and we’re ready to burn. I’ll be in touch.”

“Good luck Jack, Enterprise out.” Max signalled Kaitrin to cut the channel.

On screen the asteroid was suddenly scoured with searing bright light as the two intra system boosters flared to life, pushing the Skull ship slowly forward on twin pillars of flame. Within seconds it had accelerated to kilometres per second velocity. In under a minute it was just a fast moving star.

“Set jump co-ordinates to Menelaus Paradise, eastern gate,” Max ordered finally. “Let’s get back in the game.”

The Stoertebeker Clan station occupied almost the same orbital slot as Teladi Prime, trailing the planet by nearly two million kilometres and for Jackson's attack force, three days, allowing for a mid course correction and a series of speed dumping burns.

The Skull ship did not have a bridge, just a cramped four-person cockpit, two pilots in tandem with a pair of general purpose stations along the rear side bulkheads, leaving just a notional path to the aft hatch. Jackson and Payter sat hunched at the aft stations, their faces made ghoulish by the pale glow of the display screens in the darkened cockpit.

"That's not too bad, I was expecting worse," Jackson said irritably, another large bead of sweat falling from his nose onto the long-range display. It was warm in the claustrophobic cockpit, as warm and humid as a tropical evening in the monsoon season. He'd spent three lousy weeks in an equatorial rain forest on Argon Prime once, when he was a kid, trying to get into the pants of a nature obsessed co-ed nearly two years his senior and that was enough. The whole uncomfortable and frustrating experience left him with a keen appreciation of artificial environments, comfort at a touch of a button or vocalised command.

"Computer, reduce cockpit temperature by five degrees," he ordered, mimicking its deadpan electronic response in a sing-song voice. "The environmental system is working at maximum efficiency, damn Skull crap heap ship. Just two LT's, what do you think?"

Payter bit down on his instant retort. 'Then we should have taken one of your Confederation Clan interplanetary luxury cruisers.' Beggars and choosers, it was a bit warm, so bloody what? At least insects weren't feeding on your face or things shooting at you! And at least the cockpit doesn't reek of shit and sweat like the rest of the ship, packed to the outer hull thrusters with men and equipment. A hot bed slot in a Bayamon cockpit was luxury accommodation. Jackson commandeered an Orinoco, the Sarge bunkered down with his people in a foetid maintenance tunnel, two dozen men breathing defensively through their mouths.

"Two deployed but how many on standby?"

"Law is a show-all sort of guy, I'm betting that's all they have. They're in a secure system and he needs every megawatt of firepower around his new place. We're pumping out Joker's Clan recognition codes so if we're lucky we could have troops in their main bay before they realise we're not a resupply ship."

"I'm not a betting man," Payter replied, "and if I relied on luck I'd be a long time dead." He had been indifferent to Jackson before but now, after three enforced days close company, poring over schematics recreated from the memories of Joker and others familiar with the station, indifference had matured into a growing dislike of both his command style and attitude to risk but in some ways that made his task easier. The Commander did not want to see any Raiders casualties, pilots or assault troops, particularly in an action they would not directly benefit from. This was part of some debt Commander Force owed the Confed Clan, he understood that but it was also, as the Commander had put it, 'look and learn' time, an opportunity to look at the way the Stoertebeker Clan defended a fixed position. Jackson's people would spearhead through to the command centre, fanning out to secure key power and environmental systems as they went. The Force troops would secure the flight bays and provide the strategic reserve.

"And if I weren't I'd be some kid snapping yes sir, no sir to jerks instead of the guy just about to strike the mother lode."

"Assuming Director Morn does not order her fleet to blow the place to fragments the instant you reach orbit."

"You know Sarge," Jackson swivelled the seat to look at him directly. "You worry too much and you're way too quick to judge. I didn't just luck my way to the top of the pile; there was the odd bit of planning involved. I'm young not stupid."

"For instance," he continued, "I've been in contact with Teladi Board Directors who aren't snout to tail with Morn. The General had some friends and more allies whose speculative investments look pretty

shaky without the main man. Morn's support among the military isn't as strong as she probably imagines either. Plenty of people suspect her involvement in the Stoertebeker Clan killing of Daht and that convoy loss did her no favours. Me though, I've been spreading plenty of favours around, I'm betting Morn won't dare act against me in any overt way."

Betting with other people's lives Payter thought, including mine.

It was a long fourteen hours before the assault ship reached the target, slipping into its frame of reference with one final burn. Jackson could get no response from the station and as the assault ship matched relative speed, ten clicks distant, the two laser towers powered to life and Bayamon fighters launched.

"Win some lose some," Jackson said with an enthusiastic grin. "Hold the fort Sarge, I got me another furball!" His eyes shone with excitement as he pushed his way through the dank, cramped access ways to the fighter drop bay.

The assault ship could carry just twenty fighters, and two troop carrier variant freighters in one large and cramped bay running the length of the lower hull. The base launched only twelve Bayamons in response and, to judge from the ragged formations and uncoordinated tactics, crewed by the wannabee, has-been and never-was detritus of Law's pilots. Led by Jackson the battle hardened elite fighters of the Confederation swept them from space with the loss of only four ships, and these to the laser towers before they were silenced by repeated barrages of silkworm missiles.

Jackson let the wild exhilaration fade from his blood before signalling the station. This time it responded, a tense, just under control, voice only. "We dare not surrender." He understood, they had families and loved ones, that was the way the Stoertebeker Clan operated. And knowing he had not come all this way to reduce the station to component atoms in a hornet storm they thought they could still win.

"Your choice," Jackson replied breezily. "All survivors will be offered the chance to switch sides. Those who don't will be let loose once I fly that piece of junk back. Don't be heroes."

"We still must fight," the man replied, Jack could almost see in his layered tone one of Law's goons standing over the guy enforcing the party line. "All ships, let's get those shields down, cannons only, like the drill."

The remaining Confed fighters formed up into two wings on the clan freighter armed troop carriers and each pack flew alternating strafing runs along the defenceless hull of the station, emptying their energy banks before soaring away to recharge while the other wing swooped to keep up the pressure on the stations' dwindling shields. Finally, with them held on the point of collapse by carefully calibrated fire, a troop freighter dropped a shaped charge. It darted on tiny manoeuvring jets to hug the main launch bay doors. The second troop ship slowly orbited the station, disgorging small squads of space walkers at strategic points along the hull. They quickly flew to airlocks, maintenance hatches and identified hull weak points and placed their own charges.

"Your very last chance guys, it's going to get very bloody after this," Jackson signalled. The station did not reply. "Oh well," he shrugged. "Don't say you weren't warned." He switched to the shared command channel open to all his forces. "Fire in the hole!"

The docking bay door shattered inwards in a flash of focused energy. Around the huge, curving hull of the hulking station six smaller but similar explosions blossomed briefly, venting atmosphere while the small squad assault teams scrambled through. The Skull assault ship was already inbound with repair teams to crudely seal the breaches with vacuum foam.

"Okay, Red Two and Red Three," Jackson signalled his wingmen as he pivoted his Bayamon towards the darkness of the shattered docking tunnel. "You know the route and the target locations," provided Joker was telling the truth and nothing's changed he thought warily, "with me."

The three fighters swooped in formation towards the tunnel and entered arrow-head style, PAC's blazing as they swept through towards the main docking bay destroying point defence systems as they went. The second troop carrier followed them in.

## **Chapter 16: Shadows**

Kaitrin shook her head almost imperceptibly in response to his questioning look and her dark, flashing eyes warned against asking again. There had been no signal in the last ten minutes and if there had been she would have mentioned it. Dammit. Sir. Corrin smiled inwardly as Max, blithely unaware of the nuance, again reminded her to tell him as soon as the base assault force reported in.

“It’s been twenty hours,” Max snapped, “we should have heard something by now.” They had heard nothing but on the positive side there had been no sign that the Teladi Navy was preparing to take an interest in the attack. Max half expected Morn to concoct some anti-clan pretext to send a deep space task force to intercept the assault ship but there was no indication of any such movement on the deep space scanners and nothing in the news, just more pronouncement on the culpability of Daht’s people in the loss of the Scale Plate Green relief convoy and the imminence of arrests. The more excitable sections of the media were already speculating on the possibility of civil war, a possibility dismissed with derision by more sober and better-informed commentators. It was an analysis with which Xela concurred, despite plotting large-scale fighter movements across Teladi sectors, including several big wings tracked escorting a freighter convoy through Chin’s Clouds. Another supply convoy for Black Hole Sun.

“It’s been nineteen hours and forty seven minutes,” Corrin replied, deliberately pedantic, “and we can’t second guess the tactical situation. We’ll hear from them soon and haven’t you got something to do?”

“I guess so,” Max said, swivelling the command seat to look at Massoor at the Systems station as he quietly marshalled the small fleet of Force freighters scuttling through Thyn’s Abyss, Chin’s Escape and Family Njy. “How long?” The Trade Master flicked through the sector display, noting possible production surpluses in both Rastar Oil and Silicon in Thyn’s Abyss. With storage bays approaching full the station managers would be sweating on a production bottleneck and he silently bet himself he could skim the surplus for as little as ten per cent on top of cost. He knew a few stations that would take the raw materials at cost plus thirty with only a small detour from his plotted jump route and that would be a gross profit of something like fifty thousand credits. Damn, he loved this game!

“Mr Massoor, how long do you need?”

Massoor caught the Commander’s question on the second repetition and dragged his attention back to the Enterprise Bridge.

“Another hour, give or take Captain. After that we’re on a tight schedule, the Stott Spices are contracted for delivery to the Boron home sectors for distribution in the next two hours otherwise there’ll be production shortfalls.”

“Then I’d better get going,” Max said to Corrin reluctantly. “I’ll drop a nav-sat if I get in trouble.”

“And we’ll come running, I know the plan,” Corrin said, smoothly taking the captain’s seat as Max stood up. “You stand relieved, now stop fussing and get going. Mr Massoor’s haggling aside we need the credits.”

“I know and I’m going!” Max grinned. “No-one going to wish me luck?”

“Everyone’s too glad to see the back of your fretting,” Corrin smiled, “and since when do you need luck against the Xenon?”

“It’s the Split I’m worried about, is Thyn’s Abyss still clear?”

“Has Kaitrin said anything?”

“No.”

“Then it’s still status quo,” Corrin said. “No capital ships, just the usual training flights, now go before you begin irritating people.”

Someone on the bridge snorted derisively.

Max held up his arms in surrender. “Okay, okay, I get the message! Going, going, gone.”

He tried to push his concerns to the back of his mind as he made his way to the flight deck but this was a new experience for him and his thought twisted back obsessively to the base assault. Jackson and the Sarge had enough forces to overcome a skeleton guarded station but he’d been enmeshed in too many failures of military intelligence to be sanguine about the fight and he realised this must have been how Captain Sheva felt, stuck in the Vigilant command centre while Marteene led the First of the Fifth, the good old Screamin’ Demons, (from how many lifetimes ago?), on some plausibly deniable skirmish.

His mind still juggled alarming scenarios as he ran through the Mamba pre-flight checklist.

“Force One ready for launch,” he signalled. Kaitrin granted permission immediately and the swoop winged Split fighter eased itself from the deck on thrusters accelerated through the hanger bay containment field into space.

The Enterprise stood station one klick from the gate to Thyn’s Abyss, behind and above so as not to impede navigation through the Family Njy sector. The three ship Mamba wing, sunlight glittering off their gold and black livery as they banked in unison, continued to circle the Orca, careful to remain well beyond the range of the two laser towers on point defence. Now that Force managed a frontier sector Commodore Njy was unable to continue denying his ships docking and transit rights but Max knew the old savage would be chafing like a tethered beast against the paper constraints. It was not in Split nature in general and the Family Njy in particular to meet a challenge anything but head on and the anchored TL was just that. By now Commodore Njy would know Force was directly competing for the prize of the alien technology and he would know Max knew of his involvement and would be plotting a strike.

Where and when, not if.

Always fight battles at a time and place of your own choosing, it was a strategic truism battered through the skulls of Special Ops candidates and one Max took to heart. He slipped the Xela chip into the universal port and as the AI insinuated itself into the Mamba systems he flipped and rolled onto a heading towards the Thyn’s Abyss jump gate.

They were almost there when Kaitrin’s appeared in the HUD, her face tense. “We’re picking up something on the Scale Plate Green nav-sat, the Teladi cruiser on station looks like it could be moving to intercept that Teladi convoy.” Xela instantly flashed up the sector display, a large group of Teladi ships were cutting through the sector from the PTNI HQ sector gate.

“It looks like they’re heading for Nyana’s Hideout gate,” Max said uncertainly, watching the mass of icons jerk slowly across the display. As Kaitrin said, a Teladi capital ship was cutting towards the same gate from its usual station near the gate to Xenon space. “Or towards our Dream Farm,” Xela suggested ominously. “Morn might be making a move. Wait, I’m picking up a sector-wide alert.” She paused for long, tense seconds. “They’re claiming rogue elements of their military are on unauthorised manoeuvres .... state of emergency ..... communications lockdown.” A three-ship wing of sector defence fighters were already close to the Force nav-sat. The transmission stopped abruptly.

Corrin’s face immediately appeared in the HUD, his brow furrowed with concern.

“If we jumped to Hideout we might be able to get there in time,” he suggested uncertainly. Max pursed his lips tight in thought before shaking his head. “No, we can’t go up against the Teladi Navy, we’re going to have to take this one on the chin. I just hope our people make a run for it instead of putting up a fight.”

Corrin nodded distractedly, listening off-screen.

“Omicron Lyrae are declaring an alert through all the Argon frontier sectors, they’re ordering all non-governmental communications systems to shut down.”

“You’d better do it,” Max said sombrely, “We don’t have a choice. See what our Teladi Gain people can find out and get a fast scout down to Green.” Corrin acknowledged the order with a grimace and cut the channel.

“Morn’s really beginning to piss me off Zee. If we lose people, there’s going to be a reckoning.”

“One thing at a time Max,” Xela answered. “You’ve got a job to do here, keep your focus.”

It was good advice and Max professionally pushed his concerns out of his mind before accelerating to full speed through the Thyn’s Abyss gate.

That Split frontier sector was notable for just one thing, the jumpgates were not located in a planetary orbit but in the dense and mineral rich asteroid field that gave the sector strategic value. To avoid unnecessarily provoking the Xenon the Split Navy based no capital ships here. Instead the sector was designated a final proving ground for graduating fighter pilots who provided the security patrols, three ship arrowheads eager for a first blood furball. He picked up a Mamba escort before he transited half the sector, the three fighters dropping onto his six where they maintained a discreet two-klick separation as he cruised towards the gate to Xenon space.

Max watched the sector scanner closely, remembering that the Family Njy controlled this sector and at least some elements were in league with Law but no other ships moved to intercept. “Any comms?” Max asked as they approached the gate. “Have I said there are any incoming transmissions?” Xela answered tartly. “No don’t answer,” she said, “that’s what we refer to as a rhetorical question.” “A simple ‘no’ would have sufficed,” Max answered. “You ready for this?”

“You’re really getting the hang of this rhetorical stuff Max,” Xela replied with a smile tilting through her tone. “I was of course, programmed ready! Let’s just hope no hotshot with an eye for a chance to snuggle up to the bosses comes over all friendly fire while we’re playing tag with a Xenon fighter.”

“That would be rather unsporting,” Max agreed, his mood lifting with the familiar banter, “but we’ve done this before, what could go wrong?”

“I’m sure I must have warned you about tempting fate when I was alive,” Xela answered. “Probably,” Max agreed. “Ready or not, here we go!”

As the Mamba fell through the hyperspace tunnel Xela ran a final diagnostic of the graduated fire control system and inserted her awareness into the sensor node and power relays, preparing to moderate the ferocious plasma energies of the alpha HEPT’s to keep enemy shields on the point of failure while she probed the Xenon systems for a back door entrance that would allow her to seize control of the ship.

“Break, break!” Xela yelled as the Mamba emerged into normal space. If there had been the time Max would have muttered something witty about rhetorical instructions but mouth and brain were locked down by the survival reflexes that hit the burners and banked of the fighter away from the onrushing ram of a Xenon cruiser bridge. The sideswiping shield scrape sent his Mamba rolling and tumbling away from an abruptly truncated plasma barrage as the cruiser slipped through the jump gate and vanished.

He fought for control as Xela calmly designated threats and incoming fire strafed his shield, ripping them down to under twenty per cent before he could go evasive, rolling through the plasma streams as two bird winged XM fighters dropped past his nose. He rolled 180 and broke high and right in instinctive response to Xela’s instructions, juddering through the fringes of another firestorm of plasma balls as three of the big Xenon mark L’s twisted in unnatural unison onto his tail. The manoeuvre brought him head to head with another knife blade cruiser slicing in to attack. Max weaved through the incoming fire, taking the Mamba on a strafing run close in along the hull of the huge ship, hosing the vertical bridge structure as he flashed by.

“Three destroyers inbound, fighters every damn where,” Xela said tersely. “Get us out of here Max, get us out of here, now.” The cruiser was already pulling a long intercept arc and his sky was full of fighters, too many to do more than snap opportunity shots as they flashed across his twisting nose as he desperately tried to engineer a break towards the gate back to Split space. Trapped in a sphere of hostile fighters, carved from the vacuum by the orbit of the three destroyers, it took two of the longest, fear soaked minutes of his life before Max realised there was no way past the picket ships and even if there was, the cruiser was now parked four-square across the jump gate. More Xenon destroyers were stampeding across the sector and it was taking every shaved millisecond of his reflexes, every iota of training and experience and every black cat of luck to just stay alive, even with Xela’s eyes in the back of his head.

“Xenon don’t.. break right, break right.. act like this...high left..snapshot, snapshot!” Xela said, her voice iron with tension. “Fight like this?” Max said as they flew through a fireball that had been an XN, “like they’ve decided to take things personally?” He snapped out another XN as it flashed through his sights. “Black Hole gate, activate jumpdrive!” The Mamba shields flickered around zero by the time the fighter was swallowed into the safety of the hyperspace jump point.

Fortunately for Max every Xenon ship within a five hundred-klick radius was storming towards the Thyn’s Abyss gate, else, with its pilot temporarily incapacitated by the shakes, aware of but unable to respond to Xela’s exhortations, the Mamba would have been melted fragments and dissipating gases.

“Incoming hostiles,” Xela repeated until Max was able to react. “All of them?” he asked in a trembling voice as he managed to force his body to stop shaking. “Except for a wing of L’s around the other gate, confirmed. Activate jump drive?” “Activate drive,” Max confirmed, “on my command.”

He waited until the first of the destroyers was almost in range before giving the order. The Mamba jumped as the first volleys from their forward facing batteries drifted lazily towards it and re-entered the sector through the Thyn’s Abyss gate. With all the capital ships on the other side of the sector, Max had time to engage the five patrolling XL’s, destroying one before racing through the gate back to Split space, pulling a four Xenon train through the long tunnel.

Thyn’s Abyss was a battlefield; fighters clashing in disciplined, fraternal wings or in desperate, isolated solitude, black silhouettes against the colour splash of distant gas clouds or scintillating, shooting stars against stygian space, sunlight flashing from their wings as they danced a score of deadly ballets across the whole stage of the sector. A single Split destroyer duelled the Xenon cruiser.

The Mamba cockpit filled with the simulated growl of distant drive systems, the sullen echo of plasma cannons and the hiss of lasers. Reflexively Max hit the burners and went evasive and he soared clear of the energy bolts hosing towards it from two XN’s that broke from a pack chasing down a solitary Split Navy fighter, another Mamba, its shields almost pinpricked to extinction by the stabbing needles of Xenon lasers. Max reversed his bank with an abrupt half roll and smashed through the XN ranks, scything two down in a rippling display of precision fire and ramming a third. The Xenon flashed to fragments as he wrestled the Mamba back onto the rear of the remaining wingman pair. They died as Xela warned of the arrival of the pursuing XL’s from Xenon space.

Without a word the Split fighter pulled up on his wing, close enough for Max to acknowledge his curt nod as he rolled to re-engage the enemy. “Looks like you’ve found yourself a playmate,” Xela observed between situation calls. “Just make sure he keeps out of my hair once we cull this herd,” Max answered tersely. Xela did her best Max Force impression as the two fighters punched through the oncoming ships, swaying through the incoming fire and banking as one to target the tail ender. With her co-ordinating two of the remaining three lumbering heavy fighters fell easily to the swift and nimble Split ships.

“Tell him this one’s mine, time to reap what we’ve sowed,” Max ordered. “Already done Max,” she answered, “although I’m not sure your sentiments are in the spirit of the saw.” Max ignored her pedantry and with his impromptu wingman swatting nippy XN’s from his six he herded his intended victim out into deep space with focused weapons fire until the shields were low enough for Xela to punch a carrier wave through to engage with the Xenon AI, the chill of its relentless logical imperative to destroy sentient organic life finding a faint echo in her own partial Xenon legacy.

It took just two minutes to choke the alien presence from the system and seconds to over-write flight sub-routines with her own auto-pilot and reprogram the transponder to signal that this was now a Force Security ship. “Incoming message from our Split friend,” Xela grinned. “All very colloquial, I think it translates roughly as ‘what the fuck?’”

“Tell him finders keepers,” Max said, “and thanks for the assist, that crate still has one shield and full weapons, we can take it from here.” The Split pulled alongside, dipped his wings in the universal pilot gesture of respect and rolled away, back towards the battle still raging across the sector and ignoring a second finger three of XL’s doggedly chasing Max’s ship. With Xela adroitly guiding the captured ship they quickly destroyed one and split the remaining two. The superior abilities of her combat AI allowed the outmatched Force XL to keep one fully defensive while she hijacked its companion. Within five minutes Max had his own three-ship Xenon wing. Back in the now distant sector the battle still raged. Both capital ships were gone and Max felt a sharp stab of regret at the deaths of so many Split but he pushed it to the back of his mind, into the vault that held all the other bitter memories of Borass, Daht, Artur, Race, Challenger and all the others that died because of him, one way or another.

“Just one question Max,” Xela said after reporting that none of the remaining Xenon fighters were focused on them. “How are we going to get these ex-machine-heads to market? I take it we don’t want to bring the Enterprise into the middle of this and even if the Split accept their IFF designation as friendly the Xenon won’t.”

Max thought for a moment. They could bring the Enterprise in through the Xenon sector jumpgate but that would leave it totally exposed if the Xenon sent reinforcements but if they tried to go through to Family Njy someone was bound to start shooting. “We’ll skirt the sector and come in from the gate rear,” he answered, “keep a two hundred klick safety margin and meet up with the Enterprise on the other side.”

He dropped a nav-sat and quickly briefed Corrin on the plan before retrieving it and setting out on the long arc to safety. They were barely a third of the way to the Family Njy gate before the Split defenders extinguished the last embers of the Xenon attack. “We could bring the Enterprise in now and get out before the Split become surly,” Xela suggested. “Too late,” she said, cutting through Max’s opinion that the Split were born with a challenging disposition. “Incoming signal routed through the Navy nav-sat. On-screen.”

The Split looked angry, confirming Max’s prejudices concerning racial disposition.

“Force Security human, you are commanded by the voice of the great Family Njy to surrender your ship at the sector Trading Station and transfer control of all captured ships to the glorious Split Navy.”

He sounded angry too.

“That’s a negatory,” Max answered with equal venom. “Legitimate prizes of war, check your treaties.”

“Which apply not to charges war criminals!” the Split snapped.

“Charges, what charges?” Max demanded, stunned.

“Incitement of interspecies conflict as forbidden by Executive Order of Governor Njy.”

“Which was issued when?” Max asked, already knowing the answer.

“Very, very recently,” he replied with the Split equivalent of a sly grin. “You may argue legalities from custody.”

“Take it up with my lawyers!” Max snapped. “Not a bloody chance.”

“We hoped that would be your response, now suffer the consequences.”

The channel went dead.

“Prepare for company,” Xela warned and flashed the sector display onto his HUD. It looked like half the fighters in the sector were engaged in a race to his position. “We can just about all make it back to the Xenon gate,” Xela suggested. “Perhaps we should call the Enterprise in now, take a chance?”

“Any of those fighters carrying Hornets?”

“Affirmative,” Xela answered after a quick scan. Max quickly considered his options. “Head for the gate but we’ll leave the Enterprise out of it. Work on a way to spoof the Xenon into thinking those ships are still under their control and maybe we can get them through to Black Hole.”

“I’m a genius not a magician Max,” Xela answered, “but I’ll give it the good old Raiders try.”

Her tone gave its own assessment of the chances of success.

The small fleet was almost at the gate, a mob of Split Navy Mambas snapping at their heels when the Xenon gate winked repeatedly, heavy fighters falling into the sector like tears from an eye.

## **Chapter 17: The Scarlet Claw**

“Transmission complete Ssir,” the Teladi hissed. It may have been something in her tone, or maybe something in her alien body language, something registering subliminally and interpreted by his subconscious, programmed by years of working with members of the reptilian species, but he had the intuition that she realised what was coming next.

Something in his body language perhaps, despite a lifetime of cultivated imperturbability? The palm-sized blaster sprang from his sleeve and terminated the puzzle with a single shot. He was a kilometre away, another tourist heading for the spaceport when the charge exploded, collapsing the low-rise housing block into the smoking crater that had been the clandestine Stoertebeker communications tap into the Teladi Military Net, courtesy of Director Morn. Another atrocity in the war raging between Law and Skull, the authorities would be led to assume, by the trail of planted evidence. One that severed the single channel to the distant station, deep out in the Teladi Gain system.

The die was cast, no more doubts, no more hesitations and no turning back. Hagman disembarked two stops before the main terminal entrance, dropped the blaster into the river and walked the rest of the way. In another three hours he was back in space, transferring to an inter-system passenger carrier at the sector trading station en-route for Profit Share.

“Objective secured Chief.”

Jackson hurled himself headfirst across the junction, sliding into the safety of the opposite corridor as an ill-directed laser fusillade sizzled over his head.

“Thanks guys,” he said, acknowledging the covering fire of the three crouching Confed soldiers he’d picked up as an impromptu personal guard after his squad had been smashed and split in a suicidal counter-attack by Stoertebeker loyalists at the very blast doors of the station command centre.

“Jackson here, repeat last message,” he gasped as he rolled to his feet.

“Central computer core secured,” the voice of his security commander crackled in his ear.

“Great, casualties?”

“High,” Rayner answered, the tone of his voice encouraging Jackson to add the word ‘very’ to that assessment. Law’s people had put up a ferocious fight and Jackson’s forces had taken more casualties than he’d anticipated. If it had not been for a counter-attack by the Force tactical reserve led by the Sarge they could even have lost the main docking bay. “How about the Geek Squad?” Jackson asked. More of his fighters flowed up the corridor behind him, some staggering under the weight of a force-shielded assault cannon. “Ruin somebody’s day,” he grinned in encouragement as his guards took turns to blindly empty magazines in the direction of the command centre defenders, prone before the blast doors.

“The techs are in.” Rayner paused. “Internal security neutralised, working on taking control.”

Safe now from the cloying clouds of gas that guttered over the scattered fire-fights raging throughout the station, Jackson ripped the protector from his face with relief and wiped the sweat on his sleeve.

“Good work, hold and report back,” he acknowledged and cut the comm. Jackson literally chanced his arm to lob his last Stun-Flash towards the defenders and then emptied his blaster in a blind-fire spray. As the power cell failed the assault cannon snarled to life, filling the air with its guttural roar and heating it to tropical temperatures with the flaring energy of the compressed plasma bolts. The explosions sent a shockwave that popped eardrums rolling down the corridor and all opposing fire died. Only the animal keening of a single surviving defender, screams her only relief from the terrible pain of her wounds, broke the sudden silence. Jackson led his men forward and put the shattered, burned woman out of her misery with a single shot into what was left of her melted eyed face. Around him his

soldiers fanned out to secure the approaches to the blast doors, pausing to check the scattered bodies of the first failed assault for life.

The air was thick with the stench of broiled flesh and Jackson was tempted to seek relief behind the sweaty protection of the gas mask, but feigned indifference rather than show weakness in front of his own men. "You two," he delineated a pair of his new guards. "Find another tech team and bring them here, I don't want to trash C and C by blowing our way in." They nodded in unison and disappeared at a trot.

By the time they returned, two determined counter-attacks had been beaten off with awful casualties inflicted on Law's fanatical followers by the assault cannon. And by the time the three grey cover-all clad technicians insinuated their hacker bots through the electronic defences another wave of attackers laid smeared and burned along the corridor length. The sweet smell of roasted human meat made even the most battle hardened of his men pale with the effort it took to control their stomachs. One tech crouched helpless in dry heaving agony as her empty stomach continued convulsing, the acrid stench of vomit causing Jackson's mouth to fill with bile that burned his throat as he forced it back down.

With his soldiers squatting ready either side of the double-doored entrance, poised to storm the command centre, Jackson signalled for the techs to trigger the lock. The heavy door parted with a grinding reluctance that almost drowned out the panicked cries of those inside.

"We surrender, we surrender!"

Jackson waved through a single trooper to verify the capitulation before stepping through. Five of Law's people lay prone under the gun of his man, who nodded towards a flashing comm panel. Jackson looked at the small screen, it was black except for the words, 'FAO Jackson, date of birth encryption,' blinking on the display.

He tapped his birth date into the console and recognising the face of Law's security chief frozen on screen, waiting for him to play the message. Quietly he ordered the room cleared. After listening to it twice he scoured the centre for a data crystal and recorded a copy. Jackson then ordered a tech to permanently erase the message and the communications log.

The words 'rock' and 'hard place' flashed through Max's mind as the Xenon gate spat out ships. Split Mambas closing from the rear with hostile intent and ahead... "Teladi fighters," Xela said, puzzled. The pale eye of the gate continued winking. "And now Xenon," she added, bringing up the sector display, which showed a growing mass of ships clustered around the gate, Xenon and Teladi fighters of all types. "If this is one of your little surprises Max, now is the time to share." As she spoke she instructed the captured ship AI to go weapons hold, fully defensive. Until she knew what was going on she did not want to risk starting a war.

"Don't look at me," Max answered uncertainly, "I'm a genius not a magician," he quoted back at her. "Get our ships out and away from the ecliptic plane and hail.."

"Incoming call," Xela interrupted, highlighting a Teladi Falcon in the HUD. The cockpit flickered with shadows as the chasing pack of Split fighters swept over his Mamba, ignoring the Force ships in the face of the new developments. Max was about to sigh with relief as two wingman pairs broke from the pack, breaking back towards him in a high-low pincer.

"It's never easy," he muttered, rolling onto a vector diametric to that of his captured Xenon flight in the hope of luring the Split away, "Put them on."

"Commander Forcece?" The Teladi pilot sounded a male, unusual but not uncommon in the matriarchal species. A red cloth with the sheen of silk, worn incongruously bandana-like, covered his forehead. "The Scarlet Claw would purchase your assistance."

The words registered as Max rolled to break between the closing jaws of the Split pincer. The four Mambas, every bit as fast and as well-equipped as his own, adjusted to intercept. "You've got it fella," he yelled, "if I make it out of this sector alive!" He broke again as the channel closed, low and left as a

Mamba opened fire, taking a glancing hit that rocked and juddered his ship. “Dammit Zee, warn those bastards off, I don’t want a shooting war with the Split!”

“No-one’s picking up,” she answered, “I’ve been trying.” Max cursed as a Xenon L flashed through his sights, pursued by two Teladi Hawk fighters. A second Xenon rippled his shields with plasma as two Mambas fell onto his six. He tried to shake them with a high-energy turn but they remained locked on his tail, as if connected by a tractor beam. Azure plasma bolts streamed past the cockpit and rippled across his shields, taking giant bites that Xela reported in flat tones, between missile warnings. The second pair stalked every attempted escape vector as multiple fighter dogfights, Xenon on Split and Teladi on Xenon raged around them.

It took every last firing neuron of his concentration to stay alive and out of the gun-sights of what seemed the best pilots he’d ever encountered outside the Raiders and the Demons, leaving nothing free to worry about the Scarlet Claw, whatever they were, until a pair of Falcons sliced down onto a Mamba cutting in from 11 O Clock high, their own cannons blazing. Max’s ship burst through the wreckage, suddenly clear of pursuit.

“The Scarlet Claw accepts your bid,” a Teladi voice hissed over the comm. Just then Xela announced the arrival of a Xenon carrier, followed shortly by two Split destroyers and all hell truly broke loose.

“Zee, drop a nav-sat and get the Enterprise to the north gate pronto.” He targeted the Teladi Falcon and opened a channel. “Attention Scarlet Claw, disengage and withdraw to the northern jumpgate for pickup!”

He didn’t wait for acknowledgement as he followed his own advice and used the speed of the Mamba to extend and escape. Xela redirected the captured Xenon to the north gate on a long arcing course that kept them clear of the now fully engaged sector defences. The nav-sat survived in the fire-fight cross-fire just long enough for the Orca to jump in. With a handful of Teladi fighters standing a suicide rearguard that Corrin later called ‘the gutsiest fight I’ve ever seen’, the rest managed to break free of the massive furball and follow Max into the safety of the Enterprise fighter shield. With the giant hanger crammed with Teladi and Raiders fighters it intercepted and retrieved the captured Xenon before jumping to the safety of Menelaus Paradise.

“The Njy have sent a formal protest to all governments,” Corrin said as Max took a seat at the conference table in the Enterprise Ready Room. “About what?” he asked, wearily taking a long, grateful draw of java from the mug his friend thrust into his hands as he entered the room. It was a rich, dark roast, almost bitter without milk and sweetener and was hot enough to peel a patina of skin from the roof of his mouth but he didn’t care, it did its job, enervating his nervous system, jolting him from the post-combat fatigue that added lead to his eyelids and fog to his thoughts.

“Malicious endangerment, conspiracy, flying under the influence ... just about everything on the statute book along with a few more they seem to have made up on the spur of the moment,” Corrin replied dismissively. “You just can’t seem to help making friends wherever you go,” he smiled. “I bring a little excitement into their mundane little lives and all they can do is complain,” Max agreed with a rueful grin. “Sometimes I wonder why I bother, I really do!”

“The Teladi Trading Company Board are also accusing you of, and I quote, ‘aiding and abetting mutiny,’ ‘hijacking’ and ‘harbouring fugitives’. I think they mean our friend here, and his associates.’ He nodded towards the Teladi perched uncomfortably on a seat ill suited for his anatomy, at the table. Max assumed he was the leader of the Teladi pilots and the same one he’d spoken with back down in Thyn’s Abyss. He certainly had the same red headband but from his brief observations on the chaos of the flight deck, so did all the others. On closer inspection Max could now see the band also had a stylised Teladi claw, filigreed in gold thread, like a third eye in the middle of the forehead.

Max extended his hand in greeting. “Commander Max Force, thanks for the assist.” The Teladi shook his hand uncertainly, as if unfamiliar with the human gesture, carefully sheathing his talons. “Scarlet Claw,” he answered sibilantly. “That’s an unusual name for a Teladi, who are you people?” “Scarlet Claw,” the Teladi repeated. Corrin shrugged in response to Max’s querulous look. “We have no name,

we are all Scarlet Claw,” he offered by way of explanation. Max sighed; it was one of those days. It was, he thought darkly, always one of those days.

It was like pulling teeth from a mouth of cultural misunderstanding but they finally managed to extract enough information from the taciturn reptile to piece together the situation. The pilots were veterans all of Daht’s victorious campaigns, denied justice and seeing the arrest of their comrades on specious charges had abandoned the long, proud names of heritage and took up the only remaining option, vengeance. Sixty had begun the mutiny; just thirty-three Teladi fighters remained to crowd the Enterprise flight deck.

All Scarlet Claw, all pledged to destroy Law, or die.

“And you want to join us?” Max asked, already spinning new strategies to take advantage of the unexpected windfall. The Teladi waved a negative claw. “The Scarlet Claw sseeks only to regroup and re-arm, our honour iss our own.” Max argued vehemently while Corrin fielded an insistent call from Sinas.

“He says the Powers are in emergency session,” Corrin reported, “and we shouldn’t under-estimate the seriousness of the situation. Mutiny is mutiny and we can expect a multi-species fleet any time now.”

Max replied with a stream of invective against the universe in general and politicians in particular and then said, “Speak with Zee, perhaps she can find some legal wriggle room, with thirty crack Teladi fighters and pilots added to our own we could punch through Law’s defences with brute force.”

Corrin shook his head, “Not this time Max, you know that.”

He did. As a soldier he knew that mutiny was indeed mutiny.

“Can we move now, get enough ships and troops into a second wave to take the station?”

“Possibly,” Corrin answered after a few moments thought, but his tone revealed considerable doubt. “But a lot of our best soldiers are with Jackson and we could leave ourselves open to a counter-strike if one of Law’s TL’s gets away.”

The urgent chime of the comm system pulled him away while Max clenched his fists in frustration. Every instinct told him to seize the moment but his training told him that a large-scale assault, launched unplanned, was a disaster recipe. And they did not have an interplanetary vessel or a destination for it.

“A four carrier fleet is forming up in Black Hole Sun,” Corrin said quietly. “We’re running out of time Max.”

Damn, damn, damn! His nails sliced small half moons from his palm and his jaw ached with tension. Damn those who used the letter of the law to defeat the spirit and damn the stubbornness of the Teladi rebels and their bloody honour; leaping in guns blazing when a quiet little conspiracy was called for.

“Have we had any official demands to surrender the Teladi?”

Corrin shook his head.

“Then shut down all communications in and out of the sector and put a CAP the other side of the Bluish Snout and scan every ship coming through for Nav-Sats. If the big boys want to come play they can walk here.”

“I’ll declare a sector emergency to ground all ships. There’ll be plenty carry satellites in-sector already.”

“Do that,” Max confirmed, “and tell the sector patrols to shoot down any ship that launches. You,” he indicated the Teladi, “does your code prevent you from taking good advice?”

“Any tactical data that would help uss die well iss acceptable,” the Teladi replied.

“Good,” Max snapped. “Come with me. Corrin make sure the rest of ‘em get to the Briefing Room. Round up our Flight Leaders too. Re-arm the Claw with what we can spare.”

He swept from the room, the Teladi warrior loping behind him.

Law was in the Observation Lounge, alone except for the panorama of stars, when the Teladi fighters swarmed through the jump-gate. Like demons boiling from some ancient hell they kept coming, two for every one his laser towers sliced from the sky, suicidal in the ferocity of their attack. His fighters fought back with discipline and steel but the Teladi had no fear. One by one the cloud of towers barring the Menelaus Paradise gate fell, to concentrated plasma fire and, chillingly, to deliberate rams.

“Fanatics,” he murmured, half in admiration as he took control of the defenders, whose superior numbers combined with the surviving LT’s, were beginning to count. The Black Heart still wallowed crippled in the arms of the Dockyard but the Infiltrator was fully armed, fully operational and in-sector. “Captain Coniston, take your ship to the rear of the Paradise gate, Force will make his move now. Engage the Enterprise with missiles and half your fighters then strike his rear. Use every hornet we possess.”

## ***Chapter 18: And Carve their Name with Pride***

‘Kolumanias Thakliniak Kalioomus.’ He allowed himself to savour his name one more time, rolling each syllable, redolent with the pride of his long lineage, in his mind like a bantha sweet under his tongue.

Kolumanias Thakliniak Kalioomus, the Fifth and the last.

A fighter flashed across the nose of his Falcon, into the burning stream of plasma roaring from his guns. The Bayamon exploded into scattering shards and dissipating gases and Scarlet Claw felt one last moment of pride in the exceptional reflexes and acute peripheral vision that had marked his calling. When he had a name, when The General embraced him as comrade and weighted his chest with honour.

Honour! A word almost spat by most Teladi for its profitless connotations, action without reward, a concept so foreign to what they had become, that the very word had to be imported from an alien vocabulary. And now its greatest proponent, the man who would lead the Teladi onto a path to greatness paved with the deeds the simple term could inspire, was dead – by conspiracy, by treachery – and his glorious name coldly tarnished by those not fit to trim his talons.

The anger pulsed cold in his blood. Those who honoured the great general could not hope to extract justice from those responsible or even defend themselves, as events had brutally demonstrated through dark of the night arrests and swift, secret drumhead trials that mocked the very notion.

Three more Bayamon fighters swept across his aft quarter, ripping at his shields. The flash of a beam laser dazzled him and sent his Falcon careening, like a rowing boat tossed in a winter storm, across the sky and the cockpit filled with the caustic stink of burning insulation and fried components. The ship computer warned of shield failure in its usual disinterested hiss.

Justice was beyond their reach, but they could, as the humans said, die well.

Kolumanias Thakliniak Kalioomus the Fifth locked the nearest laser tower down and rolled onto a collision course.

“Attack Wing Alpha – go,” Max ordered, the sector display from the almost instantly destroyed satellite still a ghost image on his retina. Law had dozens of fighters in the air, several LT’s remained operational around the gate and those picketing the station and shipyard unscathed but he knew it wasn’t going to get any better than this.

Tyre’s hand weighed, warm and comforting on his shoulder as Kaitrin conveyed his order. The Raider fighters vanished in iron formation through the jumpgate, swallowed in the wink of a giant, alien eye. On the Enterprise bridge, time slowed to a silent crawl.

“Attack Wing Beta away,” Kaitrin announced. “Nav-Sat online, jumpdrive engaged, Changeling One entering gate,” Kerman announced simultaneously and the Enterprise raced the destruction of the Raiders navigation satellite through hyperspace.

“Kill that signal,” Coniston muttered as another Nav-Sat powered to life, dropped from the bay of a single running Pegasus that was cloaked in a flock of combat drones. They immediately broke off into co-ordinated packs to swarm the closing Infiltrator Mandalays. “Activate missiles, targeting to automatic, standby jumpdrive and drones.”

With the computer locking and firing at close range the instant it registered the Enterprise, there would, she thought fiercely, be no escape. On screen another Teladi fighter, bent on a futile attempt to smash through her missile defences, boiled to vapour.

“Missiles away, jumpdrive engaged,” the Infiltrator computer announced, its voice deadpan, mechanical. “Designated target destroyed.” Coniston punched the air and hissed a triumphant ‘yes,’ as the main viewer focused on the Menelaus Paradise jumpgate. The ancient technology was undamaged by the multiple hornet explosions but the Force carrier was gone, completely and utterly destroyed by the fierce burning energies. As the Infiltrator fell into its own hyperspace tunnel she quelled the bubbling triumphalism of the bridge crew with an unfelt scowl and focused on the next stage of the plan.

“Launch Sweeper One, clear out any Force ships on the other side of the gate,” she ordered the instant the Bluish Snout sector appeared through the fading energies of hyperspace, “Helm bring us ..” The order died in her mouth as the first explosions resonated through the hull. Silkworms, her subconscious identified immediately. She had been hearing that echoing crump, feeling the distinctive vibrations through the soles of her boots in her sleep, ever since Brennan’s Triumph and fear choked her throat, grabbing it with thick iron fingers that cut the blood to her brain, stopping her thoughts for fat, vital seconds as her crew looked to her for orders.

More explosions rocked the Infiltrator as the missile alert belatedly blared to life. On screen, plasma bolts, glowing emerald green, sailed lazily past, followed by an arrowhead of Mamba fighters. Just a few stray shots – the Orca resonated with the staccato pounding of a fire-stream hosing over her shields. Without waiting for instructions her new helm officer switched the viewer to aft. Coniston’s mouth moved soundlessly, her hands gripping the arm rests with a force that threatened to force her knuckles bursting through the parchment thin white skin protecting them.

She tried to say the word, tried to force it from her frozen chords, but nothing came. The Enterprise impossibly loomed in the view-screen, closing from the port aft quarter in its own blazing fighter screen as it fired another multiple salvo.

“Jump,” she tried to say, but her tongue seemed to fill her mouth, blocking even the thinnest of syllables like it did in her lost child dreams, with ghosts flickering all around, just beyond the corners of her vision. The Enterprise swept over them, vanishing from the screen and the steel bands choking her to paralysis lightened their grip, just a touch.

“Jumpdrive now!” The words came out in a scream of terror that unnerved her almost as much as it did her bridge-crew.

The computer began the countdown, seeming to Coniston to labour each short syllable as if sadistically drawing out her impending death while her crew screamed out damage reports. On three she began to relax, they would make it back to the relative safety of the Station Prime guns. On two, the computer announced the nav-sat signal lock had terminated. There was no ‘one’, just Coniston screaming, ‘Abort, abort!!’ as the fabric of space slit open around them.

The Infiltrator and three hundred and seventeen crew, assault troops and pilots toppled into hyperspace and fell.

It was a fall without end.

The flash of the exploding jump-hole seared his eyes, concealing the stars of Bluish Snout behind a jostling herd of primary coloured amoeba that slowly faded to transparency as Max’s vision returned. The Enterprise bridge held silence, no triumphalist crowing, just a deep shocked silence broken only by the routine hums and soft chirps of the station computer systems as each person embraced the enormity of what they had done.

“Haul in the fighters and send the messenger drone through to recall all our ships from Law’s base.” He did not need to add, if any survive. Law’s station had been absolutely festooned with LT’s according to the last brief nav-sat scan and his Raiders could have taken heavy casualties carrying out their only order. ‘Close down every nav-sat, the instant it’s launched.’

At his side Corrin quietly ordered Kaitrin to jump back to Menelaus Paradise the moment the Enterprise fighters docked. A few minutes later the Enterprise emerged through the gate to Bluish

Snout and set course for the opposite gate to retrieve the surviving Raiders fighters returning from Law's sector.

"Seven of our ships destroyed," Kaitrin reported softly, "including your Mamba. All but two pilots rescued. No Teladi ships or pilots survived."

Dozens of Teladi but just two more Raiders dead, just one more Memorial service – the ashen taste of victory.

Back aboard Station Prime, Law sat alone in the Observation Lounge, cloaked in an anger that burned cold as liquid nitrogen. The Infiltrator and the original base of the Stoertebeker Clan, gone and as usual there was just one person to blame.

Force.

It could not be allowed to stand but the loss of men and equipment had been enormous. A dozen laser towers, forty fighters and a command carrier presumed lost. With a jumpdrive. He watched fighters flit like glow flies, deploying the last of his LT reserves around both his stations and considered how he might obtain more. Finally he summoned Captain Hart and apprised him of his plans. Hart accepted them without comment and vowed his ship would be space worthy within five days. He left with Law's comment ringing ominously in his ears.

It had better be.

Later, over their private secure channel he spoke directly to Njy, the Butcher himself. It stuck in his throat but under the circumstances he could see no alternative. "I agree to your – suggestions." The old Split made no attempt to mask the smile of triumph, he was being given what he had wanted ever since becoming embroiled in the search for the alien technology.

A foot in the door and more besides.

"Shadow Skin tech for one of his TL's, I'd call that a Queen Exchange," Xela stated as Max recounted the recent turn of events in the seclusion of the small computer room that was the AI's home aboard the Teladi Gain Chip Plant. "A favourable one though," she concluded as she finished analysing all the sensor logs and processed the results through her strategic sub-routines. "With just one jump equipped TL Law will find it hard to either re-stock with LT's or gather sufficient materials to get the shipyard producing. We should help Skull re-assert control in the Unclaimed Sectors, starting with the LT Factory in Split Fire.

"There's plenty of high tech production in those sectors, it'll be nearly impossible to stop them shipping stuff out to a Teladi middle man, short of starting a war. And if I remember my Intel Assessments the Skull Clan needs them for its own supplies, not to mention the profits they cream off."

"True," Xela replied. "Do you have an alternative? You have that smug, I-have-a-plan look on your face."

Max grinned and nodded.

"I've been talking with Massoor, we're going to buy up all the strategic stuff and sell it off to trusted buyers. With the right inducements I reckon station owners could be made to see the wisdom of trading profit margins for security and the Boron shipyard down in Ocean of Fantasy could always use more supplies, particularly with the Xenon acting up and the Split making even more threatening noises than usual."

"And I suppose you have a subtle plan in mind to get station owners to see things our way?"

"I wouldn't call it subtle," Max answered.

Three hours later a narrow-band data squirt informed them that Jackson's assault had been a success, objective secured, no significant casualties. Stage Two underway.

"My people report we can go for orbital burn in under three days Sarge, it'll be a rough ride but they're the best right?" Jackson winked. Payter ignored the crude innuendo and asked, "And what's to stop Morn's forces blasting us from space the instant we appear?"

"You know Sarge," Jackson said, dropping a friendly arm around the Raiders troop commander and guided him to the door of the small comms room Jackson had secured for his own use, "You worry too much about the fine details. Trust me!" Payter muttered something Jackson thought it just as well he did not catch. Alone again Jackson turned to the comm. and began work on making his own blithe assurances true.

## **Chapter 19: Split Loyalties**

They had no names so the single, short phrase, The Scarlet Claw, joined those listed on the Raiders Honour Board. Despite losing two more pilots the Raiders' mood was ebullient. Their enemy had taken heavy casualties and there had been no reported sightings of the Orca since it plunged into a collapsing wormhole, hull plating peeling away like cardboard in a hurricane. There was a second victory also, a brief smiling data squirt from the Sarge. Objective secured, minimum casualties, estimated time to orbital insertion – three days. Names to be mourned, to be sure but nothing could dampen the feeling that the slaughter at Scale Plate Green had been partially avenged, a down payment made, that the tide had turned.

“Those who sow the wind shall reap the whirlwind.”

They might not have known its origins but they cheered Max to the point defence systems, high in the Enterprise hanger deck. It was a scene replayed incessantly throughout the media, planted by Anje Delenari and chewed over endlessly, by military experts, business analysts and fashion designers taken with the cut of Max's long leather coat, until something more dramatic came along to feed the ravenous news beast. And with the mutineers dead, no pretext on which all races could agree to intervene in his affairs, remained.

The next few days passed in a haze of jumps as the Enterprise flitted from sector to sector, following the Trade Master's schedule, soaking up the excess supplies of strategic goods caused by the loss of Law's primary cargo hauler. There was no sign of his second carrier.

“Sorry to interrupt Max,” Xela said in a tone that suggested quite the opposite. “Breaking news - you need to see this live feed from one of our nav-sats.”

Max almost told her a more suitable location to deliver breaking news but feeling the moment wither away he disentangled himself from Tyre's sweat soaked limbs and reluctantly said, “put it through,” as he groped for his scattered clothes. Tyre threw him a scowl along with his T shirt.

“Lights, play,” he ordered. The small, wall mounted display flashed to life as the ambient lighting in his small living quarters rose to Argon standard. On-screen a bright star was moving against a background of dimmer, scattered companions. As he watched it briefly pulsed several magnitudes.

“Magnify,” Max ordered, knowing what he would see. Like all Clan bases it was a ramshackle sphere, a miscegenation of parts from the technology of many species. Whatever was available, whatever could be hacked together to do the job. The four boosters, strapped like stun batons around the bulging waist of a cop flared again, bleeding away remnant interstellar velocity. The engines peeled off, one by one, pushed away from the station hull by exploding bolts, tumbling from view. One collided with a small, rocky asteroid, vaporising in a flash of fuel vapour that momentarily outshone everything in the sky.

Asteroid? He couldn't remember any asteroids within the Teladi Gain gate sector. He checked the time index on the feed. “Zee, the last message we had from Jackson estimated they'd hit orbit in just under three hours. What sector is this?”

“It took you long enough to get your brain in gear Max,” Xela said acerbically. “It had a long climb,” he replied deadpan. “Now give.”

He just knew he wasn't going to like the answer.

“Ghinn's Escape.”

The last image transmitted by the Force Nav Sat was a pirate Orinoco, plasma streaming from its spade shaped forward hull.

The newly named Harmony Station slipped a stable orbit on the fringes of the Teladi Gain gravity well almost lost in the cacophonous noise of the crisis enveloping the eastern edge of the New Frontier. Ghinn's Escape marked the border between Split and Boron holdings and typically for the Split it was heavily garrisoned and fortified against the 'Aquatic Threat' just a jumpgate away in Hila's Joy. Equally typically, the Boron border sector was a demilitarised zone.

"So as not to provoke the Split," Sinas sighed wearily. On the main display of the Enterprise briefing room, the new Confederation base was deploying all the laser towers Max had been able to spare from the current production run of his Menelaus Paradise factory. A continuous stream of freighters brought in supplies, took away the finest Force spaceweed at opening sale prices and more importantly deposited civilians of all species, eager to have the first taste of the crude pleasures and possibilities on offer. Human shields that kept way the trouble that could not be bribed, threatened or blackmailed off.

Somewhere, Director Morn would be chewing her tail in frustrated rage.

"They generally don't take that much provoking," Max said, sharing the Boron Colonial Governor's impatience with the innate pacifism of the race he served. "And the Commodore, none at all. Nibris warned this would happen, the fear drove her to break out the long spoon and sup with Law. They should have listened."

"Water under a very dead bridge," Corrin interjected. "The question now is, what are the Boron going to do about it? Two of our freighters have been attacked in Hila, forcing us to burn energy cells and disrupt the Enterprise trade schedule to protect them because no bugger would launch from the stations to help. If we have to provide a heavy escort for every freighter hauling through there it's going to leave us stretched. Massoor has tied us into a lot of contracts down that way and we need every credit we can get. What's the response going to be? Increased sector security patrols, a carrier on permanent station, a blockade?"

Sinas shifted uncomfortably in his seat and took a small sip of java, stretching the moment until he had to reply.

"It's illegal under Community of Planet rules to blockade a trade route jumpgate."

They all knew that. Corrin and Max looked at him expectantly.

"Nothing," he said finally, "they propose to do absolutely nothing."

Corrin banged the table in disgust, then discreetly flexed his fist, testing for fractures.

"As they see it they don't need to."

"Don't need to!" Max exclaimed. "The Butcher has declared a state of emergency, closing all the Split Frontier sectors this side of the Xenon Rift to all except Split ships and unleashed his pet clan to ride roughshod through the Boron border and they propose doing squat! You've got to be kidding me right?"

"He's not kidding Max," Xela's disembodied voice interjected. "The production facilities are icing on the cake of the Boron economy compared to the potential cost of a border or even possibly a full scale war with the Split. They have their fleet just a jumpgate away in Ocean of Fantasy and they have a chump that'll have to do their dirty work for them – haven't they Sinas?"

It took Max a fraction of a second longer than Corrin to get up to speed. He waited for comprehension to dawn.

"We hold most of the contracts so if we want the profits we're going to have to fight for them," Max said disbelievingly. "The cunning little bastards, someone give me a hand with these stitches!"

“Failure to think ahead is not the same thing as being stitched up Max,” Xela said disapprovingly. “You should have thought things through rather than snatching at every shiny credit that crosses your path.”

“I need, ‘every shiny credit’ to finance your project. Research stations don’t just bubble up from the quantum foam you know. How is that coming by the way – alien ship location nailed down to the last kilometre yet?”

“Children, children,” Corrin intervened, “the music’s stopped and we’re the only ones standing. We can’t walk away from the contracts and we probably can’t rely on the Boron Navy stopping the bullet if they decide to attack us directly. Correct Sinas?”

The governor turned a paler shade of grey and nodded.

“The Boron Government has a strong desire for peace, and they’re desperately afraid of Family Njy.”

“And we know Law is tied in with Njy therefore these new players are part of the same game. They could load up in the Black Heart and launch just the other side of our southern gate. Welcome to a two-front war guys and remember what the book says about fighting one of those!”

“Don’t,” Max responded as he thought furiously, “that’s a great help. Fortunately,” his face hardened, “I tore up that book a long time ago!”

Jackson waited until the last of the Force troops had boarded the transport and were safely out of the way on Max’s Chip Fab before taking the controls of a Teladi Bat in straight gray civilian livery. Just another escort for a freelance Vulture transport heading for Theophant’s Joy, the Profit Share Bliss Place, hoping for a score.

As was he. Hagman would offer him a deal, he was sure of that. Something big, something almost impossible to resist. He was sure of that too. The Big Question, or one of the Big Two, he ruminated as he impatiently dogged the wake of the lumbering freighter, was – is he on the level? His first thought was of course, ‘it’s a trap!’ It was always his first thought, it kept him alive, but one he quickly dismissed. The man had a reputation, a bad one but they were meeting in a place of his choosing and each side would take security precautions as read. People would be watching people watching people – all with quick hands poised near suspiciously bulging armpits. Neither Law nor Hagman would risk so much just to kill a rival, particularly when it would just incense the Confederation into an even closer alliance with their main enemy.

No – he was going to offer a deal, something big, something dramatic, something Hagman thought he would not be able to refuse. Max had already made him that offer and he’d accepted it, fingers crossed. There was, after all, a limit to how far he could really trust a former government operative, even one who’s story smelt right and checked out in every detail. He’d even tracked down a sot of a spacer who remembered the intoxicated hard luck ramblings of a man spaced out on Red Thunder down in Profit Share. He corroborated every word of Max’s story even though the guy did not believe a syllable.

Other things checked out too, Max did kill Challenger and nothing could fake the weeping wound in his soul Jackson heard in Max’s voice when he confessed all. And there was the Fat Man. He checked out too. It had taken a lot of work even to pick up his trail but once he knew what he was looking for there were enough tell-tales and occasional fingerprints that rendered certain events a lot less inexplicable.

That Max was on the level when he offered his own deal Jackson had no doubt and the potential prize too great to ignore. Whether he could swing it with his white hat friends or whether conscience and training would bring Martene back into play – that was the blades edge, the gamble that added the frisson.

And when it came down to it, damn, he couldn’t help it – he liked the guy, liked his attitude, his humour and his reckless urge to gamble everything on his own abilities and the skills of his people.

The man would make a great clan leader, would make a great clan leader if everything panned out. The two of them, allied and with a monopoly hold on new technologies, there was no limit on what they could achieve.

If Max was on the level.

And there it was, that nagging little voice of doubt, whispering ‘too good to be true’. As the saying goes, a Split cannot shed its skin. Jackson docked at Theophant’s Joy with a mind filled with uncertainty.

It was his first visit to the Split-Split Club but it was tediously familiar from a dozen stations and even more spaceports. A sullen, darkened dive, air so thick with spaceweed, alcohol fumes and the tang of multiple species pheromones, stimulated by the writhings that passed for entertainment on the tiny stage that you almost needed a vibro-blade to slice a path through and nose filters to stay. No class, no class at all – he kinda liked it, he thought with an impromptu smile.

Jackson let his eyes slide around the place as the barkeep poured a cold one straight from the bottle. They slid over his people, an anonymous couple bickering with abandon in a corner booth and a thin stick of a man apparently engrossed in the activities of the two Argon women on stage. His eyes lingered there before drifting over the fat guy at a front table, sweating with excitement into a grubby white suit. That would be Rarr from Max’s description and the two hovering goons. He took his beer and slipped smoothly into the couple’s booth as they left for the roulette wheel, still arguing. The upturned glass on the table signed the booth was clean of bugs.

“Permission to launch, good hunting Commander. Enterprise out.”

Max ran a last test on the ship capture technology, now installed in his new fighter. It was all functioning perfectly, in theory. As he did so, he listened to Xela updating him on the Challenger research.

“How about Jack’s moles?”

“They’re actually a pretty sharp bunch Max,” Xela answered. “They cracked the quantum resonance problem in a couple of weeks. The trick is preventing them from using that information to get a jump on the putative location of the alien tech for Jackson, but I’m keeping the research heavily compartmentalised. Do you want to know what the QR problem was?”

Max waited until his new Mamba burst from the Enterprise launch bay into the fierce glare of Black Hole Sun before answering.

“It depends, are you just going to tell me anyway?”

“There’s no point being a genius if you can’t rub it in the face of you mortals every once in a while!”

“Gee there Zee, in that case I’d just love to know, just dumb it down to knuckle dragger levels.”

“Should I use pictures and glove puppets?”

Max rolled onto a new heading, towards the jumpgate to the Xenon sector that bifurcated the New Frontier. Four other Raiders Mambas already orbited the jumpgate, both to provide back-up and prevent a Xenon counter-strike harassing other ships or stations. The Enterprise slipped into its self-generated wormhole, on the next leg of a trade run.

“Just tell me.”

“As well as attempting to retrieve the data from the damaged chip I’ve been trying a second tack. Recreating Challenger’s route from the traces left by the solar wind at the sub atomic level. In fact the second approach would probably be the quickest route to the answer.”

Max could hear the wings of a big 'but' beating loudly and said so.

"But we need a baseline record of solar activity to correlate the readings."

"Which we don't have."

"No, but we know a man who does. Everything we need will be in the Law's base sensor logs and.."

"And this means," Max cut in, "if he recovered any hull fragments and have access to some bright lights of his own, they could beat us to the punch. Damn, without a deep space explorer we couldn't even follow them."

"We could just keep the Skull ship."

"We could," Max agreed. "If we wanted to start a war with Skull or cut her in on the deal. Besides, the Black Heart would chew us up and spit us out. We need to take the Enterprise. What would it take to refit her?"

"Sinus quoted five million credits and two weeks in space-dock. The Boron make extensive use of Orcas to re-supply deep space outposts so while it's not a standard upgrade it's a straight forward job."

"It'll leave us vulnerable too," Max observed. "Okay Zee, let's see what this baby can do!"

The Mamba vanished through the gate to Xenon space in a wink of a cosmic eye.

Luring Xenon fighters back through to Black Hole Sun proved not to be a problem, four flew picket on the gate with a large wing standing a few clicks off. Max effortlessly destroyed a pair of XM's and hosed the shields of an XL before preceding a whole angry mob back through the jumpgate, his blood singing. It felt good to forget about Law, Njy, Challenger and the whole tangled web enmeshing him. No need to think, no need to plot; just act.

By the time the last Xenon fighter blossomed to fire under the Raider guns another three of their craft were under Max's control, heading for the Omicron Lyrae shipyard under the watchful eyes of a Raiders escort. Three minutes later a curt, 'cease and desist' order came in, bearing the electronic signature of the Argon Frontier Command.

"You'd think they'd be grateful for a little excitement," Max said. That just left the Teladi Frontier sector of Eighteen Billion as the remaining fishing ground. "That's controlled by one of Morn's allies," Xela said. "They're going to be thrilled beyond belief just to see you in their sky!"

"Then we'd better put on a spectacular show!" Max grinned. "Fancy a trip to Company Pride through Chin's Cloud?" "Why not?" Xela replied with a smile tilting in her tone, "You haven't unnecessarily provoked a Clan for, oh, days now!"

Despite their attitude the Argon authorities happily paid a premium price for the Xenon ships and as the five Raiders fighters cruised defiantly through Split and Teladi sectors to Chin's Cloud, security patrols gave them a wide berth.

The Pirate Base in that sector was totally locked down, not even a cursory CAP, just a bristle of Laser Towers remorselessly tracking the Raiders fighters as they orbited the Station, beyond their effective range.

"Perhaps you're just not pronouncing it right," Max suggested as Xela finished firing another goading barrage of insults across the communication channels. "My pronunciation is perfect thank you," she snapped, "If I had a throat it would be red raw by now." "Well, perhaps you just aren't being insulting enough. Did you mention their mothers at all?"

"Look Max, I'm sorry I wasted my life on education instead of learning multi-species cursing and if only Artur hadn't filled my empty little head with all these useless tactical sub-routines. Face it, they

aren't coming out to play. I suggest we.. heads up Max, clan convoy inbound, western gate. you're going to like this."

She paused for dramatic effect.

"According to the codes embedded in the IFF carrier wave it's a Law convoy! Four Vultures, four Bayamons, four Orinocos and three Mandalays."

Max was already targeting them in the Gravidar.

"They're making a run for it" The freighters and Orinoco heavy fighters were already turning back towards the gate. The remaining fighters streaked across the sector, towards the Raiders wing.

"All fighters, V formation then engage at will and keep an eye on the base, I'll run for the runners!"

One by one the Raider pilots called in, each voice bright with excitement. The general consensus was, 'bring it on!'

With Max at the apex of the V the Raiders smashed through the oncoming fighters, hosing three from the sky in the first head on pass. After that the attackers were too busy trying to stay alive to chase Max down as he rocketed across the sector in pursuit of the fleeing ships. As he approached the gate he dropped a nav-sat so that Xela could keep up a running commentary, just in case their gung ho got the better of their caution but he had no real worries. His pilots were the best of the damn best and in the fastest heavy fighters in space. If they got in real trouble the Enterprise could be there in seconds and in his gut he knew the Bluetooth Gang did not have the balls to mix it with the Raiders again. He made a mental note to ask Xela whether the Split actually had balls as they transited the gate event horizon and plunged towards Chins Fire. He dropped a second satellite on entering the sector.

It was like a free fire zone, what civilian ships there were, were hightailing it to the nearest station and, honouring the terms of Law's non-interference bribe to the very letter, Split Sector Security were meticulously assessing the threat posed by a distant asteroid.

He caught the Stoertebeker convoy halfway to the Family Chin jumpgate and with a laughing, 'don't you just love it' Max fell upon the hapless Orinoco fighters as they lumbered to intercept. He burned one in a head on pass, rolling his wings to dance through the characteristic electric blue particle rings of their Gamma PAC's and dropping three Xela-controlled enhanced combat drones to fire flit through the barrage of missiles, snapping each one down with machine precision while the Mamba pulled an inverted roll, twisting at the zenith onto the tail of the unprotected tail-end Charlie. With weapons convergence set for 100 metres Max rippled the narrow profile. The high energy plasmas clawed away the Orinoco shields in seconds and ripped into the hull. Max was already pulling an evasive break when it melted to vacuum.

The pilot of the third Orinoco ejected at the first kiss of his shields, allowing Xela to take instant control. The final pilot put up a fight, seemingly determined to die with his ship despite the hopelessness of the odds but the outcome was the same.

"Got it," Xela exclaimed as the ejection system triggered, sending the Clan pilot arcing and tumbling away.

"Get the Enterprise here and get these babies to market!" Max ordered. The four freighters barely made it to the Thurok's Beard jumpgate before Max was upon them. It wasn't a fight. Two of the Teladi freighters he killed with brutal efficiency, the remaining pair, seeing the Enterprise emerge from the nearby gate, ejected.

"You and I are going to have to have a chat about all this fun-hogging laddie!" Corrin grinned over the comm. as Xela flew the captured ships into the Enterprise docking bay. "We can certainly discuss the issue," Max answered, deliberately emphasising the word, 'discuss'. "Bring in those pilots and those cargo pods too. Methinks our friend Law is suffering something of a morale problem."

'Problem' turned out to be a grotesque misnomer. Max had only to hint at what vacuum could do to a man's lungs and the human slumped in the seat across the small metal table in the improvised interrogation room told everything he knew in a sullen monotone. These weren't Stoertebeker veterans, these were a rag-tag of new recruits and mercenaries with little love for and no loyalty towards the clan or the leader.

"It all just stinks, man. The reek of defeat y'know? Wars ain't fun when you're not winning."

Max almost felt sorry for them.

Acting on the information the garrulous pilot blurted out in exchange for being shuttled to the nearest station the Enterprise jumped to the independent sector of Hatikvah's Faith. There, in a brutal display of firepower Corrin led the Raiders against a Shroda Clan convoy running nav-sats and weapons components to their base in Company Pride for trans-shipment to a string of independent traders hired by Law to run the gear to a rendezvous with a Stoertebeker transporter.

Two wings of Stoertebeker Bayamons launched from the sector's satellite factory in a futile attempt to intervene but Max unleashed the tactical reserve and smashed them from the sky, leading them himself. At any moment he expected the Black Heart to jump in, hornets blazing but hyperspace remained quiescent.

While a Raiders Pegasus headed for Company Pride and another for Brennan's Triumph Max took Massoor, who had business connections with the station owner, and a contingent of the meanest looking Raiders troops he could find, over to the satellite factory and made him an offer he couldn't refuse. The troops remained when the Enterprise jumped.

Three hours and several jumps later the Enterprise was in Company Pride, orbiting the eastern gate, to Thurok's Beard.

"Maximilian Force!" There was no disguising the malice in the sibilant hiss of the Matriarch or the mad hate glittering in her eyes. "You have broken our understanding." Max glanced down at the tiny tactical display in the arm of the command seat. A shoal of Clan fighters already flicked around the Shroda base, glittering iridescent fish in the light of two suns. More shot from the base docking tunnel every few seconds. He nodded to Corrin, who in turn whispered instructions to Kaitrin.

"If one of your little toys strays so much as a klick from your perimeter your sky will be full of real bad news," Max snapped. "Now what understanding was that, the one where we agreed to stay out of each other's business? You broke that when you started running supplies for Law. Since when did you two become best buddies anyway?"

"Everything has a price, Commander," the Matriarch said slowly. "And the price of my friendship was high. Your pilots are good but we have the numbers. Withdraw now, I do not repeat my warnings."

"Everything has a cost too," Max fired back, ignoring her threat, "particularly being on the losing side. In case you haven't noticed I'm a Power now, my own sector and my own pocket battleship. I don't see yours and I damn well know you ain't going to be seeing Law's come running to your rescue."

Max paused to let the words sink in and then said,

"Now I'm through screwing around with you, you dried up old toad. Launch all fighters!"

He ran the blade of a hand across his throat and Kaitrin cut the signal, leaving the rage contorted face of the Clan leader frozen on screen.

"I think you've got her a tad riled old chap," Corrin observed, deadpan.

"The Bridge is all yours Corrin, you know what to do."

"That I do laddie," Corrin answered as Max headed for the teleport. Seconds later he materialised on the tiny transporter pad in his new Mamba, already orbiting the Enterprise.

“Captain on deck!” Xela snapped ironically as he took control, squinting against the sunlight glare until he put a helmet on and slid the HUD visor down. The thirty strong Raiders strike group of Split Mambas, Boron Piranhas and ten Bayamons, formed up into wingman pairs around him. In the background Kaitrin and her flight controllers whispered instructions.

“I hope you know what you’re doing Max,” Xela said. “I’m counting ninety four Shroda ships, including a dozen Falcons. Enough to ruin our day.”

“The clock’s ticking Zee, we can’t afford to go slow but sure anymore. Law could figure the Challenger location any day now and with his own shipyard he’ll soon be churning out ships unless we can throttle his supplies. With that new Split Clan base we just can’t afford to let these people have free reign.”

He checked the sector display, to confirm the Teladi Navy were remaining true to form and staying well away from unprofitable conflicts.

“Right people, let’s roll!”

The Raiders fighters arrowed towards the Shroda base, the Bayamons taking the lead.

“Jackson?”

Jack said nothing for a moment, just looked the big, shaven-headed man up and down. Like the goons that preceded him, all bulging muscles and beady-eyed suspicion, Hagman looked typical Stoertebeker, brawn and bad attitude, not a single subtle bone in his body. Appearances, Jack thought, can be deceptive, but not this much. He knew Hagman by reputation and sight – an enforcer and a blackjack crack to the skull of Law’s enemies, which made the hinted possibility of an alliance all the more plausible. The offer was too ridiculous to be true, therefore it must be.

Jack indicated a seat with the bottle neck.

“You know I am Hagman, your muscle clocked me two minutes ago. The table’s clean but scan away.”

Hagman palmed a small searcher and probed the table and placing it between them, activated the dampening field, reducing the roar of the club to a forest whisper.

“Drink?”

Hagman shook his head and his eyes narrowed with suspicion. Jackson shrugged and took another pull on the cold bottle.

“Your choice but there’s no point doing business if it ain’t a little fun. What’s on your mind?”

“Straight to the point?”

“Why not?”

“I’ve had enough,” Hagman stated simply. The weariness implicit in the phrase was clear in his tone. Jackson considered himself a quick and good judge of character and noted the slight slump in his shoulders and the shadows under his wrinkled eyes, haunted eyes that flicked uneasily around the booth, never quite settling, never quite meeting his. A man wrestling with his conscience.

Jackson raised one brow and waited for him to continue. There was an old phrase, give a man enough rope.

“The Clan is going to be destroyed, you and that bastard Force are going to see to that. What networks we haven’t traded to the Matriarch for supplies Skull is tracking down and burning, pacts be damned! If haven’t spent most my life..”

He hesitated and a strange look, which took Jackson a second to realise, was regret mixed with something that looked almost like shame, flickered across his face, like a momentary breeze rippling a stagnant pond.

“I haven’t done the things I’ve done just to watch it all be thrown away in a war we can’t win. Not while Law is in charge.”

There, he had said it. Jackson could see that very thought written across his face – loyalty fracturing before his very eyes, like a breaking heart.

“So if I’m on the winning side why should I listen to you?”

Hagman smiled a lizard grin.

“Because I can make you a better offer.”

“I’m listening.”

“Short and sweet. I can get the location of the object we’re all chasing and the Black Heart does inter-system. You get rid of Force, I get rid of Law. Between us we can stop the war with Skull and re-establish the Clan truce, getting business back on track. With Force out of the loop there’s more cake for the rest of us.”

“And you think this is something I haven’t thought of?” Jackson asked coolly. “Force’s legit status gives me access to R & D, manufacturing, all that good shit. You know how we struggle for that, we ain’t flying obsolete crap thrown together in our grandpa’s cast off yards for nothing. With Max as the front I can lord it over all you guys.”

“Wise up Jackson,” Hagman snapped, “Damn the commerce laws, The Community of Planets will never allow Force a monopoly of new technology. Every player in the galaxy will be lining up to take it off him. Force and his soldier boys may have the drop on the Clans, we got old and complacent, but the Split and the Teladi will eat him alive once they really start taking him seriously. Better if we just sell the stuff off to each government for billions of credits and assorted blind eyes. Besides, he’s a fucking Junior Leader, probably spends his off days helping shut-ins. I can smell the type and that ain’t you. You might like to play the kid but you’re in the game for the power and the credits, just like the rest of us.”

“And the chicks,” Jackson said with a smile. “Don’t forget the chicks!”

“My way you can sniff pussy up to your neck without having to worry about some Special Forces blade coming down. Go with Force and you’ll snap it off looking every which way and still not see it coming.”

“So, your offer is basically lesser but more secure pay-off in the short term and a better business environment in the long?”

“And all the cunt you can eat in peace.”

“And..? C’mon Hagman, don’t be coy – there’s a damn big rider on this deal. You’re not the only one with a sense of smell.”

Hagman thought for a moment, his face impenetrable.

“I want the Stoertebeker station in Teladi Gain, it’s ours by right and tradition. In return you can have the New Frontier base, your own virgin sector. A man could do big things with that.”

“Some pretty noisy neighbours though,” Jackson observed.

“The machine-heads? They don’t seem to have any interest in the place. The way they run warships through I figure something’s kicked off real big out on the Edge. If you ask me they’re happy having the Clans as a block on Boron expansion, no-one likes fighting a two front war. We leave them alone they leave us alone.”

It was an interesting offer, homing in like a Silkworm on the weakness of his deal with Max, even though Hagman did not know the specifics. Once the authorities sniffed out the Data-Hub tampering and traced those millions of credits back to the Confederation, fifteen different types of shit would be dumped all over the Force Corporation. He was gambling on Max either being able to barter his control of the new technology into some sort of deal or striking out on his own.

Preferably the latter. A clan with its own sector filled with stations, joined at the hip with his and able to use the new technology to buy off the Community of Planets, playing one against the other. That would be, Jackson struggled for the right tasting word, cool.

Risky but chilled! Hagman was right, the safe thing to do was to cut Max out, re-unite the clan alliances he’d fractured and make profitable deals with the Community. And that point about the Special Forces hit the spot and Hagman didn’t even know the truth about Max/Marteene. These people could ruin your day something permanent and although he believed Max had struck out on his own because no-one could fake the smell of bitter desperation that reeked from him when he confessed to the Challenger hit, you could never quite be sure with do-gooders. Never tell when they might revert to type, even when you could blackmail them to vacuum.

But damn, the guy was fun to be around, never far from the sort of trouble you could really enjoy! It was a tricky decision.

“How do you reckon I can take Force out? If I just kill him someone else will take his place and I don’t want to have to check my six for Raiders for the rest of my life. You know what those guys are like about that loyalty shit.”

“I can arrange a little betrayal that will let Force get past Law’s defences. If your people are there, loaded for Split with hornets to waste his TL and back stab his fighters, we can rip their guts out. Rock and a hard place.”

“It would be a shame to waste the Enterprise,” Jackson mused. “I look good in a Captain’s chair and if, for the sake of argument, I had a few illegal hornets I’m not sure Force would let them anywhere near his precious carrier. He’s not a fool, but, as the Split say, there’s more than one way to gut a Boron.”

“If you can take it you can keep it,” Hagman said.

“Oh, I can think of several ways to take it, right off the top of my head,” Jackson smiled. “And if I control it I control its LT’s and add a bit of a cutting edge to the rock.”

“Then we have a deal?”

Jackson shrugged noncommittally.

“I’m going to have to think about that, talk to a few of my people Hagman, but you make some cogent points.”

“Don’t take too long,” Hagman answered, “and don’t even think of screwing me over, I’ve got more ears than Delaxian Wheat and you know what I’m capable of.”

Jackson did indeed, and the knowledge was not comforting but he shrugged insouciantly. “How do I get in touch?”

Hagman slipped a data crystal across the table.

“Times, frequencies and keys. Don’t take too long.”

He stood up abruptly and pocketed the dampener.

Within seconds he and his minders swept from the club leaving Jackson thoughtfully juggling the crystal as he snatched a quick glance of Rarr. The sweating fat man’s eyes were fixed on the exit. Jackson smiled, he loved small time crooks with ambition beyond their petty talents.

They were so predictable.

## **Chapter 20: Matriarch Rage**

“Back off a little there Leader Two, this isn’t a display!”

“Roger that Leader One,” Makk acknowledged, and silently berated herself as she eased up on the throttle, allowing her Piranha some distance from the port upper six of the Commander’s Mamba.

This was her fifth combat mission since the first battle for Scale Plate Green, when the black ship mercs almost horneted the Bliss Place and despite eight kills to her name the memory still festered like a ulcer sucking on her guts.

“Stop that Fran!” she muttered as a memory of Borass, the cutely curious Boron flashed. Borass made her laugh with his peculiar ideas of certain aspects of humanity. She remembered him being joshed by some Raiders for his frequent squeals of delight at some detail so minor no Argon would give it a second thought. “You sound like a school girl!” Race admonished with a grin. She remembered the earnest way he listened to her deadpan description of the deadly predators that infested all Argon settlements. The claws, the fangs!

Borass drifting alone in space as that missile homed in.

“Leader Two, repeat last message.”

She cursed herself silently this time and muttered, “Disregard Leader One, just a prayer!”

“We’re all nervous Makk,” the Commander’s tone was soft and comforting, like a heated blanket on a cold night. “Just watch my six, expect the unexpected and follow C and C instructions.”

“Roger that Leader One,” she acknowledged and closed the direct channel. The communications system automatically reset to Command and Control. She found the background murmur of tactical updates and orders to the other wingman pairs comforting. As usual the Raiders were outnumbered by more than three to one but this time they did not have an equipment advantage over the enemy. This was the Matriarch’s home turf and there were a dozen Falcon Heavy fighters in the air, along with the usual clan mix. With his forces stretched thin across the sectors the Raiders had only twenty good fighters in the field, ten Mamba and Piranha wingman pairs, three kilometres behind a spearhead of five Bayamon pairs.

She knew from experience that the C and C provided by the All-Seeing-Eye, the catamaran Lifter configuration that had once been the base ship of the mercenary team that killed Borass, was one helluva force multiplier and that one Raider in a Piranha was worth two of anybody in anything, but she was more nervous now than before her first kiss. The Matriarch base would be providing its own C and C and there were all those LT’s waiting to stab through the dark. And no one she’d ever met suggested the Teladi that provided her clan’s backbone were anything but good.

Makk licked her dry lips as the two forces closed.

“Raiders One to Ten, contact,” Kaitrin said as the Bayamon pairs engaged the leading edge of the Matriarch’s fleet.

“Leaders One to Twenty, come to a heading of 438 Mark 5, designating targets now.”

Makk followed the Commander’s fighter through the course change, taking in the tactical update that accompanied the order. The Matriarch forces had split into four. Only one group, thirty Bayamons and Mandalays, were engaging the Raiders spearhead. Two other two wings, comprising their best fighters were pulling a right hook, the Hawks forming an armoured gauntlet around a hornet armed Falcon fist, aimed straight at the Raiders jaw, the Enterprise.

A group of twenty Orinoco fighters plodded relentlessly towards the Raiders second wave, even as they adjusted course to block the punch, coming forward like a second hulking, lumbering heavyweight in the ring, stalking them with his big left fist cocked. They might be slow but a pack of them, falling onto the nimbler Split and Boron Raider fighters while they grappled with the Falcons and the Hawks, could, Makk realised, ruin a whole lot of days.

As the Leader Wing accelerated to intercept, the Bayamon Wing smashed into the Matriarch defenders, outside the range of the station's LT perimeter. Makk followed the battle in snatched glances as her eyes danced over the HUD displays and scanned near space, sucking up the ingredients of her own tactical awareness, the All-Seeing Eye Controllers interjecting with crackling snippets of information.

"Splash one bandit."

"Raider Seven down."

"LT's, Raider Four, engage and destroy... Raider Four, Raider Four?"

"Raider Four down."

It was the sort of trick the Commander would play, drop a string of towers in the middle of a furball and hope they sliced the guts from an attack before they were blown away. Three Raider Bayamons vaporised before the four towers fell, leaving the Leader Wing flanks exposed and the Enterprise vulnerable as Matriarch Bayamons began to leak through the Raider Bayamon defensive jab.

The Leader Wing were seconds from engaging the outer perimeter of Hawks and Falcons, already peeling from the Matriarch Strike Group when the Commander ordered,

"Enterprise – withdraw to Redoubt One, repeat, withdraw to Redoubt One."

"Acknowledged," Corrin replied, "Engaging jumpdrive."

Makk swallowed hard and felt tiny beads of cold sweat forming on her hairline. This was not part of the plan. She pushed it from her mind and concentrated on her one and only job, keeping the Commander's back covered while he smashed through the fighter-screen to get at the bombers.

Then, as the closing fighter waves exchanged long range plasma bursts Corrin cut through the comms chatter of pilots and flight controllers, his voice steel tense through waves of static and the wailing of an alert klaxon she had not heard before, a wavering pitch, like a baby in distress that made her hackles rise.

"Jump aborted..." a crackling firestorm of white noise drowned him out. "...failed.....secondary explosions.....withdrawing to...."

The Commander's voice cut through the chaos, like a knife slashing fog.

"Leaders Two through Six, with me. Rearguard Free, I repeat, Rearguard Free! The rest, withdraw to the Enterprise and follow instructions. Force out!"

Makk's Piranha rolled off his six even before he finished.

"Shit, shit, shit!" she muttered in time with the rapid thump of her heart as she scanned for a target.

A Hawk flashed through her sights and she reflexively snapped a burst.

"Leader Two, designating target."

The cool, measured voice of the Lead Controller acted like a wet blanket over the fire of her panic.

"Just like we drilled people," Kaitrin continued.

Just like they drilled. It was the same high risk strategy that allowed them to beat the odds in the first big kick off with Stoertebeker. Rely on C & C to be your wingman, total trust. Break when they say, attack what they say, while the Commander did what he did best, fight and fly like a bloody maniac with eyes in his ass.

Time does funny things in combat, stretching half seconds to impossible lengths as a plasma stream hoses in from 11 O Clock high, the pulsing bullets drifting so slow you feel you can dance through them, like a running back sways through muscle bound blocks, then slamming by so quickly it sucks the breath from your lungs, leaving you shaking like a leaf in a storm and wondering, how the fuck did I live through that?

Makk grabbed that beast and hung on tight as her whole life narrowed down to a kaleidoscope whirl of strobing fire and fractured glimpses of fighters blinking through her guns as she reflexively obeyed orders she didn't consciously hear. Just her own razor voice snapping, "Good kill, good kill!"

The last thing she heard was, "break left, break left," Kaitrin screaming loud. Makk reflexively pulled on the stick but the Piranha was pinioned in cross-fire, the shield indicator melting in the HUD, like a snow cone in the desert. She hit the eject as her ship flared around her and time resumed something like its normal pace as she drifted in space. The only sounds she heard were the steady bip of her distress beacon and the rasp of her gasping breath, echoing in her helmet as the rearguard battle raged in bizarre silence, drifting away towards the Thurok's Beard gate.

Through her zooms she saw the Enterprise was listing like a staggering drunk, its stabilisers functioning only intermittently to bring it to beam and the drive flickered a dull glow, instead of the normal, full power glare as it nosed through the gate. The bulk of the Raiders fighters flew close support, hunting down the Bayamon and Mandalays that had broken through the screen. There were, she realised with a churning gut, no Raider Bayamons in sight.

The last thing she saw was a Matriarch Bat, sunlight glinting from its wings as it banked and turned towards her. The last thing she thought, as the laser bolts arced towards her, was Borass floating alone.

"Got her?"

"Behind you."

The voices were muffled, indistinct.

Makk unclenched her eyes and lowered her shielding arms, reaching out to brace herself as the floor seemed to shift under her feet, sending her tumbling with a force that would have cracked her skull if it was not for her helmet.

"Stop clowning around and take a seat!"

It took her brain a few seconds to register she was not dead. In fact she was sprawled on a teleport pad and the voice was not that of a Deity but Commander Force. Still gasping with shock Makk clambered forward, holding on as the fighter shuddered under incoming fire, and sunk into the right hand seat. Force's hand snapped out and hit the restraints, the field holding her in the seat as the Mamba rolled 180. Her helmet filled with the simulated roar of plasma cannons as the Combat Awareness system engaged.

A Bat flared and died and the Mamba plunged through the dissipating orange cloud and rolled hard left, forcing her back in her seat.

"Speak to me Makk, you okay?"

The Commander did not look at her, instead his head swivelled constantly, like a turret seeking a target, his eyes dancing.

"Okay Sir, I think!" she stammered. Emerald plasma balls streamed by the right wing. "Thanks."

“All part of the service.”

He flashed her a quick, reassuring grin.

“Great, do your co-pilot stuff and call it out.”

Her training snapped in and she quickly scanned the sky, craning her neck and activating the co-pilot console she set the screen to rear view to check their six.

“Eighty plus ships in pursuit, seventeen hundred metres,” she reported. Three Hawks closing fast!”

The Mamba had long legs and when it set its heart on running there wasn't a lot of ships that could match the pace, particularly if they didn't have the shields to laugh off missiles. She knew the drill and targeted them sequentially as the Commander snapped a brace of dragonfly missiles at each, forcing each to go evasive.

“Four Hawks between us and the gate.”

There were a handful of Raiders fighters clustered around the gate but one by one they faded from the screen as they slipped across the border to Split space.

The blockading Hawks rolled with a glittering flash of wings onto an intercept course, glossy shadows against the fragile blue whirlpool of the winking gate.

The Commander danced through the incoming fire with a reckless daring that had her gripping the arm rests and holding her breath, taking the fire of one long enough to smash it to vapour with a precision burst. He walked the plasma stream across a second, it exploded as it streaked past, metres from them. Makk rapidly targeted the survivors and the Commander fired off a pair of missiles.

Unmolested the Mamba plunged through the gate into hyperspace, the chasing pack of Matriarch fighters just one click behind.

Seconds later it burst into Thurok's Beard. The Enterprise was already two kilometres distant, limping towards the southern gate to the independent sector of Hatikvah's Faith at barely seventy mps. Strangely for a border sector the scanner showed no Split Navy carriers or destroyers and what sector defences were in the sky were clustered close to their home bases.

She did a quick mental calculation.

“The pack will catch the Enterprise before we get halfway across Hatikvah,” she reported. “We won't make it to Aladna Hill.”

“Where else can we run?” Max asked. “The Split aren't our best friends at the moment.”

A stream of commands from C & C cut off the discussion as the Force deck was given a defensive reshuffle. She counted the ships, the entire Bayamon wing was missing and the fleet was three Piranha short. The Bayamon were AI controlled but both the missing Piranha Identification Friend or Foe checked out to close friends.

The Commander glanced across, noting the ship list scrolling on the sector scan.

“No casualties so far Makk, we pulled back before any serious fighting and the Pegasus snatched them up.”

She smiled with relief, the Commander grinned. “It was just us crazies out on the proverbial limb!”

The Raiders reshuffled into new wingman pairs, forming a protecting cone around the Enterprise as it limped like a wounded animal across the sector, the huge Matriarch fleet in dogged pursuit. Whoever was leading them had done the same calculation they had and the entire fleet plodded relentlessly at the

speed of the Orinoco fighters. They wouldn't want a battle in Split space and they didn't want to take on the depleted Raiders fleet anything but mob handed.

Only the Commander's fighter lacked a wingman. It lead a small spearhead of the most seasoned of the Raiders, pointing the Enterprise.

"Don't need one with you here," the Commander smiled. She appreciated the vote of confidence.

The Enterprise made it through the south gate with the Matriarch fleet practically snapping at its heels.

It was barely two kilometres from the gate, when the enemy spurred through.

"This is it," she thought to herself. If she knew anything about tactics, this was the moment the Falcons and Hawks would break and engage, leaving the Hornet Falcons under an Orinoco wing, punch through and blam!

"We're not dead yet," the Commander winked. "What did I say to you before this all kicked off?"

Isiques Iebndeys Osaquos methodically rearranged her fleet, ordering a two Hawk escort for each Falcon attack fighter and sending the hornet laden Falcon bombers burrowing into the egg of the Orinoco heavy fighter squadron. Her own escorts formed up on each wing and she waves an acknowledging claw to both. The Hawks dipped their wings in return.

The enemy was close now, close enough to reach out and slash. She savoured the thought. She was Isiques Iebndeys Osaquos and this was her chance to make the name something to be worn with numbered pride in the generations to come, Isiques Iebndeys Osaquos I, the hero who led the entire Clan fleet to a crushing victory against a mighty foe. Sing her name with pride!

Even as the thought glinted in her eyes the scanner began filling with new contacts, fighters launching from one of the independently owned stations, a few kilometres ahead of the Force fleet. For long, egg drying seconds her mind froze as ship after ship launched but shock turned to grinning triumph as the Gravidar identified the new-comers. Clan fighters of all classes, claw after claw of them, all transmitting the latest identification badge of the Stoertebeker Clan.

The Argon had a saying she knew well. Between the rock and a hard place was the hated Force! As the Stoertebeker ships clenched themselves into a fist and punched towards the pitiful Force fleet she calculated relative speeds and distance and timing her order to let the Stoertebeker fighters engage the defenders first she said,

"All attack wings, break and engage!"

"Wait for it, wait for it.."

Makk's mouth was as arid now as the Great Southern Expanse and her heart somewhere far down below her stomach, which had free-fallen into her boots the second the gravidar translated the IFF codes and designated them hostile red, Law's fighters. The Commander repeated his admonition. She didn't know how they did it but none of the fighters flanking them opened fire. Her fingers had been squeezing an imaginary trigger for the last five seconds.

'Now!' the primitive, flight-or-flight, strata of her cortex was screaming as the wall of Stoertebeker fighters slammed towards them like a towering tidal wave charging towards a beach. 'Now goddamit, I know what colour their eyes are, now!'

Still he didn't give the order, still the fighters closed, eight hundred metres, six hundred, four hundred, filling the scanner with dozens of blood red hostile icons.

If her limbs were working she'd have snatched at the controls and fired herself. The fighter wave crashed over the small band of defenders and as it did so Kaitrin's voice, commanding, urgent, brooking absolutely no argument, cracked over the comm.

"Designating new friendlies, break and engage hostiles, repeat, designating new friendlies, break and attack, break and attack!"

The Mamba rolled 180 and burned through a half loop, throwing her against the restraint field as her brain gasped to keep up.

"I told you Makk, expect the unexpected! We picked up the codes from some captured ships and gambled Law wouldn't have time to change them and inform his buddies."

Makk didn't have time to ask how the Commander had managed to reprogram the Identification Friend or Foe devices of an entire fleet in a bare two hours. Like the rest of the pilots of the Wing guarding the Teladi Gain facility she'd caught up on the battle in Hatikvah's Faith from the excited accounts of some of the pilots who fought in it when they transferred over. She had heard the Enterprise spent an hour orbiting the Skull base while the Commander shuttled across and given Skull's colourful reputation a small number of libellous conclusions had been jumped at.

The unmasked Skull fighters churned through the Matriarch's ranks and as the Enterprise accelerated away at full speed, dropping a chain of LT's that flared to life and began slicing away at the Falcon bombers, the Raiders fighters struck, an irresistible second wave.

With Makk calling targets Max's Mamba weaved and darted through the twisting mass of fighters, tearing at shields with precise, raking bursts before moving onto the next. If any survived, Makk administered a killing, missile, blow.

The battle became a rout and when the Enterprise jumped back to the north gate and deployed another four LT's, the rout became a bloody slaughter. Less than a dozen Matriarch ships straggled to the precarious safety of Company Pride only to find the Enterprise had jumped ahead of them.

Max and Corrin led the Raiders and smeared the handful of surviving Bayamons while herding the Falcons like chelt out into the depths of space, systematically denying them any route to the safety of their base perimeter defences. Outnumbered, out-gunned and their morale crushed beneath the Raiders heel, all seven Falcon pilots ejected the second Max demanded their unconditional surrender.

"Ever flown a Falcon before?" Max asked. Makk shook her head. "Well, now's your chance."

"I thought she'd never leave!" Xela sniffed as Makk faded from the teleport pad. "Teleport confirmed."

"Don't fancy the co-pilot competition Zee?" Max grinned. "Give me a casualty report."

Xela interrogated the Enterprise database.

"Not counting my Bayamon babies, four ships down, only one confirmed KIA. Not counting the Skulls of course, their losses estimated at fifteen to twenty ships, seven KIA's. I'm going to try not to cry a river though."

"They lost plenty but they kicked a rival clan from the trade lanes. Skull will make millions from this so I doubt we'll be seeing any new rivers flowing in Brennan's Triumph either. Open a channel to the Matriarch."

Max had never seen a Teladi face that colour before, a puce that oozed through the green like a fever.

"Now, you toothless old crone, to quote a formerly powerful clan leader. I don't repeat my warnings – stay out of my business, stay away from Law. If I as much as dream that any shipment heading for him even passed through this sector I'm going to come back, break your snout off and give it something foetid to chew on. Have I made myself absolutely clear?"

He cut the channel without waiting for a reply.

Just one of the captured Falcons carried hornets and Max ordered Makk to eject them in response to a peremptory command from Sector Security.

A few minutes later the Enterprise materialised in Menelaus Paradise.

## **Chapter 21: A Broken Thread**

“I’ve got more ears than Delaxian Wheat’, that’s what Hagman really said?”

Jackson nodded, grinned and threw a red chip into the pot as a chuckle rippled around the table.

“I thought only stereotypes in bad holo-flicks talked like that!” Max continued. He took another look at his hole card, flexing it so just a corner showed and then met the bet. Across the table Corrin snorted derisively. “You can cut that out laddie!” He smiled at the women sitting either side of him. “It’s an old card sharp’s trick, make others think you’re uncertain how it fits with the show cards.”

“Shame on you Max,” Tyre smiled, her eyes flashing warmth.

“Yes, taking advantage of us helpless little girls,” Kaitrin added. “For shame. Does two pairs beat a blush?”

“Flush,” Corrin corrected. “And you can cut it out too lass! I can barely see you over that pile of chips.”

“Well, you’ve certainly paid enough for a closer look later lover.”

Her chuckle was like the tinkle of fine crystal.

“See you and raise two of these pretty blue ones!”

Corrin groaned and threw down his cards.

“I’m surprised Rarr didn’t tell you,” Jackson continued while Tyre examined her hand with screwed face concentration, oblivious to the nuanced interchange going on across the Enterprise briefing room table.

“He can’t read lips,” Max answered. “Relax Jack, I know you chose his place for the meet knowing he’d recognise you both and report to me. Clever, otherwise I might think you’re playing two hands.”

“Why’s that?” Tyre asked innocently as she tentatively pushed three chips into the centre of the table.

“Rarr and I have an understanding,” Max answered dryly.

“He does what Max wants or he ends up in a medi-bay.” Jackson raised his bet again, two red chips.

“Hagman is a thug, he’s just not cut out for scheming. I’m sticking with the winning side!”

“Which is us?”

“Who else?” Jackson responded. “Your bet Max.”

Max contemplated the two queens in front of Jackson and then looked at him quizzically.

“You’re bluffing Jack.”

Max tapped his two tens showing and doubled the bet.

“Fold,” Kaitrin said. “You too hon, a pair of three’s ain’t gonna cut it. Can’t you smell the testosterone?”

Tyre primly folded her cards and placed them precisely on the discard pile.

Jackson doubled again, Max grinned and met the bet.

“I don’t want to take your ship Jack. Call.”

He flicked up his hole card, another ten and added a pair of fives from his hand.

Jackson turned up the third queen and added a fourth with a thin smile and scooped the chips in as Max groaned. He liked poker, almost as much as he enjoyed playing chess.

Mate in five.

“To victory,” Kaitrin raised her wine glass. The others echoed her toast, Jackson joining in, warmed as much by the radiant comradeship as the Argon whisky burning in his stomach.

Jakiziak swallowed hard, the bile burning her throat. The Teladi computer expert shuddered in the hot egg of her small laboratory and inserted the crystal wafer into the interface. She systematically ran the claw crafted program it contained on the data burned into its unique matrix, checking it once again for errors she was certain enough of her own abilities to be sure were not there but Hagman would be here soon.

She tried not to react as the door hissed open and the man slipped in but she could swear the temperature fell several degrees. Unbidden, the old egg tales of the demon with the heart of ice crawled in her brain, making her colder still.

“You have it?”

Jakiziak plucked the crystal from the interface with a shaking claw and held it out, flushing green with the shame of her fear.

“You know what this is?” Hagman asked quietly.

She did. It was a Secure-Core, more rumour than technology. Under different circumstances it would have fascinated her.

“And all your work has been conducted on it?”

She managed to nod, her head feeling it was not quite hers.

Hagman removed a black leather glove, pulling on each finger with a fastidious precision she found hypnotic. He touched the polished tip and she held her breath, as the sensor tasted his DNA. A slow blue, like an ocean seen from space suffused the pale crystal. “Good,” Hagman smiled. There was no warmth in his voice or eyes.

“Sssee,” she said, “no copies. Iss original master.”

When he ordered her to lie down she did, her will stolen by the horrible inevitability of it all.

Law said nothing when Hagman reported the murder but his eyes glinted with anticipation when he identified the remaining conspirators.

“From his secure backups, Lord. The murderers overlooked them.”

Law wasn’t interested in details; he barely stirred in the depths of the throne, barely taking his eyes off the spectacle of his fully functional shipyard beyond the armoured plexi-glass of the Observation Lounge and then only to snatch a glance of the naked slave hanging spread-eagled, a shade against the stars, blood below her feet. The Black Heart hunched cradled in its arms, disgorging the equipment it had managed to snatch from the darker corners of the universe in what were sometimes the bare minutes before the Enterprise jumped in.

“Production is slow,” Law observed. “It is time Njy and his associates paid their dues.”

Hagman dipped his head in a slight bow.

“I leave on the next jump. We will return with supplies.”

“My triumph is inevitable,” Law said in a distant voice. “Now leave, I have business to attend.”

The suspended woman moaned like a crushed animal.

The crystal blushed blue in Hagman’s hand and he slipped it across the table to Jackson. Behind him two young blond Argon women were becoming over-friendly. Jackson took it without taking his eyes off the show. “Half a Binary Core, so far so good Hagman.”

He inserted it into his data padd.

“You can’t read the data without the other half, or my fresh DNA.”

“Wouldn’t have it any other way,” Jackson smiled. “Just correlating file patterns.”

The padd confirmed the pattern matched the holo-image Hagman sent the day before. It was a perfect bifurcation.

“Good, so neither of us can run the program without the other, the perfect basis for trust. Now how are we going to work this thing?”

“When you know when Force plans to make his move, contact me the normal way. Once he’s through the gate and fighter screen I can disable the station defences. Then bring him to me.”

He slipped a data chip across. “Holo of the station and channel encryptions so we can speak securely over the station comms. Don’t wait too long. Law has a second team working on the same data, it’s only a question of time.”

Jackson palmed it and Hagman stood up to leave, gathering his goons with a glance.

“Hagman,” Jackson said sharply. “Don’t you screw with me. Play along and we’ll all get what we want. Fuck about and I promise you more shit than you’d ever believe, even from beyond the grave.”

“All I want is the old Stoertebeker Clan in the old, stable Clan system and my cut of the new technology. And Force better make a move soon, the Njy are beginning to siphon off Split Naval supplies. Leave it too long and Law will have a new fleet.”

He wasn’t, Jackson was confident now, clever enough to fool him. If he moved his pieces right the Confeds could come out on the top of the heap and if Max bowed to the inevitable, when the time came, he could be a part of it.

A big part.

If not? Well Jackson sincerely hoped it wouldn’t come to that but in the end business was business, even between friends.

The next two weeks passed in a constant game of hide and seek as the Enterprise hounded the Stoertebeker TL across the sectors, between incessant trade runs. With his factories working at full capacity, the profits made from the contracts Massoor helped strike with independent entrepreneurs, and the sale of a slew of ships seized in Eighteen Billion before the Teladi Navy closed the last Xenon hunting sector, Max was able to deposit the five million credits required for the deep space conversion.

“Any progress on cracking the Challenger chip?”

“We’re making progress all the time,” Xela answered. “But to be honest you should not be optimistic. It could take months and if Jackson is to be believed...”

Xela left the question hanging in the ozone air of the small computer room aboard the Teladi Gain Chip Fab.

“Jack’s on the level,” Max said. “He’s kept us informed every step of the way and you’ve checked that Binary Core out yourself.”

“You’re gambling Max,” Xela warned. “We could try and punch our way through the defences and blow the station. Then no-one would have the data, leaving us plenty of time to figure it out for ourselves. You’ve got a few hornets stashed in Hatikvah’s Faith.”

“That station is full of slaves by now, we’d be murdering them. And I don’t want to think about the casualties we’d take running the LT perimeter. Our last probe showed twenty around the station alone. If the perimeter goes down we know Hagman is on the level.”

“It’s not Hagman I’m worried about,” Xela repeated. Max shrugged. “My call Zee, how are those Xenon conversions going?”

“Both XL’s have new cockpits and control systems, they are still poor ships. You should sell them and get some more Mambas. While the Enterprise is in Spacedock our forces are going to be spread thin even if we do rely on the Confeds to protect this place. And those Split pirates are getting bolder. They almost caught one of our convoys in Hila’s Joy and once the Enterprise is out of commission those convoys are going to get juicier. The Boron Navy TL Sinas sub-contracted won’t leave Ocean of Fantasy except to jump to Kingdom End. I vote we wait.”

“Community accountants are already probing our finances. You aren’t going to be able to catch all their spiders and the lawyers won’t be able to stall them forever. With the Black Heart taking on supplies in Family Njy and the Split denying everything the odds aren’t going to get any better. The clock’s running.”

“I hope you are right Max,” Xela sighed. “Ready for disconnect.”

Max punched a code into the keypad and removed the Xela chip.

With the Enterprise wrapped in the arms of the Ocean of Fantasy Space-dock, the Raiders transferred to the Menelaus Paradise Laser Tower Factory. The forty available fighters were in almost constant use, flying CAP on both jump-gates and escorting the convoys of Force and Independent freighters that kept the blood of trade flowing in this segment of the New Frontier. The strain on the maintenance crews was immense, on the pilots even worse, despite the support of two wings of Confed Bayamons Jackson led himself from the cockpit of his Argon Elite heavy fighter. Even Corrin pulled enough flight hours to still all his complaining, taking command of the rapid reaction wing based on the Ocean of Fantasy Trading Station in a rented hanger.

The Raiders ground troops incessantly practised base assault tactics using the data Jackson provided.

“It’ll tumble like a pack of cards Commander,” the Sarge assured him with a grin Max could barely return through an exhausted fog.

It took all his willpower to resist the Siren lure of stims but his time he had Tyre’s soft shoulder to lean on.

Jackson and Hagman met again, this time in the cockpit of an Argon Lifter that docked briefly at Confed Station to take on spaceweed destined for Black Hole Sun.

“Is Force making his move? We know his ship is laid up in Space-dock.”

“He’s moving,” Jackson confirmed. “The feds have somehow got on his case about a little skeleton in the Force locker.” He smiled innocently.

“And your people will be in a position to take out his people once we waste Force?”

Jackson’s eyes narrowed to an armour-piercing stare.

“Let’s get one thing straight Hagman, Force is mine. There’s a fucking reason why I’m a clan chief before the big three zero has even nosed over the horizon and you’re a flunky asking for my help. I don’t throw tools away, I use them. Whoever controls Force controls the Raiders. If his corporation is cut from under him he’ll be right back to what he used to be, a merc leader for hire. Unlike you clowns I don’t waste good men.”

“And you can do that?”

“Screw your fucking scepticism Hagman, you came to me remember? I’m not the one working for a madman who’s destroying his clan. As it happens I know a secret that can blow the Force Corporation from space with one transmission.”

“Then give,” Hagman demanded.

There was no way Jackson was going to tell Hagman about the penetration of the Data-Core and that the Force Corporation had been bankrolled by a Clan. It was his black bishop, static on the board, waiting for the moves to play out until with one move it could pin the White Queen, leaving it unable to move without putting the King in check. The Community of Planets would go Split all over the Force Corp ass. Thanks to his subtle tip-offs they were already suspicious. They just needed the clues hidden in his own Clan records.

Our deal is I remove him from your way. If any killing needs to be done it’s going to be by me. Clear?”

Hagman nodded but his eyes told the truth of his intentions. Jackson fought back a sigh. He’d do his best to keep Max alive and bring him and his organisation, into the Confed fold but it just may not be possible he realised, with genuine regret.

“You’d better get one thing straight too Jackson,” Hagman said. “Morn’s people are standing by to take over my station, they think this is all part of Law’s plans. If I don’t monitor your people leaving as agreed I’ll blow me, you and Force to atoms.”

“I’ve a core breach ready to run,” Jackson answered. “We’ll head for Force’s Chip Fab.”

“Good, so long as we understand each other.”

Jackson briefly considered ordering his LT’s to swat Hagman from the sky but he let the Lifter fly away. He’d clawed his way to near the top of the heap and it was too late to let friendship block the path to the summit. He could see how the pieces would move so clearly now, as Law’s and Max’s mirror fixation played out against Hagman’s clumsy treachery. He’d end up the head of the most powerful clan in space, with the Powers in his debt for the new technology.

Somehow he imagined total victory would taste better.

“Control to Escort One, scan those canisters, we don’t want any surprises.”

Makk’s response came back, crisp and business-like.

“Roger Control, performing sweep.”

The pale glow of the sector display drained Kaitrin’s face of colour as she tracked the hand over in Hila’s Joy. The icon representing Makk’s Falcon detached itself from the clustered convoy and headed

towards the dozens of cargo containers drifting behind the Chinn's Escape jumpgate. The four Mule freighters were already plodding back towards Split space.

With the borders sealed to alien traffic, Split entrepreneurs seeking to trade Rastar Oil and Chelt Meat directly with other species rather than through Family Njy middlemen, had turned to Max for help. Massoor negotiated a series of deals that were profitable for all concerned, except of course the Family Njy, but it required the transshipment of goods.

The exchange had become routine. The Split freighters would slip across the border, drop the cargo and a mixture of Force and independent freighters would scoop it up under the watchful eyes of a wing of Raiders fighters out of the Ocean of Fantasy Trading Station.

The All-Seeing-Eye orbited the sector shipyard, where the Enterprise was berthed, although locked deep in the windowless Control Centre Kaitrin and her small team could see nothing. Their view were the signals from the network of Force nav-sats, scattered through the more friendly sectors of the universe. Naturally this did not include any sector controlled by the Family Njy. Small raiding wings from the new Clan base just across the frontier had made a habit of crossing into Hila's Joy, forcing Max to keep a strong presence to compensate for the Boron reluctance to deploy forces that close to the border. Two Falcons and two Piranhas were on permanent station but after inflicting a few crushed snouts the patrols had become humdrum routine.

"Escort One to Escort Two, go free while I check out these crates."

Makk eased the big Teladi fighter on a new course as her wingman responded with an affirmative which crackled with static this close to a jumpgate.

She'd been flying the Falcon for two weeks now. At first she missed the speed of her old Piranha and envied the Commander his sleek deadly Mamba but she had come to appreciate the extra 25MW shield, particularly for escort duties where the ability to hang in a fire-fight was more important than the speed to launch slash and disengage attacks. Defenders and interceptors, they all had their role in a decent force mix and her Falcon now felt like a second skin.

Giving the ungainly Mule freighters a wide berth as they lumbered back to the jumpgate she orbited the drifting canisters and methodically scanned them for mines or any of the other nasty surprises they might conceal. Chelt meat and Rastar Oil, just like the manifest stated.

"Okay boys, they're all yours. Escort Two, rejoin formation."

One by one the Boron Dolphins swam forward to feed, filling their subspace holds to whatever capacity the independent traders could afford to tune up to. The escort wing flew two wide covering circles, being careful not to stray too close to the mouth of the jumpgate, in case one of the infrequent Xenon caps chose that moment to drop in.

Don't provoke the Xenon! It was a standing order.

"Escort One – gate activating!"

Makk caught the flashing wink from the corner of her eye just as Alimo made the call.

Her heart quickened in anticipation, revving her body for fight or flight.

She broke high and right, craning her neck to keep the blinking gate in view and identify the incursion. Small ships, fighters, little more than shadows against a nebula smear of colour. She recognised the distinctive quadruple nacelles of the Bayamon fighter just as the C & C channel crackled to life.

"Escort Leader, Escort Leader, be advised. Six, repeat six Bayamon fighters in sector."

"Copy that Control," Makk acknowledged, pulling out of the loop and half rolling to put the newcomers above her.

“Escort Three, cover the freighters, I’ll check them out.”

There was a chance they were just nosing around and the Commander did not want his pilots starting any fights. They were though, and he was clear on this point, they were to finish them.

Like fish in a synchronised shoal the six Bayamons flipped on their axis and fired on her and her trailing wingman. Makk rolled the Falcon through the plasma streams, taking glancing hits.

“Escort Four, bug out with the freighters. Everyone else, break and attack!”

Kaitrin thought for a short second as the three Raiders fighters moved to engage. Against six Bayamons it was no contest, which was why her nose was twitching like something had crawled into the Control Centre and died.

“Reaction Wing to standby, Alert One, Alert Two – immediate launch. Looks like a set-up to me Race, contact the Commander.”

Her assistant controller began whispering into his mike.

The three Raider and six Hostile icons were one tangled mass on screen. The three freighters and the lone Piranha escort were arcing away from the combat zone as per Standard Operating Procedure. Once clear they would head for the sector Trading Station.

“Alert One and Two, launching now, what’s up lass?”

“Pirates in Hila’s Joy, lover, I think it’s a trap. Get there ASAP.”

Corrin snapped an acknowledgement.

She glanced at the HJ sector display and her voice tightened.

“More bandits inbound, Reaction Wing immediate launch. Shake those tails guys! Copy that Alert One? We’ve got a real fight on our hands.”

Corrin’s Mamba and his wingman were already burning towards the Hila’s Joy jumpgate. She switched back to the HJ display. A five ship sector security patrol had launched from the Trading Station and was racing towards her freighters.

“Escort One, hang in there, help’s on the way. Race, send a tactical update.”

Then she glanced at his screen. The Menelaus Paradise gate to Law’s sector was buried under a mass of red icons. Without needing to be told her assistant triggered an All Ships Scramble.

Kaitrin shivered, like someone had just walked over her grave.

In Menelaus Paradise Max was wrenched from a grey, restless, sleep by the animal wail of the alert klaxon. “What...”

He silenced Tyre with curt, warning, palm and snapped open the portable comm.

“Force here, go,” he snapped as he struggled into his crumpled flight suit. He didn’t recognise the man’s voice but could hear the coiled tension. “Multiple incursions from the East gate, LT’s engaging, scrambling all fighters and there’s some clan activity in Hila’s Joy. Stand by..” There was a short pause. “All Ocean of Fantasy defenders launching Commander.”

“Prep my ship,” Max ordered, “I’m on my way.”

He grabbed a quick kiss and bolted for the launch bays.

“Six cleared Escort Two,” Makk yelled as her own ship shuddered under crossfire that raked over her shields. “Damn,” she muttered as she was forced to go evasive before she could deal the final blow to the Bayamon hounding her wingman. The three Raiders fighters were outnumbered four to one now and the enemy did not fly like Clan, like they had a skin and a ship investment to protect. They fought like warriors, with discipline and precision, knowing precisely how far to push a position and when to use their speed to extend and regroup.

And a Pegasus had slipped through the gate and was bolting for deep space, she didn't like that at all.

Another pair fell on the Falcon, again she sweated out a series of defensive breaks but the two Bayamons stuck to her six like they were molecularly bonded. Straining to look left and right over her shoulder she barrel rolled the heavy fighter, dragonfly missiles flashing past the cockpit.

“Hang on lass, we're almost there, bring them left, bring them left!”

She glanced at the HUD and rolled into another break, through a storm of plasma.

“Splash one, splash two!”

Corrin's voice was warm and avuncular, comforting like a favourite uncle and the plasma barrage abruptly ceased. Two Mambas streaked by, their graceful gull wings glittering in the bright sunlight as they broke high and low.

“All right baby,” Makk muttered, “let's turn and burn!”

“Way to go lover!” Kaitrin yelled as she tried to keep an eye on both battles. Corrin's two fighters had arrived in the proverbial nick of time to rescue the beleaguered Raiders ships. The second wave of Piranhas were already rocketing towards the freighter convoy where another dozen Bayamons battled the lone Raider escort and the surviving four Piranha from sector security. One freighter was already vapour but experience told her the odds were ebbing in the Raiders favour.

The battle in Menelaus Paradise was going the same way but the same experience told her they were missing something. The initial attack wave was a dozen Mandalays swathed in a cloak of drones that the LT's flashed and sliced through as a second wave of Mandalays and drones arrived. These fighters just slammed into the LT's, detonating squash mines at such close range they destroyed themselves. The surviving fighters just scattered across the sector, making no effort to engage the defenders.

“They're on autopilot!” Max realised quickly. Race ordered the heavy fighters back, expecting the real attack through the unguarded gate. One Mandalay had arrowed for deep space at a full two-sixty mps, dropping another nav-sat each time the pursuing Piranha splashed one. She expected the Black Heart to arrive, hornets flaring, every second.

“Chew on that you bastard!” Makk snarled as the Bayamon flared to fragments in her sights. She rolled and fell on another, smearing away its shields with a superbly judged piece of deflection shooting.

“Good shot Makk,” Corrin called. “They're running so let's give them a jolly good hiding. Hammer and Anvil chaps.”

The two Mamba arced at full speed around the fleeing wings of fighters, ten in all, while the two Falcons came relentlessly on. Curving around the far side of the gate Corrin and his wingman banked and shot straight through it, engaging at long range and forcing the fleeing fighters to break. The Falcons pitilessly picked their targets and fired.

“Nav-sat!” Kaitrin shouted, “All ships, clear the gate, clear the gate!”

Reflexively Makk rolled and climbed as a slab of metal seemed to loom from the vacuum, the huge black snout of the Stoertebeker Albatross protruding from the swirling energies of the jumpgate. Almost instantly the missile alert sang and the sky was full of burning spearhead on shafts of fuel exhaust, arcing and tracking. And for the first time she was afraid, really afraid, the Falcon didn't have the speed of the Piranhas and the Mambas and so could only outmanoeuvre, not outrun the killing rain.

Kaitrin, her voice calming cool, called the breaks, allowing Makk to presciently roll and dodge the mosquitoes, the dragonflies and the silkworms hailing in from every vector, all the time seeking to move her away from the hulking epicentre as the Black Heart juggernauted on. Race did the same for the other Falcon and Corrin and his wingman slashed through the storm, snap shooting silkworms and keeping the Bayamons at bay even as they evaded those homing on them.

It was utterly magnificent.

“They can give it out but can they take it lass!?”

There was a smile in Corrin's voice, the confident tone of one who was right where he should be, where he wanted to be, doing what he did best.

The four Raiders fighters shook themselves free of the remaining missiles and locked their own silkworms on the Black Heart. As the missiles exploded from the two Mambas surging forward like racers given their exuberant head, the Black Heart vanished in the aqua swirl of its own wormhole, leaving three spheres that shone like jewels set in a sea of stars.

She saw it happen, from the corner of her eye as she banked away, it burned on her retina like animated fire. The exploding squash mines tossed both of the graceful Split fighters, like bottles on an angry sea. She saw the explosion snap their elegant necks and shear their beautiful wings from their bodies. She saw the cockpits shatter, peeled away like the shell from an egg.

The penumbra of the explosion kicked her ship like a giant kicking a child's toy but she pulled the nose round, defiant of the shield low warnings, defiant of the energies raging around her, pulling it round like a mariner facing a storm.

She saw the twisted, drifting, figures and somewhere distant, like the echo of a nightmare, she heard a woman scream.

Jackson rode a Pegasus through Black Hole Sun, he stormed through Xenon space, weaving through the plasma, skimming between the cruisers that barred the jumpgate. He ignored Split demands, in a cold, cold, rage he smashed the Pegasi sent to intercept him in Chinn's Escape.

He made it in time for the memorial.

And as the Raider fighters flew by the Laser Tower Factory observation lounge, in a diamond formation achingly missing two facets he saw his friend, standing stiffly at the front, surrounded by his men.

And he'd never seen anyone look so alone.

## **Chapter 22: The Beating of the Drums**

“Thanks for coming Jack.” His voice sounded hollow and somehow distant against the background murmur of the party as it strained to take the sort of wing Corrin would have liked.

Max took the proffered whisky and killed it with a single swallow. It burned down his throat and sat in the pit of his empty stomach, a warmth that touched nothing because there was nothing to touch. He almost envied Kaitrin her grief; at least she was feeling something, this was just like stepping back into a dark tunnel. Just the faint echoes of what he’d felt before, when he thought he’d killed Paskaal, when he did kill Challenger and his crew.

For the greater bloody good.

Jackson refilled his glass. “Kaitrin taking it hard?” He realised immediately how hollow the question sounded and took a sip from his own glass. “Tyre’s with her. She blames herself,” Max answered.

“And you?”

Max shrugged. “There was nothing I could have done. Law outsmarted us and Corrin got careless, overconfident.”

“An occupational hazard.”

“Yea, I’ll drink to that.” Their glasses met with the dull cheap, glass chime of a funeral bell.

“Hagman said nothing about this, if he had I’d have said something, you know that. Corrin was a stand-up guy and a great pilot.”

Max looked at him through the distorting lens of the whisky and finally broke the silence.

“Xela thinks you’re fixing to sell us out.”

Jackson nodded thoughtfully. “And what do you think Max?”

He looked at Jackson for a long moment.

“If you think it’s in your interest to trade both the potential credits and power you’d accrue from our exploitation of the new tech and a base in Teladi Gain for the guaranteed income and influence that selling to the highest bidding Power would bring..” He shrugged.

“I’d also get my own sector, with control of Station Prime,” Jackson added. “And I have to factor in an estimate of whether you are willing and able to be a partner. You could just carry out your mission and turn the stuff over to The Cabal.”

“With Artur killed, I wouldn’t know how. And he thought they were compromised. Marteene is dead and gone, it’s just Max now.” Max spoke without passion, words were lighter than hydrogen weighed in the scales of self interest.

“You could just turn it over to your government?”

“And turn the New Frontier into a war-zone as each race fought to control the sector?”

Jackson emptied his own glass.

“What would you do in my position Max?” he asked quietly.

“I think that’s up to you, I’m on a road with no turns.”

Max channelled every spare credit into new ships and Laser Towers.

“Enough LT’s to hold off another attack, Zee?”

She ran the tactical simulations through again and answered instantly.

“Everyone’s screaming about your ban on fighter escorts and the threat to shoot anything down that deviates from a pre-agreed flight path but it should allow our light fighters to splash any nav-sat deployment that Law slips through, in seconds. Our LT’s are programmed to go for ships in order of speed and ignore drones so if the Black Heart wants to come calling directly it’ll have to come through the East Gate. If it enters through the south it’ll have to jump into Bluish Snout, in which case we’ll see it and be waiting on the other side of the door with a big stick. We could lose a lot of stations despite the protection, but the Trading Station and the LT Factory could hold out long enough for our faster ships to get back.”

Max looked around the table, the Sarge, Jackson and Kaitrin, thin and pale.

“Your people up for a fight Jack?”

“Absolutely Max, all this close defence work around my two stations has been fraying their nerves and the booty wouldn’t go amiss.”

“Sarge, you clear on your part?”

“If you think the damn thing will fly,” he answered in a tone that suggested little confidence in simulations, no matter how advanced and human sounding the AI validating them.

Max checked his watch and stood up. “Make sure you catch the show.”

“Try to smile Max, we want people to love you not use you as a threat to get their kids to behave!”

Max forced the corners of his mouth upwards and Anje Delenari threw up her hands in mock exasperation. “No, stop! Can you do mean and moody? Great, perfect, leave the shades on. Don’t forget, pause after each question as if you’re thinking about it. Try not to let your mouth get ahead of your brain okay? And keep your eye on the monitor.” She gestured towards the small screen, a few feet off to the left. It showed the same green sofa he was sitting on, only it was empty.

Max nodded. He’d heard it all before. Just then the green light came on and the lights dimmed. The technician behind the console at the far end of the rectangular holo-studio started a five second countdown with flashing fingers. The Raiders PR slipped away into the shadows. Max took a last sip of chilled water from the glass on the low table in front of him. As the tech sat down the space besides Max shimmered, like a haze rising from a hot desert floor and a perfectly coiffured blonde Argon woman, handsome still in middle age, appeared beside him. It was only the fact that the sofa did not shift with new weight that informed Max’s senses that this was a hologram and not some attention seeking teleportation entrance. The monitor screen showed just the woman.

The near empty room filled with applause and Mori, she was too famous to bear the onerous burden of a surname, smiled a gracious acceptance, her red lips glittering with diamond dust and her eyes sparkling with the inner light of her own self-esteem. Max tried not to stare at her cleavage as the applause swelled to a crescendo of whoops that she modestly silenced with a gracious wave of her hand.

“Welcome back, and next up on the holo couch is a man that needs no introduction, but I’m going to give him one anyway.” She paused, smiled roguishly and licked her lips. The tech was counting down from five again. “All the way from the edge of the New Frontier, mercenary turned gate racer turned plutocrat and scourge of the Pirate Clans, a big Mori welcome to,” She paused and smiled again. “Max Force!” The applause burst like a wave and rapidly swelled to a crest of “Max, Max, Max,” like the

race fans did, back in Black Hole Sun. A genuine smile cracked his face at the memory and the swelling roar of popular acclaim. He was now beside Mori on the monitor.

“Max,” Mori smiled. The illusion was perfect, right down to the eye contact. “First I’m sure we’d all like to express our condolences for the recent loss of your friend.” She looked directly towards the audience.

“Max’s friend and associate, Mirv Corrin recently lost his life in a skirmish with Stoertebeker forces.”

Max gave a thin, awkward smile and following the prompts Xela scrolled across the shade’s HUD he said,

“Thanks Mori, Mirv was my friend and I miss him.”

He paused as the prompt instructed and sympathetic applause rippled through the invisible audience.

“This act will not go unpunished.”

The applause swelled to a roar. Max felt unclean.

Eyes glistening, Mori let the applause thunder for a count of ten before raising a hand.

“Max,” she said, her voice lightening. “You’ve come a long way in a short time, mercenary for hire and now the governor of an entire sector of the New Frontier. To what do you owe this great success, apart from your charm and good looks?”

It was like Anje had assured him. “She’ll serve ‘em up, you just whack ‘em out the park!”

Max leaned back, relaxed and began reading the prompt Xela scrolled across the personal HUD in the mirrored glasses.

“Well Mori, I guess it’s all down to my enormous peni...” He grimaced and removed the shades. “My enormous penchant for...” He pretended to be considering his words rather than groping for them. “For not being screwed around. Can I say ‘screwed’?” Mori smiled indulgently and scattered whoops came from the invisible audience. “I guess if certain people hadn’t started messing with me I’d still be hauling cargo in the old Destiny Star. That was my first ship – an Argon Lifter. I’m a you push me and I’ll rip your face off kind of guy.”

The whooping intensified.

“Then you have no intention of backing off even though we know Law has a working shipyard?”

“This became personal when he whacked my facility in Scale Plate Green and snatched Tyre, Mori. This won’t end until one of us is dead. In a couple of weeks the Enterprise refit will be complete then there will be no place for him to hide.”

“This refit, Max?” Mori consulted her datapadd. “We understand it involves new engines of some kind. Why?”

“It’s a complete refit Mori, she’ll be capable of interplanetary travel, just like Law’s ship. It means when I take his station the bastard won’t be able to run away like the murdering coward he is.”

He leaned towards the unseen audience.

“You can run but you can’t hide!”

He felt cheaper than an old Bliss Place hooker with the Fleet out but with the Feds sniffing around his finances he needed as much public support as he could get. The audience roared it’s bellicosity and Max compelled another smile from his face and wondered how much harm just one spaceweed joint could do.

“Two weeks,” Law repeated. He pivoted his seat away from the panoramic blaze of stars to look at Hagman, his face hard and querulous. “Do our agents concur?”

Hagman spoke carefully. “That is the estimate they confirm the Boron shipyard quoted and that is the schedule in place. We do not have access to the ship. If we did we could sabotage it.”

Law turned back towards the observation window. “In two weeks our fleet will have doubled in size providing Njy and Morn’s supplies continue to flow. Confine the Black Heart to trade runs, we should not risk further escapades no matter how satisfying the outcome.”

Hagman nodded, refraining from observing that the last operation was conducted entirely between Law and Captain Hart.

Like a street magician running a shell game Max had shuffled his fighters between escorts duties in Menelaus Paradise, convoy escorts up and down this segment of the New Frontier and combat patrols until the bulk of his forces were sequestered in Ocean of Fantasy.

Kaitrin watched the convoy crawl towards the Hila’s Joy jumpgate from The All-Seeing-Eye. Five Lifters, sub-space holds filled with Computer Components, Quantum Tubes, Warheads, shields and particle cannons and five wingman pairs of Eel and Piranha fighters. Almost every last credit the Force Corporation had, Massoor, the Raiders Trade-Master invested in high profit yield technologies to feed the voracious appetite of the shipyard in Family Njy.

It was one of the bitter ironies of capitalism, he thought as he watched the convoy progress from his temporary station aboard the Force Command and Control vessel. The laws of supply and demand meant the Stoertebeker Clan and Force were probably sustaining each other through trade even as they girded themselves for battle. The Split were equipping their ally but had no compunction about making out like Teladi in the process.

The Force convoy stood off fifteen clicks from the Chin’s Escape jumpgate, awaiting the Split transporters. One by one the Mules slipped through, five of the box-ugly ships and the Force freighters dropped cargo canisters and rolled back towards the Ocean of Fantasy gate. The escort fighters circled the canisters – credits on delivery. The Mules were halfway to the Force convoy when fighters flooded through from Split space.

“Bayamon and Orinoco wings inbound,” Kaitrin whispered into her microphone. “And Scorpions!” she said, surprised. Then, six Mambas. It was hard to believe Njy could be so blatant but it was no secret that he lived for the day the Split-Boron hostility flared to war. The few Boron sector security fighters clustered close to their stations and no navy fighters launched from the Trading Station. They had made their position clear. This was Max’s war.

“Makk,” she whispered urgently. “Tactical withdrawal, now. Leave the crates and protect the freighters.”

Qyrtiz t’Rrgg’s bulbous nose tingled, his eyes glittered beneath the single bone ridge and his jowl heavy face broke into a grimace of pleasure as the enemy fighters turned to flee. He glanced left and right to confirm his wing protectors were in place. They were, the regulation four wingspans distant, as he expected. They were elite, the best of the best of the best. And the best were the Njy Honour Guard and their blood sang to be in battle, cried out for the hated Boron to join the coming battle. He acknowledged his comrades with a clenched fist and lowered his visor. The six Mambas swept on over the drifting containers, towards the crawling Force convoy.

The first inkling that something was wrong came when the Eye to Ocean of Fantasy winked aqua, and kept blinking. He checked the scanner, there was some kind of static interference from the cargo field but that didn’t concern him now, that was the business of the Clan and their big, hybrid fighter-traders, poised to appropriate them as their forty escorts swept on in his wake like a cloak. No – there were

motes flecking the Eye. Ships, many ships. He dropped a navigation satellite to identify them because the Boron had locked the attackers out of the sector info-net. Mambas and Piranhas, too many and too soon. The Family Intelligence Master stated that Force's fleet was too thinly spread to muster such strength in such a brief time and the likelihood of the craven aquatics evolving a spine were zero.

Forty Force fighters, practically his entire known strength, raged towards him like a storm. Qyrtiz was not a fool, if his being did not so thrill to the clash of arms, respond with such delicious pleasure to the risking and taking of life, he would have been an Honoured General, commanding an entire Brotherhood of fighters, wielding them like a sword from the command deck of a Raptor Carrier. But that was not for him, victory without risk was bloodless and without worth. He would die with a control stick in his hands, pouring fire into the foe, screaming defiance with his last breath.

But not today, not to this trap.

"All fighters, fall back to Position Two."

Qyrtiz was indeed no fool. This he had anticipated. Word from the Boron sectors came as faint whispers and even the Intelligence Master could make mistakes. A prudent leader anticipated that an enemy as worthy as Force had repeatedly proven himself to be, may have surprises to spring. Qyrtiz would engage Force near the jumpgate, allowing a clear escape route. If Force followed, The Fist of Njy, a battle-ready Raptor-class Carrier, would smite him down.

The second inkling that his carefully woven plan was coming unravelled came in a flash that overloaded his visor's light attenuator and filled the cockpit with a long rumbling roar, like the ignition of an old chemical booster. Blinded, he held the controls firm. The stick shuddered in his hand but he held his course on instinct, cresting through the shockwave.

Through the coloured, shape-shifting blobs, drifting like amoeba in his vision, he saw what his brain had instinctively surmised. Force had mined the canisters. It was a ruse he had used before and the interference patterns on the scanners a clue. He would have cursed his allies for their lack of caution, for their failure to thoroughly check for the kind of trap they should have known to expect, but space around him was filled with their wreckage, their twisted, burnt bodies. Nine Orinoco fighters survived and they, typical of the individualistic, Teladi-like greed of those drawn to the Clans, were scavenging like P'grak. Force would kill them all, he spat with contempt.

His ships though, were intact, and he noted with pride, still in two, perfect, tri-formations. The bulk of the Clan Bayamons followed, although a handful had joined the feeding frenzy in the debris field, jockeying without honour for the broken bones of their comrade's ships. Let Force crush them also.

As the vast Clan armada of Bayamons sped towards the border gate he began issuing orders. Without the Orinoco contingent the Force fleet outmatched them and morale would be low. However, this was not an encounter they needed to win. The goal remained the same, inflict substantial casualties and stage a 'rout' back through to Split space, where the Navy could deal with the invaders.

The final clue that this was not his day came when the border gate flashed to life, at first the nose of a huge ship protruding through from hyperspace, then the whole, gleaming white thing. It had the un-aesthetic lines of a Boron transporter and two long nacelles hanging from inverted curved struts on either side of the hull. It was dropping Laser Towers, deploying drones and it was launching fighters. Wave after wave of fighters.

"They're breaking and running," Kaitrin announced, struggling to keep the feral hatred she felt from her voice. "Your orders Captain." "Crew's discretion," the Sarge answered. "You people know your jobs, I'm just keeping the seat warm."

"Discretion aye!" Kaitrin confirmed. This time there was a blade in her voice. She glanced at the holo-pic taped above her monitor and said.

“This one’s for you lover.” Then she was in the groove, working with her assistants in near telepathy, assessing the tactical instructions feeding from Max’s ship, routing them, whispering instructions. The Raiders hammer smashed the scattering Bayamons and Mambas against the Enterprise anvil.

Max locked onto the Mamba at the apex of the leading three ship wing. They were flying the standard Split formation for this situation and that being so, he would bet good credits that it was the leader of the this attack. The fact that only those six ships retained any semblance of discipline cemented his suspicion that this was more than a Clan incursion, into certainty.

“This is what it’s all about isn’t it Max!” Jackson’s voice buzzed over the comms channel.  
“Confederation fighters moving to kick Split ass!”

With two Raiders Mambas flying loose cover Max stalked his opponent, pulling up onto his six as it jousted with a pair of Confederation fighters. His first shots ripped across the glowing drives but the enemy rolled and twisted away, dumping speed for a second and forcing Max to overshoot.

“Tricky bastard,” Xela commented with a fraction of her attention as she kept up a stream of orders to Raiders fighters and tactical analyses to Kaitrin.

For Max, the battle narrowed down to this one on one encounter, just peripherally aware of the background chatter, seeing only what his fighting instincts needed to see. Pairs of Confed Bayamons ripping apart single Split counterparts as they battered against the inexorable confines of the trap like flies against glass, the slicing scimitars of LT beams tearing ships to plasma, Raiders ships in close formation, hounding solitary prey. Flashing vignettes in his line of sight, in his peripheral vision as he wrestled the controls.

The Split was good, the Split was very good. But Max was better, he flew like he never did before, Paskaal, Corrin, his old friend’s voice in his head. “That’s it laddie, steady, bring him round, bring him round, bring him in close. Fire!” His PAC’s ripped into the Split and Max followed him through every desperate twist, matched each speed bleeding barrel roll, each attempted break, every split S, firing energy conserving bursts, chipping away at the shields until the sun-hot particles ripped through the engine core and it flared to fragments.

It felt good and he scanned for more targets.

The battles was not a battle in any usual sense of the word. The Raiders and Confed fleets fought with discipline and restraint, never pushing an unfavourable position. The enemy ran in solitary panic and there was nowhere to go. The Confederation lost five ships and two pilots, the Raiders two Piranhas with no casualties.

Not a single Split ship made it out of the sector.

The Confederation pilots, as Jackson so aptly put it, “made out like bandits,” recovering a Boron Queen’s ransom of salvaged weaponry. Max squirted an encrypted tactical update to Sinas and thanked the Governor for the pressure he exerted on the Boron to rush the Enterprise refit.

“What’s going on Max?” Jackson asked warily. “You’ve got my guys locked down on the flight deck.” Uncertainty, rather than triumph permeated the Enterprise Briefing Room. Payter looked uneasy but Kaitrin seemed to crackle with barely contained anger. Max had on his poker face, looking like he was concealing a straight flush. “Sit down Jack,” he said.

Jack thought for a moment, suddenly aware of the blaster strapped to Max’s thigh, and the weight of his own. Jackson shrugged and sat at the end of the oval table nearest the exit. Max sat opposite.

“Is Hagman on Station Prime?” The question took him by surprise and as options raced through his mind he felt the deck vibrating through his soles. “We’re jumping. Teladi Gain or Nyana’s Hideout first?”

“Neither,” Max snapped. “Change of plan, we’re not dropping your people off anywhere. Is Hagman on Station Prime?”

## **Chapter 23: Betrayal**

“Is Hagman on Station Prime?”

Jackson’s mind spun like an out of control Bayamon as he raced to catch up with the implications of the query.

“It’s a simple bloody question Jack,” Kaitrin snapped. “You’re in contact with him.”

“Hey,” Jackson raised his arms and took a step back. “I’m sorry Corrin got killed but it wasn’t me!”

“It was a Clan,” she spat back. “Kivvers don’t change their stripes.”

“Ah, Max, you’ve filled them in on the plan,” Jackson said. Max nodded.

“Yea, last I know he’s back with Law. You’re making your move now.”

“Very quick Jack,” Max said. “Today, no more screwing around. We’ll be taking on troops back in Paradise and your fighters will garrison the Enterprise. My ships will rearm and go in through the front door. Any objections?”

“What about my troops? You need them.”

“Any one of mine are worth three of Law’s, we know the layout of the place and we’ll do just fine,” Payter answered.

“We do need your troops Jack,” Max cast an apologetic glance at the Sarge. “How quickly can you muster a team and how soon can you arrange this simulated core breach evacuation of the Teladi Gain base?”

“Now. They can be in Scale Plate Green in an hour. The core breach? That I can trigger remotely if I have access to a comm. channel.”

Max indicated the briefing room table console. “It’s directly tied into our nav-sat network. You can contact Hagman?”

“If he’s home.”

Jackson swivelled the terminal and punched in the access code to the Stoertebeker satellite and then the frequency of the encrypted channel. He could feel the weight of suspicion. It took a heavy five minutes before Hagman responded. It was a voice-only link.

“The time is now,” Jackson said simply. He cut off Hagman’s furious response. “Listen Hagman, it ain’t up to me, you wanted to dance and the band’s now playing our song. I want those perimeter turrets off-line when we hit.”

“When I see my people in my base!”

“Okay Hagman, one of us has to make the first move but you’d better believe that if those LT’s don’t go down I have two dozen hornets with your name scrawled on the warheads. You won’t make it out of that sector alive.”

“You’ll get your damn sector!” Jackson felt like he should be wiping spit from his face. “Now pucker the fuck up!”

“Puckering.”

Jackson cut the channel, selected the Force satellite in Teladi Gain and transmitted the code.

“Can you give us a live feed?” he asked Kaitrin.

She scowled, but there was less heat behind it. Spinning the console she flicked through option menus and a flat screen slid from the ceiling. It flickered to life, showing a close up shot of his base and a sector display overlaid in one corner.

“Zoomed from our station,” she explained curtly. Within a minute the first freighter launched, followed by a trickle of freighters and fighters. Then the trickle became a stream. The sector display showed a flood of icons crawling towards the Force installation. “Look at that,” Kaitrin said. She selected a group of ships launching from the Teladi Trading Station and extrapolated their course. “Director Morn is making her move.”

“Satisfied?” Jackson challenged the room.

Max nodded. “Get your troops moving then you and the Sarge can brief your pilots on the plan.”

“And the lockdown?”

“That stays Jack, as does the comms blackout. We can’t risk Law having agents among your people.”

Jackson bowed to the inevitable.

Back aboard Station Prime, in his quarters, Hagman slumped in his chair with a shot of Argon Whisky, feeling his age. The Binary Data Core segment felt heavy with the sheer enormity of what he was about to do and just for a moment he considered informing Law, cloak his intended treachery as a ruse to lure his enemies within the grasp of his claw.

But that would be an agonising suicide. No, he had a few well-chosen men, some carefully inserted sub routines in the command and control functions and an encrypted link to the Teladi Gain Commerce-Sat. It confirmed Jackson was upholding his side of the deal, so far. That just left two loose ends. Force would be dealt with and Jackson was pragmatist enough to swallow it to keep his new alliance and the control of the technology it would bring. He would not have access to a deep space vessel once the Enterprise was dealt with. And the second?

Just then the door discreetly chimed. It opened with a word and Captain Hart entered. “Captain, welcome.” He gestured for the grey haired man to take the seat opposite and poured whisky into a glass. “Aged twenty-five years, the best I’ve had.” He took a sip from his own glass. Hart sipped his tentatively and his face broke into an appreciative grin before slamming back the rest. Hagman refilled his glass and leaned forward conspiratorially. “Now you are sure no-one knows you’re here?”

“Sensors clear Captain,” Kaitrin announced. Max acknowledged the report with a nod. “Okay, Helm, bring us into a three klick orbit.” Kerman grunted and tapped his controls and the Enterprise cruised slowly towards the Hatikvah’s Faith Satellite Factory. “Orbital course established.”

“Sensors still clear,” Kaitrin said.

“Bring them in.”

Kaitrin transmitted the launch instructions and one by one the five ship Raiders garrison launched.

“Activating transporter.” She paused. “Hornets aboard.”

“Get those fighters docked and activate Stage Two. We need to be out of here before some passing Argon Navy patrol scans us, we don’t want to get busted for WMD’s now.”

The Alert Siren blared a brief warning. The tension around the bridge twisted up another notch. Max stabbed a key on the command chair console.

“Your people ready Jack?”

“Ready to kill,” came the irony-laden reply.

Seventy seconds later Kaitrin announced. “Signal received, targeting drive.”

“Activate jumpdrive,” Max ordered and the upgraded Boron Orca slipped into hyperspace. The tension on the bridge swelled to white-knuckle levels as the Enterprise rumbled and rocked through the tunnel. When it burst back into sunlight Max did not need to give orders, the crew smoothly followed the plan, aware that a single second could mean the difference between survival and death.

“Scanning,” Kaitrin reported crisply. Stars crawled across the main viewer as Kerman hauled the ship around.

“Launching CAP,” she said, three seconds later.

Max followed the action on his own screen, as did Payter, sitting at Corrin’s old station, at his right hand. Three Xenon destroyers were over one thousand clicks beyond the gate to Black Hole Sun, chasing down the AI piloted Pegasus that had dropped the nav-sat. Just a handful of fighters guarded the Thyn’s Abyss jumpgate the Enterprise had jumped in through and the Raiders Combat Air Patrol was already moving to engage them. A single Xenon carrier lumbered to intercept from its station near the Xenon facility in the centre of the sector but it was too slow to represent a serious threat to the faster Orca.

“Strike force away,” Kaitrin said. The Thyn’s Abyss gate swung into view and Kerman grunted,

“Station keeping.”

The three Mambas burst past the carrier at full speed and it heaved itself round to pursue, launching waves of fighters.

“Destroyers inbound,” Kaitrin reported tersely. “Enterprise sky clear, CAP RTB.”

The three Raiders fighters flashed over the Xenon Shipyard, weapons blazing, banked and strafed it again. Using their superior speed they evaded the carrier and the Xenon fighters and stormed back towards the Enterprise.

“Get them docked ASAP,” Max ordered unnecessarily. “ETA on those destroyers?”

“One eighty seconds..... Mark,” Payter answered.

The strike force made it through the docking bay screens just as the first wave of Xenon N’s hit. The Enterprise barely felt their bite through her shields.

“All aboard,” Kaitrin reported.

“Stage Three,” Max said.

The Enterprise lurched towards the jumpgate as the Xenon fleet closed. The distant Pegasus dropped another nav-sat.

“Ahead 100 mps,” Max said as soon as the Enterprise burst into Split space. “Viewer aft, tactical overlay.”

The quiescent jumpgate appeared in the big screen. The superimposed tactical display showed a dozen fighters swarming around the gate, with more inbound. Including one of the big, Python Destroyers, two slab-like, weapon-filled wings hanging from a central drive system.

Max nodded to Kaitrin and Kerman. The Enterprise shuddered and rolled gently as the Paranid cut the engines and disengaged the stabilisers. “All ships, all ships, this is the Force Corporation Ship Enterprise, requesting assistance. Total drive failure, life support on emergency power. Please respond.”

The destroyer accelerated and the Mambas and Scorpions circling them formed up into strike formations. Max winked at the Sarge. “The old ones are always the best ones.” The jumpgate whirled and sparked with power. “Drop LT’s. Ahead full, get us out of here!”

The Enterprise righted its list and lurched forward. As the nose of the Xenon destroyer protruded into normal space the laser towers opened fire, ripping at its shields with plasma claws.

The massive Xenon vessel surged past the spitting lasers, its own weapons stabbing a reply. Missiles dropped in a steady stream from the rear launchers, they arced on vapour fingers towards the towers, until they were lost to sight behind the flaring blasts. A second destroyer glided through the gate, as the first launched fighters. By the time the Enterprise was halfway across the sector the Xenon carrier had gated in and launched a swarm of fighters. Max’s scanner showed dozens of Split fighters, erupting from every station, moving to engage the attackers. “Launch Pegasus 4,” he ordered.

“Family Njy gate activating,” Kaitrin reported. “On-screen.” The huge, distinctive, triple-hull of a Split Raptor Carrier slammed from the gate and rolled left to clear the way for a Python, which rolled right to allow a second to jump in. “The Split jump-capable reaction force,” Max surmised. He looked at the three huge ships thundering towards the Enterprise and then scanned the Xenon gate. One of the biggest fighter engagements since the last Xenon Conflict raged like a forest fire, growing as its roaring heart sucked in more fuel.

“My work here is done!” Max said with a grin. He checked the Galaxy Display. “Stage Four.” It took just a few minutes to dock the Confederation Troop Vultures waiting at the Teladi Gain western gate. He linked into the nav-sat Pegasus 4 had dropped on the fringe of the sector and watched the battle, picking the right moment to say.

“Stage Five.” He could feel the surging power of the jumpdrive through the soles of his boots.

The Enterprise emerged once again into Thyn’s Abyss through the Xenon gate. “On screen,” Kaitrin said quietly. The battle stretched over a quarter of the sector now. Three Xenon destroyers, two Pythons and a Raptor, too many fighters to count. The Split capital ships formed a stolid, lumbering fist, the Python’s lancing beams spearing out at the swarming Xenon ships, Wolf light fighters dancing through the fire to snap at incoming missiles which blossomed with the searing light of ship-killers. The Xenon destroyers flew wide attacking arcs, slashing over the Split fleet in turn, more missiles raking out and their high energy plasma throwers searing away at the enemy’s shields. Fighters winked to melted fragments at a horrifying rate.

“Stage Six,” Max said grimly to Kerman. The Paranid helm needed no further instructions. He extrapolated the course of the Xenon destroyer sweeping over the Split formation, adjusted the Enterprise’s heading and slammed the drive to full power. Max glanced at Payter, the Sarge’s face was white with worry. “An Orca against a Destroyer?” Max grinned. “No contest!” “That’s just what I was thinking Commander,” he managed to reply around the fingers gripping his throat.

The Enterprise shot across the bow of the destroyer as it swept down on the Split carrier group and walked into the missile barrage like a man walking into a swinging door. Max did not have enough silkworms to waste on the Xenon but he could spare just enough to let them know he was there. The Enterprise ploughed through the melee, rocking in the crossfire, shaking under missile impacts.

“Shields at fifty percent,” Xela said, speaking for the first time. “Destroyer changing course, moving to engage!” Kaitrin announced, excited and frightened at the same time. “Activating jumpdrive.” On screen the thin, menacing hulk turned towards them, growing and growing as the seconds ticked away. The Enterprise fell into the safety of hyperspace as six hornets roared from the nose of the destroyer. Max let go of the armrests and remembered to breathe again.

“Destroyer on intercept course,” Kaitrin confirmed as the Enterprise hauled its nose towards the Family Njy jumpgate. It stampeded towards them at a frightening speed. “Catch me if you can,” Max grinned as the jumpgate loomed. “Stage Seven.” The Enterprise barely transited the gate into sector Family Njy when Kaitrin said, “Jumpdrive activated.” By the time it jumped to the northern gate, leading to Ghinn’s Escape, the Xenon destroyer rampaged in pursuit. “They’re hooked,” Max said, standing. “Sarge, the bridge is yours.”

The atmosphere of the Station Prime Observation Lounge was dry with ozone from the mismatched clutter of consoles, monitors and power units jury-rigged in a rough arc before the panoramic window. Law lumbered their length, monitoring station systems, tracking the fighter wings ceaselessly prowling the sector and observing events in the places his nav-sat network still functioned. One of these sectors was Thyn’s Abyss, courtesy of his temporary alliance with the Family Njy, or more particularly with ‘The Butcher,’ the Split who governed that segment of the New Frontier.

He did not like what he was seeing. What he was hearing was also, unsatisfactory. “No ships, not even a single fighter, can be diverted to your cause.” Law bottled his rage, feeling his veins swell with the tension, with the urge to rail against the voice, to smash the communications panel to fragments. The effort to reply with the polite formality needed cost him even more.

“With all due respect Commodore,” he said in a soft voice that would have his own minions voiding their bowels. “The Force Transporter escaped your space, its hull unblemished. In previous conversations I was given to understand this was not a possibility.” There was a long pause and Law could visualise the gnarled old Butcher sifting his words for an affront.

“His Enterprise is no possible match for Destroyer! Xenon will crush Force if he stand and fights. If he flees he must pass through your sector. Then you can destroy him. You have the firepower.”

“I fear Commodore, that your understandable unfamiliarity with Force may be leading you to underestimate his ingenuity. If any man can defeat a Xenon battleship with a glorified Transporter and a clutch of fighters it is he. Our enterprise,” Law emphasised the words, “would be more secure if the designated Raptor were positioned to engage him, should he flee in my direction.”

“All Split forces fight fearlessly against the machine foe! Battle, glorious! If you cannot defeat one Transporter with the tacit aid of the Xenon then perhaps you are not worthy of Split aid.”

The channel went dead. Law managed to halt his fist a hairsbreadth from the console. Instead of pounding it to splinters he stabbed a button and said. “Hagman.”

“Yes Lord?” his lieutenant replied a few seconds later. “Has Captain Hart been found?”

“He has Lord. Beside two empty bottles of Space Fuel. He will not be fit for duty for many hours.”  
“He is not fit for duty at all, place him somewhere suitable and take command of the Black Heart. We expect the Force Orca shortly. You have followed the tactical feed, your assessment?”

“Force is no fool, Lord. If he cannot defeat the Destroyer in Boron space or in his own sector he will attempt to embroil our forces in the fight. The Xenon are unlikely to make fine distinctions between organic beings if fired upon in this sector. We should withdraw our patrols from the gate and rely on our laser towers to protect our installations. Not even a Destroyer can survive their cross-fire long enough to threaten us.”

Law assessed the advice, rolling it around his synapses.

“Agreed, ensure that it is so.”

“Force may try to deploy a navigation satellite to jump in to the opposite gate. We should keep our fleetest ships close enough to interdict any ship he sends through.”

Law concurred.

“Keep the Black Heart beneath the defensive umbrella,” Law ordered. “And be prepared to withdraw to deep space if threatened.”

He dismissed Hagman and studied the station manifest. Just four laser towers remained in reserve. He ordered them to be deployed around the far jumpgate, just in case Force managed to slip a navigation satellite in.

“Ensure they are set not to fire on Xenon ships.”

They had, so far, ignored his installation as they cruised through to whatever was consuming their attention, out in the uncharted regions. He would only engage them if they fired the first shots.

Hagman materialised in the teleport bay off the Black Heart Bridge, hiding a smile. The First Officer, a taciturn old Navy man who’s personal vices had not sat well with the Argon Fleet Admirals, waited to greet him.

“Hart has been confined at the orders of our Lord.”

Commander Patterson knew better than to say anything other than, “Yes Captain.” Hagman stayed aboard just long enough to impress his authority on the bridge crew and left Patterson in command, with extremely specific orders. Certain that these were understood, certain that they would be obeyed, he returned to Station Prime. Events threatened to outpace him.

He hoped Jackson would remain true to the plan but fine-tuned his preparations, in case he did not.

## **Chapter 24: Tumbling Dice**

“You were going to weren’t you?” There was no hint of playfulness in Tyre’s tone and Max choked back his usual light dismissal of risk. Raiders pilots surged past him in the narrow confines of the lower deck Enterprise corridors; bulky in the same full flight gear Max wore. “Go without saying goodbye!” Max could only give a faint shrug to signify all that needed to be said and braced himself for the blast. It came in the form of a single, slashing palm that reddened a cheek unprotected by the raised helmet visor. Then she kissed him full and hard, her body firm against the pressure suit, leaving his face dampened by her tears.

“Xela’s keeping a transponder lock on me,” he patted the transmitter in a thigh pouch. “And one of the Rescue Pegasus fighters is going to be stuck to me like a shadow. That was something you and Kaitrin thought up, right?” His tone said what he thought of the idea.

“You remember Corrin and you remember you’re not damn immortal.” Her voice cracked. “Everything is down to you now, just you. Now you go do that man’s gotta do crap but promise me one thing.”

Max nodded.

“Kill him Max,” Her voice trembled and the helpless terror of her incarceration reprised in her eyes. “Kill him good.”

Max slapped the blaster strapped to his thigh. “Consider it done.” He kissed her again, once, with all the long pent passion of his life, and ran to the launch bay.

The Enterprise was halfway between the Menelaus Paradise gates when the Xenon destroyer transited from Bluish Snout. It immediately rolled onto an intercept course and began eating the intervening clicks with its superior speed. The Sarge gauged the distance between the destroyer and the Enterprise and the Enterprise and the jumpgate to Law’s sector. “We can’t make it in time,” he concluded out loud. “Confirmed,” Kaitrin said briskly into the chill atmosphere of the Bridge. “Launching rear-guard.”

‘Stage Eight,’ Payter whispered.

At Kaitrin’s signal Max snapped down his visor and hit the afterburners. His Mamba burst into sunlight with a dozen other of the Split heavy fighters, piloted by the best of the Raiders best. “Iron Fist away.” Kaitrin confirmed the launch of the second wave; three Teladi Falcons and the three captured Xenon L fighters, all configured with Silkworms and the handful of Hornet missiles Max had scavenged from battle. Three transporter equipped Rescue Pegasus light fighters followed.

“Ship-killers at my command,” Xela confirmed. She formed the Falcons into a spearhead, fashioned a shaft from the XL’s and simultaneously extended her awareness through Max’s Mamba, letting its senses become her own. “Destroyer launching fighters.” She locked sensors upon a single XL in the Xenon defensive screen, brought the enhanced scanners of the ship capture technology online and subjected it to a micro-millimetre probe. “Thirty plus fighters inbound. Okay Max, you know what to do.”

“Whatever you tell me?”

“Good boy Max, trust me, it’s the Xenon that put the Zee in Xela. You want chaos then I’m your girl!”

Back aboard the Enterprise, Kaitrin and her flight controllers began whispering instructions and the Mambas formed into wingman pairs, leaving Max’s ship as a single rogue element. She scanned the tactical feed from the Xela AI and identified sub formation lead elements for target allocation with touches of a laser wand.

“Enterprise to Strike Leader, Control ready to go,” Kaitrin said and switched to the internal channel connecting her to the controllers down in the bowels of the ship. “Good luck guys, keep them away from the big guns.”

Max flicked weapons safeties off and his weapons automatically locked onto a target.

The Raiders took out the stampeding fringe of Xenon light fighters with co-ordinated snapshots that burned away the low shielding of the XN ships in a searing instant. There was time to do the same to a few of the XM’s but as the Xenon medium fighters began to engage, the Raider Mamba pairs split high and low, port and starboard to barrel through the screen and fall upon the slower XL’s.

The Raiders fighters cut through the Xenon ships with the precision of laser scalpels. Six more fell in the second pass to precisely co-ordinated fire and with the sudden destruction of all the wing co-ordinators their formation disintegrated. Like a boxer with a bigger opponent on the ropes, the Raiders kept stepping under the flailing counter-punches to push a jab in the Xenon face. “Every man for himself mode,” Xela said, slightly smugly. Just as she predicted, the Xenon AI had abandoned its attempts to reform a co-ordinating network and defaulted to solo mode. Even with superior numbers and the improved combat AI they seemed to have developed, the Xenon attackers could not lay guns on the disciplined and co-ordinated Raiders formation.

To the unenlightened eye the ensuing battle became a twisting melange of individual fighters in individual combat; bravery, skill and inspiration against tactical algorithms but to the tutored gaze it was anything but. Raiders fighter pairs spun through the burning streams of weapons plasma as elegantly as dancers on stage, carving a coherent narrative from the chaos, as a tale is crafted from the dance by the individual moves and gestures of its solitary components. Keep the Raiders casualties to a minimum, slow down the destroyer, keep the enemy embroiled and off the Commander’s back it read; until...

Kaitrin felt like a choreographer then; her own short words, her own brisk gestures with a light wand on the targeting screen, harnessing the elite Raiders pilots in her own dance.

Max weaved through the chaos, sticking firm to the tail of his target, keeping its shields low with single Alpha PAC blasts. “How’s it coming Zee? Destroyer five clicks and closing,” Max murmured. His ship rocked through a plasma pounding and he caught the flash of an explosion as the fire abruptly terminated. Two Mambas flashed over him, wings rocking. Xela shifted a portion of her awareness away from the internal systems of the Xenon L.

“Patience is a virtue. Sheep One in position.”

She linked into the AI of the captured Xenon L that had settled one hundred metres off their port bow and routed it a live feed of the Mamba control states. The XL mirrored the Mamba movements as Max followed the target through a rolling break. At Five Low a stalking XL rolled out of the crossfire ripping through its shields.

With the target AI at her mercy Xela moved the Raiders XL in closer and began transferring data across to its enhanced computer system.

“On my mark, my you’ve let that big nasty ship get awfully close haven’t you Max? Three, two, one mark!”

Max held the trigger down, destroyed his target and rolled away as the first plasma streams rose from the onrushing destroyer. A feint by three Hornet armed Falcons slipping in but rolling away without launching, drew the Xenon attention long enough for Max to escape with half his shields intact.

Around him Xenon and Raiders ships flashed past in managed disarray with no casualties so far.

“Zee?”

“Our little baby is frolicking free Max, joining in the fun. If your flyboys can refrain from destroying it.” On the Raiders tactical displays the Raiders XL now showed hostile red but the icon was outlined in blue.

By the time they’d twice repeated the manoeuvre the Raiders had lost a Falcon and a Mamba. Kaitrin watched as a Pegasus rescue fighter dashed fearlessly through the battle to snatch the last floating pilot to safety and opened a channel.

“All ships execute tactical disengagement, targets allocated.” She paused long enough for the pilots to focus. “Execute.” The Raiders fighters rolled and curved out of the chaos of the furball into four diamond formations. Moving as one they followed Max through a high rolling turn that bought them head to head with the destroyer. Beyond it the Enterprise was silhouetted against the jumpgate to Law. Another four Xenon fighters fell to a choreographed attack as the Raiders slashed through the defenders and weaved low along the gigantic hull, leaving an orange plasma storm rolling in their wake as they raked the shields with missiles and plasma fire.

The destroyer accelerated away, its shields battered half down. At a command from Max the Raiders fighters streamed back to the Enterprise, settling like a flock in a space among the fighters packed on the large, open Orca flight deck. By the time the Xenon destroyer completed a slow wide turn and retrieved its surviving fighters, the Enterprise nosed the jumpgate event horizon.

Max stood braced against the juddering deck as the Enterprise shook through hyperspace, a technician fed a chain of silkworm missiles into the Mamba from a hovering ammo trolley. “Stage Nine,” Max observed. “With all those LT’s waiting to slice us, it’d better be a good one,” Jackson called down from the forward boarding hatch of a Confederation Troop Vulture. “Can’t we just go straight to the fun stages?”

“Fun for who?” Max retorted as the jumpdrive rumble subsided. Jackson shrugged and winked, ducking back into the Vulture. Certainly not for Payter, sitting in the Captain’s Chair on the Enterprise Bridge as the ship began to shake and the shields scream. There was nothing he could do, just listen to the crew call off their actions, watch the shields and pray.

“Jumpdrive charging,” Kaitrin confirmed what the vibrations in the soles of his feet told him. “Drones away, missiles away, Pegasus away,” Kerman grunted. “Containers away,” said Massoor.

Law’s throne hovered at the panorama window, overlooking the western jumpgate. The dark of the observation lounge was broken just by the subdued glow of the panels of the command and communications system. It would have told him everything he needed to know about the tactical disposition of his enemy but this had the feel of the end of things, like both he and Force were walking two converging paths and only one could pass and he wanted to witness it with his own flesh.

He’d had enemies before; most dead, some so strong or so useful they survived, but none so persistently personal as Force. No compromise, no mutually beneficial accommodation, no bowing to threats. He just kept coming. There was more to Force than a trumped up mercenary with a long arm to chance, Law could see that now. He had come too far, too soon, with extraordinary luck and influential friends.

Now, right at the death, it reeked of the game. The question was, whose? Until this moment he was confident that Force was unconnected with Argon Intelligence, which had never shown any awareness of the lost alien ship or the existence of a conspiracy to seize it. There was their shade, this Cabal but over the decades that organisation had been as entwined in the tendrils of the conspiracy as a computer core is wrapped in optical pathways. They may not have controlled it but they were well aware of its goings on, despite the truly deep cover of some of their independent operatives.

But then, so much of the conspiracy intelligence network was controlled by allies who turned out not to have been fast. Were they planning to exclude him all along and used Force as their tool, or perhaps they are in league with elements of the Cabal? Or perhaps he provoked Skull with his own plotting? Now that he found an intriguingly ironic thought. With hindsight he regretted the attempt to enforce a profitable transport monopoly for Morn and her associates but it had been a price of her support.

Or perhaps Force was just his personal nemesis with his relentless ingenuity, his sheer bloody-minded determination? Destiny, it was an archaic and unfashionable notion, but one that felt comfortable to Law, for a destiny can be seized in the will. It was a moment on which the fate of the universe pivoted. The super-profits of monopoly and anarchy, whatever Force had in mind, or Skull or Jackson, or..?

The waiting and the line of thought were broken by an alarm and the eye of the jumpgate swirled to life. Satisfied that things were at last coming to a point, Law raised his scopes and zoomed in. The distinctive curved nose of an Orca protruded into normal space and the rest of the craft snapped through, propelling the ship clear of the gate. Even as the Enterprise engines flared to full power his laser towers swung their glowing barrels towards it. Drones, glittering like silver insects in the sunlight, swarmed from the Orca launch bay. Missiles, arcing on fingers of expelled propellant, burst from the forward tubes.

Drones plunged straight across the LT firing lines, exploding in the energy flash and silkworms curved towards the towers, triggering defensive pulse fire. Yet still, enough sun-bright high-energy beams ripped over the Enterprise shields to destroy one 25MW generator entirely before it fell back into hyperspace, leaving the detritus of battle cluttering the scanners.

The scopes smashed against the plexi-glass and fell in pieces to the deck. As Law pivoted his chair towards the control panels the gate flashed to life again. "Tracking target, Xenon destroyer," the computer intoned without emotion. Law took in the board, confirming that the laser towers were powering down.

Do not provoke the Xenon. He watched the long, slab-like machine on screen as it began to slowly accelerate through the debris around the gate. Law held his breath. Move on, your fight is not with me. As the destroyer began to move away a navigation satellite flared to life, dropped by a small fighter Force must have slipped out in the confusion. Two of his fast fighters would be there in seconds and terminate the signal. Law's mind raced catch up. Force would know the signal would not survive long, it was not a useful diversion, which meant the Enterprise must be returning through –

"Northern jumpgate activating," the computer intoned. Force was not planning to fight both him and the Xenon! Law frantically scanned the debris around the gate – inactive drones, scrape metal and canisters containing..?

"Laser towers active!" Kaitrin screamed over the jumpdrive countdown as Law's LT's began to fire. The Enterprise used all its remaining drones to disrupt the beams and six AI Mandalays to ram the weapons and survived long enough to fade away with some shielding intact. Survived long enough for the four laser towers around the other gate to explode free of their containers, lock and fire.

"No!" Law roared because he saw what Force had done, something that, even as Law watched the sequence unfold with dreadful slow motion inevitability, screamed betrayal. The towers carried the latest Stoertebeker transponder code. Fighters dropped from the destroyer as four laser talons ripped over its shields.

"Defences stand down, stand down! Only fire if our defences are fired upon!" Law yelled into his comm. The Enterprise had jumped out, so the Force LT's had no command and control. Maybe the Xenon didn't want a fight with him; maybe they were still focused on Force? Law held his breath as the destroyer eased itself from the gate, two dozen fighters cloaked around it and time seemed to stretch like rubber. It did not fire and its shields were intact and re-charging.

He breathed again, just as two of the heavy fighters escorting the Xenon ship pivoted and fired at the same tower. Its shields boiled away in seconds and it exploded as the fighters accelerated towards a second.

Law hesitated for a half second and roared into the command comm. "Fire! Engage and destroy the Xenon." Belatedly, his own towers flared to life and hornet armed strike wings shot from the station docking bays. Law switched comm channels and whispered commands to his personal security team outside the observation lounge entrance. One by one his gate LT's were destroyed.

Like every pilot on the flight deck and every trooper huddled with his kit in a transporter, Clan or Raider, Max glanced nervously at the bulkhead high above, as if it were a roof likely to fall from the battering the Enterprise was taking. Smoke was in the air and multiple alarms almost drowned out the jumpdrive countdown coming from the cockpit comm system. Max sealed the cockpit, reducing the pandemonium roar to a background rumble.

“All set for Stage Ten Jack?” The jumpdrive cut in again.

Jackson appeared in the comm display, grinning.

“My man says come on in, the water’s fine!”

“Which translates to the station LT’s being offline and its docking codes in our computers?”

Jack nodded. “He was somewhat more prosaic. See you onboard Max, keep your head down.”

The Enterprise shuddered free from hyperspace and across the crowded expanse of the hanger deck; fighters began responding to launch instructions. Max’s Mamba was in the first wave.

There are battles where two well-defined forces, each schooled in an appropriate tactical doctrine and ably marshalled by informed leaders, meet and act out an engagement whose very name becomes synonymous with the great leader, the new weapon system, the innovative tactic. These encounters are hard-wired into the curriculum of military colleges, the subject of endless treatise that tease out every nuance and endlessly re-enacted on everything from beer smeared tavern tables to 3D Holo-sims.

This battle though, was not of this type. Officer Candidates did not use its name as convenient shorthand when debating subtle tactical points and no-one got rich selling entertainment recreations. The sector had no name and the sides were somewhat undefined - Force, the Confederation, Law, the Xenon, Hagman. Maybe even The Family Njy, Director Morn? It depends where you draw the boundaries and what you really believed happened before, behind the scenes.

It was, despite the most assiduous efforts of Kaitrin and her controllers, every pilot for themselves as near fifty Force and Confederation fighters clashed with twice that number of Law ships, while the Xenon struck out at all, with emotionless indiscriminate. Max could only get an impression from Xela’s running commentary, heard in snatches between long moments of terror and chaos as missiles flashed past the Mamba from all angles and its cockpit flickered kaleidoscopically with the incessant flash of lasers, the flare of high energy plasma and the explosion of ships. It was carnage.

“Destroyer firing, two B’s at 5 high,” Xela intoned. Max snap rolled through the incoming fire, hosed plasma over the shields of the attacking Bayamons, triggered two Wasp missiles and extended the roll into a long turn that put the destroyer off his forward port quarter for a long instant in which he absorbed the tactical position by osmosis. Plasma from a Stoertebeker Falcon ripped across his shields forcing Max to break right, defensive. The destroyer hammered towards the Enterprise. Its shields flared and glittered as the Xenon forward batteries pulsed.

A Bayamon shot across his nose and instinctively Max pulled up into a half roll and break that took the Mamba through a clutch of Xenon fighters that scattered with the organised chaos of a startled flock. “Enterprise jump Zee!” he shouted as the Bayamon appeared above him. Max held a straight course just long enough the punch away its shields. The pilot ejected just as the fighter exploded.

“Break high!” Xela yelled. Max responded instinctively but still the Mamba lost half its shield strength in a Xenon, Stoertebeker crossfire. “She’s gone!” Xela continued. “Unnecessarily ambiguous,” Max answered grittily, his brow beaded by tiny drops of sweat along his hairline as he strained every reflex to give his shields time to recharge.

“Inverted roll, two Falcons,” Xela answered. Max obeyed. He put about two seconds fire into the tail of one before a flicker of movement in his peripheral vision caused him to slide right with a touch of the strafe drive. “Enterprise jumped, the Sarge knows his orders Max. Task at hand, task at hand.”

Xela continued sketching the tactical situation as the Mamba weaved and spun through space full of ships, missiles and so much fireworks it looked like both VZ celebration days in one. “The Black Heart is pulling out behind a small fighter screen, Confed forces unable to break through,” she said. “Let it go,” Max answered. A pair of Orinoco heavy fighters came in on him, head to head, shimmering electric rings of Gamma PAC fire billowing from their noses. Max rolled the Mamba wings 90 degrees to present a narrow profile, taking it between the two attackers with its shields still strong enough to press an attack on a third, isolated Orinoco while two Mandalays snapped at his six.

The Stoertebeker ship flashed to debris and Max broke right, high. “XD?” “Orbiting the gate, engaging targets of opportunity,” Xela answered. “I’ve put the Enterprise on hold but we need the Enterprise back! Nav-sat down, just four left for deployment.” Another Bayamon boiled away under Max’s guns.

“Get me a strike team and get the E back!” He half rolled and pulled up onto a pair of Bayamons stuck to the six of a Raider Eel heavy fighter. His plasma tore through their shields, destroying one and forcing the other to disengage. “There’s one,” Xela said. The Boron fighter slipped onto his starboard side. A Falcon dropped onto his port. “And that’s your lot,” Xela said as two Confederation Bayamons pulled onto his tail.

Max targeted the Xenon destroyer and pulled the formation through a turn that bought it onto the enemy rear. The Confed Bayamons peeled off at Xela’s order, to discourage an element of the Xenon CAP moving to engage. Keeping to the speed of his slower, more heavily shielded wingmen; Max took the three ships skimming over giant maws of the drive system, rocking in the edge of the wake and through the winged shadow of the towering Bridge. Weaving through blind defensive fire the three fighters drained their weapons into the destroyer’s shields and as they flashed over the bow they each snapped off six missiles, as Xela designated. A motley mix of Silkworms and Dragonflies slapped, like three short arm jabs into the Xenon chin; their sting barely attenuated by anti-missile fire.

“Enterprise at the gate,” Xela said. The Xenon destroyer emerged through the blossoming explosions, its shields damaged but strong. Max led the flight through a slow left turn, towards Station Prime. All around them, Xela and Kaitrin marshalled what ships they could to slap and batter away would-be attackers. “Those station LT’s still off-line?” “Confirmed,” Xela said, “Seems like Jackson called him good.” “Let’s not rely on his good word,” Max answered. “Is the XD hooked?” “Confirmed,” Xela repeated.

Max straightened the turn on a course that passed directly through the centre of a four LT diamond protecting this quarter of the revolving station. As the Mamba passed through the centre of the four towers’ field of fire Max dropped an LT. In seconds it linked into the Enterprise fire control system and began firing at the approaching destroyer.

“Wing break,” Max ordered. The three ships starburst away from the station as the Force LT stabbed out for a second time, the beam screeching loud through the cockpit Combat Awareness System. The Xenon ship concentrated its heavy plasma weapons and burned the LT to vapour. Then it began systematically targeting the quiescent Stoertebeker towers.

“You know, I actually knew you were going to do that. You’re getting predictable in your old age, Max!” Xela said lightly. “Xenon off the starboard bow.” Max banked to go head to head with the attacking fighter, easily rolling through the incoming fire to slam a full weapons charge into its face. The cockpit filled with the distinctive simulated crump of exploding LT’s.

As he rolled onto the XL’s six to finish it off the Stoertebeker lasers shrieked belatedly to life. Transfixed in a long emerald burst, the XL exploded and Max banked through the debris to bite into the starboard quarter of an Orinoco with the dregs of his weapons energy. By the time it died and Max was rolling defensively away from a swooping Bayamon, all the Stoertebeker LT’s around Station Prime were destroyed and Jackson was shouting in his ears.

“What’s the game Max? Nicely done but Hagman’s screaming like a two-timed chick. This wasn’t part of the deal.”

Max snapped a blast at an XM flashing across his bow.

“Just removing any temptation to cheat,” Max answered distractedly as he dodged between three attacking Bayamons. “Too late to back out now.”

“Except that your Xenon friend is ripping up the station now. We lose that and we lose the other half of the Binary Core. But you have a plan, right Max?”

Max pulled up onto the six of a Bayamon, focused his guns and fired. The Stoertebeker fighter exploded.

“Station shields at twenty-five percent,” Xela said. Max targeted the destroyer and banked towards it. Across the pitted hull of Station Prime small explosions flashed and power leaks arced in the dark. Behind strips of windows on all levels, internal fires glowed red.

The Xenon ship was five clicks out, turning to make a second, killing pass. “Let’s make this look good Zee,” Max smiled, “I’ve got a legend to keep alive!” He rolled the Mamba head to head with the on-rushing behemoth. “At my command.”

The dwarfed fighter shot towards the Destroyer, opening fire at extreme range.

“Now.”

Deep within the Xenon ship, down beneath the hanger deck, where damaged or malfunctioning ships were repaired or recycled, a Xenon L fighter hummed out of stand-by. Its AI had gone non-responsive after an inconclusive engagement with the organic vessel that had interrupted the newly constructed destroyer’s deployment to the redrawn front line. Around it six, more heavily damaged fighters crawled with auto-repair units. A single, squat diagnostic droid, hummed at the fighter’s external interface, working with inhuman patience to unscramble the damaged access codes. Its probe registered the increased power flow and failing to identify the sub-system resonance signature it echoed a copy through all the ship’s co-ordinating intelligences. The identification came back almost instantly but by that time cargo canisters were materialising around the fighter.

The Destroyer shuddered once, along its whole length; and then, like a flaming fist, an explosion punched through the rear port lower hull, scattering a trail of debris sucked out into the vacuum. Max banked away as the Xenon swept past, still firing. Then it convulsed again, then once more as secondary explosions ripped through the ship.

Max hit a diametric escape vector.

Then, like a toy taken broken over a child’s knee, the Destroyer split across the middle, a boiling belt of fire raging in the gap. The Xenon ship disintegrated to fragments, the shockwave picking up the Mamba like a cork on a storm wave. As Max wrestled to regain control Jackson’s voice chuckled approvingly in the comm. “You smuggled my squash mines aboard in one of the captured ships. I thought you’d do that, you’re getting easier to read than a comic book Max!”

“I wish people would stop saying that,” Max muttered.

“I knew you were going to say that,” Xela said quickly. Max groaned, theatrically.

The destruction of the Destroyer was the signal for all the remaining Xenon fighters to withdraw towards the far gate to Xenon space and Max ordered his forces to let them go. The Black Heart was three hundred kilometres out now and with the Enterprise free to co-ordinate the attackers the tide of battle slowly turned. The Stoertebeker fighters fought with the desperation of those with nowhere to go and they fought well, inflicting significant losses on both Confed and Force fighters.

Four Raiders pilots were dead before the defenders broke and ran for the fleeing Stoertebeker flagship. Max listened to the names. Makk’s was among them, he noted with a stab of feeling he pushed immediately away.

“We’re going in,” Jackson announced. Two Confed Vultures and two Force Lifters slipped from the Enterprise hanger deck and headed for the Station Prime docking tunnel.

## **Chapter 25: Showdowns**

Law witnessed the demise of the destroyer from behind the sweeping arc of the control station at one end of the Observation Lounge. From his throne he witnessed the event through the thick, plexi-glass as live theatre and on the main monitor, as dry symbols and numbers. Neither vantage point offered an acceptable account of events and he sat unmoving in the twilight, his scarred face uncharacteristically expressive of the churning chaos of his head. Force had destroyed a Xenon destroyer, one of the most fearsome warships in space. Whether through, as his own eyes suggested, the use of a new fighter-based weapon of unheard of power or, as logic and experience suggested, a trick, hardly mattered now. The ship had ravaged his defences as if under Force's command, then, when its actions became inconvenient, he just destroyed it.

The leader in Law was impressed with such bravura tactics, applauded even, but other voices drowned this out. Voices that raged, voices that howled, voices that bayed for blood. Any blood. Law held himself still, not daring to do more than breathe short shallow breaths lest any movement disturb the precarious equilibrium of his temperament. Here, with his enemy kicking down his gate, with his carefully crafted defences smashed and scattered across half the sector; here without the opportunity to slake the ravenously savage animal screaming beneath his skin with helpless, terrified blood; here he could feel his Will slipping away. No – not a slipping away but a giving up, a submission to the dreadful seductiveness of the urge to destroy.

The beast had no name, it was just that. The Beast had been stronger in his youth and its excesses responsible for the early steps on the path that led him to become the most feared head of the most feared criminal organisation in space. But it was something he learned to contain, to leash in the harness of his own philosophy. Do what you Will shall be the only law. Law stood up and took a couple of paces to the far end of the control panel, then he smashed the backup communications display with one deliberate, controlled, pound of his fist. It shattered into thin alloy fragments that sliced into the leather of his gauntlets but did not penetrate the skin.

The solitary act of destruction was enough to sate the monster, enough to force a chink in the curtain of rage falling across his mind, enough of a gap for cold, merciless logic to assert control. He stood trembling while his mind raced with possibilities and questions. Questions such as why it had taken so long for the station defences to engage? He returned to his throne, happy to let its anti-grav unit take the strain of his bulk. On impulse he guided it to the other end of the control desk and removing a glove so his thumb print could be scanned, he accessed his own personal files. Then he activated the security sub-routine. This was not the standard package, aimed at preventing system penetration, neither was it any of the other three hidden backup routines. It was a custom hardware system, accessed through a completely unrelated station subsystem. Undetectable.

Law took in the access log at a glance and ran a diagnostic. His records had been penetrated, penetrated by someone with enough skill to bypass the alarms, someone skilled enough even to detect and disarm the alert function of his last line of defence. He traced the target of the penetration. His fatigue reddened eyes glittered like rubies and his lips pursed in an inscrutable grimace. He had more questions now and his guards had not returned with Hagman as ordered. At that moment the double blast door behind him hissed open and Hagman stepped through, alone. His wild eyes contradicted the resolution of his hard-set face. The Argon designed heavy hand laser answered so many of his queries. Law felt as if a black hole was forming in the deck beneath his feet and he and all he had fought for, all he had dreamed of accomplishing with the new technology, were being sucked down.

Across the light-years, in her Inner Sanctum aboard the Teladi Gain Trading Station, Director Morn was also watching proceedings on a small, desktop monitor. Different proceedings and a different mood. Exultation.

“Objective achieved Director,” the Teladi, whose grinning visage almost filled the screen, breathed sibilantly. His nostrils flared with the same excitement that filled Morn, he appreciated the import of his words, the significance of the deed, as much as she. To him it meant shares, it meant credits. To her it was even more.

“The Stoertebeker troops?”

“Contained Director, with extreme courtesy as you commanded. Your soldiers outnumber them greatly.”

Morn nodded approvingly and cut the channel. She had no idea how the reactor overload ruse had been perpetrated but it had worked. Law wanted his old station back and he would have it, once she had received certain assurances and concessions. With Teladi Naval soldiers now in control he would concede. Grudgingly, she knew, but he had no choice now. Morn let her weight sag back against the leather of her chair and relished the moment.

The warm glow lasted as long as it took her to respond to the insistently flashing red indicator on her comm. panel. It was the same troop commander but this time his nostrils were pinched almost shut and his breath rasped noisily through his clenched maw. “Director,” he hissed, “the reactor.” Time seemed to shift at that point, take on a different, frozen, form like a river freezing. “It is no ruse.” The commander’s eyes darted nervously around and Morn became aware of the muted cries of alarm filtering from the comm. speaker. Her mouth was dry now and she had to swallow several times before the words would form.

“How long?”

“Unknown,” the soldier said, the professionally controlled fear just an echo in his tone. “Perhaps soon. Permission to withdraw?”

“Permission granted,” Morn said after a second’s thought but the words were barely clear of her tongue when the comm. screen flared white for a brief instant and then flashed to static. Almost overwhelmed with trepidation Morn checked the sector scan feed from the Naval Satellite. The station still orbited the planet. She was no scientist, she did not need to be to realise that the reported radiation levels meant everyone aboard was now dead.

For long moments the Director wrestled with the bitter rage roiling in her gut but then she smiled and then, as she weighed the situation and considered her options, the smile broadened and her reptilian eyes glittered. For the first time Force had made a mistake.

The adjutant to General Tharn was young enough not to be able to contain either her surprise or her pleasure at receiving a direct communication from the Chair of the Teladi Trading Company. She acted on her request with brisk efficiency, hissing demands down through the chain of command to the duty officer in the planet-side sector monitoring station.

“Confirmed Director, Confederation evacuees are sheltered on the Force manufacturing facility.”

Morn’s expression was anything but enigmatic but it served only to confuse the young staff officer, who had no idea why such information should provoke such pleasure in so powerful a being. She was tempted to listen in to the Director’s conversation with her superior. It was something she did as a matter of routine but this time she wisely paid heed to the warning hissing in her brain.

Max snatched the Xela Chip from the cockpit interface the instant his Mamba powered down and drawing the long barrelled blaster strapped to his hip, cracked the cockpit and slid it back. The ship immediately filled with the chaos roar of the thrusters as a second of his troop carrier Lifters alighted delicately among the Confed and Force troops disembarking from the other two freighters. Beyond the half open bay doors to the main station body came the whine of lasers and the deeper roar of an M70.

The docking bay was the same one from which Max and Tyre had made their escape. It was small and cramped enough, with the crates, canisters and other detritus of repair facilities, to make the organised deployment of troops somewhat more difficult than current doctrine recommends but it was known territory and likely to be less well guarded than any of the main docking platforms. Groups of soldiers in a motley assortment of uniforms and insignia, flowed through each other in semi-controlled chaos. The Sarge’s voice boomed through the bedlam, ordering and cajoling the Force contingent into their

designated configurations. The weapons fire was more distant now and squads of soldiers slipped out through the blast doors on their way to their objectives.

Max let the bay clear somewhat before clambering down from the cockpit. One of his maintenance droids appeared at his side almost immediately, hovering silently on its small anti-grav unit. He inserted the Xela Chip into a modified diagnostic port and slipped on his shades.

“You know what to do, Zee?”

“No, my permanent memory has been wiped by the leading edge of a radiation wave from a super nova explosion,” Xela answered tartly. Her tone changed. “You remember what I said Max, this whole thing smells of a set-up. Watch your back and watch Jackson.” She sounded so much like his murdered cousin that tears stung the corner of his eyes and were it not for the squat plasma torch extending from the waist of the droid he might have hugged her, but he stifled the impulse.

He caught Jackson waving from the shadow of a Force Lifter, where Payter had set up a mobile field command console. “You take care too Zee, I don’t want to lose you again.” Xela pivoted smartly and glided through the thinning crowd of troops like a waiter adroitly manoeuvring through a packed restaurant with loaded trays. At the blast doors she transmitted, “Good luck Max.” “To you too Zee.” The droid, hovering above the soldiers pushing through the blast doors, dipped her torch in salute.

They would not be together again.

Max waved an acknowledgement and jogged over to where Jackson and Payter waited.

Law’s narrowed eyes were unreadable, even to Hagman, even after all the years, but his face was not. Shock, surprise and rage, mostly a rage so intense the white scar tissue around the scaled leather flash of skin slashing his face stood out like snow in blood. “Sire,” The word was on his lips and spoken before he could intercept the genuflecting reflex. “You are relieved of command.” Law froze for a moment that seemed to stretch between them, as if neither could quite believe the situation. Before he could move a finger towards the arm mounted controls Hagman cautioned him with a curt jerk of the long barrelled blaster and held up a small silver device. “Your throne functions are under my control.” To emphasise the point he triggered a pre-set command and Law felt the acceleration restraint field tighten across his abdomen, confining him to the chair as effectively as a chain across his stomach as it slipped back beyond an arms reach of the sweeping arc of the command control panel.

With an effort visibly written on his face Law imagined his rage as a wild ravenous beast and visualised a cage around it with bars forged from his Will. It worked, just, and his tone contrasted sharply with the angry blood flaring his face.

“My personal files, you accessed the schematics for this unit.” He clenched his fist and hit the inactive controls once, with controlled deliberation as if to illustrate his self-restraint. “Interesting. You were never that devious.” He could not fully sheath the bitter blade in his voice. “Or so disloyal.” Hagman stepped across to the panorama window and took a small oval shaped charge from a pocket and placed it at the centre point.

“My loyalty is to the Clan,” Hagman snapped tightly, “And pursuing your schemes with reckless disregard to the enemies you made is the betrayal. Morn, Njy – these are not our natural allies, the Clans are. Skull, the Confederation. Even Force, but you united them all in a careless gamble for power.”

“With the technology waiting on the alien vessel and the help of the allies you so easily dismiss the Clans will be united under my name and strong. We can rule entire systems.”

Hagman reconfigured communications channels on the main control panel as he spoke. “Force has beaten you at every turn. That stupid trade war to satisfy Morn’s greed, blackmailing him with his woman! You had him in your very claw and still he escaped. His cleverness and luck exceeds your savagery, you can’t beat him. All you can do is drag the Clan to defeat.” An explosion several decks below trembled the room. “His soldiers are already at your door.”

“Thanks to your betrayal!” Law roared, his face suffused scarlet with pent up rage. “He would have been crushed against our shield wall with my new fleet.” He gestured towards the Space Dock, glittering with the reflected flash of energy weapons from a dozen close in dogfights around its hull. “With Njy keeping him off-balance in two weeks I could have a hundred new ships and pilots to fly them. “Force would be mine!”

“You saw what Force did with the Xenon,” Hagman said. There was something in Hagman’s face, maybe just a touch of pity imagined in his hard eyes, that dashed Law’s rage like ice water. “You imagine you can ally with Force!” With his anger now stifled Law followed the thought with natural cunning. “And if not then with Jackson and his Confederation, with who you imagine you have an agreement.” He smiled as surprise flinched Hagman’s face. “You are a fool to trust either of them. Force is a spy sent to destroy us and Jackson is a creature of pure self-interest. You may think he is betraying Force but he will plunge him between your shoulder blades. With this station lost the Clan is destroyed.”

It was Hagman’s turn to smile. “We shall see. You underestimate your enemies and that is your downfall.” He opened a communications channel. “Jackson.” He touched a control. “Location, access route and over-rides transmitted.” He strode to the far end of the Observation Lounge, pointed his gun at the high alloy ceiling and fired. Shards of hot metal fell around him, some singing his uniform, some falling onto his close cropped skull. He brushed both away without emotion and gestured to the exposed maintenance crawl-way. “Soon we shall see.”

“This way Max,” Jackson muttered, staring intently at the map displayed on his data-padd. Weapons fire echoed back from both ends of the long curving corridor they crouched in. Jackson took a few steps and punched a code into an access panel lock. It hissed open to reveal a vertical shaft with a recessed metal ladder. “You’re familiar with these, right?” Jackson said with an easy grin. “Somewhat,” Max said warily. “Watch out for point defences.” “All taken care of,” Jackson answered confidently. “I’ll even go first.” He ducked into the hatch and began climbing. “Hagman’s gone to too much trouble just to kill us now. Our fighters control space and our troops’ll soon have the station locked down.”

“It’s a trap,” Max said. “The only question is whose?” Jackson paused and looked down. “It’s a great question.” He flashed a quick, deliberate grin. “You could still back out Max, leave it to me to settle.” Max shook his head. “I want you where I can see you Jack.” They climbed on in silence until they reached a cross way. Jackson consulted his padd and crawled into the left passage. It was high enough for him to run at a crouch. Max padded behind him through a twist of turns until Jackson stopped at a junction and raised a clenched fist.

“This is it Max,” he whispered. “Hagman and Law should be in the room below. If Hagman holds his end of the deal up he’ll have Law for us.”

“And then?”

“Then you strike the best deal you can.”

“Not we?”

“We all have our own best interests at heart Max. When the time comes you do what you have to. There’s a compromise on offer, you should take it.”

“Why do I think I’m just not going to like it?”

Jackson shrugged. “You’ve come a long way Max. You’re clever and you’re not afraid to mix it, whatever the odds. I like that y’know? You said yourself, there’s no way back for Marteene, there’s a treason warrant with his name written on it and a murder rap with yours. Not to mention all that fraud waiting to catch up. Do the smart thing, trust me and play along.”

“I’m all out of trust Jack, and I’m all out of patience too. Too many deaths and they’re still going on.” Max sighed wearily. “I just want it over.” His eyes glinted. “And for Tyre and all the rest, I want Law dead.”

“Well there’s a piece of common ground already. Try and build on it Max.” Jackson inched around the corner and Max followed. Ahead, dust motes danced in the soft light rising through a jagged hole from the space below.

Xela’s droid slipped through the combat torn corridors past clumps of scorched bodies where the station defenders had made futile stands. The security lock-outs on the elevators hampered her tracking of Max from level to level as she tried to keep up. With part of her awareness she monitored the battle still raging around the station, sending the Rescue Pegasus she controlled weaving through the plasma streams to snatch drifting pilots and teleport them to the circling Enterprise. And with another part of her consciousness she monitored Max over the open communications channel.

‘Yes Max, it’s a trap,’ she thought but she didn’t say it, not daring to risk an active transmission giving away her existence and location. She was, as Max said, his Ace in the Hole, his back-up in case of betrayal. ‘But not much use if I’m not close enough to help.’ The elevator lock-out fell to her probe and she ascended three decks, Max was another four levels up in a different quadrant of the station. Such was the jury-rigged design of the place that the next elevator was several hundred metres away and judging from the weapons discharges and the screams there was a major battle going down along the way. She paused at a four way junction strewn with bodies lying under a curtain of criss-crossing weapons fire and she suddenly realised she was afraid. Afraid for both herself, for the survival instincts of Hela was imprinted in her neural net, and for Max, who even as she hesitated, was about to stick his neck in a noose. It was an interesting experience in a way, but one that threatened to hold her back. She scanned the station blueprints again, it was a very human gesture, she already knew there was no other direct route.

‘You’re going to be the death of me Max,’ she thought and drawing on the warm memories she carried for courage, Xela charged the droid’s anti-grav unit to maximum and flew into the raging energy storm. She almost made it through but a good cause squeezes just so much dumb luck from the universe and hers ran out. Inches from safely a laser bolt caught her cylindrical machine body just below the top mounted sensor package. The explosion slammed the smoking droid into the safety of the opposite corridor, smashing against the wall. The anti-grav unit struggled for a few seconds, generators whining under the strain. Then Xela sank to the floor.

“We’re coming through!” Jackson shouted down through the hole in the crawl-way. “No surprises huh?” Max couldn’t catch the reply but it seemed to reassure Jackson, who grinned and winked. “After you?” “It’s your party Jack, I just wish you’d let me stash a couple of grenades.” Max patted the pockets of the long leather coat that replaced his more bulky flight suit for the crawl through the station guts. “Hagman’s scanned us every step of the way. He might be a traitor but he’s not a fool.” “And who’s scanned him I wonder?” Max replied. Jackson shrugged. “Sometimes in life you just gotta gamble to get what you want. Cover me.”

Max adjusted his shades nervously and inched to the jagged lip of the hole and drew his blaster. Jack snapped a mock salute and jumped through feet first like a sky diver jumping from the belly of a plane. He landed easily and rolled aside in one smooth movement. There was no cover to speak of and he came fluidly to his feet, his own weapon covering the two figures at the other end of the lounge.

“Well, lookee here Max, it’s bad old Uncle Law. You been wanted words with him right?”

Max dropped through the ceiling without answering, landing on bent knees, his own long barrelled firearm snapping up to cover Law and Hagman. They stood unmoving under the stare of two barrels.

“Ah, let me guess, energy dampeners,” Max said, absorbing the indifference of the two Stoertebeker Clan leaders. He aimed away to his right and fired at the floor. Energy flared from the barrel and seared the covering from the bare metal deck, seasoning the air with the tang of burned carpet.

“Have you finished?” Jackson asked. Max didn’t reply for at that instant the quiet, underlying hum of Xela’s carrier wave went silent. He activated the shades diagnostics with a measured flick of his focus over the HUD controls. “I’ve lost contact with Zee and the problem’s not our end.”

“That’ll have to wait Max, she’s a big girl and there’s a lot of reasons comms can go down in a battle like this,” Jackson answered, his voice taut with tension. “More immediate problems.” He waved his gun barrel over the two men at the other end of the room. Hagman was holding his own gun, unthreateningly down by his side.

“A gesture of trust,” Hagman snapped, his own voice almost imperceptibly quavering. He sheathed the gun back into its waist holster. “Yes, a gesture of trust,” Law said, his own bass timbre shaded with mockery. “We’re all friends together aren’t we, about to forge a brave new world.” He stabbed the controls of his throne futilely and glared up at Hagman. “Traitor!” He hawked and spat on Hagman’s boots. He did not react.

Jackson was right and Max tried to push his concern down. Whatever was going on elsewhere in the station here was the pivot on which the moment hinged. Here, this room, these four people – none of whom he could confidently call a friend, not even Jackson now the cards were about to fall on the table. He suddenly regretted telling Jackson his backup was down. In the distance a cacophonous firefight raged.

Jackson holstered his own weapon and Max reluctantly followed suit, the stench of a trap strong in his nostrils. His eyes burned into Law, sitting in the electronic monstrosity of a chair, his own face twisted with the emotions he barely held in check. Law returned the mirrored stare with a mocking smile. “Ah – you want to kill me Commander Force, like you killed Professor Challenger and his young assistants.” He shook his head ruefully. “That was a very bad business Max.”

“Shut him up or I will,” Jackson said with even menace. Hagman held open his hand to show the control device, stepped to one side and slammed the chair back into the double blast doors. The impact snapped Law’s head back and forward, leaving him dazed. “I keep my side of the bargain Jackson, it’s time to keep yours. You’ll want to see this Force.” Hagman stepped forward and touched a control. A virtual, holo-screen formed in the centre of the panorama window.

“-repeat. The Teladi Trading Company today announced the seizure of all Force Corporation holdings in Teladi space pending the arrest and trial of Max Force for conspiracy to commit murder, conspiracy to commit fraud and conspiracy to commit conspiracy with the criminal gang known as the Confederation.”

The unseen woman continued to talk over a shot of a squat Teladi destroyer firing forward plasma’s at a space station. “Following the deaths of three hundred Teladi Navy marines in a deliberately staged radiation incident aboard the new Confederation station in Teladi Gain, government forces pursued the Confederation personnel to the Force Corporation installation in Teladi Gain. Fighting still continues aboard but Director Morn has issued a statement saying that major combat operations are almost over. Casualties are said to be heavy.”

“In a further development, a joint statement from the Split and Teladi governing authorities accuse the Force Corporation of being an active front for Clan monies, alleging specifically that its holding in Menelaus Paradise were fraudulently funded. A fuller statement, providing detailed evidence said to prove an unparalleled penetration of Data-Hub security is promised shortly. Unconfirmed reports suggest major fleet movements in Menelaus Paradise.”

Hagman snapped the channel shut. “Just in case you were getting cold feet Jackson. There’s nowhere for you to go Force, listen to your friend here.” Max could see in Jackson’s face that this was not part of whatever script he imagined they were working from. “This wasn’t part of the plan,” he said quietly. “Neither was irradiating Morn’s soldiers,” Hagman retorted. “Just wanted to guarantee you vacant possession,” Jackson answered expressionless. He turned and faced Max, stepped back and drew his gun.

“I’m afraid it’s make your mind up time Max, you’ve lost your corporation, all the things that made you a player in the Conspiracy. You’re just another merc now, a damn good one with damn good

pilots. Throw in with me and the three of us can split the proceeds of selling off the alien tech. Here's Law, all primed and ready for a slice of rough justice. You want that right? Crime with a human face, you and me pal, what d'you think?"

It wasn't a very convincing pitch and Max barely heard it through the blood pounding angrily in his ears as he thought of the new batch of dead laid at his door. Xela should have been leading his troops through the doors now but the carrier wave remained dead. Max felt numb now, as numb as when he dropped the hammer on the Challenger ship, numb beyond the ability of spaceweed to smoke out a good feeling. The sound of fighting intensified, but it came no closer.

"Come on Max," Jackson urged. "You've nothing left to fight for, you knew you were going to lose it all in the end. There's nothing to go back for right?" Nothing to go back for, Jackson had got that right. As both Martene and Force, he was a hunted man now. The thought was like a weight on his shoulders, bowing them down.

"I always said he would not see sense," Hagman muttered. An amused smile danced over Law's face as he watched the tableau unfolding. "Draw your weapon and shoot him," Law said to Hagman in a silky voice. "Shoot both of them. Oh I'm sorry, you can't. You need Jackson to take command of the invaders, if they will listen to him once Force is dead." He shook his head and tutted, somewhat theatrically. "He's gambled everything on you Jackson and I'm not sure he should. Your past actions speak for themselves but regrettably people change. Are you ready to betray your friend now, even though he is worthless? If you cannot convince him, he will have to die. Isn't that ironic Commander? The both of us betrayed by the closest of comrades. Someone should write a play!"

Jackson raised the barrel and pointed it straight at Max's head. "Take off the shades Max." Max complied reluctantly. "It's too good a chance for me to miss. I just can't turn down a quick and dirty short-cut, I'm sorry. Just tell me you'll bring your people into the Confederation, let me see it in your eyes and we can waste this psycho and go. I gotta see it though Max."

Max held Jackson's gaze with equanimity. "Okay Jack, I know when I'm beaten. I'm in."

The barrel didn't waver but Jackson shook his head. "Wrong answer Max, there's still that Junior Leader gleam there," he said, reluctance coating his words like a thick honey. "Are you sure Max, are you really sure?"

Max shrugged and put on his shades again. He felt tired now, down deep into the bone and he could almost hear Xela telling him again, not to trust Jackson. "I guess I'm not untrusting enough to be a good spy," he muttered, half to the silent Xela. He saw Hela's face again, the dimpled smile, the long blonde hair pulled back in a severe bun as she examined a data-padd.

"I'm truly sorry about this." Jackson's blaster hummed to life and Max saw the faint red flash of the pre-ignition sequence, deep in the barrel.

Several decks below a repair droid lurched awkwardly into the air on anti-gravs that howled under the strain. Xela finished rerouting power through sub-systems not designed for such a load and diverted a trickle to the comm. unit. It hummed to life and she caught the jagged hiss of energy fire.

And then the comm. channel went dead. Anger flared in Xela, it burned with a cold intensity that came as much from her suppressed Xenon template as from the neural net imprint of Hela. "Max! I told you it was a trap, I knew it was a trap!" The channel remained silent. Quickly, before the patchwork rerouting of power and control systems collapsed Xela raced the droid through the corridors to the elevator, leaving the sound of battle behind. She cracked the elevator lock-out almost instantly and was nudging the door in impatience when it lurched to a halt. It opened on another raging fire-fight, a badly burned body slumped like a discarded puppet in the lee of the opposite corridor and the air was hot with plasma fire.

She didn't hesitate but this time she kept low, practically hugging the deck as she shot across the corridor. Energy bolts sizzled overhead but she made it through unscathed. With the anti-grav generator whining on the brink of failure the droid sped towards the space designated an Observation Lounge on the station blueprints Jackson uploaded.

Jackson! If Max was dead and if he was involved ..... If! She didn't know how, the repair droid was unarmed, but Jackson would pay for that betrayal. A power bridge collapsed under the strain and the anti-grav unit faltered as Xela reduced and rerouted power through an even more fragile sub-system. He would pay if it was the last thing she did.

"I'm truly sorry about this."

Each syllable hit Max with the force of a blow and time became a sluggish, ice filled, river, meandering its last few metres to the fathomless ocean. Max had all the time in the world, time to note the skin of Jackson's trigger finger whiten over the knuckle, time to note the beads of sweat on his upper lip, time to see conscience fighting with ambition in his eyes, time enough to regret every stupid thing he'd ever done, time enough to picture Tyre one last time, time enough to see the pre-fire sequence flare to orange in the barrel, time enough to do anything but act. He looked Jackson straight in the eyes.

"Oh what the fuck," Jackson exclaimed, pivoting smartly on a heel and firing straight at Hagman, who stood beside Law. The plasma bolt flared inches from his chest, causing him to flinch and smile. Jackson's blaster spluttered and died. Hagman held up the silver control box again. "My former leader places great emphasis on his own safety. His chair contains many useful devices, this force-field among them. And a directional energy dampener, none of your devices work." He raised his own weapon. "Unlike mine! Discard your weapons."

Jackson raised his hands, letting his blaster slip from his grip and moved to stand beside Max who'd placed his own gun on the floor. He smiled ruefully. "I knew there was a reason I never did the right thing!" "You left it real fucking late Jack," Max muttered. "You owe me a new pair of pants." Jack grinned, something more like his normal self. "So now what Hagman? You still need us to call off the troops."

"Think again," Hagman sneered. "Hand over the chip." He waved his firearm in emphasis. "I can just take it from your body." Jackson took his half of the binary data chip containing the location information for the alien ship and held it out. "Put it there – carefully," Hagman ordered, indicating a spot two feet in front of him. Jackson obeyed, backing away cautiously afterwards. Keeping them covered Hagman briefly disengaged the force field and stooped to pick it up.

"You'll never get clear of this sector," Max said. "My people will burn any ship from the sky."

"Law has a fully equipped Pegasus in a hidden launch bay, I'm betting I can make it to the Black Heart and make a jump before 'your people' can spit."

"But you'll have lost the station and lost the chance to cream the good stuff from the crash site. You need us Hagman," Jackson urged.

"I don't care about the technology," Hagman spat bitterly. "I don't care about this sector or this station. You had your chance Jackson, we could have had it all, instead..." Hagman shrugged. "You made your choice. All I care about is the Clan. We're down but not out. With the Teladi Gain station back under our control we will rebuild and until then, I still have the data. You see that?" He nodded towards the panorama window where the explosive charge was a dim silhouette against the blackness of space. "That inconspicuous little device is a charge, one command from this," He flourished the small control box again. "And it blows."

Law spoke for the first time. "Death by vacuum? A somewhat melodramatic ending, I would have thought a straight-forward shot in the face was more your style."

Hagman touched the control box with a thumb and everyone flinched. Law's throne hummed briefly and moved forward, clearing Hagman's retreat through the rear blast doors. "The Clan doesn't need martyrs," Hagman said. "You die in a random act of war, not at the hands of your enemies. Or your successor."

Max gauged the distance to the maintenance crawl-way and held himself ready to run and jump but he knew it was futile. It was too far and Jackson would have the same idea, they'd both die fighting to get up.

Xela nursed the faltering droid through the deserted corridors towards the Lounge, still unable to raise Max on the comm. Her transmitter was damaged but she could still squeeze enough power through to get a signal. Just maybe the failure was at Max's end, she hoped but she knew he was probably dead, but she had to be sure. The door itself was manually sealed from the inside and quickly she opened a maintenance cover in the wall outside the lounge and probed the circuits. Energy flowed into the lounge, powering something big, something with multiple connections to command and control functions. So, no energy dampening field, she revised the odds on Max's survival downwards. Using the optical cables as a carrier she probed the device, seeking a way through to the communications sub-system. The lock-out was, to her, crude. She began cracking the codes and the lockouts fell, one by one, hacking her way simultaneously to the sector transmitter and the internal monitors.

"There is still time for you to come to your senses," Law said quietly. "You have not the wit to lead the Clan, surrender to me now and I will forgive you." The promise sounded hollow, even in his own ears and Hagman did not reply. Instead he holstered his blaster to tap a code into the blast door lock. With a scream Jackson leapt forward to attack. He hit the force-shield with a flash and jack-knifed back, hitting the floor with a stunning thud. Hagman drew his gun and stepped forward, his face suddenly contorted with blazing rage. Max stepped back a step and raised his own hands higher, seeing that the tightly controlled man was on the very cusp of a melt-down under the strain. He tried to not react as the supposedly immobilised Law rose from his throne behind Hagman but didn't quite succeed. Hagman caught the tightening of his eyes and turned. One of Law's huge gauntleted fists smashed down on his gun arm, the other fastened around his throat. His windpipe collapsed like cardboard in the crushing grip as Law lifted him from his feet. Both his gun and the control box slipped to the floor as the strength faded from his limbs. His feet beat in futile struggle against Law's abdomen and then, with a gargling rattle he died.

As Jackson climbed unsteadily to his feet and Max ducked and rolled towards his weapon, coming up smoothly in a firing crouch, Law casually knelt and retrieved both Hagman's blaster and the control box. "The force-field is still in place gentlemen so please, no dramatics. And thank you for bringing me these." He took the binary data chip from Hagman's pockets and kicked his corpse in the face, the nose broke with a snap. "You should not always believe what you fortuitously discover in another's private database," he muttered. He smiled at Max. "You just can't get reliable help these days can you Commander Force? So much betrayal."

"You planted false blueprints," Jackson said admiringly. "I'll have to remember that!"

"Not false, just incomplete. The matter of an over-ride function, just in the event." Law smiled at his own foresight and cleverness and he moved back to the door. "However, Hagman was correct about one thing." He examined the control box for a moment, then his face brightened. "Ingeniously simple!" He pointed the box at the panoramic window where distant fighters still jousted. The shadow of a nearby fighter flickered through the lounge as it shot past, too quick to see. "You both deserve death by vacuum. Don't worry, the force shield will function long enough for me to make my escape."

Max opened fire, his blaster futilely pouring a coruscating tongue of fire over the shield. Law didn't so much as flinch. "Goodbye Mr Force," he said softly and triggered the blast door lock. It slid open. He smiled again and activated the small control box. The explosion shattered the plexi-glass window into a thousand shards that glittered in the sunlight as they plumed into the vacuum, dragging three bodies with them in a shroud of freezing air.

## **Chapter 26: Retribution**

The AI chip consumed minimal power and dissipated what waste heat it generated through passive cooling fins filigreed at the microscopic level to provide a large radiant surface area. Xela did not sweat yet she could feel a hot dampness slicking her forehead and a leaden reluctance to move with precision infect her swollen clumsy fingers as they fumbled through the circuits and relays.

Xela terminated the Interface, switching Control Metaphors seamlessly. The default sub-routine predated the imprinting of Marteene's cousin Hela onto the clean slate neural network and rested on a foundation constructed from the captured Xenon templates. It was a cool and efficient CM, its relentless logic untrammelled by feelings. Her frantic concern for Gragore's safety faded behind a cold ice wall, which leached emotion from the facts like bright sunlight bleaches colours until the lack of contact with Force and Jackson became just a Prime Motivational Factor in the cascading neural chains driving the repair droid as it connected to the severely damaged internal comms network.

It didn't feel good, it didn't feel bad, it was just an absence of input. Only the control wave harmonic tuned to the quiescent Human CM carried a faint echo of true emotion, like the memory of a cold, dead passion.

'Goodbye Mr Force.' She caught Law's words through bursts of static that mirrored the frizzling hiss of lasers and the deep, phlegm roar of plasma's down the corridor. She caught the grinding rasp of the blast door opening, in both the discharge flensed comms channel and close by, back towards the raging fire-fight. Then she caught the inchoate roar of an explosion and the fracturing crack of plexi-glass, slow and clear in the stretched time of the analytic enhancement filters. Then the silence of vacuum and the metal grind of the closing blast door just down the corridor and fast approaching footsteps.

Motivational Factors recalculated and precedence signifiers shuffled in the light of circumstances and access to an external link became Priority Over-Ride. The footsteps came closer, a short but heavy stride. It took 2.34687 seconds, approximately, to map a path through the still functioning Lounge command panel to a secondary external array and open a channel. Cleansed of emotions that stretch and distort the sentient perception of time, sometimes happy fast, sometimes crushing news slow, the seconds passed with metronome precision. The steps echoed close round the curve of the corridor, above the weapons fire as she took control of the Rescue Pegasus AI and kicked it out of standby. Ahead two bodies spasmodically twitched in a cloud of frozen air and glass shards, like trapped insects setting in diamond. Another floated perfectly still. As the footsteps stopped close Xela formulated a command sequence.

The corridor howled with weapons fire and the screams of the wounded and what faith Law once had in his soldiers had been swept way in the tide of setbacks and defeats inflicted by Force. They would break soon. Better to withdraw, regroup and strike a deal with the remnants of the Confederation Clan once they realised both leaders were dead. There was a Pegasus standing by in a small repair bay on the next level but it was only lightly defended and it was only a matter of time before the attackers severed the access route. Anxious to make his escape and buoyed by the blood singing pleasure that came from striking down his enemies in such a cruel fashion Law almost ignored the repair droid probing an uncovered maintenance panel. It had been the subtle, subliminally noticed change in Hagman's demeanour that had prompted him to take extra precautions, a feeling that something was not right that festered and itched until it erupted like a poison sore in his consciousness. That same instinct for the out of place fired now and he remembered the hunt for the traitors who facilitated Force's escape. What was a maintenance droid doing working in an apparently undamaged area? With roused suspicion came another question – what was the device hooked into the Universal Access Port? Law raised his weapon as the droid pivoted an optical sensor in his direction.

As the barrel came up Xela transmitted the command sequence. As Law's finger tightened on the trigger she re-initialised the HCM and everything flooded back, Hela's memories, her emotions and her fears. And as the barrel flared an angry pre-fire red and brightened to unbearably bright white with the impossible torpor of time stretched to the snapping point, Xela screamed.

It cut through the burning pain in lungs suddenly, gratefully, agonisingly able to suck in air, it cut through the bone deep cold freezing his muscles, it dashed away the blind, awesome terror of imminent death.

“Max!”

A static burst cut the nerve flensing scream and as his senses bought the cramped cockpit of a Pegasus fighter into focus, as the heat melted the ice limning his face, as he tried to force his cramped, convulsing limbs to work, as the auto-pilot fired thrusters, Max wept.

Dimly aware of another body lying under him on the cramped teleport pad, Max staggered to his feet and hauled himself into the single pilot seat, fighting panic for control. The hull of the station skimmed by, impossibly close and barely able to control the spasmodic convulsions that twitched his limbs he jerked the stick hard right. It had no effect.

“Max!” Jackson managed to squeeze a note of high alarm into the word between lung ripping coughs. The Pegasus came to a full stop at the ripped maw of the Observation Lounge and slipped sideways through the gap on thrusters, touching down just inside the lip of the shattered display window. With an act of will Max pushed down his grief and terror, compressed them like rubber, stuffed them into steel box and forced the lid shut.

“Nice flying,” Jackson said behind him, keeping himself upright against the shakes with one hand resting heavily on the pilot seat headrest. Max could feel it tremble and he glanced back, taking in Jackson’s face, blanched so bone white with shock that the tiny burst capillaries pocking it stood out like fresh blood on a fresh linen sheet. “And more to the point,” the Clan leader continued, “How..”

“Xela, she had a rescue ship tagging me,” Max answered his voice quivering like his fingers as they punching control keys and riffled through control menus. “I think something’s happened to her. There was a transmission, gunfire and static.” Jackson heard the tight, final, note in his voice and squeezed Max’s shoulder in brief sympathy. “The ship flew here on autopilot.” His eyes were blurred with tears and he rubbed them to double check the readings. “The shields are blocking the hole, there’s an atmosphere outside, let’s go.”

Max didn’t wait for a response and forced his way past Jackson towards the tiny airlock at the rear of the cabin. It was cramped beyond friendly with the two of them and they half stumbled and fell to the deck as the outer hatch slid open. “You call this,” Jackson took several deep, rasping breaths as he rested on his hands and knees, “an atmosphere.” Max’s lungs laboured to scour enough oxygen from the thin air to breath a reply and he forced a smile. “There’s no pleasing some people, on your feet.”

The Observation Lounge had been sucked clean of debris by the explosive decompression; only Law’s command console remained. As the lounge filled with air leaking in from the crawl-way above, Max staggered to it, his legs shaking so much he could barely walk. “Take this,” Jackson said, joining him as Max tried to glean some sense of the tactical situation from the displays. Max took the ampoule reluctantly. Jackson took a second stim from his flight-suit pocket and it hissed into his carotid. “Come on Max, one more won’t hurt.”

Max injected the stim, his body welcomed the enervating rush of energy like a lover embracing a long-lost soul mate. Damn, but the power surging through his nervous system felt good, it filled places he’d forgotten were empty and he relished the new confidence, that feeling that he could do anything.

The internal sensors were protected by lockouts but the primary display was tuned to the externals and showed the Stoertebeker fighter resistance was broken, the few surviving ships fleeing in a ragged line, harassed every metre of the way, towards the Black Heart which sat 50 clicks beyond the northern gate.

“We’re winning,” Max summarised. “Come on!”

The blast door slid open with agonising slowness and as soon as the gap was large enough Max forced himself through. Law’s throne sat abandoned and powered down, directly outside. Weapons fire and screams echoed through the corridor.

“That’s close,” Jackson said, nervously aware that they were unarmed. “Which way did that murdering bastard go? No-one, but no fucking one, spaces me!”

“This way,” Max answered. He closed his eyes to better recall the station schematics. “There’s a launch bay.” He pointed down the corridor, away from the sounds of fighting. “I wonder why he abandoned this, with its shields and all?”

“Too slow probably,” Jackson said. “He’s bugging out on long legs. Let’s go.” He jogged in the indicated direction, Max loping alongside him. As they turned a bend both stopped dead, the acrid bite of scorched metal and melted insulation strong in the air.

Max approached the smoking ruin of the repair droid with the reluctant air of a child at their first funeral, too afraid to look in the open coffin, too afraid not to. He recognised the droid, he didn’t want to, but the markings were unmistakable. Where the Xela chip interfaced was just a soft-lipped hole with a blackened gob of twisted ceramic and metal held by a thin silver peninsula of heat-softened alloy and optical conduits.

“No.” There was a horrible finality in the word. “Zee!” He sank slowly to his knees, all his stim strength and bravado leaching away with the hope, forlornly held like a guttering candle cupped against a hurricane. She was gone, really gone. It was like Hela had died over again and this time Max embraced the long dark cloud coming down in his brain, the bleaching of colour from his senses, the seeping away of his will as the universe bled meaning.

“Max, come on buddy, snap out of it! We’ve got to keep moving.”

He was dimly aware of the voice above the weapons fire echoing off the bare metal walls of the corridor and angrily shook Jackson’s hand from his shoulder, not trusting himself to speak. The gunfire increased in intensity, the whine and crack of lasers smothered in the throat roared blast of a heavy plasma weapon.

“That’s an M70,” Max said absently, the characteristic guttural howl triggering memories of his frantic rampage through the station to free Tyre. He saw her face then, sharp and high cheek-boned, framed in blonde and realised how much she resembled his dead cousin. “There’s one for the psycho-biographers,” he muttered, smiling distractedly. Jackson stared at him as if he were mad.

The fire fight roared to a crescendo, the deep retort of the M70 counter-pointing the electric sizzle of the lasers like a bass anchoring the free flight fancy of violins. And then it all stopped. Just for a long second a silence as complete as that in which his lungs had wheezed vainly in vacuum, with just the vibrating pulse of his blood to count out the last few horrifying seconds of his life, fell leaden on the corridor.

A single moan broke the spell, a groan that seemed to grow from stunned disbelief to a shrill scream of terror that burned the blood.

“My dick, fuck no, not my dick, not my dick!”

There was a single shot, silence, then the quick, short, staccato beat of boots on metal pounding up the corridor towards them. The firing resumed, but at reduced intensity.

“Hostiles inbound Max,” said Jackson, nervously glancing back. “You got a hold-out?”

Max shrugged. “Not even a sharpened stick.”

The Stoertebeker soldiers could hear defeat in the white noise silence of the command channels and smell it in the seared flesh and punctured guts of their casualties. They’d broke and run, pounding up the corridor, behind the rearguard cover of just two of the squad, too lost to the red-mist madness of combat for their survival instincts to kick in.

Seven of them surged past the sealed door to the Observation Lounge, past the shattered repair droid and over the two bodies sprawled like broken puppets where the corridor curved sharp left, in a ragged, panicked line. Jackson rolled and scissored the legs of the tail-ender, snatching up her pulse rifle as it fell from her hands. Continuing his roll he came smoothly to one knee and hosed the full energy clip into the backs of the fleeing soldiers.

“Rock and roll! Grab a gun and get moving buddy.”

Max shook his head and raised his arms in surrender and Jackson did a double-take before he realised the firing behind them had stopped. The corridor echoed to the tramp of boots hitting the deck in disciplined unison. Jackson dropped the rifle as two helmeted soldiers came around the bend, running stealthy point for the rest of their squad.

“On the deck, on the deck!” one screamed as the other dropped to one knee and covered them.

“Corridor clear,” the first called and then lowered his weapon. “Commander, how..?”

“Can it and move!” Payter appeared at the head of a group of four more of his mercs. The point men hustled past Max, advancing down the corridor; move and cover, move and cover. “It’s good to see you Commander.” The tone of his voice and the look on his face added, ‘you look like shit!’

“Law is heading for a launch bay on the next level, I want him alive,” Max said. “You got schematics?” Payter nodded. “You heard the man,” he said to the big woman holding the M70 in an easy one-hand grip, the stock resting on her hip. She snapped orders to the others and continued barking instructions into her helmet mike.

“I need a comm. link,” Max said as the soldiers hurried away, “and a gun.” Payter unholstered his spare blaster and tossed it him. Max reflexively checked the charge, slammed it into his thigh holster and took the small communications unit the Sarge handed him and tuned it to the command channel.

“Force to Enterprise, report.” He paused and Kaitrin’s voice echoed from the static hiss. “Enterprise here Commander, area secure, reporting green across the board.”

“Law might be making for a ship, I want a picket around the docking port and if possible I want him alive.”

“And if he fights?”

“Waste him,” Max said with a bitterness Kaitrin could taste through the hull and through the intervening vacuum. “Understood,” she replied after the smallest of pauses, in a tone that said that somehow she really did understand. “I’m sorry Max.”

Payter looked quizzically at Jackson.

“Women’s intuition, don’t knock it. The electric chick bought it hauling our asses out of vacuum.”

An explosion shuddered through the station.

“Ship launch, ship launch” Kaitrin called. “Damn, it blew straight out of the hull, moving to intercept.”

Unconsciously Max held his breath.

“He’s gone Max. It’s a full speed Pegasus, making for the Heart, we’re not going to catch him.”

Max’s shoulders slumped in defeat, as if the weight of everything that had happened since he lost his name, finally came smashing down. All those deaths; Artur, Daht, Challenger, Paskaal and now Xela.

“All for nothing,” Max completed the thought out loud. “They died for nothing, he’s got the location data.” Despite the stims he was tired, right down to the marrow in his bones.

“I heard that Max,” Tyre’s voice snapped from the comm. like a slap in the face. “I didn’t give up when that bastard had me and I’ll be damned if I let you give up now.” Her voice rose a pitch. “You promised me he’d pay and you’re bloody well going to keep it!”

“Zee’s gone,” he replied dully. “I know,” Tyre replied with a gentle concern that stung his eyes with tears, “But she came back from the dead to see through this super-secret mission and if she can do that you can damn well suck it up and get on with the job! No sex until I see a head on a plate.”

Jackson chuckled and Payter scoured the bare corridor for a place to hide his face. A small smile cracked Max’s ashen face and as it broadened into a grin his chest went out and his shoulders stiffened.

“Kaitrin – split our fighters into three groups and put a picket on each gate, nothing except Xenon jumps in and lives. Use mines and any LT’s we have left but keep two in reserve and garrison the Enterprise with a core Raiders strike force, auto-pilot my Mamba on board. Understood?”

“Understood Commander,” she acknowledged. “That’s my Max,” Tyre lilted. “Or a close facsimile,” he said and closed the channel.

“Sarge – secure the station and get back to the Enterprise with enough men to drag Law’s fried ass from his bridge.”

Payter snapped a parade salute and began calling orders into his mike.

“Coming or staying Jack?”

“I want a piece of that psycho too,” Jackson grinned. “Try and keep me from it!”

Five minutes later Max piloted the rescue Pegasus through the Enterprise hanger bay doors. Two minutes later he was back in the command seat, with Tyre at his side, drinking in the tactical displays.

“Why doesn’t he just jump out?” Jackson asked. Max shrugged, Law had made it back to his command ship, now lurking out in the fringes of the gate system, hundreds of clicks away.

“Because he knows he’ll never get back in?”

Max checked the sector display again, to confirm that enough fighters and static defences were positioned at each of the two jump-gates to prevent Law using them to escape combat.

“Thin,” Jackson said, reading his thoughts. “The Black Heart could probably barrel through without critical damage.”

“Not without risking its inter-planetary capabilities. No, he’s got three options. Fight, flee or do a deal. A rational person would try and strike a bargain using the location data as a chip.”

“Run or fight then,” Jackson said with a grin. “Computer, can we track him if he goes inter-planetary?”

“Uncertain. Once the Enterprise inter-planetary drive is activated the enhanced sensor efficiency is reduced by 43.564%, approximately. There is a greater than 50% chance that the target lock can be broken. Competence of commander and navigator of target – unknown variables.”

It spoke in Xela’s voice and for a second Max’s heart leapt with hope that somehow she had transferred herself to the ship systems but the tone was flat and intellectually he knew everything that made her Zee was tied to the unique neural technology of the destroyed chip. He masked the tears stinging his eyes and spoke with a deliberation that did not quite conceal the quaver in his voice.

Tyre rested a comforting hand on his and squeezed. Max flashed a grateful smile.

“Law must have had a long range scanning capability we could tie our nav-sats into. Kaitrin?”

“Scanning.” Her fingers danced over her control board. “Confirmed.”

The sector display appeared on the main viewer and she zoomed the magnification out to encompass a distant, solitary asteroid.

“I’m picking up leakage from a focused low power carrier wave. Spaceweed to Scruffin Fruit its aimed at the station. We should be able to track the Black Heart at least until it accelerates to interplanetary velocity. After that it’s a matter of extrapolating the course because you can’t vary it by much without decelerating back down to normal speeds.”

“And then we’d nail his ass to the mast,” Jack said.

“Status of the Heart?” Max asked.

Kaitrin took a moment to interrogate the sensor readings.

“Orbiting another asteroid outlier.” She refocused the display. As they watched the large red icon depicting the Teladi Albatross calved two more. They in turn birthed six more. Max didn’t need Kaitrin’s analysis to know what was happening.

“He’s digging in - LT’s and a fighter screen. Anyone want to bet that that rock does not hold some nasty, big boom surprise?” No-one took him up on it.

“It’s a trap,” Jack agreed. “But we’ve beaten worse. Let’s settle this thing once and for all.”

Max forced Xela from his mind and ran options through his brain. The fighter strength of the Black Heart was an unknown variable but he was willing to bet that it did not match even the skeleton Raiders squadron aboard the Enterprise, not in numbers and certainly not in quality. Law would know that too, therefore that ‘roid must hold some real nasty surprise. A hidden cache of Hornets at the very least, maybe a few dozen squash mines.

“Kaitrin, if there’s a sensor relay on that other rock might its logs contain records of transmissions we could triangulate with its orbit to narrow down the search area?”

“Probably not,” she replied after a few moments of careful thought. “From what we know Law’s technical people were on the ball and his security no slouches. They’d have disabled the back-up or do what I’d do and transliterate the readings to give a false pointer. Technically difficult, but possible.”

A weary silence fell on the bridge – another murderous battle and this time some unknown trap.

“But I bet Law doesn’t know that,” Tyre said suddenly.

Max looked at her blankly and then a slow smile spread across his face.

“Tyre, that’s so brilliant I could kiss you!”

“Me too!” Jackson added enthusiastically.

“I’m expecting a lot more than that Max,” Tyre answered, her face flushed. “But Jack, you can just send flowers okay?”

Kerman had the course punched into the helm before Max gave the order.

“ETA 1.3 of your puny Argon hours,” the Paranid volunteered unasked as the Enterprise engines roared to full throttle, shaking the deck with their power.

“The Enterprise is underway.”

Law adjusted his bulk but the Black Heart Bridge command seat refused to yield a more comfortable position. Annoyed, Law snapped. "Estimated arrival time?"

"ETA?" Law glanced at Patterson sharply, suspecting as always that the old Navy First Officer hid a military contempt for all civilians behind his neutral, clipped tone. "None, Admiral." Law's eyes narrowed as he parsed the slight pause before the honorific for a slight. Then he caught himself and smiled. His enemies were dead; Jackson, Force and Hagman; they were gone now – their last breaths coming at his hands. He closed his eyes for a moment and smiled, reliving the sweet feel of the neck snapping in his grip, the tiny snap, snap, snap of vertebrae. The smile broadened to an incisor flashing grin that rippled a frisson of terror across the bridge like ripples on a thick, stagnant pond as he pictured Force's last few agonising seconds. The lung rupturing attempt to hold that very last breath, the flesh freezing on his face and that final fading thought. Law hoped the knowledge of his own total triumph would be eternally frozen into Force's brain – a final, everlasting thought.

Then Patterson's words forced past his imagining.

"Cut off the heads and the snake will die," he stated with grand satisfaction and stood up. "Prepare to deploy a navigation satellite and transfer control to the captain's ready room. We will retake the station within the day and our allies will hound the Enterprise to destruction, wherever Force's pathetic remnants flee."

He was halfway to the small door leading off the bridge to the Ready Room when the particular quality of the silence pervading the bridge registered. Fear. Fear was good, it reminded people with expensively purchased loyalties that there were other reasons for keeping their side of the bargain, but he sensed something else, as if the air itself held an electrical charge.

"I have personally killed their leaders but they do not withdraw? Extrapolated course of the ship!" Law snapped at the anonymous functionary sitting at the Helm station. She swallowed twice before finding a quivering voice.

"This rock Admiral." She tapped her control panel and the sector map appeared on the main viewer with a single blue asteroid designating symbol highlighted. "Data without content means nothing," Law replied with an evenness that added to the chill in the air. "Why? Present hypotheses and possible actions."

"It houses a long-range intra-system communications array," the woman stammered. "The secret, I don't know..." Law cut her off with an imperious slice of his hand, she didn't know anything about the real reason they were in this sector, nothing beyond a promise of more wealth than someone of her skills and potential could lawfully expect to realise. She swallowed hard and concentrated on her board with a tight, shoulder hunching determination.

"Belay that satellite order," Law said, wearily taking his seat. "That asteroid may contain information that could jeopardise the fruitful completion of our enterprise here." He turned to Patterson, who had taken the First Officer station at his right hand. "We must destroy that ship. Tactical situation."

Patterson's fingers danced over his station's controls and he absorbed the information in a cold sweat silence. Law's eyes felt like razors, slitting down his spine.

"Both jump-gates are interdicted with mines, laser towers and fighters, any ship using them would suffer serious damage. We have twenty Bayamons we didn't have pilots for, seven Falcons and nine Orinoco fighters remaining. We recovered twenty of our guys and have another ten walking wounded roused from their bunks."

Sweat beaded his gun-metal gray hairline and the bridge fell silent as every breath was held.

"Thirty-six ships? I do not understand why if we had such reserves they were not committed to the fight."

"Most of the Bayamons were battle damaged and still being patched together. Without pilots to fly them we were using them for spares."

“And now?”

“They’ll fly, so long as no-one runs a pre-flight check.”

“And the enemy?”

Patterson checked his display again but the figure had not been revised.

“Assuming a complete Enterprise deployment and assuming each ship our sensors recorded docking is combat ready, no more than thirteen ships. Mambas and Eels.”

“Better ships and better pilots,” Law stated, because no-one else would and it was an important factor. It was why he ordered the Black Heart to orbit this particular asteroid. If it had been in the Ore Belt or any of the other mineral rich sectors it would sport a mechanical carapace by now, to process the ore ripped from its nickel-iron core but Law valued it for its tactical possibilities, not its mineral density. Long range scans would not reveal the Gamma HEPT’s dug into its ore striated crust or the inert squash mines on its surface, waiting for the signal that would send them shedding the minor gravity constraint on crude chemical boosters, the twenty Hornet-class missiles. ‘The Xenon Redoubt’, as Captain Hart had called it, a trap, a knuckle-duster fist and a black-jack cosh, just in case being good neighbours didn’t work out.

And now, with Force and Jackson dead, Law realised someone else was in charge, someone who was thinking with their head rather than their blood. He could feel the rage building, in the twin dull ache behind each set of tight-clamped molars and see it in the mist that seemed to fall over his eyes, making everything on the Bridge appear distant and the colours red-shifted towards the far end of the spectrum.

Then he relaxed, consciously making it so with a single, deep, chest-expanding breath. Force and Jackson were dead – with both their leaders gone the Force Corporation and the Confederation would be in disarray. The alliance was unnatural in the extreme and would in time fall apart. He did not have that time but he did know how to push, how to insert a cold-forged wedge of doubt between the granite and hammer.

“Can we use the asteroid communications facility to flood all channels? I want my words to be heard from every speaker aboard that ship.”

“With preparation,” Patterson nodded a quick affirmative. He wasn’t a technician but he knew what the answer had to be.

“Then make it so and inform me when it’s ready. How long before the Enterprise reaches the asteroid?”

“Helm,” Patterson prompted.

“Fifty seven minutes,” she replied in a shaking voice.

“I will speak in thirty,” Law stated. “There are slaves aboard?” he asked, turning to Patterson. “Have something, young, female and pretty brought to the Captain’s quarters instantly. I have some time to kill,” he chortled.

No one laughed.

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"I have personally killed their leaders but they do not withdraw? Extrapolated course of the ship!" Law snapped at the anonymous functionary sitting at the Helm station. She swallowed twice before finding a quivering voice.

"This rock Admiral." She tapped her control panel and the sector map appeared on the main viewer with a single blue asteroid-designating symbol highlighted. "Data without content means nothing," Law replied with an evenness that added to the chill in the air. "Why? Present hypotheses and possible actions."

"It houses a long-range intra-system communications array," the woman stammered. "The secret, I don't know.." Law cut her off with an imperious slice of his hand, she didn't know anything about the real reason they were in this sector, nothing beyond a promise of more wealth than someone of her skills and potential could lawfully expect to realise. She swallowed hard and concentrated on her board with a tight, shoulder hunching determination.

"Belay that satellite order," Law said, wearily taking his seat. "That asteroid may contain information that could jeopardise the fruitful completion of our enterprise here." He turned to Patterson, who had taken the First Officer station at his right hand. "We must destroy that ship. Tactical situation."

Patterson's fingers danced over his station's controls and he absorbed the information in a cold sweat silence. Law's eyes felt like razors, slitting down his spine.

"Both jump-gates are interdicted with mines, laser towers and fighters, any ship using them would suffer serious damage. We have twenty Bayamons we didn't have pilots for, seven Falcons and nine Orinoco fighters remaining. We recovered twenty of our people and have another ten walking wounded roused from their bunks."

Sweat beaded his gun-metal gray hairline and the bridge fell silent as every breath was held.

"Thirty-six ships? I do not understand why if we had such reserves they were not committed to the fight."

"Most of the Bayamons were battle damaged and still being patched together. Without pilots to fly them we were using them for spares."

"And now?"

"They'll fly, so long as no-one runs a pre-flight check."

“And the enemy?”

Patterson checked his display again but the figure had not been revised.

“Assuming a complete Enterprise deployment and assuming each ship our sensors recorded docking is combat ready, no more than thirteen ships. Mambas and Eels.”

“Better ships and better pilots,” Law stated, because no-one else would and it was an important factor. It was why he ordered the Black Heart to orbit this particular asteroid. If it had been in the Ore Belt or any of the other mineral rich sectors it would sport a mechanical carapace by now, to process the ore ripped from its nickel-iron core but Law valued it for its tactical possibilities, not its mineral density. Long range scans would not reveal the Gamma HEPT’s dug into its ore striated crust or the inert squash mines on its surface, waiting for the signal that would send them shedding the minor gravity constraint on crude chemical boosters, the twenty Hornet-class missiles. ‘The Xenon Redoubt’, as Captain Hart had called it, a trap, a knuckle-duster fist and a black-jack cosh, just in case being good neighbours didn’t work out.

And now, with Force and Jackson dead, Law realised someone else was in charge, someone who was thinking with their head rather than their blood. He could feel the rage building, in the twin dull ache behind each set of tight-clamped molars and see it in the mist that seemed to fall over his eyes, making everything on the Bridge appear distant and the colours red-shifted towards the far end of the spectrum.

“Can we reach that relay station before them?”

Patterson shook his head. “They are closer, by about 60 clicks, and faster.”

“Best speed,” Law growled, “We have soldiers?”

“A full complement Admiral, at Hagman’s orders.”

‘Even in treachery he aids me!’ Law thought fiercely. “Then we shall board and take their ship.”

It wasn’t a plan, just something to focus the attention of his crew. He had a working plan though, one that he’d carried since Force and Jackson were swept into space.

He relaxed, consciously making it so with a single, deep, chest-expanding breath. Force and Jackson were dead – with both their leaders gone the Force Corporation and the Confederation would be in disarray. The alliance was unnatural in the extreme and would in time fall apart. He did not have that time but he did know how to push, how to insert a cold-forged wedge of doubt between the granite and hammer.

“Can we use the asteroid communications facility to flood all channels? I want my words to be heard from every speaker aboard that ship.”

“With preparation,” Patterson nodded a quick affirmative. He wasn’t a technician but he knew what the answer had to be.

“Then make it so and inform me when it’s ready. How long before the Enterprise reaches the asteroid?”

“Helm,” Patterson prompted.

“Fifty seven minutes,” she replied in a shaking voice.

“I will speak in thirty,” Law stated. “There are slaves aboard?” he asked, turning to Patterson. “Have something, young, female and pretty bought to the Captain’s quarters instantly. I have some time to kill,” he said, deadpan.

No one laughed.

He returned to the Bridge just over thirty minutes later and the crew affected not to notice the blood flecking the leather of his gloves. Patterson signalled readiness with a nod.

“Attention officers and crew of the Enterprise. Attention members of the Confederation clan, Force and the traitor Jackson are dead.” He let his words freeze in the gap between the two opposing groups, expanding like ice in a rock fissure. “I have what I needed from them, I cannot be stopped, the Force Corporation is destroyed and the Confederation Clan weakened to the point that it will be unable to fight off the predators that circle.”

Law smiled, a deliberate cold grin that the scars on his face twisted into something mocking and evil.

“My name is known and my rage legendary. To those that come under my banner I promise positions in the Clan and a share in the wealth your leaders knew lie in this system. For every fighter that comes to rest on my flight deck me I promise 20,000 credits.”

He let his words worm under the skin of his enemies. Law knew people and he knew what sort of scum gravitated towards the clans. Without a strong leader, without a strong organisation, they were a rabble waiting to be picked off by the military or by the law. Without their leader he was certain even a substantial segment of Force’s own Raiders would recognise defeat.

And if not? They would be too busy fighting among themselves to stop him destroying the relay station and then he’d deal with the survivors, with the help of his Split allies if necessary. He hoped Force’s woman would survive long enough to resume their unfinished business. The thought made his blood sing.

## **Chapter 27: Showdown**

The Enterprise did not deviate from its course. It would, Patterson passed estimated, reach the communications relay, twenty minutes before the Black Heart. “Can I assume the station is secure?” Law asked evenly. Patterson’s face was like a big, high definition view-screen, revealing every pore and follicle of his thought processes with crystal clarity but Law let him answer, just to measure the man.

“The base is completely locked down and the system safeguards,” the hesitation was fractional but telling, “robust.”

“Robust has never proven adequate where Force was concerned,” Law snapped contemptuously and Patterson’s face whitened under his old spacer’s tan. ‘Was!’ Law savoured the word, allowed it to warm his stomach, before continuing. “Force is dead but his people still seem motivated. They penetrated station security so I’m sure they can get through a few standard security protocols. It was assumed nothing could interfere with the relay without our intervention so no beyond-the-call of duty precautions were taken.”

It was a statement not a question and Patterson just nodded, his lips pursed tight and thin. Law let the tension build until the only sounds were the subdued electronic chatter of the bridge systems and his own harsh, wheezing breath.

“I have reason to believe their ability to work miracles has been removed,” he stated, recalling his destruction of the out-of-place and unfamiliar looking repair droid. “So perhaps your optimism will hold long enough for us to intervene. Any signal from that ship?”

“Nothing Admiral,” Patterson reported, almost completely masking the tremor in his voice.

“Are all fighters ready to launch?”

“Standing on your word,” Patterson confirmed.

Law eased his bulk back into the protesting leather and waited as the Black Heart ploughed remorselessly towards the Enterprise. As the two ships converged on the asteroid and the distance separating them closed without any communication only he remained immune to the fear that filled the air like ozone from an unshielded power relay. Patterson had barely looked up from his panel to mark the distance with a curt ‘One hundred clicks and closing,’ when the Helm officer turned, her eyes wide and voice trembling. “Fighters launching!”

Patterson flashed the data onto the main viewer. “Twenty ships Admiral, twelve Bayamons, five Mambas and three Eels.”

They outmatch us. He didn’t say it, he didn’t have to. Force had bloodied their noses repeatedly and now the expectation of defeat was in his tone. Law regretted not being able to exhibit the corpses of his enemies to stiffen backbones.

“Contact the Force ships again. I want to be heard by everyone, including the gate picket fighters. Understood?”

Patterson stood hunched over the communications post, muttering in a soothing tone to the Teladi female officer as he claws skittered staccato over her board. “Boosting power, refocusing the array,” Patterson relayed over his shoulder. A quickly muted feedback howl sliced through the bridge like a sonic blade on overload and Patterson nodded readiness.

“This is Law, chief of the Stoertebeker Clan.” His voice became silk, dripping reason. “Your leaders are dead and a Split destroyer will be here within the hour. By the time you learn what you seek to learn your ship will be a burning hulk. You will all die. You will all die for nothing. Join me, join my Clan and live in prosperity.”

He counted silently to three and let his voice acquire a jagged, venomous edge.

“I claim your vessels as my own. Any resistance and all will...” Law drew out the pause like a old steel razor peeling the scalp from a skull. “Suffer, at length.” He turned to address Patterson, deliberately keeping the channel open. “Launch Wing One, all strike squadrons to launch status.”

He cut the channel and smiled as Patterson gave the launch order. Force was not the only one capable of bluffing and in the confusion caused by his and Jackson’s death he was confident his words and his bluff would paralyse the two ill-matched factions. Force’s Raiders might be mercenaries of above the norm rectitude and discipline but the Confederation were just pirates, regardless of the pretensions and ambitions of their leader. Scum - leaderless scum with nothing to gain and everything to lose and they were as good as his.

The Black Heart decelerated so as not to outpace the thirty assorted Clan fighters spread out before it like a shield. The Force fighters formed into two ragged packs, a right fist of heavy fighters and a left jab of Bayamons poised over them. Law was no tactician but the plan was clear. The Confederation ships would keep his fighters busy while the Raiders went for the Heart. The tension on the bridge began to develop an edge of panic and as the remnants of the two fleets closed it began to flense his nerves too. That they still fought at all let alone fought as one defied everything Law knew about the type of men drawn to the lives of mercenaries and pirates.

“Our fighters will lose.” Patterson barely breathed the words lest they infect the bridge with panic and the breaking tremor in his voice told of the effort it took to voice that truth. Law nodded. Beads of cold sweat formed along his ragged hairline and slid stinging down his scarred face as he groped for an alternative strategy. There remained none. Both jumpgates were too well defended for the jumpdrive to be a useful tactical device. All he could do was fight or withdraw from the sector completely.

And then what? Eke out the remainder of his days as the leader of a base-less Clan, dependent entirely on the goodwill of Morn? Once they jumped out of this sector he knew they would not be able to get back. The Powers would blockade the sector beyond any chance to deploy a navigation satellite. Patterson read his thoughts, so it seemed.

‘We could head directly for the ‘destination’, if you provide us with the coordinates Admiral,’ he tentatively suggested. “And hope for something to show up in the mean-time?” Law snapped. “If we cannot beat them now how could we expect to defeat them later?” His voice rose to an angry roar and a familiar red mist rose before his eyes, swathing his faculties in a shroud of flesh-rending rage.

“Open all channels, open all channels damn you!”

The Teladi female froze at her post and Law was upon her in a second, grapping her by her smooth, cool throat and smashing her head back onto her board. He kept pounding until the panel was slick with blood and the quivering pulse beneath his fingers stilled.

“The channels are open Admiral,” Patterson said. “Audio and visual,” he added pointedly. Law lifted the corpse and hurled it to one side and stormed to the front of the bridge to stand before the view-screen.

“I am Law!” He held up a bloody hand. “And I will destroy all who oppose me. One hundred thousand credits to all who come under my banner and a painful, lingering death to those who do not. You have no other choice, you have no other choice!” What little self-control remained was almost eaten away by the continued defiance of his leaderless enemies and his screaming threats incoherent as he kicked the bloodied body of the Teladi communications specialist, each snapping bone sending his further into the abyss of his own psychosis.

“Admiral, Admiral!”

The voice was distant, like the cry of a bird against the pounding roar of an ocean storm and someone pulled at his shoulder. His fist smashed back into a face and he turned to see Patterson picking himself

off the deck, his nose a bloodied pulp. He shuffled back in terror as Law advanced. ‘Sire, the screen...look!’

The words barely forced themselves through the blood pounding in his ears but he turned and looked.

The glowing trails of distant weapons fire, punctuated by the flashing death of ships, stood stark against the stars. Without needing to be told the Helm officer increased the magnification and Law snarled in triumph as Bayamons fought Mambas and Eels in a tangled mass of plasma fire.

“Incoming transmission from the Enterprise Admiral,” Patterson said, slumped over his console, blood still pouring down his face, a black stain spreading over his tunic. “On-screen.”

Law turned and his snarl metamorphosed into a smile of triumph and vindication.

“I now command,” roared a Paranid over the cacophonous riot of sirens, screams and the high buzzing whine of weapons fire. He stood from the Command chair and fired a pistol point blank into the chest of an Argon male looming behind him, catapulting him back and out of sight. Smoke drifted across the screen, almost obscuring the Enterprise Bridge, but the sights and sounds were clear in their implication.

Mutiny.

“I speak for the Confederation and I lead,” the Paranid stated as the screen cleared and the sound of fighting subsided. “Sire, we must meet,” he said, addressing Law directly. “I have two prisoners that will interest you greatly.”

“The Paranid is demanding the Raiders and their allies stand down,” Patterson reported from the communications station. His brow furrowed and he unconsciously touched an index finger to the relay earpiece. He kept one eye on a tactical display set to monitor the internecine fighter battle. An isolated Mamba exploded as he watched, pinned in Bayamon cross-fire, the pilot punching out through the explosion in the bar nick of time. The fighting had extended now, to the ships blockading the jumpgates.

“Multiple responses, attempting to clear.” He tentatively flicked through the comms option menu, just to give the impression that he knew what he was doing but Patterson couldn’t make out more than fragments from the inchoate tangle of pilot voices. Only the direct audio relay from the Enterprise came through distinct.

“Slow to one hundred, launch every fighter we have,” Law ordered from the command seat. “Escort formation. Let’s provide another incentive for reason to prevail.” His voice was measured, calm – as if the murderous rage has been just switched off like a light but the distinctively sweet tang of Teladi blood hung over the Bridge, falling almost as heavy as the brutality of the act itself.

“He is threatening to begin executing hostages Admiral, and promising safe passage to an independent sector to all those who do not wish to join the Confederation.”

“Give me another all-channel flood,” Law ordered. “I will speak.”

Fortunately the link to the comms relay remained set on stand-by and all Patterson had to do was switch relays and avoid touching the flecks of grey matter staining the controls.

“Channel open Sire.”

“Attention Raiders pilots, you have fought well but you have nowhere to go. With the Force Corporation destroyed there is no haven for you this side of the Xenon divide. Surrender now and I too guarantee safe passage and a substantial reward. There is honour in fighting a lost code, but no future. When my allies arrive there will be no quarter. Stand down now.”

Law slashed the edge of his hand like a blade across his throat and Patterson closed the channel.

Threats and blandishments, rocks and hard places, it did not, Patterson mused silently, take much to sway loyalties made hopeless by circumstance. One by one the Raiders pilots signalled their surrender and set course for the Enterprise and Law and the Paranid spoke again. The negotiations were perfunctory under the circumstances with the Paranid agreeing to almost all of Law's terms. Shrewdly, he refused to stand down the gate pickets, 'until the terms of our alliance are concluded.'

Law suggested a meeting aboard the Black Heart, the Paranid countered with the Enterprise.

"You do not trust me," Law observed in the even tone that to those familiar with his moods signified a rage boiling beneath a thin ice carapace of reason.

"Trust no-one, is my rule," the Paranid grunted. "Observe where trust has left Force and his allies."

It was, Law conceded, a very good point. They would meet on board the relay station to finalise the terms of the new alliance - an unarmed ship, the Paranid and two escorts with sidearms only plus the prisoners to be handed over immediately, as a sign of 'good will'.

"And all ships to observe a ten kilometre exclusion zone, to prevent any teleport surprises," Law added. "The unarmed ship provision of course applies only to you. I will be escorted. If we are to be allies you must show obedience. We cannot fight because even if you win you will destroy the key to unlimited power."

He flourished the data chip and holding the Paranid's triple-eyed gaze, stared him down.

"Agreed." The word appeared to stick in his throat. "We will utilise a single Argon Lifter."

"That class is unarmed Admiral," Patterson observed quietly. Law nodded acknowledgement.

"The terms are acceptable," Law agreed. Triumph oozed from his voice like juices seeping from a well-roasted joint of meat.

"Display for me the asteroid schematics," Law ordered. There was just a single docking bay and with careful pilots could berth three freighters. There was also, Law observed a functioning teleporter. "Have a full security squad standing by on the Black Heart transporter," Law ordered, "And be prepared to move into teleport range at my command."

"You suspect deceit Admiral?"

Law regarded him with one raised brow.

"This Confederation creature was recently with and some of his wiles may have rubbed off. Deploy a navigation satellite and transfer command to my station," Law ordered and swung the command seat console across his lap. He entered a code sequence and in seconds the pugnacious features of Njy himself appeared on the small screen. From the glimpse of uniformed Split in the background Law judged the Butcher was aboard a warship. From his knowledge of the being it would be a carrier or something else with massive firepower. The thought gave him pause. He needed Njy as an ally; to both intimidate his enemies into joining him, and to keep this sector secure while he took the Black Heart out into deep space. But he did not need him starting a war with a strike through the back door to Menelaus Paradise. He let the problem slip to the back of his mind to be worked on.

"So?"

Aggressive, eager.

With formalities brusquely dispensed with Law was equally blunt. "I am victorious, the enemies throat beneath my bloody heel." It felt like two wild animals bearing their teeth over a kill. "You are personally supervising?"

"I command!" the Split snarled. "And 'The Priest-Kings Rage' stands by for the jump lock."

“I negotiate surrender. You will be summoned when the scales are in the balance.”

“I am a sword not a cosh held behind a coward’s back! We have an agreement and you have had my aid. Do not think to betray me now. You can have me at your back with either a dagger or a shield.”

Law realised just how much he needed to subsume his enemies’ strength to his own.

“Hold for my signal,” Law said, cutting the signal to leave the ambiguity hanging in the static.

“Make a freighter and two fighter escorts ready. All ships equipped with teleporters and load two full squads. Deploy one in hidden positions along the upper walkway. Make sure the Paranid understands he awaits my summons.”

He thought for a moment, eyes narrowing. “And have our fastest rescue ship ready for instant launch. Tie the communications to my command channel.”

“Understood Admiral,” Patterson acknowledged.

Law stood and gestured to his seat.

“You have command. Do NOT disappoint me.”

Patterson swallowed and nodded.

Law swept down to the hanger deck, gathering guards and dispensing orders as he went. The Bridge filled with his blindly loyal eyes.

From behind the safety of a portable screen generator and six armed troops surrounding him, Law scanned the hanger. It was little more than a low square cavern gouged from the black rock of the asteroid, with a metal deck. A maintenance walkway clung to three sides, some ten metres above the landing pad. Hastily positioned crates concealed ten snipers. He hoped they would prove unnecessary but he could not shake a superstitious believe that if anyone could strike from beyond the grave with the power of blind, stupid loyalty it would be Force. He would believe in his victory fully when the prisoners hung screaming. He let a frisson of lust warm his stomach. He hoped one was the Force woman. They had unfinished business and he could all but feel her fear now in the tingling thrill of anticipation. There were many women in the Force organisation and his preferences were well known. Women they would be and, he searched for her name, Tyre would be one of them.

His own Lifter sat in the centre of the landing deck and the two Falcon escorts were parked in tandem beside it leaving the port slot free for the Paranid’s ship. As he pushed the picture of Tyre’s red-eyed face from his mind the red rectangle of the docking bay door split to the whoop of sirens. A Lifter, in blood red and black livery flickered through the atmospheric containment screen and drifted to rest on light bursts from its manoeuvring jets. It was he realised, Force’s personal ship, the one that had given him so much trouble back in the Boron blockade. Its name was emblazoned on the nose, The Destiny Star.

Law stepped from behind the defence screen and walked towards the landed craft flanked by his six guards, uniformed all in black and faceless behind reflective face shields. At his word two of them moved to deploy the embarkation steps against the primary hatch. Law waited at a discreet distance and his four guards unholstered their sidearms as the exit opened and the Paranid appeared alone. His sidearm remained contemptuously sheathed as he walked down the ramp. He stood for a moment, his own triple-eyed gaze scanning the hanger. Law swore the worst of deaths on any careless assassins but satisfied the Paranid turned and with a grunt ordered the rest of his group forward.

He at least was keeping his word. Just two guards, both Argon males, both with holstered blasters and both pushing prisoners. They both wore some kind of black fabric hood and their hands were cuffed before them with standard brig restraints. A second set of the manacles hobbled their feet, the short length of connecting chain leaving the prisoners barely able to shuffle. A length of cable joined the chains linking their wrists to the chains on their ankles, forcing them to walk almost doubled over.

Law approved of the caution and the style. Both prisoners wore the black and red of the Raiders squadron. Both tunics were pendulous with curves that flared a lust that dried his mouth. Let Force's woman be one of them! The guards hustled them to stand beside the gangplank with the Paranid.

"Search that ship as briefed," Law ordered the two soldiers waiting warily near the embarkation ramp, poised with hand-scanners for that command. "And if there's a cargo life-support unit," he stared at the Paranid, "Disable it."

The two parties regarded each other with mute suspicion while Law's men scoured the Destiny Star.

They appeared at the top of the ramp a couple of minutes later.

"The ship is clear Sire. No surprises, teleport and sub-space cargo hold life-support disabled as you commanded."

He was not familiar enough with the Paranid as a species to gauge body language but he thought something registered. The prisoners too, their shoulders seemed to slump but with the stress of the situation it was hard to tell. A rescue plan foiled possibly? Well, if there were troops trapped in the hold they would soon be dead or insane.

"My word is given," the Paranid rumbled. "You may take the prisoners as a token." As he spoke his guards each grabbed a prisoner and roughly shoved them in the direction of Law. "Walk!" he commanded. "Come," Law echoed as the hunched, bound and blind figures shuffled towards them. The smaller of the two whimpered huskily, sending fire into Law's blood.

"It's a wild gamble," Sarge stated "You'll need a back-up. Stick me and a few of my boys in the hold and set the teleport on a timer to pluck us out." Max thought about it quietly as Tyre and Kaitrin joined with Jackson in hotly arguing the proposal's merits. "Too risky, Law's the very suspicious type, particularly around Max," Jackson said.

"He thinks you're both dead!" Tyre snapped. "He's overconfident. I know the bastard, you don't!" Kaitrin draped a comforting arm over her shoulder and led her into a corner of the briefing room.

"I'll take that chance," Payter said. "Getting close enough to grab him alive before the troops he'll have hidden about the place can react is our best shot but a diversion would help."

Tyre and Kaitrin broke from a heated, whispered discussion. "Jack's right, it's too dangerous. There's been enough senseless deaths. Take us along with you though, we want to be there when you take that bastard down Max. For Corrin, right Kaitrin?"

"No backup," Max said. "And you two are most definitely not coming along. The foot is coming down, absolute end of story! Understood?"

Kaitrin and Tyre exchanged a glance and seemed to come to agreement in that strange way women do when they've decided something particularly inexplicable by any form of logic.

"Okay Max, we'd just like to see the look on his face when you leap from your coffin!" Tyre said. "Particularly wearing false boobs. You've both got to look convincing enough to get really close." The thought seemed to give both the women some kind of perverse pleasure. "If it'll keep you here without the need for restraints go ahead." Max conceded. "Sarge rustle them up a combat engineer."

Payter raised a deeply sceptical eyebrow and followed the women out.

Looking up through the translucent black gauze of the hood at the ghost like and gloating Law, in a hot sweat at how near he had come to backing that plan, Max shuffled forwards. Sweat stung beneath the tape strapping his blaster to ribs, the adhesive fixing the two sagging membranes of turbine lubricant tugged painfully at his chest hairs and he could feel the sights of the soldiers Law would have hidden

along the upper walkway as he moved slowly forward, careful not to accidentally slip the trick locked manacles and cuffs. Jackson shuffled beside him, hunched over like Max, to disguise his height.

After all the fighting, all the sacrifices, all the deaths it had finally come down to this, five more metres, a grab for the gun and then out with the chip and the hostage. Max scarcely dared to breathe as he took another short step. What could go wrong? For a moment he imagined Zee articulating a list. He readied himself to spring the last few steps and then, as it happened. The tape holding his blaster against his ribs, already loosened by sweat, gave way as he reflexively drew a deep, readying breath. Under the weight of the big handgun it peeled away in nightmare slow motion. Max's own reflexes betrayed him as he snatched for the falling weapon, his hand popping free of the tricked out cuffs. Even as his fingers grabbed for the stock the landing bay filled with the echoing pre-fire hiss of multiple weapons charging. The blaster hit the metal deck with a clatter and just for half a second everything was as quiet as the vacuum of space.

"Down, down, on the floor! I said on the floor! All of you. move, move!"

Guards were upon him before Max could respond, knocked to the floor by a back-hand blow. He curled into a protective ball as a boot cracked in against his ribs. A second kick slammed into his face and his mouth tasted the hot salt tang of blood.

"Enough!" At Law's bass command the hanger fell silent, except for Max's own rasping breath. Rough hands dragged him to his feet, the cable linking his wrist bonds to the ankle chain tugging loose, allowing him to stand straight. Acutely conscious of the barrel rammed into his back and too stunned by his sheer dumb bad luck, Max made no move as Law loomed wraith-like through the hood.

"So, this woman has teeth. We shall see them pulled." His leather gauntlets were cool on Max's throat as he grabbed his hood. "Now my feisty assassin.." He removed it with a single flourish. "Surprise!" said Max with bitter resignation and spat a bloody goblet in his stunned face. Law wiped it away mechanically, his lips fighting to form a response to developments that blanched his face with shock and Max took the chance to snatch a glance around, looking for an out. Kerman and his two guards stood under the barrels of a ring of guns from the upper walk-way and Jackson was prone on the floor beside Max, a guard's knee in his spine. Four more soldiers stood around them knuckles white on the triggers of blasters held in double-fisted grips.

"Why won't you die?" Law said finally, in a quiet shrunken voice. "Why won't you die?" The question tailed off into a whisper like the cracking of ice on a thawing pond. "Why won't he die, why won't he die?" he repeated, walking in small circles rubbing the fabric of the hood over his sweating face. Max bit back a caustic rejoinder, fascinated and horrified by the spectacle.

"And you," he said with the small voice of a child, "You must be.." Law knelt and pulled off Jackson's hood. "One of the guy's who's going to kick your psychopathic ass!" Jack struggled violently to shrug off the guard, who just bore down harder. "Hey, watch the tits!" For a moment Law's face crumpled like that of a child almost on the verge of surrendering to tears then his whole face shifted mercurially in response to the venom of Jackson's tone, becoming adult, hard.

"Nice going Jack," Max muttered. "Just trying to help," he managed to gasp. "What's your excuse?"

"Enough," Law snapped, his voice now brittle with the effort it took to control his raging impulses. He ripped Max's tunic open and gaped at the gel membranes fixed to his bare chest in disbelief. He half reached out to touch them. "Enough." He held Max's face, squeezing hard. "Enough." He turned his back and his shoulders sagged with a weariness that matched his slumping shoulders. "Kill them all, immediately." His voice raised to a roar. "Now!"

Tyre let out her breath in one long, tightly controlled exhale as the footsteps above, more felt than heard through the ceramic deck plating, faded. "They can't scan us let alone hear us, that's why it's the Star that's used for the low volume, high value illegal trade," Kaitrin observed. "Then why are you whispering?" Tyre countered. "Is it safe to get out of this place yet? It kind of reminds me of the ride I took in a sub-space hold, and that didn't end well. Or a coffin."

“A crud lined coffin,” Kaitrin replied, referring to the tacky remnants of the last cargo lining the walls, and sticking their hair. “It could have been worse. We’ll give it another couple of minutes before..”

She didn’t manage to complete her sentence.

“That’s not got to be good,” Tyre said as the small hidden compartment was plunged into absolute darkness. She took a deep breath and tried to quell the panic rising in her throat and seemingly filling their hiding place with the thunderous beat of her heart. There was only one way in or out of the shielded compartment the Destiny Star had come equipped with when Max won it in a poker game, and that was through the teleport. And the small control panel, a sign that the compartment had been used for smuggling more than commodities, had been the only illumination. In the stygian dark the bulkheads felt like they were beginning to close in. Life support in the compartment was jury-rigged, low powered to avoid detection, and minimal and already the air felt stale with carbon dioxide.

She lay still and tried not to think about what might be happening to Max. Teleporting ahead of him, after their last goodbye’s had been Kaitrin’s plan, cooked up while the boys were arguing about back-up even though it was clear from Max’s body language that his mind was already set. Kaitrin squirmed in the blackness, trying to turn onto her back to reach the panel embedded in the ceiling, just inches above their heads.

“Do you want the good news or the bad news first?” Kaitrin breathed after a minute. “The good news,” Tyre said firmly. “That’s a shame, there isn’t any. The teleport is off-line and there isn’t a physical exit.” “No escape hatch at all?” Tyre said, her voice fracturing. “Something’s gone wrong, we’ve got to get out!” “Stop it!” Kaitrin hissed, “We’re not dead yet and unlike Max we’ve got a back-up plan.”

“We have?”

“Of course.” Kaitrin hesitated. “It’s just not a very good one.” She struggled unseen in the dark and suddenly the compartment was faintly illuminated by the dimmest of an electric blue glow from something Kaitrin had wrestled from her pockets.

“What’s that?”

“A blaster, you’ve got one too. Back-up and stuff, remember?. You should probably hold your breath and cover any bare skin.” Kaitrin tried the best she could in the cramped space to pull her jacket up over her head. “Ready?” She tried to picture the weapon in her mind and recall the brief instructions Corrin had given her. She adjusted the setting by touch. “Firing on a quiet five,” she warned and took a deep breath.

The intense beam roared into the ceramic, instantly heating the air to oven temperature and she could feel broiling her exposed face. Gritting her teeth against the tiny melted globules falling like a fine acid rain on her hands she sliced a hole barely as wide as her shoulders and pushed hard. The effort burned her hands enough to make her moan softly through gritted teeth but the ceramic gave way, petalling outwards on a melted hinge. Cold clean air flooded in as she struggled with rising panic to force her arms through the gap.

“Your hands!” Tyre said as grimacing fiercely Kaitrin pulled her coughing and choking up through the hole into the small Destiny Star rec-room. “There should be a First Aid Kit in the flying place.” “The flight deck, that’s where we’re heading. I’ll be okay, come on.”

They hustled rapidly through the narrow twilight corridors to the flight deck, ducking below the level of the canopy as they entered. Tyre popped the med-kit from below the left hand seat, opened it and pushed it back to Kaitrin. “Here, I don’t know what I’m looking for,” she hissed. While her friend rummaged for the burn spray Tyre folded herself into a pilot seat and then cautiously, like a cat checking the other side of a wall for threats, she cracked her eyes just above the canopy rim.

“What can you see?” The spray hissed in Kaitrin’s hands, numbing the pain in her hands with its cold, antiseptic breath.

“Law.” Just the sight of his scarred face and barrel body triggered fight-or-flight memories and her breath quickened. “And a few guards. Four, no – make that six. And Max is almost there. Go Max! It’d be nice if just this once nothing went...” She froze as something fell at Max’s feet and a ring of troops snapped into sight around the upper walkway. If every eye had not been on the tableau before her she would have been easily spotted from their vantage point.

“Wrong? Don’t tell me..”

“They’ve been caught. Quick – what do we do, Law’s just unmasked Max!”

‘We’ll be their back-up.’ It had sounded a grand idea when Kaitrin mooted it. Grab a couple of blasters, teleport in ahead of them, stowaway and then..?’ She realised she had no idea what to do next. Dammit Max, I’m a hostess not a mercenary! Kaitrin clambered into the co-pilot seat, scanning the control station with wild, frantic eyes. “Whatever you’re looking for, find it now!” Tyre shouted as Law turned his back on Max and walked away.

“Hey, now hold up!” Jackson shouted. “You can’t just shoot us down!” Law turned to regard him with an unblinking stare. “And why not exactly?” Max braced himself for a final, defiant fight but the soldier behind swept his feet from beneath him, sending Max crashing to the deck.

“Because it lacks style, it lacks finesse! Don’t you read comics, watch any movies?”

“The ones where the villain leaves his enemies to die in some improbable and overly elaborate manner? Unfortunately this place was built rather quickly and the man-eating fish pond got left on the drawing board. But, if it will make your last moments any more comforting I’ll do it myself.”

He drew his pistol.

“Goodbye Mr Force, this time for good!”

As he took aim at Max’s head a silence as deep as an ocean trench fell on the hanger. It was fractured by a metal hiss from the direction of the Destiny Star and in the time it took Law to recognise the object protruding from the upper hull for what it was, the silence was totally shattered. The gatling gun roared an untidy metal tattoo along the walkway, slashing through the metal deck, equipment crates and screaming flesh with callous indifference.

Max reacted with fighter ace reflexes, rolling and bringing one foot hard up into his guard’s groin. As he crumbled forward Max sat up, grabbed the front of his tunic and dropped back in one smooth motion, propelling him with both legs into Law. Both fell to the deck in a tangle of limbs as the discipline of Law’s soldiers disintegrated into frantic attempts to find cover from the hot metal storm. He drew his own blaster as Law struggled to his feet but a huge explosion from the upper walkway knocked him down, stinging his face with tiny shards of hot metal that left it cut and bleeding.

“What the fuck?” Jackson yelled through the chaos as a chain of secondary explosions roared along the walkway as it slowly peeled from the rock wall of the chamber. Men fell screaming and a blazing comet of a barrel bounced inches over Max’s head, dripping tiny incendiary droplets on his shoulders and head and guttering a thick, black and choking toxic tail as it went.

“Kerman, get back onboard! Jack, with me!” Max yelled above the roar of the point defence gatling and the screaming chaos, trying to make out Law through the haze. “There!” Jackson yelled, squeezing off a shot towards the far end of the bay. Max caught a glimpse of a shadowed bulk ducking through a door before diving under a smattering of ill-directed return fire. The gatling whirred and spluttered, empty.

“Cover me!” Max shouted into the sudden silence and dashed after Law at a crouch. Hot plasma bolts sizzled past his head and behind him Jackson squeezed out short staccato bursts of fire at anyone who showed their heads. Max made it to the door and leapt through headlong, barely registering the near miss that seared his tunic and scorched his ribs. Gritting his teeth against the pain Max followed the sound of boots pounding the metal deck.

## **Chapter 28: The Threat**

“How the fuck can they run with these,” Max muttered, stopping just long enough to rip the prosthetics from his chest. “Argh – shit - or wax their legs!” Unencumbered now he lengthened his stride, slowing only when the echo of Law’s flight faded behind the heavy clank of a door just around a wide curve in the rock-walled corridor.

Max leapt headfirst and rolled around the bend, coming up to one knee, his blaster sweeping the corridor length. Just three doors in a dead end. Two hissed open with a touch; an automated control centre and a cramped, confined living space. Max swept them perfunctorily, knowing Law’s psychology well enough to guess he was behind the third, locked, metal slab. Xela would have finessed the lock codes in less time than it’d take her to snap out a smart-ass remark on her own superiority. Max disabled his blaster safeties, triggered a forced chamber overload and ducked back round the corridor to avoid the ear-popping explosion. He was through the empty, melted frame into a teleportation station while flensing shards of rock and metal still ricocheted like angry, whirring insects around his head.

The room was small and its L shape had shielded the teleport pad from the full force of the blast but a fragment of debris must have caught Law as he was still struggling to his feet, his forehead bleeding from a ragged gash. With an animal roar that carried all the fear, anguish and rage of everything that had happened since that chilled moment he heard his cousin had died, Max launched himself feet first. His boots smashed into his enemy’s face with a cathartic crunch of bone but Law was a big man and beneath the blood streaming from his sliced forehead, his eyes blazed hot with an insanity that inoculated him against pain.

“You! You!” he screamed, rising to meet Max’s second attack and like two wrestlers entering the last round of a bruising bout, their warrior rage the only thing keeping them going, they clashed head-on. He smashed his forehead into Law’s face, pulping his already bloody nose as his hands clutched at Max’s neck but it barely registered in his glittering eyes. With inhuman strength he pushed forward, forcing Max to give ground as he struggled to keep at bay the gauntlets choking down on his throat. It was the closeness then; the bloody mess of his leather scarred face, the raw taste of his breath, the bestiality in his eyes that ignited a blazing memory of incidents and faces and the red mist rose in Max’s eyes, firing his own body beyond its limits.

He smashed a foot into Law’s groin and shook himself free of his loosened grip. “Bastard!” He leapt forward with the image of Tyre in that cell and smashed a cheekbone with the heel of his hand. Law felt that, Max could see it register in his eyes as he followed through with a punch to the ribs Law absorbed on an arm as he shoved Max back off-balance. Like mercury rising through ink, calculation shone in the shock as the pain of Law’s injuries kicked in. Reflexively he caught Max’s left hook and wrestled him back with his superior weight. With boots clattering towards them in the corridor Law shoved Max to the floor and took three long strides to the teleport. As Jackson leapt through the shattered entrance and as Max lunged forward, his own eyes blazing, he faded from view.

“Great way to lose your head Max,” Jackson offered his hand and Max pulled himself up off the teleport pad, trembling slightly with shock at how close he’d come to falling through an active beam. “Dammit Jack, I was that close to nailing the bastard and he’s got away again. What do we have to do to kill him?”

“Now you know how he feels. The Star’s bugged out, you can thank Tyre and Kait for your ass, we should be able to fight our way to one of Law’s ships.”

Max checked the teleport controls and opened a communications channel.

“I told them they needed a backup,” Payter muttered. No communications and two Falcons launching from the asteroid had been clue enough. The Black Heart Pegasus speeding towards the station, the Raider’s own in close pursuit confirmed it. The Split cruiser sliding from the Menelaus Paradise gate was just overkill.

“Shields still at forty per cent.” The Sarge nodded acknowledgement, realising he did not know the name of the young woman sitting at Helm in Kerman’s seat. “It’s returning fire.”

“Get our picket fighters back to the station and form a tight CAP. Tell them to hold on!” He kept the swelling panic from his voice. He was a soldier, he wasn’t trained for this and he knew his limitations. They needed the Commander but he had a sinking feeling about that.

“Sarge, status?”

He almost sighed with relief when Max’s voice crackled over the comm.

“Destiny Star inbound, fighter escort deployed, Split cruiser in through the MP gate, static defences overcome, two Falcons launched from asteroid, Black Heart manoeuvring to retrieve, both sides Pegasus inbound, Enterprise recovering all fighters. Standing by for orders.”

Military concision.

Max and Jackson teleported aboard the Raiders Pegasus just as Law was teleporting from a Falcon to the Black Heart equivalent. Both docked at the same time and Payter ceded the command chair to Max with relief. Jackson beat him to the first officer’s. Kaitrin took her post, Kerman took helm and Tyre stood behind Max, her hand resting on his shoulder.

“Status,” Max snapped.

Payter began to answer but Kaitrin looked up from her board and cut in.

“All fighters docked Commander. The Black Heart is at 10 clicks and holding, all fighters recovered and the Split cruiser is inbound ETA fifty minutes.”

“Law’s going to wait us out and let the Split take care of us. Suggestions?”

“Take the fight to him,” Jackson said quickly. “Take him out before the big stick comes down.”

“And then?”

Jack shrugged.

“If we go for the Heart they’ll just jump to a gate. If we follow them the Split will jump all over us and then we’re finished.”

They couldn’t fight a fully equipped cruiser and everyone knew it.

“Maybe its time to cut our losses?”

“And run where?” Max demanded. “Whatever sector we jump into we’ll have to fight or surrender. I’m no-one’s blue eyed boy any more.”

“We’ve got a periodic satellite drop in the unclaimed sectors around Nopileos Memorial. The next is due in fifteen minutes. I can keep it online,” Kaitrin said.

“We’ll be on the run and will never be able to get back here,” Max snapped, frustrated by the gnawing realisation that Jackson may be right. He was willing to fight to the last breath but other people’s lives, he squeezed her hand, Tyre’s life, was not his to throw away. Gnawing a knuckle with frustration he closed his eyes and tried to blank his mind and see some sort of pattern in the pieces that would show him another option.

“ETA on the Split?” he asked finally. “Forty seven minutes,” Kaitrin answered quickly. “Then you’ve got forty minutes to see what you can get out of that rock’s logs and systems. You know what we’re

looking for. Massoor, take her station, Sarge teleport a team ahead and secure the control centre. Helm, put us into a four-klick orbit, keep us inside teleport range. Perhaps we can force Law's hand."

"It's there," Kaitrin reported from the asteroid, her voice fractured with stress. "But it'll take hours to get at it, unless I get real lucky." Max could hear in her voice what her assessment of those odds was. Jackson reached the same conclusion and leaned towards Max to whisper; "My offer's still open. Throw in with the Confederation and I promise we'll take the fight to Law."

"When? In three months it could be too late, he'll have struck the mother-lode."

"Law isn't biting Max, and in twenty minutes the Split are going to be stuffing Hornets down our throats."

"You're right," Max conceded reluctantly and opened the ship-wide comms channel.

"This is Commander Force, you've all been following the situation and I'm not going to lie to you, this isn't a fight we're going to win, but I've come too far to back down now. A ride in the sub-space hold of a jump capable Mamba will be leaving within the next fifteen minutes for anyone who wants to pull back. It's been an honour people, it really has."

He cut the channel. No one on the bridge made any move to leave.

"Most of my people will be on it," Jackson observed. "I'm sorry Max, there's no profit in suicide."

"No apologies Jack, I want you in the pilot seat and I want Tyre and Kaitrin in the cockpit even if you have to stun them. Is that clear Sarge?" Max added as Tyre opened her mouth to protest. "Not a word, Jack will drop a nav-sat and I'll jump the Enterprise out, but only when I know there's no hope."

"No way Max," Tyre yelled, "You've got no intent-uh." She slumped to the floor.

"You said stun her if necessary," Jack said, holstering his handgun. "I'm dropping that sat. Be on the other end okay?" He stuck out his hand and the two men briefly shook. Jack scooped Tyre's body over his shoulder.

In five minutes the Mamba stood by, waiting for Kaitrin to be teleported straight into it. The cruiser had already slowed and launched a cloud of fighters.

"Recall the team," Max ordered. A minute later Payter confirmed all were back on board. "Do we have any LT's?"

"No Sir, but two were salvaged when our pickets withdrew. They're aboard the station now."

"Evacuate the station, we'll swing by and pick them up. Standby Jack, when it gets too hot I'll give the word," Max signalled. "Helm, set course for the Heart and charge!"

The Enterprise swept over the slower ship, rippling the Black Heart shields with a barrage of dragonfly and silkworm missiles. Law acted as Max expected and the Black Heart made straight for the Split cruiser and its fighter escort despite the ten hornets scans registered in its tubes.

"Force a channel through to Law, target jump-drive – west gate, just like we said Kerman."

As the computer counted down from ten, Law's ruined face appeared onscreen, twisted to beyond grotesque with rage.

"You want to finish this thing then you'd better step up to the plate you sick sad loser, because whatever happens you know I'm going to be waiting for you. Engage jump-drive."

“Insufficient energy cells for out of sector jump,” Kerman boomed. Max let a look of wild alarm cross his face. “Target Menelaus Paradise gate, immediate jump! Be seeing you Law, stay away from dark alleys.” He killed the channel and said, with slightly more confidence than he really felt, “He’ll bite.”

The Enterprise faded into hyperspace as the first Split fighters opened fire. “It’ll take the cruiser a couple of minutes to recover its ships,” Max said as the Enterprise emerged from the West gate. “Ahead 150, bring us around.” Kerman eased the Enterprise back towards the gate on a wide, turning arc. The Black Heart nosed from the electric swirl and blossomed missiles. “Engage jumpdrive,” Max ordered. “Keep your eyes on Law’s ship Massoor.” The Trade Master curtly acknowledged the order.

The Enterprise slipped from normal space as the first missiles rippled fire over its shields. Seconds later it re-emerged, on the tail of the Black Heart, firing missiles as it accelerated. “Station fighters launching,” Massoor reported. “Setting recovery vector,” Kerman said. As the Black Heart went evasive, accelerating and arcing away from the stalking missiles the Enterprise shot towards the ships evacuating from the captured clan station.

“Black Heart jumping,” Massoor reported, his voice dripping with contempt at the cowardly manoeuvre.

“Split jump-hole forming,” Payter warned. “Hurry up with those fighters,” Max muttered, his knuckles white on his chair arm, he was gambling on the one advantage the Orca had over the Split cruiser, its cavernous rear hanger bay which could dock a dozen ships at once. “Cruiser emerging and launching ships...all aboard, jumpdrive activating!” Massoor said; his voice stretched thin with tension. The Enterprise thundered down the hyperspace passage towards the northern jumpgate.

The Orca launched fighters the instant it emerged and accelerated in pursuit of the Black Heart. “Be advised,” Massoor warned, “The Split are deploying squash mines and fighters at the west gate, they’re boxing us in!”

“Don’t sweat it,” Max said. “They’re cornering Law too, he’s not the trusting type! Now let’s finish the bastard. Watch for hornets.”

“Missile defences primed and ready,” Payter said confidently.

The Black Heart began launching fighters as the Enterprise thundered towards it and as Law’s flagship turned head-on it launched steady volleys of missiles.

“Jack, it’s time to go. Say goodbye to Tyre for me.”

“When she wakes up,” Jackson’s voice crackled over the bridge. “Good luck Max.” There was a fatal note in his tone. “I’ll try and lure some heat away before I jump. Whatever happens, it’s been fun.”

“Hornets inbound, launching drones,” Payter cut in. “Mamba away.”

The Enterprise smashed through the oncoming missile storm behind a buzzing shield of combat drones and Bayamons, autopilot programmed for missile interdiction. They caught most of them but not enough, the Enterprise rocked like a rowboat in a typhoon as hornets, silkworms and wasps fireballed against the shields.

But it survived, with a bare ten percent of shield energy remaining and the Black Heart launched more fighters.

“Split activating drive,” Massoor said. “Launching the Eye, all fighters moving to engage.”

“LT’s stand by,” Max said as the Enterprise looped around towards Law’s ship. “Head to head Helm, wait for it, wait for it... Now!”

The last two Force Corporation laser towers tumbled from the Enterprise with the distance between the two ships was just 500 metres, nose to nose.

The two massive vessels screamed over each other, Raiders Mamba and Eel fighters hacking at the Black Heart shields while the Xela Combat AI controlled Bayamons harassed the Stoertebeker escorts.

Then the LT's cut lethally in, slicing at the Black Heart's shields like knives.

"Split cruiser at North Gate... She's not moving," Payter said. "No honour among thieves, they're waiting 'til Law is really willing to pay."

The Enterprise came round again, its shields still dangerously low. The Black Heart twisted and rolled under the combined fighter and LT assault, needing only a hornet barrage to smash its shields down. Max had none but just for a minute it seemed that the combination of superior fighter power, multiplied by the command and control and defensive fire of the twin hulled All-Seeing Eye Lifter, might just do it. Then, just as Massoor reported the Split cruiser moving to intercept, first one then the other LT fell to suicide rams by Stoertebeker ships.

They were remote controlled and on such overlooked possibilities do battles hinge.

Max checked the sector scan. Jackson was at 10 clicks distance now, mixing it with a melange of Black Heart fighters while a massive fight raged around the Black Heart as the Raiders pressed their attacks home through a thinning swarm of Stoertebeker defenders. There could be only one outcome, but for the Split juggernaut roaring down on them like Death made manifest, and Max knew now he had gambled and lost. The Enterprise could jump to safety if it abandoned its fighters but that was simply not an option, to anyone remaining on board. They were Force's Raiders, not some rag-tag bunch of mercenaries and they did not forsake their own.

Never.

Max looked around the bridge, his heart swelling with pride. Even though he was technically an impostor they were his people and he was their leader. They'd tried to do the impossible and failed, all that was left now was to stop Law acquiring the alien technology by any means and at any cost.

"Helm set an intercept course." He did not need to specify a target; the crew were waiting for the order. He gave it.

"Helm, ramming speed!"

Only the swelling throb of the main drive could be heard in the silence of the bridge and as the huge metal slab of the Albatross hanger doors loomed Max close his eyes.

"Aborting.." Kerman growled. The rest of the Paranid's words were lost in a cacophonous roar of alarms overlain by a howling feedback scream that seemed to come from the hull itself. The Enterprise shuddered and shook, like a wooden ship ripped to its guts by jagged tooth rock shoals, as it listed heavily to port, flinging Max against the seat restraint field with bruising force.

"What the.." Max screamed over the chaos roar as the Enterprise rolled violently back to starboard. The Paranid gripped the Helm station with just one bracing hand long enough to adjust the view-screen focus. "Northern Gate Commander," Kerman shouted. Two blade-like Xenon capital ships hung poised against the energetic maw. A third spat from the wormhole as Max raced to catch up.

"Threat assessment!" he screamed. "Damage report, Enterprise and Black Heart, and kill those alarms!" Payter began calling systems damage into the sudden silence of the bridge.

"Shields ten per cent, hull integrity compromised on eight decks, starboard thrusters inoperative .... jumpdrive disabled.."

Max cut him off. "The Heart?"

"Worse Commander, I'm reading only one functional shield generator and multiple internal explosions. On-screen."

The Stoertebeker Albatross wallowed heavily to port in a roll that seemed not to respond to the twinkling flash of stabiliser jets along its hull.

“All ships – attack and destroy, attack and destroy. Kerman..” He did not need to continue for the Helmsman had already pulled the Enterprise out of its roll and swung it on a long, high arc to starboard to bring the Enterprise up onto the rear of the Law’s flagship. Its main drive spluttered strobe-like in the black as the lumbering vessel tried to escape the stinging attack runs of the Raider Mambas that had broken through its tattered fighter defences.

“Give it everything we have, at my command.” His finger hung poised over his small command console and as the Enterprise leapt forward, roaring the length of the Albatross hull, it stabbed down. missiles streamed from launch tubes and plunged towards the Black Heart.

“Give my regards to The Reaper.”

The viewer stayed locked on the Black Heart, almost invisible beneath the rippling flare of explosions, as the Enterprise pulled another long starboard turn. For a second it looked like it had weathered the assault unscathed, then an explosion that the Combat Awareness picked up and translated into a low booming roar that swelled and merged into a chain of secondaries, shuddered its bulk.

“Clear the area,” Max whispered, enthralled by the death throes of the giant beast. With a rending shriek of metal that filled the bridge the upper hull of the Black Heart split, a jagged tear that began near the slab-like bow and spread towards the drive like tearing paper, spilling a crystal fog of frozen air in which tiny forms twitched. Then a series of explosions, that began aft and rippled forward, tore the ship apart like an angry, invisible giant. With a flash that left Max temporarily dazzled and deafened it exploded.

He would have liked some time then, some time to absorb the moment, to reflect on a victory of sorts, and its cost but already Payter and Kerman were both earnestly demanding his attention with warning cries.

“Regard – the Split!” the Paranid growled and nodded towards the view-screen.

“Are they insane?” Max asked no-one in particular. In all the excitement Max had forgotten about the Split cruiser. No-one answered as the big tri-hulled ship poured streams of plasma all over a Xenon destroyer it almost rammed as it over-shot.

“Tactical!”

He drank in the overlay in the lower right quadrant of the screen.

Njy was many things; a hero, an inspired political leader; a genocidal murderer, a war-monger, depending on your species and point of view; but there was one thing he was not, regardless of perspective. The Butcher was no coward and faced with two Xenon warships and another that seemed to be some kind of transporter like his race’s own Elephant, his first instinct was not to run.

It was brave, it was glorious but it was utterly futile.

“Remember the standing orders, don’t fire on the Xenon unless they engage first. Tell me when that fight is over.” Max ordered.

“Ships!”

Sarge?”

“Three ships Commander. Falcons that escaped before the Heart went down. Our fighters are engaging the surviving Black Heart ships moving to escort.”

“Law,” Max breathed. “I’m sick of trying to kill that guy. Recall all fighters once they’ve swept up and evac all our remaining people on board the station and the shipyard and rig the reactors, we’re not gifting the machine-heads anything. Leave the Falcons to me, you kept me a ship right?”

“Of course Commander,” Payter replied with a faintly insulted air that he signalled was an unexpected joke, with just a twitch of his lips. “There’s a fully equipped Mamba on the flight-deck.”

“Fully equipped?”

“Except for cargo bay life support, the only spare unit we have is attached to the Destiny Star.”

“Good enough. You’ve got your orders,” Max stood up. “Law will be aboard one of those ships and I’m taking the bastard down.”

“You should take wingmen,” the Sarge urged but Max could tell from his tone he’d already realised the futility of the suggestion.

“When the Xenon have finished chewing up the Split you’re going to need every fighter you can get if you can’t get the jumpdrive back online. Evacuate the stations and if you can’t jump then head for Menelaus Paradise.”

“And then Sir?”

“If I’m not here then you’re in command. If you can make it to the Confed Base.. Otherwise it’s up to you.”

Surrender. Max left the word hanging in the air as he ran for the teleport. A few seconds later he was in the cockpit of a Mamba. Disregarding all pre-flight checks he signalled launch readiness, gunned the thrusters and roared between the hanger doors as they split open. He quickly locked up the fleeing flight of Falcons and rolled to pursue as the Raiders chewed up the last of the Black Heart fighters.

The Falcon wasn’t built for speed, clocking out at less than half the velocity a fully configured Mamba could touch but it had the same fire-power and double the shielding. It was not a ship to be taken casually.

While Massoor kept up a running commentary on the Xenon-Split battle at the Northern jumpgate Max took the Mamba on an arc around the mess of scrapping Raider and Stoertebeker fighters. Law’s pilots fought a stubborn rear-guard but they were now out-classed and out-numbered. A Raiders Mamba detached itself from the melee as Max skirted the expanding combat sphere.

“Not thinking of keeping all that fun to yourself were you Max?”

“Jack!” Max snapped. “What the fuck are you doing here, I ordered you to get everyone to safety.”

“I don’t respond well to orders,” Jackson replied glibly, pulling up on Max’s port side. “Particularly when I’ve got a blaster pointed at me.” Max looked across. Tyre waved back. “You and I are going to have words later Max. Now shut up and let the man fly!” Max sighed deeply.

“I heard that, you are so going to catch it later,” she said. “Okay, okay,” Max conceded. “We’ll gut and feather these birds and then you’re bugging out, those Xenon are not here to be our friends. I’ll be right behind you.”

“Xenon Destroyer down,” Massoor interjected. “One, no - two more now in-sector.” He hesitated. “Commander, I think the Unknown is carrying a station deployment package!”

“I do believe I’m cursed,” Max muttered. “Why now, couldn’t they have waited a few days?”

“And did you notice both ships had shield damage when they gated in? How do you want to take this buddy?” Jackson interjected. Max checked the HUD, the trio of Falcons were under three clicks distant now and he extrapolated their course by eye.

“They’re not heading for a gate Jack,” Max said, surprised. “Looks to me like they’re heading for that other ‘roid.”

“That’s a long trip, let’s shorten it for them. Any odds you like Law is in the lead ship. Heads he’s mine. Call Max.”

“He’s mine,” Max said. “Designating port wingman Low-Life Two. Take it.”

At 1.5 clicks both the Falcon wingmen rolled a full 180 degrees and charged. The lead Falcon also turned but lingered behind its escorts, waiting to cosh any target-fixated attacker. The Mambas kept formation as the Falcons opened fire at extreme range, snap rolling to let the plasma streams fizz by their cockpits.

“Split shields at 50% and falling.” Massoor stated. “Four fighters down, twelve in sky.”

“Keep it up boys,” Max murmured. “Buy me some time.”

The two sets of fighters entered extreme weapons range.

“Exhilarating huh Max? Breaking high to attack, watch Low Life One.”

Jackson’s Mamba jerked up and out of Max’s sight, like it was on a stretched elastic tether. Max rolled inverted and manoeuvred towards the six of Low Life Three.

“Clever,” Max muttered as he decelerated to keep within the shorter turning circle of the slower Falcon, which banked into a hard left turn. It was the old bait and switch, pulling him across the path of Low Life One. From the corner of his eye he saw Jackson open fire on his target and as plasma fire raked around the cockpit Max slammed the afterburners, rolling as he accelerated to rake the shields of Jackson’s opponent in a slashing hit and run strike. As his eyes constantly danced over the sky and the HUD, building and rebuilding his combat awareness, another flash caught them, like the twinkling of a distant star on a cold, clear night.

Then another, and another.

“Jack,” Max signalled uncertainly as he rolled to strafe a Falcon falling onto Jackson’s six. Space seemed to blossom with exploding stars and suddenly the gravidar filled with neutral designated contacts.

“I see them, shit, break, break! Taking fire, taking fire!”

Max reacted by instinct, breaking hard right and low as a blinding beam sliced like a knife past the cockpit, catching the corona of his shield a glancing blow that sent the Mamba spinning violently out of control, alarm klaxons filling the cockpit.

The gravidar contacts transformed to hostile red as something flashed across the Mamba’s nose – a glimpse of purple and black.

“Unknown hostiles all over the sector,” Massoor shouted over the comm. “All fighters to CAP, I repeat, all fighters to CAP.”

A beam slashed by the jinking fighter and Max hit the strafe drive. The Mamba lurched left as another beam sliced past it and he began the fight of his life.

“Can you read a Gravidar?” Jackson yelled, slamming the stick hard left.

A small craft, seemingly composed entirely of triangular panels that shimmered with a purple that made him slightly queasy just to look at, exploded in his sights and the Mamba flashed through the wreckage.

“What’s a graveder?” Tyre yelled.

“Never mind, if you see something that looks like it could zap us, tell me to break towards it!”

Another beam sizzled past the cockpit.

Beam weapons, these bastards had beam weapons. Damn, he railed silently – we’ve only just figured out how to cram them into something as big as a laser tower.

“Who are these guys?” Jack muttered.

“Break ..er... left!”

The beam caught them a glancing blow but Jackson wrestled the ship back under his control in time to snapshot the attacker to vapour and then he fought on instinct, never flying straight, snap shooting targets of opportunity while Falcons jinked and rolled through criss-crossing beams. One exploded in cross-fire.

“Unknowns at both gates,” Massoor reported over the common combat link. “They’re jumping in independent of jump-gates, single clusters that break into groups. Watch out for the large contact – 75MW of shields and a beam that’s off the scale.”

Jackson caught a sustained flash from the corner of his eye and thunder rolled from the Combat Awareness System.

“Split gate picket squash mines blown!” Massoor yelled, excitement and fear completely overwhelming his normal cool tone. West gate clear, I repeat West Gate clear.”

“North Gate?” he heard Max ask.

“The father and mother of all battles,” Massoor answered. “Xenon versus Split versus Unknowns.”

Another explosion rumbled deep.

“Split cruiser dead.”

“Break right!”

Jackson broke high and right, killing another of the small ships as it shot across his nose, with a wasp missile.

“At least they die easily,” he murmured. “Max, wasps, one hit one kill!”

Jackson was a good pilot, almost as good as Max and almost as good as he thought himself and having got the measure of the threat he settled into a mantra-like routine. Jink, roll, dodge, fire. Repeat. He’d never used a strafe drive so much in his life but it was invaluable in throwing off the deadly aim of the beam weapons. The surviving Falcons and Mambas hacked and slashed through the buzzing swarm of attackers, slowly thinning them out with ripple fired missiles while staying well away from the biggest contact on the Gravidar.

“Break left and low – NOW!” Tyre screamed. Jack obeyed reflexively, scanning for threats. “There!” Tyre said, punching his arm hard. Jackson winced, slammed on the afterburners and ran plasma over the Falcon shields as it pulled up onto Max’s six. He dropped two silkworms as his ship screamed over the Stoertebeker fighter and pulled an inverse roll through a group of three small unknowns.

Low-Life Three died with a satisfying crump.

Ask any battle veteran pilot and they'll tell you there's no such thing as time in combat. It starts and it ends and in between it's all instinct and reflex. If you had time you'd think but if you think you're dead. Suddenly there were just three other ships in Max's immediate sky; Jackson's Mamba, one large pyramid-shaped Unknown and a Falcon bugging out as fast as its stubby wings could beat. He did not need to check the Gravidar to know it was Law, in Low-Life One.

"Bait and switch Max," Jackson signalled. "And I'd love to be the bait but I've got your girl." Max lined up the big Unknown and gunned the drive. "Wouldn't have it any other way." His Mamba shot towards the enemy, zig-zagging and pulling expansive barrel-rolls as the pyramid lashed out with the new beam weapon.

The coronal discharge was enough to fry the C.A.S with static but the Raiders fighter flashed past the Unknown, hitting the strafe drive as it over-flew. The pyramid pivoted to follow as Jackson swooped. At 800 metres he opened fire, pouring high energy plasma on the target until their energy banks coughed dry and, skimming its hull close enough to make Tyre involuntarily hide her eyes, he fired off every silkworm he had.

The Unknown exploded as he broke high for another pass.

"That's a Yeee-hah there Max, now you go waste that murdering bastard!"

"And you get the hell out of here like you're supposed to."

Max checked the sector display. The unknown hostiles had been thinned out considerably since his last quick scan but dozens of the small craft flitted through a tangled mass of Xenon capital ships and fighters by the north gate and another large swarm whirred and snapped around the putative Xenon Transporter lumbering towards the centre of the sector. The Enterprise though, was in the clear although less than a dozen fighters flew CAP.

"Force to Enterprise; engage and destroy those ships attacking that lone Xenon while they're still occupied. Jack, are you still here? How's Tyre?"

"Poised and ready to run by the Menelaus gate Max, and your girl's fine."

"She'd better be, moving on Low Life One!"

While ten Raiders Mambas and Eels moved to intercept the Unknowns, Max locked up Law's fleeing Falcon.

"Ready or not Law old buddy," Max hit the afterburners and the Mamba leapt to full speed with a jolt he felt in his kidneys, "Here I bloody come!"

The lumbering Teladi fighter rolled to engage head to head as Max approached firing range, and raked his shields with surprisingly accurate long-range fire, forcing him to twist and roll through the plasma stream without answering. As he flashed over the Falcon he rolled inverted and craned his neck to snap a glance at the Falcon cockpit. Two crew – one the familiar bulk of his enemy, the other a damn good pilot.

Damn good – not great and once Max hit the brakes, snap-rolled and afterburned back onto his six the fight was all over.

Bar the taunting.

"That's the best you've got Law," as he rippled a huge chunk out of the Falcon shields.

"Come on Law, think you're so hard?" Max rammed more plasma into the Falcon rear as he followed it though a high, rolling break.

"Think you can breath vacuum?" he mocked, trimming the fighter's shields down to under 10 per cent.

“Come on, get your man to show me some of those funky Stoertebeker moves!”

Locked to the Teladi six like a tractor beam connected the two ships, Max sniped and taunted away.

“Wish you were here now Zee,” he murmured. “With that good capturing mojo.” He forced thoughts of his cousin, of Xela, from his mind and concentrated on keeping the shields low, hoping rather than expecting Law would lose his nerve and eject.

“Okay Law,” he said after a minute of carefully placed single shots. “Last chance before you suck the Big V, punch out now and I’ll deliver you alive to the appropriate authorities.” He gave the Falcon a double kick for emphasis. The only answer was dead static and Max triggered the burners again, breaking in a steep, off-set loop, rolling out at seven hundred metres to bring his ship hammering down on the Falcon from 11 O Clock High.

“Here it comes Law, can you see it, here it comes, here it comes!”

His thumb hovered over the control stick fire button as he centred Law in his sights.

“Here it comes!”

There was something in the way the Falcon suddenly lurched and rolled like a pay-day drunk that stayed him and as he pulled around for a head-on pass he quickly scoped it with the Zooms. Law stood over the pilot seat, pounding the occupant with his big leather clad fists, his mouth moving soundlessly. Max snapped off a short burst that smashed into the Falcon nose on, almost obliterating the shields. He came around and scoped the cockpit again; it was filled with smoke.

“Zee – I mean ‘auto-pilot,’ hold station on the target rear, 200 metres.”

The Mamba pulled up on the Teladi fighter’s starboard rear quarter while Max adjusted the comms, pushing enough power through it to half fry the Falcon with feedback.

“No more messing Law. Computer, scan target, synchronise teleports and activate in ten seconds on my count. If you’ve got one, be on it because you’ll be in vacuum in fifteen. And that ain’t fun, I’m telling you. And bring that chip. Ten.”

He moved to the back of the cockpit to the small teleport pad as he counted and stood at the small operations panel.

On four the teleport signalled a link.

On three Law’s hulking bulk began to swirl into reality.

On two Max realised he’d used his blaster as an impromptu bomb.

On one Law, his face contorted with inhuman rage behind the clotted bloody mass of his smashed face, roared like an un-stunned Chelt at the slaughter and charged. Swept up by his mass and momentum they fell back into the more cramped confines of the flight deck, smashing against the tandem pilot seats. Law came out astride him and Max smashed his forehead straight up into the broken mess of his nose but the insanity raging in his eyes made him as immune to pain as he was to reason. Max’s vision began to fade as he fought for breath through Law’s choking grip.

“You want my life work do you Force?” Law raged, pulling back one gauntleted face and pounded it into Max’s face. “Then you can take it from my cold, dead hands!” Again and again the fist smashed down and Max tasted blood as he desperately tried to fend off the blows with one hand and loosen Law’s choking grip with the other, but he was too heavy, too strong.

He almost surrendered then, right at the last, let himself drift away to where there was no pain, just sleep but something inside him, that indomitable spark that marks a true warrior, that keeps him fighting while a single breath remained in his body, while his muscles could still bunch a fist, flared. As Law’s fists flew blood, Max reached desperately back, scrabbling under the co-pilot seat for some

kind of weapon but all his fingers closed on was an emergency med kit. Max drove the alloy box into Law's face with as much power as he could muster from the prone position. He barely felt the gash in his forehead, opened up again by the corner of the tin. With one sweep of his bloody fist he slammed the kit from Max's grasp and it smashed open, scattering instruments, ampoules and sprays.

"And now, you die!" he giggled insanely. "Now you die!"

Impervious to Max's frantically flailing fists he fastened both hands around his throat and slowly squeezed, cackling with maniacal glee. Barely able to see through swollen, bruised eyes, Max stretched his arm practically out of its socket until his fingers closed around something cylindrical from the kit. Blindly he stabbed it into Law's side and pressed the trigger. Law froze and stiffened in shock above him, toppling back and off him as Max pushed with almost his last joule of strength.

Both men struggled to their feet like bare-knuckle fighters entering the thirtieth round and for a moment both stood hunched, taking deep rasping breaths, and looking at each other. Then Law straightened up and began to laugh, a deep booming laugh that filled the cockpit.

"What's so funny?" Max gasped through swollen bloody lips.

"Look in your fist," Law managed to reply between thunderous guffaws. Max opened his hand and stared blankly at the empty stim. "When I've finished with you I will find your woman." It was the wrong thing to say. With a strength he'd have sworn his body did not have left in it Max leapt at Law, hitting him low, like a Blocker taking out a Running Back. Caught off balance Law staggered back and pivoting on one heel, Max round-house kicked him in the chest, sending his foe crashing back onto the teleport pad.

Grinning contemptuously Law rose to one knee.

"I was born with pain, Force, and you are too weak to.."

Max leapt for the teleport operations panel and blindly activated it and, as Law faded from view in mid lunge, Max redirected the beam. When Law's body ceased convulsing and hung just beyond the cockpit like a limp, malevolent shadow against the stars, he reactivated the teleport and gingerly rifled the ruined corpse. He found what he was looking for concealed in its right gauntlet.

"You did say, and I quote, 'from my cold dead hands'."

Max teleported the corpse back out into space, took the controls and gunned the Mamba into a wide, arcing turn.

"From the stars we came, to the stars we shall return."

He flicked the target-under-reticule switch and fired. The comm. system sang out a ragged cheer.

"Jack are you STILL here? Put Tyre on."

"I would do Max, but she got a bit too insistent and I knew that was something you had to do yourself. You see, that's the trouble with women, they just don't have any sort of handle on the man thing, or a sense of fair play. Don't worry she'll wake up soon."

"Without too many bruises I hope Jack. Enterprise, how're we doing?"

"The sector is almost clear of Unknowns Commander, just a few holdouts around the north gate and the Xenon will take care of them." the Sarge answered. "But we've lost six pilots and ten ships." He paused before continuing. "We've contained the fires and the hull breaches but the interplanetary drive needs to recharge and the jump-drive is completely fried. The engineers say it could be weeks before they figure out how to get through the security lockouts let alone repair it."

"How long for the IP Drive to re-power Sarge?"

“Four to five hours Sir, depending on how repairs go.”

There were, Max quickly realised only two options open. Either the Enterprise retreated through the gate back to Menelaus Paradise and almost certain arrest or destruction, or they headed out into deep space.

“Get as much distance as you can between the Enterprise and the Xenon,” Max ordered. “And then head for that communications asteroid, perhaps there’s something we can salvage. Then..”

“Heads up Max,” Jackson interjected, his voice tight with concern. “The Xenon.”

Max checked the sector display - the clutch of Xenon destroyers around the northern gate had finished with the last of the Unknowns. He scoped the gate at maximum magnification and as he focused, three of the huge machines slowly swung their bows purposefully around and lit space with their flaring drives.

“Two Xenon destroyers on an intercept course,” Payter announced as if he were doing no more than repeating a particularly dull rumour. “And one heading straight for me!” Jack added, much less sanguine. “Shit, those suckers are fast, I’m reading 600 mps plus! Time to bug out Max, they’re going to seal off the MP gate.”

Max looked at the sector display and made a decision. Feeling more at peace than he could remember since the Code Black sounded, way back in the day.

“No dice Jack, I’m not leaving my people. You get going.” He set course for the Enterprise and kicked up the power.

“I know you won’t,” Jack said quietly. “Activating jump-drive. Give ‘em hell Max.” And then his Mamba was gone, leaving just a single nav-sat spinning at the mouth of the Menelaus Paradise gate as the Enterprise launched its remaining fighters and hauled its battered hull round to face the enemy.

Max gathered up the handful of CAP fighters into one big delta wing formation and moved to engage one last time.

## **Epilogue**

“And at the setting of the sun and the rising of the dawn shall we remember them.”

Brother Fenris closed the book, standing with his shaven head bowed and his angular features solemn with the weight of the ritual words and the finality of the occasion. A shadow on the watercolour rainbow smear of the nebula behind him, he turned and with the rest of those gathered in the Observation Gallery to watch wing followed by wing of Bayamon fighters slip by, each missing man slot marked with a name intoned.

“... Makk, Raise, Xela ...” The list was so long, Anje Dalenari thought numbly as the fighter wings looped silently by. “Corrin...” A small dark haired woman choked a sob at that point. “Max Force.” Beside her his widow, a tall blonde, absolutely magnificent in a simple black dress stiffened, her face an impenetrable mask. Out beyond the perimeter marked out by the Confed Station Laser Towers, an Argon cruiser swam slowly into view, stately orbiting the Clan base at a discreet distance, as if infected with the solemn grandeur of the moment.

“Damn but I hate these things,” Jackson said, an unexpected presence at her elbow. Anje nodded, not quite trusting herself to speak. “Come on, I’ve got what you wanted, ready to run.”

He took her elbow with a surprisingly gentle grip and led her through the motley assortment of mourners; Clan pilots, a handful of Raiders who escaped the sweeping purge of Force Corporation installations that followed the discovery of his financial links with the Confederation, even a small contingent of gate-race fans, snapping a final salute with incongruously large foam hands. She was grateful the briefing room was in twilight; it hid eyes were swollen red and mascara she knew was running, despite the confident claims of several prominent celebrities.

Silently she took the indicated seat as Jackson picked up the remote and activated the display screen. She watched in silence as the Clan leader manipulated the controls; zooming in on the Boron Orca, picking out the sword shaped Xenon destroyers, lingering over the Mamba leading a pitifully small band of fighters towards them. As a huge Xenon ship filled the screen, it went dead.

“That’s all there is,” Jackson said. “The rest is in the belly of that ship.”

“And it’s genuine?”

Jackson pressed a data chip into her palm.

“Run any tests you like – that’s the original transmission, not a copy.”

Anje slipped it into her purse. “It’d better be, Intel will be all over me – I’ll have to give it up.”

Jackson shrugged. “He’s dead, what more do they want?”

“Certainty Jack, spooks like that big ‘Case Closed’ stamp.”

“They’ll see,” Jackson answered softly. “I popped a nav-sat in Nopileos Memorial and waited. Damn I waited, but no one came.” He shook his head, masking his eyes with a covering hand. “The Xenon don’t take prisoners, he’s really gone.”

He’s really gone. The words hung like a toxic cloud over the room.

“What do you want Jack? Why did you bring me here?”

“A favour,” Jackson replied. “You can’t repeat any of this – swear on Max’s memory.”

She nodded mechanically, feeling that a hole in her reality was about to gape its jaws under her feet. He told her about the unknowns; the beam weapons and the pinpoint jump points that opened on their targets.

“Why are you telling me this Jack?”

“Someone’s got to prepare for this threat,” Jack said softly. “Now that the Powers have opened up all the sectors to free exploitation I thought I’d give Max’s plan a go. Set up some factories, establish a research base.” He tapped a breast pocket. “I’ve got sensor readings. Those beam weapons.... His voice trailed off.

“Yes, that whole Decree of Incorporation thing was just a restraint on trade and their last decision didn’t pan out too well. I hear that Brennan guy is first in line for the trough.”

“It’s going to be mess,” Jackson said, “The war of all against all – hey, that’s a cool phrase, do you think it’ll fit on a T-Shirt? There’ll be anonymous hits on freighters, asteroids mysteriously colliding with stations, the whole nine yards of sentient duplicity. Believe me, I’m an expert.”

“No doubt. What is it you want from me Jack?”

Jackson cradled his fingers and pursed his lips. “Max told me about the Cabal, said his controller thought the organisation compromised, but he still trusted you.”

“He’s dead now.”

“But isn’t that what heroes are like, one falls and another takes his place?”

“I never had you pegged for the hero type.”

“Things change,” Jackson shook his head, “Things change.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“What you did for Artur, what you did for Max. You know what people are like – no one from the President to the Boron Queen’s party-hearty daughter is going to believe in aliens with super-weapons. They’re just going to continue gearing themselves up for last year’s war.”

“A propagandist?”

“That’s one way of looking at it. There’s one more thing.”

Anje looked at Jackson, an eyebrow raised.

“There was a Paranid – did some kind of genetic resequencing job on Max, or Marteene should I say. I want to speak to him. Can you arrange that?”

“Possibly, I’m going to have to think about what you’ve said, check out this data chip. Your trustworthy index rating isn’t exactly stellar.” She checked her timepiece. “My shuttle’s due out soon, I’ve got to be on it. Things to do, people to meet.”

“But you’ll consider my proposal?”

“I’ll think about it, you’re asking a lot.”

“But you’ll consider it, there’s a universe at stake?”

The publicist paused at the doorway and looked back at the figure hunched in the shadows.

“I’ll think about it and if this sat record checks out I’ll get you that surgeon and I’ll get you a new face.”

She turned and she was gone.

“It’s not for me,” Jack whispered in the dark, “It’s for a friend.”